

French Adventures: Part I

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Have you ever had a holiday in which each and every day stands out with defined, unique, and rich characteristics all on its own? This has been exactly the case for me these past two weeks. It all began when, accompanied by my family, our flight from Frankfurt, Germany touched down in Toulouse, France. There, three generations of Hubeles, from 82 to 15 years of age, embarked on quite the adventure! I knew in advance that this would be a trip to remember, but now, upon reflection, I see there may still be lessons that have yet to reveal themselves.



So, why the Pyrenees you may ask? Truth be told, the idea came by way of an unexpected email that landed in my inbox early last January. The sender was a complete stranger to me, Stephane Boistard of Lavelanet, France. I would soon learn that Stephane is the leading French expert in the field of Gemmotherapy, particularly the tree-to-bottle experience, and he was seeking a like minded colleague who shared his passion. An author, scholar, and producer of Gemmotherapy extracts, Boistard reached out to see if we might learn from one

another. Our mutual curiosity and openness led to the development of an online friendship.



We would meet monthly on Skype and share our current challenges, plans for the future, and exchange ideas regarding the extracts and their healing capabilities. It soon became clear we should meet in person and since my family traditionally spends some of our summer holidays in France, why not add the Pyrenees this year? The opportunity to explore a new location in France known for its rugged spectacular beauty AND meet Stephane was certainly too good to pass up.

As a family, we have learned over our years of travel that we prefer to settle in to one home base and then explore day by day from there. We found just the perfect setting for that on the outskirts of the sleepy village of Ilhat, home to less than 30 residents. Our home for ten days sat at the end of the road and there we were rewarded with 360 degrees of splendid mountain scenery. The sunsets were as spectacular as the morning fog that rolled in over the mountain tops. A terraced lush garden was filled with raised vegetable beds and fruit trees. Lucky for us, the Mirebelle trees were bursting with juicy ripe fruit throughout our entire stay. (And, by the way, Mirebelle plums happen to be my all-time favorite fruit!)

A trail just beyond our driveway led straight up to the mountain ridge, offering vistas like I have never before experienced. While our location was remote, the bustling town of Lavelanet was a mere ten minutes away, and there we would find a twice weekly market and two fully stocked organic grocery shops.

As if this all was not enough, we had the ultimate privilege of sharing our home with Titi, truly the soul of the property. Ear-less from an early encounter with skin cancer she was truly one of the loveliest cats that I've met (don't tell Ruby.) Titi led the life we all dream of; she spent her mornings lounging on the sunny deck or garden table, moved to the shade of a fruit tree in the afternoon heat, and made her way each evening to a cozy kitchen chair to retire for the evening.



While I will save sharing my conversations with Stephane for a follow-up post, please let me indulge in some gushing over our most memorable daily excursions.

We arrived in Ilhat at nightfall and, with some help from the locals, found our way up the gravel path to our house. As darkness comes quickly in the mountains, the only exploring we did was inside the ancient stone walls of the three story building that would be our home away from home for the days to come. Bedrooms divided up and luggage unpacked, we met around the kitchen table for a simple snack and tea before heading

off to bed.

The next day began with the promise of rising summer temperatures so, after an early breakfast of fruits, we took to the path we had spotted the night before. Up we climbed for over an hour before reaching a magnificent ridge trail that offered views of what appeared to be endless layer upon layer of higher and higher mountains: the Pyrenees. After a strenuous hike, we were rewarded with an invitation for an amazing vegan lunch prepared by Sabine, Stephane's wife. Following lunch, the hiking maps were spread across the table and our days ahead began to take shape.



Day two took us to the highly recommended Mirepoix Market, famous in the area for its mix of local craftsman and international food. I was immediately surprised by the number of booths advertising vegan menus. This was not the France I had experienced in years past! The find of the day was the falafel booth run by a Syrian family with a proud sign announcing that the products sold were both gluten free and vegan! As you probably know, the next thing I would want to find is a fresh juice stand, and of course I did.

The following day, thinking we would tackle the easiest local hikes first, we scheduled what we thought would be short

morning walk around the perimeter of Lac de Montbel. Appearing as if it is from another world, Montbel, is an absolute gem of well preserved nature. Let me sum up our experience with this one statement: The pure magic we experienced those first three hours of solid hiking dwindled rapidly once we discovered we were only halfway around the lake, out of water, and the afternoon sun had increased the temperatures!

Roquefixade is the quintessential mountain village, home to the ruins of a Cathar Castle, without any of the tourist kitsch. It had every perfect component, including a teeny market square, a travelers inn for hikers, a bevy of curious cats, and breathtaking views. Our hike to the chateau and summit took us through lush forests and along narrow ridges to reach a point in which one has vistas of Spain to one direction and Toulouse to the other.



Nebias, home to a magical forest and green labyrinth, was also highly recommended by my friend Stephane. His descriptive explanations placed it high on our list and he did not fail us in the least. This forest is straight out of The Lord of the Rings and one can be sure there are fairies lurking just behind the trees. I'd revisit that forest again and again, but the labyrinth was another story for me. Somewhere tucked away deep in my memory bank was a less than pleasant encounter with

a labyrinth in England, chapters ago in my life. Funny how those memories came flooding forth when I became turned around among the giant moss covered stones. Full disclosure, a bit of panic I hadn't experienced in years paid a short but unwelcome visit, soon to disperse once I spotted the forest trail just beyond the exit.

Up a winding mountain road from the small village of Monteferrier is the entryway to the St. Barthelemy Trail. The climb takes one through a timeless enchanted forest of Beech trees before reaching the high grassy mountain ridge. We chose this hike after having enjoyed the higher elevation of Roquefixade and wanted one more similar experience before returning to Germany. This was truly a matter of saving the best for last and I believe it was everyone's favorite outing.



Please be sure to check back in next week for Part Two that includes our follow-on visit to Murten & Laupen, Switzerland!