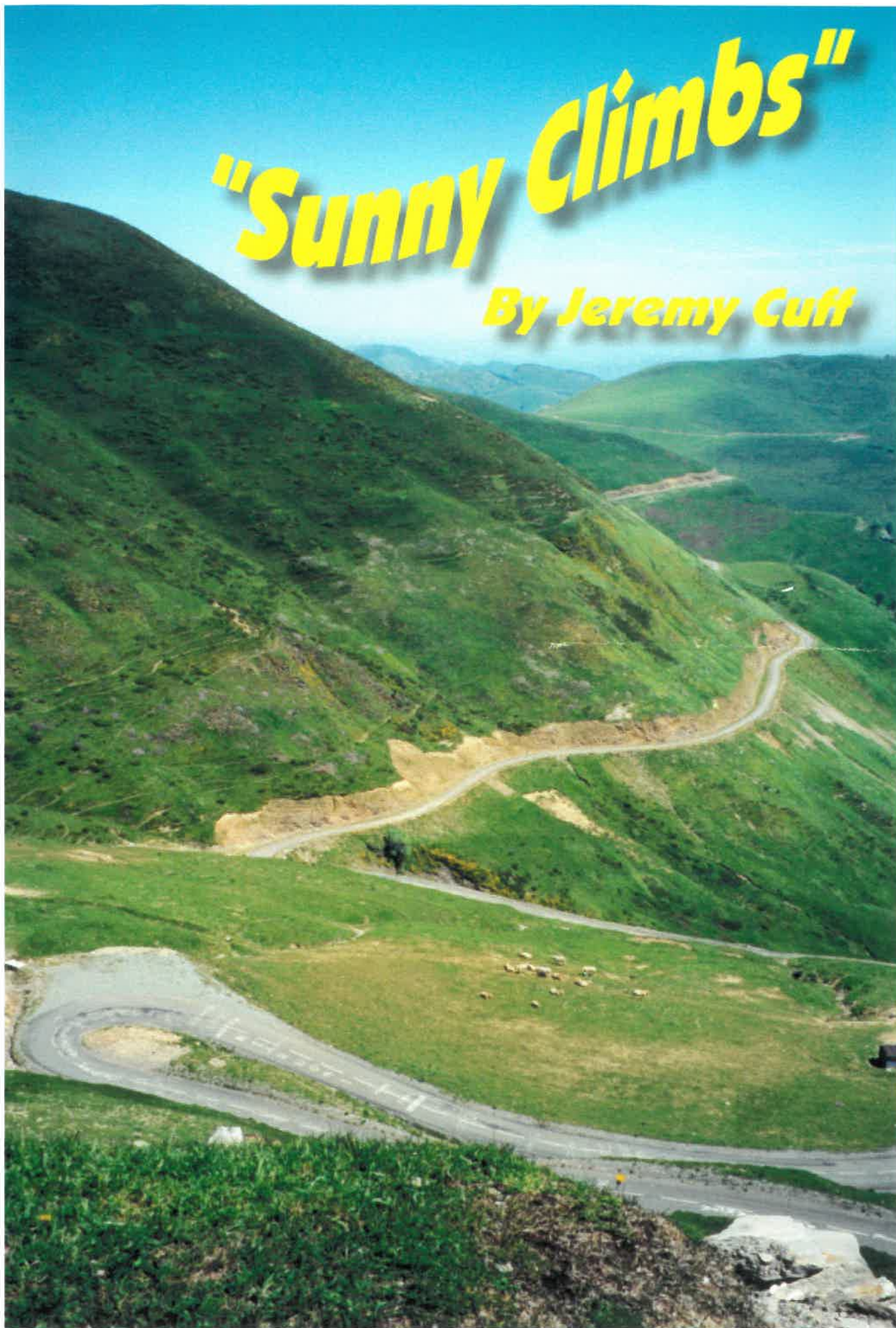


"Sunny Climbs"

By Jeremy Cuff



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A Motorcycle Tour from Bilbao to St.Malo via The Pyrenees and the Mediterranean

I'd fancied the idea of a motorcycle tour for some time and had convinced, or perhaps, coerced Amanda into believing that the concept was indeed a good one. We had the use of a Honda 750cc "Africa Twin" which is based loosely upon the Paris-Dakar desert racers. We then needed an itinerary with good roads, great scenery, interesting towns and some fine weather. With that in mind, I suggested that the Pyrenees might be a good idea and we looked into it. We both agreed and went to work on planning the trip in earnest, my blind enthusiasm and Amanda's caution combining to plot a challenging but hopefully humane journey.

Our preparations for the journey required editing to essentials. This time, our concern was not the baggage allowance but what the baggage would allow. We borrowed some throw-over panniers, bought a tank bag and Amanda would wear a rucksack. The tank bag itself, once filled, was quite bulky and slightly restricting. I soon got used to it, slicing through the rush hour traffic towards Portsmouth to catch the evening ferry to Bilbao in Northern Spain. On top of the tank bag, a clear plastic wallet contained our route instructions - one sheet for each day's travelling. Our mission statements for the journey were "To cross the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean" and "To avoid World Cup Football violence on the way back up through France".

In bright sunshine and against the backdrop of a storm, Portsmouth looked more striking than usual as the ferry edged its way out of the harbour, passing warships from past and present in the form of Lord Nelson's *HMS Victory* in dry dock and the aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious*. It was that unique sort of light that photographers from the National Geographic magazine are so expert in capturing to accompany their articles. Typically, I'd left the camera in the cabin thus leaving the event unrecorded. Gathering momentum into the Solent close to the old sea forts, the ferry pushed towards the Eastern tip of Isle of Wight and out to sea past the peculiar Nab Tower which serves as a lighthouse to guide large ships through the deep water channel.

Leaving Portsmouth in the evening, the "Pride of Bilbao" takes about thirty hours to reach destination with two nights on board, arriving early morning. It's another world on this "floating hotel" which I'd originally thought of as a car ferry similar to those used on the Dover/Calais sailings. I soon realised that, unlike ourselves, many passengers travel for the cruise itself rather than as a way of getting to Spain.

