

LE FROMAGE, LE VIN ROUGE, LES MARRONS



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EUCAN TRIP TO NAJAC, AVEYRON, FRANCE. 25 OCTOBER – 7 NOVEMBER 2009

INTRODUCTION

My amazing Najac adventure began on 23 June 2009. I work as an ecologist so was flat out at this time of year doing reptile, bat and botanical surveys, working away from home most of each week. Among other things I was also trying to hold down a part-time PhD, a precarious 'weekend' relationship with an also overstretched single dad and his son, whilst also keeping family, friends, a 'teenager' collie and an obnoxious horse happy! A friend from BTCV forwarded me an email entitled: 'Traditional Orchard management and habitat conservation visits to Europe: October/November 2009'. I was fairly desperate for a break and as I can't sit still long enough to enjoy a 'normal' sunbathing type holiday this looked perfect, the only problem was I had NO TIME! I was pretty doubtful I'd be able to get time off work and uni etc to be able to go. But, not thinking I'd get in anyway I applied. On 26th July I received an acceptance email and got VERY EXCITED! Everything I was worried might stop me from going seemed to work out around it and I accepted the offer.

KINGCOMBE WEEKEND

The preparation weekend on 21st-23rd August was pretty amazing in itself. The Kingcombe Environmental Studies Centre in West Dorset is set in Beautiful Dorset Wildlife Trust reserve countryside which created an inspirational backdrop for our orchard preparation. The food was amazing and I was lucky enough to be given extra time there to obtain my brushcutter training licence.

Both the France and Belgium trippers attended and although explaining who you were to everyone and trying to remember so many new names, professions and reasons for being there etc was mentally exhausting, it was great. We had stunning warm weather and were taken on various cider, orchard, and conservation orientated visits with a good amount of interesting speakers on the subjects as well. Sarah and Mel the leaders were hugely approachable and friendly and the whole weekend went smoothly. Everyone else on the trip must have thought it was just as successful as they all turned up in London to depart on our trip.

JOURNEY TO NAJAC

We met up in the Norfolk Arms pub in London on 25th October and had a tasty reunion lunch to get our strength up before lugging a stupidly massive amount of luggage to St. Pancras station (Figure 1).

I'd just had a difficult relationship break-up and had also been told that due to the economic downturn there would probably be no paid work for me after November, adding to my major quibbles as to whether I could afford to be doing a PhD. Anyway, I was having a bit of a meltdown! This was making me slightly nervous I'd crash and burn completely during spending time living in close proximity with a lot of new people in France for two weeks. Contradicting this feeling was one that I was also looking forward to it more than ever!



Figure 1. Excited People off to catch the Eurostar

The journey was interesting as everyone was trying to get to know each other better amid journey sleepiness and apprehension. Getting through customs was rather amusing with all the steel-toe cap boots setting off alarms and sharp hand-tools making us look like mass murderers! We got the Eurostar, arriving at Paris Nord just before 7pm where we all ate together in a restaurant then had a short wander around night-time Paris. We then crossed Paris on the Metro and boarded the sleeper train from Paris Austerlitz to Montauban. I definitely recommend the top bunk! Most people had trouble sleeping this night but I (queen insomnia herself!) slept like a baby, there was something quite comforting about lying in a train gently speeding through the French countryside at night. We arrived at 6:08am where we all breakfasted and explored the streets and cathedrals of Montauban with its “Nicole, Papa?” advert style buildings! We then clambered into two rental mini-buses for the last part of the journey.

At 11:45am when we arrived at ‘Les gites du moulin’ everyone was very pleasantly surprised. The beautiful ‘Château de Najac’ (castle) overlooked our site which was situated by itself along the Aveyron River (Figure 2). Room choosing was a very polite affair, and at last we were all settled in our 3-5 people gites, aaah lovely! However, no sooner had we emptied the minibuses of our luggage than we had to dash off again to meet the Mayor of Najac. Rather excited and bemused at the prospect of being important enough for the Mayor to want our company we all piled back into the minibuses and headed for Thierry’s restaurant. Once there, we met many of the various people we would be working with and for during the next fortnight.

