

Round Europe with a Tent

News 1

Four days in Berlin, three days in Prague. On the way to Italy via Austria. Weather has been cold, sometimes wet. End of week very hot and sunny, back to cold. How like Wales!

Transport system in both cities fantastic. Camp sites excellent. Over-dosed on European history and culture in both cities. Explored history of Art Deco, religious persecution of Hussites and Jews. Planning to chill out soon.

Long tedious journey from Prague on Monday, so took short journey to just south of Innsbruck on Tuesday and had a stunning walk in the afternoon up into the mountains in brilliant sunshine. Then snow overnight and temp. Down to 2 degrees C! Now in Riva del Garda enjoying the walks under the mountains along the lake.

News 2

Thursday 17th May

Lovely breakfast, weather improving, fantastic drive along the lake with views of mountains, connected with motorway with no problems. It became increasingly busy nearer Bologna where we turned south, too stressful to drive straight to camp site for Florence so decided to stay in local hotel. SatNav suggested one 15mins away, so off we climbed up a country road, getting narrower and narrower and steeper, but the views were terrific as we were now on a steep sided ridge. Unfortunately the hotel was remote and derelict and we were completely lost! Eventually we found an alternative Locanda 3 Virtu in Sasso Marconi (5 miles from where we had headed for the hills), having visited some spectacular countryside. Weather now fantastic.

Good journey to campsite near Florence. After putting tent up planned to go for short walk until Howard saw sign to Antiquities and climbed to iron age hill fort. Visited Florence by mini bus and train twice.. Beautiful, interesting and crowded. Passed Prada, Gucci, Cartier and Burberry! I wanted to put up a sign No longer made in UK [Wales].

Monday 21st May A day to relax! Poured all night, camp site awash. So had Tuscan breakfast, wonderful value for E6. Read in car all morning; had breakfast for lunch when sun shone. Went on lovely walk in glorious sunshine and managed to get back immediately before another thunderstorm!

In our three visits to Florence, by train, we visited Art gallery, Palace. Churches, gardens and cathedral.

Examples of Florence wealth and power everywhere reflected in their statues architecture and Art, covering every surface. Most interesting to us was UNDERNEATH the huge marble domed Cathedral. The ruins, rediscovered in 1965, of the early cathedral demolished previously to make room for the replacement more in keeping with Florence's status. The mosaic floors, the bases of its marble pillars and 2½ of the apses were still intact. It had been dedicated to St. Reparata an early teenage girl Christian martyr from Caesarea who refused to worship Caesar. Funny how women get forgotten!

Moved on. Stopped just off Motorway at Orvieto to discover a walled town balanced on top of volcanic plug of tufa. Narrow streets, tall buildings, little alleys, marble cathedral; but again the real interest was underground with a network of space hewn out of the soft rock. A pottery kiln, a burial ground, a rubbish tip, wells and reservoirs, in case of attack!

News 3

Thursday 24th May: Arrived in Cassino, to find local attraction was the Abbey of Monte Cassino where St Benedict founded his first monastery in 529.

Puzzle 1 St Benedict's rule encouraged prayer, work and study and charity is now celebrated by a huge, building with three beautiful piazzas, many beautiful chapels, and a grand church lined with inlaid marble.

Puzzle 2. The entire building was destroyed in WW2 but was rebuilt as the original by the Italian Government as a place of Prayer and Pilgrimage.

Next, to Pompeii, we camped at Spartacus almost at the front entrance. Spent an interesting day exploring the city, finding out how it was organised etc. Next day took a trip up to Vesuvius. We only had an hour and a half to reach the crater, but managed it comfortably. Fascinating! Back to Pompeii in the afternoon to explore the out of city areas. Free entry for over 65's from EU. Passport needed to prove it. We planned a relaxing day in Sorrento. Rain at midday ensured we did not adventure too far and were forced to have a leisurely lunch. Sorrento is on a shelf with the cliffs upwards and cliffs downwards to the sea. There were lots of English people staying there. The Gracie Fields effect I suppose.

Then we moved on to Rome! I am not sure which was more impressive: The Romans' ability to house 70,000 people in tiers to watch the "Games" in the Colosseum or the Vatican's ability to process 20,000

people per day through the Sistine chapel; all of whom linger at least 30 minutes listening to guides, audio guides or reading the guide book!

Rome day 1. The Colosseum, the enormous cruel sports arena, but where Christians were not tortured. Then on to the Forum. Much too confusing to make sense of all the monuments. Successive Caesars seem to have spent their time pulling each other's monuments down in order to rebuild bigger and better ones. A summer palace with gardens has recently been excavated which had been buried under olive groves for centuries.