The ship's entertainment is provided by a house band and entertainment team, and is designed to appeal to an older audience, who make up the bulk of the passengers. I wondered as to whether the predominantly young musicians actually enjoy playing "middle of the road" and "old favourite" cover tunes. Perhaps the choice between working as a musician or an office clerk tips the balance in the favour of working musician, even if you're not passionate about the music performed. The entertainment manager obviously enjoyed himself on-stage, crooning his way through the likes of Barry Manilow and Neil Diamond covers. Amusingly, the evening ended with the dance floor filled with drunks, which I cruelly dubbed "People who

can't drink turning into people who can't dance". My sarcasm aside, they appeared to be having a good time.

The Bay of Biscay is renowned for being a rough crossing. We were fortunate as the sun shone and the sea stayed calm, enabling Amanda to leave her sea-sickness tablets in the cabin. There wasn't that much to do except relax and have a lazy day, unless you like bingo. One woman in particular amused me as she concentrated intently on the bingo numbers with her tightly curled hair, haggard features and succession of cigarettes flapping away in her mouth - a stereotype bingo player if there is such a person! I read my copy of Autosport in record speed to keep in touch with the Formula One silly season - "Schumacher to drive for McLaren", "Villeneuve to drive for Ferrari if Schumacher moves to McLaren", "Schumacher to stay at Ferrari", "Villeneuve to stay at Williams", "Damon Hill to finish a race in '98"!

A number of whale species inhabit the vastness of the Bay of Biscay and an identification chart on the upper deck shows the species most likely to be encountered. During the day, hopeful passengers scanned the seascape for passing cetaceans and in the late afternoon, we were rewarded with a sighting of a school of playful dolphins.

The second evening's entertainment programme was more of the same with the addition of costumed singers and dancers performing interpretations of West End musicals. We retired early to the cabin as docking at Bilbao was at 07.00 hours the following morning.

Over a hearty breakfast, with the silhouetted foothills of "Green" Spain looming towards us, we discussed the first leg of our journey - from Bilbao to San Sebastien via the coast road and then on to Biarritz in France for our first night. Manoeuvring into Santurtzi port, we went up on deck, observing our destination with interest along with fellow passengers. Bilbao is the industrial and shipping centre for Northern Spain - a jumbled collection of cranes, storage tanks, containers, warehouses, lorries and industry. After the call, we headed for the car deck, saddled up, turned the key and pressed start nothing happened. Then I remembered - I had to leave the bike in gear. With the mystery solved, the machine roared into life - much to my relief!

And off we went - our first tentative steps into Spain, and in brilliant sunshine. I had to quickly adjust to being on the "wrong side of the road", it was rush hour and I had to guess my way to the coast road, signs being non-existent. A hunch took me through the centre of Bilbao and towards the hill beyond, where, as if by magic or miracle, we stumbled upon the sign I was looking for - to the town of Bermeo. I clenched my fist and exclaimed "Yes!" at the sight of this unremarkable object.

I couldn't help but notice the "Napalm Death" posters as we passed through Mungia, finding it hard to imagine a thrash metal band playing gigs in such a sleepy Spanish town. After the bottleneck of Mungia, the traffic thinned out considerably and the bike became a pleasure to ride on the snaking roads that thread through the coastal hills. The drop down into the fishing port of Bermeo is negotiated through a series of switchbacks that I thought were incredible at the time, although compared to what we would encounter in the Pyrenees, they were somewhat insignificant.



A Whale of a time in the Bay of Biscay



Arrival in Spain, Santurtzi Port, Bilbao



Biarritz Sunset



Leather jackets out, T-shirts in - waterfront Biarritz

Photographs by Jeremy Cuff & Amanda Chaunt

We stopped at a vista on the climb out of Bermeo, took a couple of photos and pushed on, passing a beautiful estuary between Bermeo and the next town of Gernika Lumo. We took a pit-stop there. Amanda went off in search of bottled water whilst I waited by the bike.

And so it was, at Gernika Lumo, that my lack of conversational Spanish was uncovered. A local man, who appeared from a nearby bakery, wandered over. Clearly interested in the motorcycle and the me, he started chatting. The attempted conversation disintegrated into an embarrassing clutter of monosyllable utterances, sign language, semaphore, finger pointing, nervous laughter and shrugs. I was annoyed with myself for not making the effort to learn a little Spanish before leaving home. Amanda had a similar experience buying the water. Our thirsts quenched and lack of linguistic skills exposed, we hit the road - next stop Lekeitio.

Lekeitio, like many towns along the North coast, is a picturesque fishing port. We happened upon the old harbour more by luck than judgement as a diversion forced us through the back streets and along the harbour front before rejoining the main coastal road. Stopping for a few minutes, we watched as women mended nets on the quayside ahead of the next voyage into the Bay of Biscay and beyond, perhaps even to British or Irish waters. It would have been a great day to set sail - visibility was superb and the deep blue waters were flat calm.

Drawing nearer to San Sebastien, our planned lunch-time break, we began to see more population and encounter more traffic. We cruised through the resort towns of Zumaia and Zarautz and then hopped onto the main coastal road into San Sebastien itself. A cosmopolitan resort with impressive buildings and a crescent shaped beach packed with sun worshippers, San Sebastien looked like a town worth visiting for a couple of days. We would only spend a lunch-time. "Better to spend an hour here than not at all", I mused.

It was now about midday and baking hot, no wind hitting us as we crawled through the busy town centre roads amongst scores of mopeds and cars. Spying a street café with bike parking near the beach, we wobbled across a couple of lanes and parked up. We managed to correctly order bottled water in Spanish (dos agua) but for the cheese sandwiches, we resorted to French (deux sandwich avec fromage). The waitress appeared mildly irritated!

Toll roads are a nuisance for bikers if they are unexpected - your money is always where you can't easily reach it. Our pesetas were handy but our francs weren'tand we were just inside France! Amanda rummaged through various pockets, eventually fumbling our payment into the cashier's hand.

We rode straight to our accommodation in Biarritz thanks to the brilliant idea of signposting hotels. Eager for a shower and to stretch our legs, I deposited Amanda at the hotel reception to check-in whilst I went to refuel the bike. Pleased to ride without the tank bag and panniers, I couldn't resist a quick snoop around before returning to the hotel. The seafront looked fabulous and it was only three "o" clock allowing us plenty of time to enjoy the city. Leather jackets were definitely out, shorts and T-shirts were definitely in!