We then walked back to the gites, lead by one of our new Ex-pat friends, Clive who had helped find the accommodation for us. We then rested our weary bones and ate our first lovely home-cooked dinner prepared by Sarah and Mel.



Figure 2. Najac village and Château overlooking our gites

FIRST WEEK OF WORK

The following four days consisted of work at three different farms. The first of which was Thierry Dubuisson and Cendrine's farm 'Ferme du Treil' where we learnt how to pick a good chestnut. We discovered that the picturesque yet slightly neglected farm had only recently been bought by Thierry who was gradually restoring it all to organic, wildlife sympathetic and economic order. This looked to be a massive and costly task so we were all more than happy to give some help to such a good cause. Off we went and filled stacks of buckets with round shiney chestnuts. Lunch was the first of many spectacular 4-course feasts which we ate in the welcoming farmhouse. Then followed a mass destruction to clear an area of land re-colonised by ash trees to try and restore it back to grassland, drystone wall and create enough space for a grey water recycling area. It was a very hot day and everyone was delighted when Thierry called us over to sample various flavours of his home-made sorbets mmmmm!



Figure 3. Collecting sweet chestnuts at Thierry's farm.



Figure 4. Roderic's presentation.

The second site visited was 'Ferme du Marigot' farmed by Francis and Romeric. The first day here was also spent chestnut collecting with a large BBQ picnic in the sun followed by a tour of the farm and explanation of the chestnut groves, including an unsuccessful one and a recent planting. He explained the siting of a good chestnut grove and also gave us a presentation on farming (Figure 4) including a demonstration on the chestnut processing and apple pressing procedures.

The third farm this week was that of Sabine and Raymond, 'Ferme des Finials'. As well as a spot of chestnut collecting we were all pleased to have a go at maintaining the chestnut trees using techniques shown before-hand of removing ivy and clearing epicormic growth,

removing low branches for farm machinery access and clearing surrounding scrub without damaging the very precious crop. Another picnic fuelled us for further work in the afternoon, rounded off by a tree grafting explanation and a tour of the dairy... bats, dogs and kittens included! Sabine kindly gave everyone a jar of her homemade chestnut puree 'Crème de Marrons'. A pizza in Najac ended the day nicely.

We ended the week by returning to Thierry's farm and continued with the tree and scrub clearance. The afternoon was spent in a big group effort to clear the blackthorn from the site of a historic watercress bed. Several thorny scratches and many swear words later, an old plugged well was unveiled (Figures 5 & 6). The lack of watercress



Figure 5. Before.....

disappointment was quickly outweighed by a good water source. I particularly enjoyed this day of blackthorn clearing as it released a lot of pent up frustration! Far better than therapy!



Figure 6. And After

THE WEEKEND

The weekend contained a very welcome lie-in for our now aching limbs! Then we all had a big day out at Najac.

Najac is one of the 'Plus Beaux Villages de France' (most beautiful villages of France) and lives up to this statement quite clearly. We walked up to the village and learnt about solar cookers which were being presented outside Thierry's restaurant. We then walked to the village centre where a large number of people had gathered to watch and participate in the apple pressing event (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Apple Pressing in Najac

After watching the pressing for a while we started our tour of culture. Firstly by visiting the 13th Century Saint-Jean church which was built by the villagers as punishment for their Cathar beliefs. We then toured the magnificent castle ruin which had narrow corridors and turret staircases still in good enough condition for us to explore. The castle was built in two stages, the square tower in 1100 and the 40m high Keep in 1253-63. It was one of the best military defenses of its time though later came to ruin when it was sold in 1793 to an owner who used it as a stone quarry for nine years.

