

Life as an Experiment

"Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do."

– Mark Twain

This has served as my motto for at least the last two decades. It continues to serve me in the face of my own fears, lines from old stories, questioning from my family and even surprising bouts of homesickness. It continues to guide me because I am committed to living my life without regrets. If life is one big experiment (and I am certain it is), I have surely entered a new phase. Boundaries that I perceived to be real are continually revealed to be illusions. Visiting Kyiv last month was all about dissolving geographical boundaries. But there are so many other boundaries in our lives. Some of these boundaries protect us, and some, in the end, limit us from living life to its fullest. We can gain further inspiration from Twain in the way he continued after the lines above: *"Throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."* I am.

While I may not have caught the full potential of those trade winds this past week, I did my best to explore, dream and discover all the riches here in Ariege. After six weeks of solo travel, my husband, Joachim, caught up with me in Toulouse. I was thrilled to see him for countless reasons, and at the top of the list was my excitement to share Foix. In summers past, we have based ourselves in villages outside of Lavelanet and quickly discovered the vast differences in climate and topography over a 30 minutes drive to the other side of a mountain. Foix was the home base I chose for myself last winter to finish my third book, and I quickly fell in love with the mountain views, the warmth of the people and the

charm of this small city. Now we had a week off to set sail together.

Although I had known Day 15 of Tour de France would end at Prat d'Albis, just above Foix, I had not given it much thought. That is, until I realized it would literally pass along the street above our house. For any TdF fans, may I just share that we had a front-row seat for the approach to the final ascent of the day? And it was so simple to stroll up the hill, finding a seat along the stone wall to cheer the racers on with our neighbors. We were advised to arrive an hour before the riders were due, for the pre-race entertainment. Our timing was perfect. Just as we settled in, the caravan of wacky sponsor vehicles arrived, tossing out swag to bystanders. It was quite the thrill to see the riders arrive over the hill, with Simon Yates (winner of the day) already far ahead of the pack.

I wasn't too sure how we would improve on that impromptu viewing of TdF, but each day we've had a healthy dose of the natural beauty of our location. Never traveling further than 30 minutes by car, we still only put a dent into our list of options. There is just so much to see and do in this part of Ariège. If we did nothing but follow the local markets, picnic and swim in the village streams, it would have been fulfilling enough, but there really was so much more.

Within this region, there are three magnificent prehistoric caves. We chose to visit the Niaux Cave, just a 20-minute drive from Foix, passing Tarascon-sur-Ariège. For years as a high school history teacher, these caves have been on my bucket list, but getting to the Pyrenees always seemed a bit out of reach. Now with the opportunity here, I have to say there was just a bit of hesitation. There was no doubt I really really wanted to experience that art, and at the same time, I really really hate caves, especially long, dark slippery ones. I will say in truth the experience definitely did not disappoint, and at the same time, I was delighted to

see the light of day at the end of the tour. While I was prepared to be in awe, I really had no idea how powerful the experience would be. The number of paintings alone was surprising, but the attention to detail was astounding. Imagining life that long ago, and the scenes that took place as those paintings were created, is truly overwhelming.

The small town of Foix is a busy place year-round, with a cultural events calendar to challenge cities three times its size. There is literally something artsy happening every week, and lucky for us, our dates in town aligned with the Regional Folk Festival, the Jazz Festival, a weekend antique market and the African Dance Festival. Not usually a festival fan, here in Ariege I am quite comfortable sharing space with the few hundred rather than thousands who enthusiastically attend nearly everything offered.

JazzFoix was a real find, since Joachim is a jazz guitarist and performed for years with a band in Stuttgart before our move to Texas. He was delighted, and more than a little surprised that I had bought three-day passes for the two of us, with a commitment to attend the 9:30 p.m. concerts. Afternoon naps allowed me to power past my bedtime three nights in a row, much to my own surprise! It certainly helped that the event was literally two blocks from our house. On the first night, we realized that in our twenty years together, we had never attended a single concert as a couple. To be sure, there was a bit of a learning curve, as Joachim is a front row, center seat kind of guy, opting for the full experience, whereas that was my worse nightmare. I prefer something midway back on the aisle, allowing for some perspective to take it all in. It was good that we had three nights to find our way to a good compromise. We enjoyed ourselves so much, we already have the dates on our calendar for next summer.

Scorching temps across France last week led me to make a pact to swim or wade into every stream or river encountered. It was a fabulous idea, and let me just say, I swam in water so cold

it hurt even after I was out! Not so many years ago, I would have laughed if anyone had suggested I swim in anything less than 80 degrees. And to think of all I would have missed!

I love local art events and have attended some very special ones over the years, but last week I attended the most enchanting one ever. It was Vagabond Arts, hosted annually in the tiny hamlet of Baulou. Cars are left out on the main road, and the experience begins as you enter the forest paths. Every building in the hamlet, from the church to the barns, is put to use to display work from area artists. Each display was an installation in itself under the canopy of moss-covered beech trees. The effect was mesmerizing, and I left completely rejuvenated, as if I had been to a spa.

Wasn't it perfect that the weather cooperated with my plan to wrap up our week with a short train journey to the thermal baths at Aix-les-Thermes? We went from highs of 98 degrees to rainy skies and 70 degrees, and rain overnight on perfect cue. A 40-minute train ride to the ski resort village of Aix is a treat in itself, but then two hours in the thermal baths with spectacular mountain views puts it over the top. Taking the train is a must, because the last thing you want to do when your bones are like jelly is to mess with driving home. If you needed another reason to visit Ariege, this should do it.

We have fallen more in love with Ariege on each visit, and we certainly dream of creating a second home in the area. However, with all of the unexpected events and changes in the last year, I have become immensely aware that how I will work in Europe is still unfolding. It would be lovely to make a second home base in Foix, but I think for the meantime, I'll need to take life in six-month chunks and see how this continues to play out. With that in mind, I do have a return ticket to Europe for February 2020. That ticket gets me to this continent. The where and for how long will need to make themselves known in the next chapter, setting sail beyond the safe harbor of home.