We emerged showered and revitalised, walking down to the seafront and up to the lighthouse on the headland, stopping along the way for ice creams and drinks. It was so hot that Amanda's feet began to blister, preventing us from walking much further. A few beers on the promenade rewarded us for our days travelling, mingling amongst unassuming locals and exuberant football fans from Brazil and Scotland - each predicting World Cup victories for

their respective teams. We culminated our stay in Biarritz with stomach expanding pizzas whilst watching the daredevil antics of screeching swifts (once known in England as "devil birds"), navigating between buildings and gliding across a fantastic sunset. Biarritz had been a good choice.

Our first day in the Pyrenees took us from Biarritz to Pamplona by a very indirect route. We made an early start and "headed for the hills". The road was much better than I expected for our first stint to St.Jean Pied de Port. I enjoyed the exhilaration of riding in the morning cool, imagining the adventure that lay before us as we wound our way into the encroaching mountains. We took a small detour to the sleepy village of St.Etienne de Baigorri and then on to St.Jean Pied de Port itself.

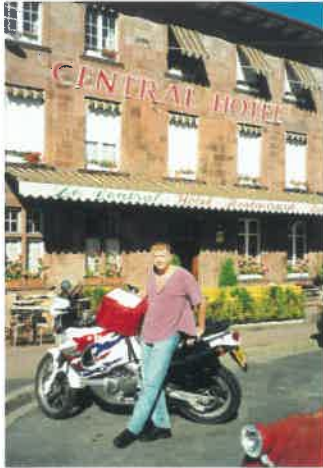
It was still quite early as we basked in the warm sun, drinking "umpteen" cups of the most wonderful coffee served with jugs of hot milk. The shops and cafes were visited by numerous delivery vans, coming and going like bumble bees pollinating their favourite flowers. We watched as the driver of the tourist "train" prepared for the day ahead, wiping down his cab with a chamois leather before the arrival of his first batch of passengers. The town was gearing up for a busy day. Later, busloads of tourists from the coastal resorts would positively deluge this picturesque town.

As we looked on, surreal comedy prevailed over harsh reality. A dog ran hurriedly past us along the pavement. It continued apace until reaching a zebra crossing where it stopped abruptly. The dog then looked both ways. Satisfied that the coast was clear, it jogged over the crossing to the other side and along the opposite pavement before accelerating back up to full speed and disappearing up a side street. We both noticed it, looked at each other and roared with laughter!

Concerned that petrol stations may be scarce in the mountains, my motto was "fuel up at every opportunity". Before departing, I topped up the tank - a discipline that was to serve us well throughout our journey. A few miles outside of "St.Jean", at the village of St.Jean le Vieux, we would turn right towards Mendive, Iraty and Larrau. We found a right turn but there weren't any signposts. Using great skills of deduction, I concluded that it must be the "right" right turning, as there were no other right turnings! Our chosen road didn't appear on all maps but what a magnificent road it turned out to be. After riding along the valley floor as far as Mendive, we began to climb sharply through a string of breathtaking switchbacks.

Patches of sticky tarmac and gravel littered the road, especially on the corners, forcing me to maintain concentration on the road whilst snatching frequent glances at the scenery. We dodged the free ranging cattle and sheep near the summit of Col Burdincurutcheta before halting at a remote cafe to marvel at our choice of route. Passing through the Iraty Forest and the skiing resort of Iraty itself, birds of prey wheeled through the blue sky and abundant butterflies (especially fritillaries, blues and skippers), danced in the sunlit glades. At Iraty, the last of the winter's snow was still evident on a few distant peaks.

The twisting descent towards Larrau gave me a crash course in overcoming vertigo. There's no barriers to stop you if you go off the road - and it's a long way down to the valley floor! Reaching Larrau we turned right towards Spain, climbing steeply towards the border at Port de Larrau at an altitude of 1585 metres.



Coffee break at St.Jean Pied de Port



Port de Larrau - a high point of the journey



Climbing out of Castejon.



The end of the road at Arinsal, Andorra

Photographs by Jeremy Cuff & Amanda Chaunt

Crossing into Spain, we began a long winding descent from the mountains back into the foothills. The village of Ochagavia seemed like a relic from a bygone age with its cobbled square, confectionery kiosk and river flowing through the centre. It was "siesta" time as we stopped for a drink, sharing a bar with a group of old Spaniards who hardly seemed to notice our arrival and departure.

We had hoped to find fuel in Ochagavia but to no avail. The possibility of running out of fuel began to play on my mind as I willed a petrol station to materialise out of thin air. We would pass through a number of small towns, all without petrol stations, before eventually finding one at Aribe. With the mountain scenery temporarily forgotten, we rejoiced at the sight of this lonely petrol station.

Being used to self service petrol stations back home, I immediately "self-served" myself to the indignation of the pump attendant. Unbelievably, this particular petrol station doubled as a bar - one half being the garage shop, the other filled with a riotous bunch of old Spaniards. What better a place to get well lubricated than a garage!

Much new development work is underway on the outskirts of Pamplona, a lot of it quite bland, giving a false impression as to the feel of the main town. We cruised into the centre, weaving between lanes in an effort to find our hotel. Close to the bull ring was the tourist office where Amanda hopped off to ask for directions to the Hotel Maisonnave. It was about four 'o' clock and the office was conveniently closed. "Perhaps it opens at midnight", I jested, sweltering in my leather jacket. Without the use of a map or directions, our search proved fruitless and we eventually admitted defeat by organising a taxi to lead us to our there.

The hotel's literature said that "The staff pride themselves on the hotels high standards and personal service and you are sure to receive a warm welcome at this friendly hotel". The warm welcome didn't seem to apply to bikers. One of the receptionists was incredibly rude to Amanda as I waited outside with the bike. Perhaps she thought that we would sever heads with chainsaws, drink chambermaids blood, sacrifice virgins and commune with Beelzebub through satanic rituals.