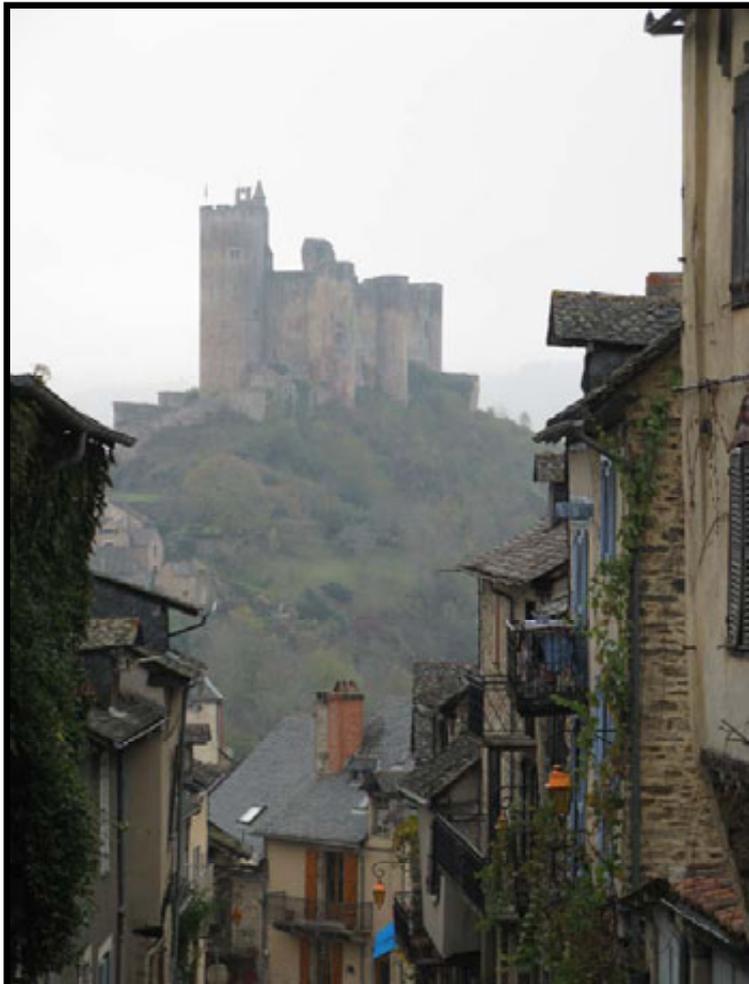


Figure 8. Najac Village and Castle

Several of us then went back to the apple pressing to lend a hand which turned out to be great fun as we worked into the evening to the beat of bongo drums. We all then had a special halloween dinner in Thierry's restaurant who served up amazingly tasty food (even for us vegetarians of the group!) and got us merry on oodles of red wine and bubbly. We all stumbled back down the hill to the gites for further sampling of the local cider!

For Sunday we all decided to visit the market at St Antonin after which we wandered around exploring. Tim and I decided to walk up the

gorge cliff which gave an epic view of the town and was a good head clearer for the hang-over! Tonight was my group's night to cook for everyone which was a little daunting but seemed to work a treat!

SECOND WEEK OF WORK (AND PLAY!)

Monday was spent at a new farm, 'Ferme Equestre de Daoudou'. We arrived bright and early to watch the goats being milked. We then had our usual coffee and biscuits prep and started work. We had to clear a fence from around the pigs field involving much wading and sliding up and down a slope with piles of fencing posts and wire.... Wooow! that got the leg muscles working! We then had a huge amount of the farms goat's cheese for lunch and learnt about how the farm makes a profit.

After lunch we were given the opportunity to go pony trekking on the farm's Fjord ponies (Figure 9). Our interpreter took this opportunity to go for a relaxing walk instead so the language barrier was quite amusing for knowing (not knowing!) what you were being told to do on the ride! I had 'Mistee' and I think we made a good little team! We understood what 'Allez, Allez, Allez' meant, and managed to get in a good amount of whizzing around bends and in between trees, which blew the cobwebs away!



Figure 9. Pony Trekking at Ferme Equestre de Daoudou

The riding group got back to the gites that evening to discover the walking group had accidentally stolen one of the farm dogs who was (sadly) returned at once!

A return visit was made to Ferme du Marigot on the Tuesday when we met the owner 'Francis' for the first time who was lovely and decidedly looked like various members of The Beatles! We were taken to a failed chestnut plantation where we took the dead trees out and dug very large holes for the new specimens. We were shown a three year old orchard and told about past and future management and funding.

On returning to the gites later that day a few of us decided to do a spot of home-made white-water rafting (Figure 10)! We returned very wet and cold but also with beaming smiles!