Rome day 2. St Peter's Basilica. Security queues looked long but we moved through quite quickly. An impressive cathedral with an excellent audio guide which not only noted the artist or sculpture but explained the significance of the work in terms of the Bible or tradition. After lunch we walked by the Tiber to a church with two paintings by Caravaggio, "The conversion of St Paul" & "St Peter's crucifixion."

Rome day 3. The Vatican Museum is amazing, housing the Catholic Church's treasures. It's like the British Museum and the national Art Gallery all rolled into one! We tried to be selective. Audio guide variable; excellent sometimes but very poor on the modern Art. Did see Caravaggio's "The Deposition" which makes the painting in Bangor Cathedral more interesting!

All very exhausting but we are glad to take a dip in the camp swimming pool when we return home each day.

After all that culture we needed a rest; so we spent two days by the sea near the tiny walled cliff top village of Talamonte. Now we are staying for two nights in Pisa. We looked round the Cathedral and huge Baptistry this afternoon and have booked to climb the tower at 10:20 tomorrow!

Fully rested we have now moved on to Bella Vista, a camp site between the mountains and the sea at Ceriale for a couple of days.

Best wishes to you all from Anne and Howard

News 4 from France.

Ceriale is famous for its Mediterranean exotic vegetables, so is one mass of greenhouses! First day at Bella Vista was windy and showery so explored the old town of Alassio and after lunch when the sun appeared went to the beach at Albenga planning to swim. However the surf was enormous, with waves as high as a house: even paddling we felt in danger. Next day we walked on the Strada Romana [a first century road] round the headland between Albenga and Alassio. To recover we went back to yesterday's beach, where now we were able to swim safely in the calm sea.

Left Italy behind and moved into France to a huge camp site near Frejus; next to the river D'Argens, adjacent to a nature reserve and near a naturist beach! It is a little disconcerting, when you arrive, to be given instructions on how to evacuate in case of Flood and then to find everywhere the 3 ft. marks of the June 2010 flood! We enjoyed spending a day walking, paddling and swimming down the sandy beach with temperatures up to 90°. Next day, hot but windy, so we explored the old part of Frejus. Visited cathedral, established in 4th century, with its Baptistry with a font for baptism by total immersion, similar but not as grand as the one at Pisa, a practice continued till the 5th century. Amphitheatre closed for repairs, Roman theatre closed for lunch so we went to the beach to relax, sunbathe and swim on the excellent recently developed "garden" promenade. Several HUGE yachts moored in the marina.

Wednesday 13th June. Off to Avignon! Half way through the journey SatNav identified major hold ups round Marseille and decided to reroute us off the motor way, we passed through interesting country side, the journey apparently did not take much longer and avoided road tolls! Arrived in time to book into hotel, take a nap and a bath and explore the historic area in readiness for visiting it tomorrow. Fantastic day. Visited the Palace of the Popes. A large complex of five story buildings built and decorated to house the Popes' activities when they were based in Avignon in the 14th century. An excellent audio guide with additional well illustrated information boards and historical videos with English subtitles. Strange that these monumental buildings, with under floor safes for the money and underground rooms for secret meetings as well as huge reception rooms should be next door to one of the smallest and simplest cathedrals! In the afternoon caught bus to the other side of the river to visit the Fort of St Andre in Villeneuve and then back again to visit the famous (1/2) bridge. Plenty of history and modern research there as well.

News 5 Tuesday 19th June

We continued on our way. We decided to camp by the sea at Canet before heading for the mountains. Chose a small quiet shady site sandwiched between the river the port and the beach, a lovely sandy beach. We decided to take time out to read and start preparing for Holiday Bible Club by reading the material and selecting the units for our group. We did this between swimming and relaxing by the pool and on the beach under a blue cloudless sky. We took a short trip to a nature reserve where we almost could see a flock of red flamingos in the distance. Today was cloudy. with a 10° drop in temperature to 69° so having done the

washing and the shopping we decided to take a trip round the port. What an eye opener; it is huge with lots of side bays and every imaginable type of vessel from big luxury catamarans to small fishing boats. One wonders what would happen if they all wanted to go to sea together. How would they all manage to get through the narrow harbour entrance? Tomorrow we head for the hills refreshed by our leisurely break.