Our "biker-friendly" hotel was situated in the heart of the old town, its tall buildings and narrow streets giving welcome shade from the blinding sun. The streets were quiet and lethargic in the oppressive afternoon heat. We walked to the top of the old city wall where I was attacked by a scruffy mongrel that exploded into action as I strolled past. Perhaps it sensed that I wasn't local! A safe distance from the frenzied canine, we stopped at a pleasant bar on the city wall, looking out over the suburbs towards the Pyrenees. Old women sat gossiping in the courtyard whilst a father and son fed chunks of stale bread to a herd of deer that are captive in the base of the city wall complex. They clearly enjoyed this supplement to their monotonous diet of grasses.

Pamplona is famous for the annual "bull run" and a great example of an authentic Spanish town. We didn't see any of the familiar franchise fast food outlets that are omni-present back home. We wanted to eat at 7 p.m. but food wasn't served in any of the restaurants until 9 p.m.! Despite our hunger, we were pleased to see that the local way of life was still alive and well - not pandering to the "24 hour, junk food, one-stop" culture that America exports all over the world.

The shops came alive in the evening cool as we wandered the streets, stopping at the odd bar and peering into a myriad of windows including that of a fishmonger, offering huge squid (Kraken perhaps!). Visiting one bar after the 9 p.m. "watershed", we ordered a beer and asked for the English menu promised on the sign above the door. It seemed that so few English speaking travellers visit Pamplona that the menu had long since vanished. Unable to find the "ancient scroll", the staff were embarrassed. We were also embarrassed - because we couldn't understand the Spanish menu.

Foreign travellers appeared to be a rarity in Pamplona. We eventually ate in the main square as groups of locals performed folk dances next to the bandstand. We retired relatively early, but the town was noisy until the early hours. Spain was playing in a World Cup match that night!

As I unlocked the bike from its subterranean home, I contemplated the day ahead. It was going to be a long ride to Andorra. It begged questions. How far? How long? How hot? How saddle sore? We were to name this part of our journey "Saddle sore-a to Andorra"!

We were on the road bright and early as a few stragglers from the night before were returning, dazed and confused, to sleep off their excesses. It was as difficult exiting the town as was finding our way to the hotel as we blundered onto the road to Jaca. It was a good road and we leaned into it, making good progress before the mountain roads to come. The early morning sun glared directly into my eyes causing me to ride with a squint and an awkwardly tilted head. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, I could afford to relax my squint and straighten my neck. We skirted the Embalse de Yesa reservoir, formed by the damming of the Rio Aragon and sped past anonymous villages perched precariously on hillocks. A few were derelict, although we weren't sure of the reason why. As we rode on, the Pyrenees loomed to our left.

We reached Jaca by 8.30 a.m. for our fuel and breakfast stop. Jaca is a kind of frontier town, a gateway to the Pyrenees with hotels, petrol stations, shops selling hiking equipment and tour operators. We selected a cafe and pulled over, pleased with our progress so far. Amanda was amused by my "froth moustache" as we sipped morning coffee, savouring what we thought was a "vegetarian breakfast" of chicken omelette!

After Biescas the mountains closed in around us and we began to climb through the forested steep valleys, the narrow roads featuring blind corners, short tunnels and occasional buses. Meeting buses on blind switchbacks whilst on the outside looking down pumps the adrenaline! The watchword was caution.

With time on our side, we made the detour to Torla and the Ordesa Valley National Park. Torla is the base for exploring this spectacular area and has numerous hostels and outdoor pursuits shops. Passing through Torla, we ascended gingerly through the spectacular entrance to the Ordesa Valley. Carved throughout the millennia by the forces of erosion including glaciers, the Ordesa Valley is an awesome spectacle. The near vertical walls of the valley made us feel dizzy and insignificant as we cruised as far as road would take us. Birds of prey seemed abundant here and we were fortunate to see both Red Kites with their unique forked tails, and a pair of rare Lammergeaiers (sometimes known as "bone breakers" due to their feeding habit of dropping bones onto rocks to release the nutritious marrow within) jostling in flight.

Back on the main road, we descended to the Rio Ara and followed the course of the river to Boltana and Ainsa. Perched conspicuously on telegraph wires were loose gatherings of European Bee-Eaters, the Northern-most species of this distinctive genus of birds. We stopped at the cross-roads town of Ainsa where thirst and fuel beckoned us once more. I set a world record time for drinking bottled water and Amanda recorded a personal best!

Reaching the next junction, we turned towards Castejon and into the spectacular gorge carved by the Esera River. Cheddar Gorge would never be the same again. At Castejon we turned again, weaving our way up through another spectacular climb. Thousands of feet above, para-gliders soared effortlessly on the thermals, circling like vultures over the African plains. It must have been the best view in the Pyrenees.

At El Pont de Suert, we made yet another fuel and drinks stop, allowing life to return to our increasingly numb backsides. With feeling having temporarily returned, we pressed on, hooking a left towards La Pobla de Segur. We climbed through yet another pass, the road similar in character to those we had experienced since Biescas. That is, until we came upon roadworks. Major roadworks.

A new road was being pushed through the valley floor, removing the switchbacks and replacing them with gentle curves and straights. I was surprised at such a large undertaking considering the tiny volumes of traffic. Ultimately, it would take all of the fun out of travelling through the mountains. Our fun, however, had just begun - and we took to the dirt, the gravel and the shale. Undaunted by the unexpected, we pitched our luck against punctures and dump trucks. We became enveloped in dustclouds behind the giant dump trucks until I seized my chance to pass, appreciating the transformation from zero visibility to visibility. As we disappeared into the distance, we retaliated with a "mini-dustcloud" of our own. I really enjoyed this section. Amanda wasn't so sure.

After La Pobla, we made the most of the good road, following the Noguera River to the town of Sort, where we clocked up our first 1000 kilometres. We made our final stop before continuing to Andorra itself, Amanda now suffering with "acute saddle soreness". It was fifty kilometres to La Seu D'Urgell, and a further twenty-five from there to Andorra La Vella. It was another spectacular road involving more twisting ascents and descents.

Somewhere near the top of the pass, Amanda began clawing frantically on my shoulder. I could only guess that she wanted me to stop. She leapt off the bike, throwing down the rucksack, pleading me to strip off her leather jacket which I dutifully did. Somehow, I didn't expect a frenzy of roadside passion. Instead, a hapless bee had travelled uninvited up her sleeve and stung her on the elbow, more than compensating for the lack of sensation in her hindquarters.