Our Wednesday was spent maintaining a community orchard (Figure 11). It poured with rain and we had our photograph taken looking very soggy and



Figure 10. Water Rafting Fun!

bedraggled for the local newspaper! We had a 'good-bye' lunch with the Mayor at the school canteen and were able to try a regional speciality of 'L'aligout' which was made from 50% potato and 50% cheese making it fairly difficult to eat in anyway but slowly!



Figure 11. Brushcutting at the Community Orchard

That evening Frederick, our Solagro contact gave us a presentation on the organisation. Solagro is a non-profit organisation with 20 (mainly agronomist) team members that work towards sustaining agriculture and energy using low inputs for biodiversity, soil, water and the environment. The organisation

mainly houses agriculture and agroforestry as well as industry. Work includes giving grants to farms to help plant and maintain hedges and good practice to pasture for conservation as well as profit. The project aim, which has involved the farms we worked on this fortnight is to create local groups of organic farmers and locals who can help each other, and in the process create a community spirit and therefore create more than successful production. Frederick then gave us a plum tree pruning demonstration outside the gites.

That evening the farmers at Ferme du Marigot threw a big soirée for us all to thank us for our work. We had a tasty 4-course meal with which it was announced ceremoniously at each course what we were being given by the chef with a 'Bon Appétit'. We were then entertained by an accordion player who we were all taught to countrydance to which was great fun, and also very funny at how rubbish we were! Christine from our group was brave enough to sing to everyone and the party ended with a few tunes played to us on the didgeridoo and drums. It was a very good night enjoyed by all.

We returned to 'Ferme du Treil' for our last day of work where we were finishing off clearing the trees. It poured all day which created very very soggy people! Thierry being completely lovely got us all to dry off by his open fire (Figure 12) where he handed out dry clothes to everyone! This was one of the nicest moments where he looked after us all so well, feeding us our last gorgeous lunch and giving us red wine and very strong Portuguese brandy. We then all sat in a circle and gave Thierry and Cendrine presents and tried to explain to them both what each of us did for a career back in England.



Figure 12. Drying off by Thierry's fire.

What was left of the afternoon was spent leisurely cleaning the gites up and packing. I helped to concoct a last meal of left over food from all the fortnights meals (I don't know why no-one was ill after that!). The lovely gite owner 'Bernard' called in that evening to cook us chestnuts and show us inside the

mill and his 'bar'! Where we all got to taste his very alcoholic walnut wine! He stayed for our last (dodgy) meal! and was made to sit through many a bad joke, but he was very polite and laughed at them all!

THE JOURNEY HOME

Bernard came to say good-bye in the morning and managed to get in a lesson of water divining in (which he had to give up on with me... I just didn't have the touch!).

Our first stop on the journey home was Cordes which was pretty but very hilly. We bought a lot of chocolate related items from a very nice pâtisserie.

Next was Albi, here we visited the Romanesque/gothic cathedral. This dominant, almost military looking building was built between 1282-1480. We stepped inside to see the elaborate architecture and paintings, but were fairly shocked to see all the gruesome paintings of Cathars being tortured or burnt in hell... It all seemed a bit debauched and depressing to me so I was fairly relieved to get out! A nicer visit afterwards was that of the Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition which was very interesting. Our last visit was in Galliac where we stopped for a spot of wine-tasting before heading off on the final drive to catch the night train back from Montauban.

Finally we arrived back in London on 7th November.



Figure 13. Bernard and Mark exchanging water divining techniques.

CONCLUSION

It was a shame that it had been such a bad year for the apple crop in France but it was good to get the chance to learn more about chestnut groves instead. I have now joined the Wiltshire Traditional Orchard Project and intend to carry on volunteering and finding out more about orchard management in the future. The trip has also inspired me to start going to French lessons!

I made some very good friends on the trip and the organisers Sarah and Mel did a fantastic job of keeping us working, entertained, happy and organised. I would hugely recommend the trip to anyone thinking about giving it a go and am VERY sad that I can't go again! I had a great time.



Figure 14. Bonsoir Najak, et merci!