

The People You Might Meet

The retreat I led early on this month was held at La Maison du' Cedre owned by **Jean and Marie**. Over the course of my days on their property I came to appreciate the beautiful gardens of their place as well as the warmth and hospitality the couple exude. Seeing copies of their books I grew quite interested in the work they did as practitioners. When we ran into them days later at the Lavelanet market, they invited us to spend a morning with them. It was then we learned of their years of travel around the world teaching the ancient Hawaiian spirituality of Ho'oponopono. This practice of reconciliation and forgiveness has been passed down by indigenous Hawaiian Healers throughout the South Pacific.

As passionate teachers, authors, and therapists, Jean and Marie are a fascinating couple. A year ago last spring, having the desire to create a space for their clients to spend some days of rest along with therapy, they bought La Maison. As with any endeavor of that magnitude they have put in a great deal of hard work to create a space that aligned with their vision. They are a remarkable example of how a couple can manifest a dream. However, they were quite open about the fact that the outcome has yet to meet their expectations. They shared that they have been warmly received as a couple by the community and claim to have met more people in their year in Lavelanet than in ten elsewhere. Yet professionally, the concept they created has not taken off. Open to how they are to share their gifts they contemplate other uses for La Maison as well as relocating to their home in Avila, Spain the hometown of Marie.

Muhammad and I actually met last summer when my family ventured out to the Mirepoix market. Needless to say I was overjoyed to see him again this year in Lavelanet. He and his engaging teenage daughters run a bustling market booth with the most exquisite vegan Syrian food. Yes, I will admit, it

was my stomach that served as my first guide. It was nearly lunchtime the day we first met and would be several hours before I could prepare my fresh finds from the market. We chatted politely as I tested their freshly made falafels and walked away munching on a small bag full. With four hungry munchers in my group the bag was empty in moments which was a very good thing. I was then prompted to turn back and learn more about Muhammad and his family. Of course last summer the migration of Syrian refugees to Europe was at its peak and their story was of particular interest.

Muhammad shared with me their journey that had actually begun in 2016 leading them first to Germany and finally to the Ariège region of France. He and his wife Mona traveled with five children in order to protect them from the peril that fell on so many Syrians. They fled like thousands of others with aching hearts, not only to leave their homeland but also the heart wrenching unknown fate of their oldest son. It is now five years since they have any word from him. With tears in his eyes Muhammad reminded me he is not alone in his pain. And for him, while it does not lessen the impact, he has others that share his experience. He is happy to have found safety for 6 of 7 of his family members and has built a business to sustain them and formed a community of support in Foix. Muhammad is not living his dream but he is finding his way given the circumstances of his life. He finds joy in his daily life through time with wife and children and when he is not preparing the most delicious Syrian food, he is a potter, his trade in Syria.

Twenty years ago **Michel** set out to create a setting to fuel his passion for herbal studies. Restoring an ancient farmhouse and creating gardens of medicinal herbs was just the start. To make use of his knowledge and the harvest of plants he soon created his own drying system and distillery. Then, to allow others to experience and learn from him, an eclectic set of accommodations were added one by one. I wish I could say my

favorite, but each has a unique charm and mystique. There is a gorgeous Mongolian yurt, truly authentic as Michel had it shipped home after one of his excursions, a gypsy caravan so kitted out I think my rustic phobic daughter might even consider a night there, a large stone gite with dormitory style bedrooms and get this – a perfect replica of a Russian log constructed sauna. The energy required to bring this purposeful vision to life permeates the land and it is impossible not to be inspired by his creative ingenuity. A recognized expert in his field, Michel established the way in which he wants to live and then found the means to support himself through his teachings and boutique quality products. Michel and his wife along with their assistant prepare a remarkable selection of creams, balms, tinctures, and extracts from local plants and those he collects from his annual excursions abroad. They have also extended their work and life to Morocco where they have a second home in the Atlas mountains. Michel spends each April living in the Berber region teaching herbalism and continuing his own studies of desert plants and their properties.

Francois and her boyfriend Bruno bought land and a small house in La Coume just over a year ago. They set out to be self sustaining by raising sheep and learning the art of permaculture. I met Francois when she delivered a sample harvest of herbs and vegetables from their 1 acre test garden. Seeing my interest, she offered an open invitation to come pick what we could use in the weeks ahead. When I arrived the next evening looking for more of that picture perfect lettuce she had shared, Francois and her boyfriend offered to give me a tour. This being only their second growing season they explained they were still in the learning stage and had planted a menagerie of all they knew was possible to grow in the region. Like all organic gardeners, they shared that there are still many lessons ahead particularly when it comes to protecting their plants from pests. They saw this as a period of trial and error and sometimes felt they had more error than

success. What I witnessed certainly looked like success to me as I looked up and down the bountiful and well cared for rows. There before me were flourishing rows of fava beans, green beans, celery, potatoes, multiple varieties of lettuce, basil, parsley, nasturtiums, and more zucchini than I had ever seen and a greenhouse bursting with towering tomato plants. I could not help but marvel at their ingenuity and determination to live the life they desired and to find a means to make it sustainable.

Paulette, 72, still lives in the family home where she was born in La Coume. She is a voracious gardener tending her collection of potatoes, herbs and flowers rain or shine. Paulette still carefully washes her clothing in the water source just outside her door and hangs it dry like a still life painting from former times. The laundry display however was replaced each day that France played in the world cup, and in its place was a gigantic French flag hung with pride. Paulette loves her country and Ariège as much as she loves her gardening. She confirmed she must see local sights yet shared that her personal favorite is the view right out her own window that opens to the mountains. She tells me that in her youth the mountains we see were not the dense forests of today. Instead, they were covered in grassy meadows that she had to cut herself with a sickle in her youth at the end of each summer. The grasses were then dried in the sun and rolled up to feed the sheep over the long winter. The fact that Paulette consciously sets aside time each evening to open wide her shutters, observe the setting sun and give gratitude for another day tells me so much about this woman. She exudes a positive spirit and finds joy in her simple daily chores and natural surroundings.

This is just a glimpse at those that have enriched our month here in the Ariège region of the Pyrenees. The people and the accessibility to nature in its purest state will have us returning again and again. This month has served as a

successful experiment for Joachim and I. We set out to test whether we could keep up with our professional commitments and at the same time consciously slow our daily pace and simplify our life. The time change allowed for us to flip our work days providing a natural space each morning breakfast on the terrace and venture off for a hike in the forest, a trip to the nearby waterfalls, or on Fridays a trip to the Lavelant Market. This ability to create spaciousness at the start of our day fed our work hours that began after lunch and continued until 9 PM. We feel so fortunate to be at a place in our lives to give this a try and at the same time have taken conscious steps to make it a possibility. While these final days are a bit bittersweet, we will depart with such gratitude for each daily experience.

Our son Sebastian is headed our way now to join us and at the end of the week we pack up and head out for three weeks of family time in Ohringen Germany. Join me next week and I will share a bit about our life in Ohringen.

Keep up on my daily experiences by following **@LaurenHubele** on Instagram. You'll also find all of my photos at **#Notesfromeurope2018**.