Once our emergency was over, life returned to normality as we rolled down the long decline towards La Seu passing the scene of a motorcycle accident. The rider was unharmed and helped to load his machine onto a recovery vehicle. A pool of oil and a smashed indicator stalk marked the point at which he tumbled, a testimony to his mistake.

The road into principality of Andorra was busier than we had seen all day. We negotiated the border crossing without being stopped and headed towards Andorra La Vella. Heavy traffic, petrol stations and shopping malls marked the approach this bustling town, a contrast to the

dozing towns and villages that seemed permanently in a state of "siesta". Our discomfort was slightly prolonged as we couldn't find signs to our hotel. Every other hotel was clearly signposted. We'd made good time arriving at around 5.30 p.m.

The Novotel, centrally located in Andorra La Vella, was to be our base for the next four nights. We could unpack, hang up our few clothes and ride without the panniers and tank bag. The receptionist seemed bemused as we lugged our belongings into the foyer, grimy and sweaty from the days exertions. I assumed that most guests arrived better turned out than ourselves, emerging pristine from an air conditioned bus or a hire car.

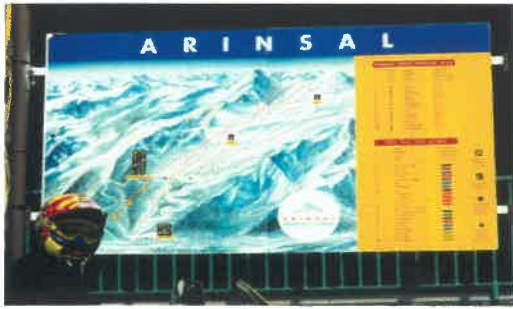
At dusk we set off in search of food, settling on a cheap restaurant, ordering our meal by pointing to the pictures accompanying the menu. Over a couple of beers, we chatted animatedly about the days travelling on what had been a long, but thoroughly satisfying day.

We hadn't planned to use the bike on the day following our epic ride. That is, until we awoke rejuvenated and inquisitive. We decided to ride up to the winter skiing resorts, expecting to be out for about two hours. Two hours turned into a whole day.

We climbed out of Andorra La Vella to Arinsal, quiet in the summer but enormously popular in the winter judging by the number of hotels already built and being built. We cruised our way up to the ski-lifts and stopped to admire the fantastic view. We chatted with a English couple about our respective journeys and grasped an opportunity for a rare photograph of both of us next to the bike. Enthused by the great weather, great roads and great scenery we decided to explore the other two roads in the area vowing to "travel to the end of each road". Before leaving Arinsal I rehearsed my Spanish and went to order drinks at a roadside cafe. I delivered my request, only to realise that the manageress was English. I blamed her incomprehension on my accent!

The next road, to La Sal, was even better. By now, I'd rolled up my sleeves - an act I was to later regret. The bright sun was quickly turning my forearms into a painful red, eventually to resemble the pigmentation of a cooked lobster! We continued past the ski station, regressing from sealed road into loose stones. We weaved our way to the Spanish border patrolled by a solitary snoozing customs official parked in a 4 X 4. Perhaps three or four vehicles might cross this border all day if he was lucky. We parked up and tiptoed into Spain, unable to tempt him into a bout of bureaucratic pettiness. Amanda delighted in standing on some remnant snow. A couple of snowballs later, we climbed to the peak above the border crossing, admiring the splendid panorama which included the Serra de Monteixo and the Serra de la Manega.

Next was the Ordino Valley, El Serrat and the ski slopes beyond, which nestled in a natural amphitheatre at the head of the valley. We stopped for refreshments at the ski cafe and embarked on a cambered uphill hike to a group small lakes formed by melt water. The air was clear and the distances greater than they appeared. We reached the lakes and looked back to the road, surveying it's vertiginous route down through the valley. A few people fished these high altitude lakes, almost certainly for introduced fish stocks. Snow lay accumulated in these depressions and it was a strange sensation indeed to stand on crisp snow in scorching heat and brilliant sunshine. And only a few yards from the snow, a young snake could be seen basking on a rock. These valleys were sensational, and the roads, a bikers dream. We couldn't understand why we didn't see more people although we weren't complaining. So much for two hours!



Contemplating the ski run at Arinsal



Switchback heaven and sunny climbs



Looking back to the end of the road, Andorra



Just inside Spain

Once again, sunny skies greeted us for our day trip to the D'Aigues Tortes National Park and Viella. We retraced our route through La Seu D'Urgell and over the pass to Sort, stopping for photographs on a couple of scenic lookouts. The valleys took on an almost mystical quality, partially obscured by dreamy plumes of morning mist. We encountered perhaps a dozen cars for the whole fifty kilometres from La Seu to Sort. After a coffee break at Sort, we turned North towards Viella, stopping briefly at Llavorsi to watch a group of white-water rafting teams preparing to lunge downstream.

Espot is the frontier town for the D'Aigues Tortes National Park - graced with hostels, tapas bars, general stores and Landrovers. We slalomed through a gaggle of hikers loading rucksacks and supplies into the park Landrovers for transit to one of the numerous hiking trails.

Beyond Espot, towards the park, the road was narrow and potholed, somewhat like a good African road. At the park entrance, the attendant ranger informed us that no "unauthorised" vehicles could proceed beyond her kiosk. That was the monopoly of the Landrover "taxis" that we had passed in Espot. A discussion ensued and a decision was made. We radioed a Landrover in Espot to collect us on the way past. For a few pesetas we were transported up to the Estany (Lake) de Sant Maurici from where we would return on foot to the car park, a distance of about two miles.

At the lake, we stopped for a few minutes to admire our location consisting of jagged peaks, steep screes, alpine meadows and mixtures of conifer and deciduous woodland. The descent through the woodland and meadows was enjoyable with the exception of my personal veil of flies which relentlessly accompanied me, taking no interest in Amanda whatsoever despite our close proximity. We strained our eyes on some steep screes hoping to spot izards, a type of mountain sheep, but were unlucky. Ideally, we needed more time in the park but we stuck to our plan to continue to Viella. Close to the car park, winter avalanches had felled a number of trees, evidence of which we had noticed two days previous in the Ordesa National Park. The Pyrenees clearly had many moods.

