

The Summer of Stops & Starts - June 2021



At last, after a break of two summers due to you-know-what, we're off. To our relief, Otter was as dry as a bone and only required the usual 5 days of preparation before launching in Grau d'Agde. An enjoyable week at the quaint little quayside hotel, enjoying fresh steamed mussels, crispy fish & chips and "blanche pizza" (with a crème fraiche base, creamy goat's cheese and honey).



This season, after passing through our favourite spots along the Etang de Thau – Meze, Bouzigues, Palavas-les-Flottes, Aigues Mortes and the Camargue, we will head north up the Rhone and Saone Rivers back to St.-Jean-de-Losne in northern France. At least that's the plan...



Happily, some things never change...



Neither do the lovely small resorts along the Etang (the shallow bays and channels just inside the Mediterranean) with their traditions, markets, boats that have worked these waterways for centuries, harbour jousting, and weddings. In many ways, it is a strange area, with a haunting, strange kind of beauty that grows on you with its tranquility, bird life, horses munching along the banks, and this year, very few private boats. However, there are quite a number of very large chartered boats, mainly French families. Not a hint of social distancing, crammed party boats of drunken revelers pass us every night at Aigues Mortes. Masks are worn (even in obligatory areas) if they feel like it (they consider it a vague guideline). As a French woman put it, "Why do you think Covid spread so fast here? The markets are jammed. From 09 August some restaurants start asking to see Covid passports. It feels as if the whole country has gone south for their holidays...and they probably have. We arrive at one of our favourite spots, the ancient, walled city of Aigues Mortes beside the vast, pink salt pans intending to stay a couple of days.



Louie has taken to life on the boat like...well, a spaniel to water and loves every minute of it. It's lovely to see him discovering new things and he is extremely proud of his new lifejacket and can't wait to get it on, even in the sweltering heat (although we only do when he is out on deck on the big rivers in a good breeze and later in the huge locks where he inspects everything from the moving bollards, to our ropes, to the slimy sides, and sticks caught in the mechanisms. How would we do it without him?



The Camargue...plus a dash of *Provence*



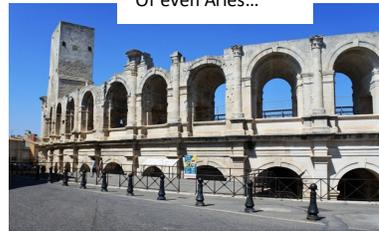
But nature had other plans...Massive flooding in Western Germany, Holland and Belgium naturally affects the rivers, too. The Rhone is a tricky one to sail up due to the normal strong currents against you. Many boats with small engines need to be towed if they are not to sail backwards. Even our 150 hp engine, only allows us to go max. 5-9 km/hr. When you chug along at 5 km an hour, you realize just what a big country France is. But now the Rhone flow is raging at almost 25 km an hour, the locks are closed, traffic – leisure and commercial is banned until further notice. Three and a half weeks later, we are still here... it's very, very hot (extreme temperature warnings...we buy Louie a paddling pool. I do a lot of work in 50C inside the boat. Phew!



When in Rome...



Or even Arles...



That's better!



Thanks, for the idea, guys!

So what can you do? The weather is fabulous, though sweltering – into the low 40's. Jan decides to pick up the car which has been left 100 km away, so we can do some day trips in air-conditioned luxury! I must also mention that we have some very enjoyable hours sharing sundowner with our neighbours, Jehan and Jim, American from "les Vieux Papillons" (The Old Butterflies) – sound so much better in French...and Angie and Hans (English and Dutch) who were all extremely helpful and tolerant of Lou's noisy defending of the boat. So it was actually a very enjoyable time and it flew by. Only one heart-stopping moment when, unnoticed by me, he decides to go off and play in the traffic on the very busy main road (searching for Jan). At Aigues Mortes, I discovered the wonderful, tiny studio of Mario di Maio, sculptor of birds who captures in cork and wood delicately painted sculptures of an enormous variety of birds, who inhabit the marshes of the Camargue.. herons, egrets, ducks and many, many more from the wider world that are sold to collectors and exhibited all over the world. An extremely charming man who shared his love of this ancient art of the Camargue with me and created my very own beautiful little egret. But, you'll have to visit



Two lovely handmade necklaces (one gold, one silver) somehow also managed to make their way into my shopping basket, as well as liquid soaps from Marseille, salt caramel toffees, apricot and plum jams, herbs de Provence, and salt flakes



The very charming St. Remy de Provence and a once-in-a-lifetime salad in a shady square amid the gourmet boutiques of the encircled historic centre! Birthplace of the prophecy-maker, Nostradamus.



Above: one of the most visited villages in France and among the 15 most beautiful, Les-Baux-de-Provence (pop.457), with its crumbling chateau perched atop the limestone spur—an area of jagged limestone peaks that seems to appear out of nowhere in the otherwise rolling countryside. Full of charming cafes and restaurants with panoramic views, and gourmet shops which feature, among other things, Calissons d'Aix, very sweet confectionary made of a ground almond and fruit paste base with an icing topping in flavours such as lavender, honey, cranberry, and are eaten at Christmas in Provence. The great homemade slabs shown above can last for more than a year without refrigeration.



Above: Salon de Provence, the home of the wonderful “Marseilles” soaps, in a whimsical mood with umbrellas dangling above all the pedestrian streets which was such a lovely sight. Everything was closed, but it was a peaceful morning wandering around the cobblestoned streets and enjoying the views from the chateau. Nice little quirks...like apricots hanging between houses. The day before we visited Aix-en-Provence, not the sleepy provencal village I had always imagined it to be, but a packed and hectic city of 144,274 inhabitants who were *all* out enjoying the chic, sophisticated bars, cafes and boutiques. We are intimately familiar with the ring road which we whizzed around at least 20 times looking for a parking space for one and a half hours...once we found one, it was very enjoyable. Not to mention, hot. But we got there in the end.



I'm getting the hang of things now...