On completing our miniature hike, we returned to Espot to find some lunch. In true Spanish tradition, lunch would not be served for at least another hour, limiting our choice to bottled water. Re-hydrated, we pushed on towards Viella, passing Esterriz before commencing a marathon climb through intestinal roads to Port de Bonaigua at an altitude of 2072 metres. More switchbacks existed here than on any road we encountered during the entire journey, thus making it one of the most enjoyable. On the way up we passed a seemingly lone British motorcycle, the first we had seen since Bilbao.

Later, near the high point of the pass, we encountered another two British registered machines parked on a gravel run-off. We pulled over to find out their route, their destination and from where? They were part of a thirty strong group from the BMW Motorcycle Owners Club, following an itinerary from Southern Spain to France via the Pyrenees, eventually to conclude their journey at Cherbourg. We swapped a couple of stories and parted company discovering that we were from similar parts of the world. They had the services of a mechanic in a back-up van carrying spares. We had a couple of spanners and the owners manual!

The descent towards Viella is negotiated through another series of switchbacks, this time with dizzying drops only a few feet away on the outside of the barriers. It was much cooler on this side of the pass. As we approached Viella, a cloud formation appeared lodged in the valley, seemingly unable to move, like a vaporous roof over the town. We were hungry by now and performed a reconnaissance mission down the main street for a suitable place to eat. We chose the Pyrenean safe bet - pizza!

We had planned to ride on to Bagnères de Luchon but decided against it, the weather looking decidedly more ominous. Instead, we kitted up and proceeded back to Andorra, lost in clouds on Port de Bonaigua. Approaching Andorra la Vella, we tailed a couple on a German registered "Africa Twin", intermittently conversing with them as we halted at lights and crawled through the traffic. They were bound for Toulouse and couldn't understand why we weren't going there. England were playing against Romania in Toulouse. We watched the game in a bar that night. England lost.

We decided to take a sabbatical from the bike for our final day in Andorra. We got up late, just caught breakfast, checked our route plan, wrote postcards and ventured around town. We visited the Caldea Centre which looks like a futuristic church. It actually contains a health spa, a tiny roof bar with good views of the town and a collection of specialist shops offering expensive designer clothes, jewellery, sculptures and art.

The town itself is pleasant hive of activity, awash with cheap cosmetics, watches, jewellery, cameras, electrical equipment, alcohol and cigarettes. We bought a bottle of "Havana Club" Cuban rum for an incredibly cheap £3.50. We spent at least a couple of hours looking around the shops before retiring to a pleasant square to watch the world go by. Back at the hotel, I'd fallen in love with long baths, treating myself to a lazy two hours - the perfect antidote for days spent on motorcycles.

Pizza restaurants and cafes abound in Andorra la Vella, appearing as if the staple diet, much like rice in Africa or fish in the Maldives. Enterprising restaurateurs may find rich pickings amongst disgruntled and disaffected pizza consumers by offering an alternative cuisine. Our evening meal was spent in a restaurant attended by the most incompetent waiters imaginable on earth. Even Manuel from Fawlty Towers looked able in comparison. They were so bad they were good and I think they knew it. It could even have been an act!

During our stay at the Novotel, we'd noticed preparations for a concert on land opposite. A stage had been erected, barriers and backdrops put in place. We asked our hotel receptionist what was going to happen there, and she said that it was difficult to explain, a local tradition. Anyone wishing for a good night's sleep could forget it.

As darkness fell, crowds gathered for what was to resemble scenes from Mad Max! The concert started, fireworks began exploding everywhere, in the sky, in the crowds, on the streets. Costumed freaks incited the audience into frenzied pyromania. Chaos reigned as Catherine wheels spun, rockets launched skyward and party-goers danced in reckless abandon on fireworks, bangers, and firecrackers. Cataclysmic sounds ricocheted off every building and flame throwers spat shards of orange particles in wild spinning barrages. A firework spewing go-cart careered through the partying crowds and psychedelic characters paraded the streets like pied-pipers dripping with sparks. We had the best view in Andorra. The festivity went on until the early hours. We never did find out the name of this most bizarre event!



Veiled in clouds, 2072 metres above sea level



In a reflective mood at the Caldea Centre, Andorra la Vella



The view from our room, Andorra la Vella



Scenes from Mad Max!!

Photographs by Jeremy Cuff & Amanda Chaunt

With insufficient sleep, we guzzled coffee over breakfast in an attempt to wake up. We needed an early exit from Andorra to avoid the worst of the traffic. Whilst burdening the machine with the tank bag and panniers, we noticed that the car park staff had kindly cleaned the screen, fairing and headlight, removing its collection of squashed insects. Traffic was light and we quickly proceeded through Les Escaldes, Encamp and Soldeu before reaching the Port d'Envalira at an altitude of 2407 metres, the highest main road pass in the Pyrenees. Morning dew carpeted the upland pastures, appearing superficially like frost glittering in the bright sun. From Port d'Envalira we nose-dived to the border post at Pas de la Casa, passing into France. Descending further, we watched as a Golden Eagle glided effortlessly to a promontory on the roadside, perhaps to take advantage of some road-kill.

On reaching Bourg Madame, we turned towards the Mediterranean and began a long winding descent, skirting the peculiar Spanish enclave of Cerdagne and into the Tet River valley - site of a scenic railway and the sleepy towns of Saillagouse, Mont Louis, Olette and Villefranche de Conflent. At Villefranche, the confluence of the Tet and Cady rivers, we stopped to view the old fortified town and the precarious Fort Liberia, accessible by the "stairway of a thousand steps" which actually numbers 734!

Close to the town of Prades, the Canigou Massif loomed impressively on our right, an area of remote villages and trails that could easily warrant a few days worth of exploration and adventure. Post Prades, the landscape levelled out markedly and assumed a more typical Mediterranean character. We noticed amusing "0898" type fly posters on this section of road, advertising the services of abnormally top heavy women for the solitary male!

The land was notably drier in the coastal regions as we neared Perpignan for our well earned break. An extremely nice town, it would have a good choice for an overnight stay but we had to push on. Back en route, we couldn't actually see the Mediterranean on the coastal road to Narbonne and recalling our mission statement "To cross the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean", we took a detour to the sea. At Leucate Plage, we recorded this milestone of the journey with a couple of photographs. Amanda feigned irritation at my excessive observation of the topless bathers - my unexpected benefit of the detour.

Close to Narbonne, we turned inland onto the "Autoroute des Deux Mers" - the "road of two seas", speeding through the Corbieres towards Carcassonne and our destination Toulouse. At Carcassonne, we stopped for fuel, a lunch-time snack and to visit the imposing fortified city (the *Cite*), the largest fortress of its kind in Europe.

Back on track, we closed the gap quickly to Toulouse, passing the World Cup stadium where England were beaten by Romania two days previously. We were pleased there hadn't been any trouble, making our "Englishness" less of a social stigma.

Somehow, we found our way to the Hotel de Paris without asking for directions, arriving hot and parched. It was a small hotel, the reception embellished with an interesting collection of abstract paintings. Situated close to the centre, adjacent to the Place Wilson and five minutes walk from the main square, we were pleased with our choice.

In the main square, a market was in full flight offering ethnic clothes and an Aladdin's cave of interesting objects and artefacts from around the globe. Gathered in the bars around the square were groups of World Cup football fans - Paraguayans, Nigerians, French, a few English - all dressed patriotically in displays of good natured fanaticism.

And fanaticism it must have been to have travelled all the way from Paraguay. The atmosphere was euphoric as we settled into a few beers in the square. Face painters flitted between the rival factions applying war paint and photographers coaxed exuberant fans to their feet, recorded for posterity in cheering, stumbling groups. Even a couple of tattooed cross dressers found their way into our photographs - almost certainly English fans!

As we soaked up the ambience, more fans gathered ahead of the evening's game between Paraguay and Nigeria. We roamed off around the town to the Garonne River, checking out a couple of bars before returning, inebriated, to the main square. We continued boozing as dusk turned to dark. A whole swathe of tables, occupied by characters in various stages of intoxication was served by the most efficient of waiters, an opposite to the "Manuels" of the previous night in Andorra. For dinner, we ate Indian, a welcome change from the pizza overkill of Andorra.

Later, we returned to the square where a band was performing their set of cover tunes on a makeshift stage. We drank more beer. Amanda was worse for wear forcing our return to the hotel. Somewhere on the way back we encountered an oompah band, with whom photographic evidence appears to show me dancing!

We both felt jaded over breakfast. I couldn't face the dry bread rolls and croissants but enjoyed the coffee. I stared bleary eyed at the art covered breakfast room, unable to appreciate the information my eyes were transmitting to my brain. It was overcast and much cooler as we set off on the 250 kilometres to Bordeaux.

The topography is fairly flat between Toulouse and Bordeaux and we decided to eat up the kilometres on the toll motorways, our destination more interesting than the distance between. We notched up 2000 kilometres near the delightfully named town of Condom, passing a pair of giant chimneys rising into the clouds from a huge power station. They resembled giant "twisters" from the American Mid-West against darkening skies. The weather continued to grow more ominous, threatening rain as we closed down the distance to Bordeaux. About 50 kilometres short of Bordeaux, it started drizzling and we pulled over to put on our waterproofs, conveniently placed in the panniers. The rain became heavier for about 20 kilometres and then stopped, returning to overcast.

Our travel agent, Jenette, recommended that we visit Arcachon if we had time. Since the rain had stopped, we continued with our plan. We stopped for lunch in the town itself before proceeding on to the real reason for our visit - the epic "Dune de Pyla" - the largest sand dune I've ever seen. We had to take turns in climbing the dune as we couldn't risk leaving our belongings unattended on the bike. It was worth the effort but we looked forward to Bordeaux and a good rest.



Leg stretching at Villefranche de Conflent
en route to the Mediterranean



The changing faces of Carcassonne



Mission accomplished, the Med at Leucate



Amanda enjoys Toulouse



World Cup football frenzy - Toulouse

It was only four "o" clock when we arrived in Bordeaux, following the gentle curve of the Garonne into town. The Hotel Continental had no secure parking which worried me. We would have to park the machine outside the hotel in the street. The night watchman, we were assured, would keep guard whilst we slept.

Bordeaux was also a "football town", hosting World Cup games, although none was being played that night. We walked down to the riverside "football village" with giant screens, fast food, restaurants and bars, catching up with the latest results. Few people attended except a few drunks, taunting and tormenting each other, always on the edge of erupting into physical violence.

Bordeaux was also hosting a wine festival, prompting the proliferation of ugly white marquees and hospitality units on both the riverside and the Allees de Tourny. The Mad Max pyromania of Andorra and the football inflected drunkenness of Toulouse had taken it's toll as we struggled to keep our eyes open. Bordeaux didn't have the atmosphere or energy of Toulouse and we didn't have the energy for Bordeaux. We fizzled out early, but once in bed I couldn't sleep.

To our relief, the machine was unharmed, although it had acquired someone else's parking ticket, carefully screwed up and placed inside the fairing. I struggled once more with the *petit dejeuner* of rolls and croissants before departing Bordeaux through deserted streets. It was approximately 330 kilometres to Nantes and we got on with it, opting for the coastal route to take in the towns of Rochefort and La Rochelle. There wasn't much to do on the dual carriageway toll roads except sit there and open the throttle.

Close to Rochefort, we narrowly avoided a severe drenching from a heavy squall forcing us to push on to La Rochelle. It looked quite an unpleasant place on it's outskirts thanks to a proliferation of unattractive industrial units and warehouses. The centre and seafront, however, was much nicer and we stopped for breakfast in a large brasserie. For the first time on the journey, I felt cold from the increasingly gusty and unsettled weather. We remained there until our body temperatures restored themselves, assisted by cups of hot coffee.

The ride to Nantes was fairly uneventful with the exception of a diversion and some sudden heavy gusts. We managed to avoid the localised showers and squalls, riding straight to our hotel in Nantes, another of the Novotel chain in the Cite de Congres area, close to the centre. Nantes looked quite disappointing as we arrived in an area dominated by bland office buildings, giving the impression of a soulless place. The town could wait anyway - we were tired, resting in our room for a least a couple of hours - bathing, reading and relaxing.

In the late afternoon, we ventured out, discovering that central Nantes was a much more pleasant place than our initial impressions of the outlying areas. Like Toulouse and Bordeaux, Nantes was also a "football town" with hospitality units, displays and giant screens located in areas around the *centre ville*. And like Bordeaux, there weren't any games being played in town that night but there were elsewhere in France, including England Vs Colombia.

The centre was busy with festivities, including a giant puppet that was paraded through the frenetic shopping streets suspended by a crane, apparently enacting some kind of drama or play. In one of the squares, a huge bull was tethered to a lamp post, wooing passers by with it's giant unwieldy horns. Over a drink, we chatted to a couple of English lads, hung-over from

their week long bender of beer, football and clubbing - in no particular order. One of them wasn't interested in football at all, only there to soak up the party atmosphere.

Later, after a row about where to eat, we settled at a Mexican restaurant enjoying tequila and a tequila laced beer called "Desperado" with our meal. We then watched the English game on a giant screen in a car park. The few English fans present erupted into "excited gibbon-like behaviour" when David Beckham punted the ball into the back of the net. We watched the rest of the game in a bar, in the company of a British expatriate translator, an Australian hippie and the rarest of the rare - an American football fan who had watched his team defeated in the "Muslim Christian War" against Iran!

Just as we thought our night was over, heading back to the hotel, we came across a huge gathering of mopeds and motorcycles on the main road into town. "Cafe racing", wheelie competitions and full throttle drag racing were the purpose of the gathering. We later found out that it happens every Friday night, a defiant two fingers to the local gendarmes. The authorities apparently make no attempt to stop it.

Next morning, we flicked through the channels of our TV, finding a weather forecast conveying possible bad news. It seemed that we might get wet. The skies looked reasonable from our hotel window, so we set off whilst the going was good. The heavens darkened as we approached Rennes for a fuel and drink stop. Ugly on the outskirts and pleasant in the centre, Rennes is a large sprawling city of contrasts. It began drizzling as we circled the centre, careful to avoid sliding the machine on the greasy cobbles.

Wearing waterproofs, we left for St.Malo. It started to rain. Light rain, moderate rain, heavy rain, torrential rain and thencloudburst! We weathered the storm, concentrating closely on the movements of cars in the near blind spray. Bullets of rain repeatedly pinged my face, in a fusillade of rapidly decaying stings. Eventually, the rain stopped and the weather returned to dull grey.

A few kilometres short of St.Malo, we peeled off into the village of Saint Jouan des Guerets bound for the equally verbose La Malouiniere des Longchamps, a lovely hotel set in the Brittany countryside where we would spend our final night of the journey.

Dye dripped from Amanda's gloves as we carried our belongings into the reception. Everything inside our luggage seemed dry despite the deluge. Showered and warmed up, we decided to risk the unsettled weather to complete our itinerary. We rode into St.Malo and cruised around the superb walled "old town", also looking for signs to Mont St.Michel. St.Malo could benefit from improving it's road signs. We couldn't find the coast road to the Mount, eventually returning past our accommodation and heading East along a busy main road plagued by roadworks. My irritation at the non-existent road signs had taken all of the journey to diffuse as we parked the machine at the foot of Mont St.Michel.

We hadn't eaten since breakfast and were ravenous. We entered one of the first restaurants and sat down, taking little notice of the prices. We looked underdressed and scruffy compared to the other diners. Former diners included the rich, the famous and the infamous whose signed photographs decorated the walls. Over fish soup, monkfish and "special" omelettes we laughed at our accidental decadence. We'd turned up on a motorcycle, not in a Rolls Royce. It cost nearly fifty pounds!



The epic "Dune de Pyla" Nr Arcachon



The view from Mont St.Michel



The view of Mont St.Michel



Homeward Bound

Photographs by Jeremy Cuff & Amanda Chaunt

Mont St.Michel is a spectacular, almost mystical place - like a fabled city from the pages of Tolkien. This mysticism is much diminished by the throngs of visitors of which we were two. We meandered through the bustling corridor of gift shops, ascending to some of the higher vantage points, buildings and churches. Lines of cars and coaches choked the parking area on the spit connecting the mount to the mainland. It was too busy and with mission accomplished, we returned to St.Malo, this time via the coast road which was easier to locate from the opposite end.

A taxi collected us for the final night out of our journey. We alighted at the seafront and settled at one of restaurants that abound inside the old town. I delighted in a bowl of delicious fresh mussels steamed in white wine, a speciality of the region. Later, we walked along part of the sea wall, watching the sunset over the *Golfe de Saint-Malo*. We finished the evening in an Irish bar, serene beyond comprehension and seemingly full of friends, embracing each other as if they'd been parted for years. The sublime music added to the wonderful atmosphere. We both felt strangely elated when we left.

We rode slowly into St.Malo, clocking 3000 kilometres before our passage onto the ferry. We secured the machine and climbed up on deck, watching as cars, lorries and even bicycles crammed into the bowels of the ferry. It was a bright Sunday morning as yachts, fishing boats and scuba divers departed for their days adventure.

On schedule, the ferry eased out of port bound for Portsmouth. As St.Malo and the Brittany coast disappeared from view, we set about killing some time. The French Grand Prix occupied two hours, although I sorely missed Murray Walker's commentary!

And so it was, we "Crossed the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean" and we'd "Avoided World Cup Football violence on the way back up through France". It had been a superb journey, a joyride through some of the great roads of Europe. A glimpse of life in the fascinating towns and cities of San Sebastien, Biarritz, St.Jean Pied de Port, Pamplona, Andorra La Vella, Perpignan, Carcassonne, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes and St.Malo. We sampled the tranquillity and timelessness of Pyrenean life and the awesome splendour of the mountains. It was an unorthodox journey in which we discovered a thoroughly enjoyable mode of travelling, where senses and instincts are more finely tuned - experiencing the turning of the weather, the changing road surfaces, the direction of the wind, the lashing of the rain and the temperature differential exiting a tunnel into open air. The scent of alpine meadows and the exhaust fumes of crawling lorries. The adrenaline of peering over the crash barriers and the ache of a saddle sore backside. By making the journey by motorcycle, the experience became more complete and all encompassing than if we'd insulated ourselves against the elements in the sterile, sanitised environment of a car. Our first motorcycle tour wouldn't be our last!

Portsmouth looked exactly how we'd left it ten days previously, against the backdrop of a storm. Time had seemingly stood still. But we hadn't. We'd learned a few words of Spanish!