Leaving Canet. There has been an amazing amount of new road building around Perpignan. A new bridge over the river, several roundabouts replaced by flyovers and then the road to Foix very recently closed and diverted for a short distance on to the main N/S motor way. Even the main country road through the mountains had been recently upgraded! Wonderful scenery especially the “short cut” over the mountains which had breath-taking views. However after that we stuck to the D117 and resisted all Sat Navs attempts at “short cuts” again.

Walking and camping in the Pyrenees

From Foix continued on D117 then Motorway and round Lourdes to a camp site near French Pyrenees National Park. We arrived in bright sunshine and wonderful views of the surrounding mountains. By the time we had put up the tent the mountains had disappeared and remained so the following days. So we just took some walks round the lake and to the chapel. The following day dawned cloudy but suddenly the mountains and sunshine reappeared. We walked from the lake, 500ft higher than the top of Snowdon, up to the high plateaux. We had to climb 2,000ft in 2 miles, luckily it was through beech woods so shady. The foot path went on for several miles but we returned to the lake at 4:00 p.m. to find a couple of laden donkeys and ponies about to lead a flock of sheep up the same path to their summer pastures.

The next day we drove to a neighbouring beauty spot in the national park and walked up a less arduous hillside of silver fir to a mountain lake and two water falls. We saw a traditional shepherds’ refuge built into the underside of an overhanging rock.

The last day we decided “No uphill struggles” so chose part of a long distance footpath following the contours just in the tree line. Surprisingly it was not well used, very narrow and difficult to follow at times. We never saw a soul all day and had a wonderful time.

Tuesday 26th June. An Amazing drive through the Pyrenees Mountains

We decided to take the mountain route into Spain. Wow, what an experience. Breathtaking views, bendy roads with sheer drops and no thought of a crash barrier. No wonder we had to have two coffee breaks and lunch on the way! The mountains were steep and bare on the first section which is part of the Tour de France so there were many cyclists. Then there was a section of grassland, [the Yorkshire dales at 6,000 ft] with the hazard of cows newly arrived on their summer pasture wandering freely across the road. Then as we dropped down to the main road the mountains became covered with trees almost to the top. We still went over a 6,000ft pass into Spain where the mountains again were bare and there was more evidence of skiing but wider roads and more crash barriers. We are now staying in the Grand Hotel in Jaca. When we arrived the Temperature was 92°. The receptionist thought it might be too cold to swim in the pool (!) as we are still near the mountains but in fact it was wonderful. We look forward to exploring this ancient city tomorrow before it gets too warm.

News 6 from Guernica on 29th June

Avery hot day in Jaca. A high pressure area over most of Spain. The Fort was closed for a couple of days because it was the festival to celebrate two local Saints. So we went to the Cathedral Museum which was set up in 1960 to rescue and display the Romanesque wall paintings from local churches in the cloisters and adjoining rooms of the cathedral. One of the murals came from an already roofless church! The selection and portrayal of the biblical stories was interesting but even more impressive was the care and expense that had gone into their rescue and display. One room had been altered to the exact dimensions of the church the wall paintings had come from. The accompanying information allowed interpretation in any language! We looked round the cathedral and old town where we watched one of the processions with 12ft statues of the 2 local saints, a band, singing and some grotesque figure whose job seemed to be to send the children running screaming down the narrow side streets. The more religious part of the festivities had taken place a day or two earlier. The afternoon was so hot we could only read and sleep in the shade by the pool, taking the occasional dip to cool off. We managed a short walk in the evening to admire the view but even that wore us out!

Journey from Jaca. The pilgrimage route to Santiago went through the corn fields parallel to the main road we were on with the poor pilgrims having to rejoin the road to cross the rivers on the road bridges. Later there were several miles of very new motorway joining up with the motorway through Pamplona. Apart from disorientating SatNav it felt very strange driving along miles of empty motorway in broad daylight! The fog came down and the rain began as we came into the coastal mountains so we decided not to camp but stay in a hotel in Guernica.

Guernica. We spent the afternoon visiting the Peace Museum which told very graphically the story of the bombing of the city on 26th April 1937 and the later efforts to ensure reconciliation and peace. There was information about the process of reconciliation and modern examples where they had been successful. Interesting, as the day before, we had learnt of Martin McGuinness's handshake with the Queen. I also remembered the church in Berlin which celebrated and displayed its links with the Coventry peace initiative and the sculpture garden in Berlin in which artists had produced work as a protest against the erection of the Berlin wall for display outside the wall. The exhibition also commented on the behaviour of both ETA and the government and suggested a more constructive way forward.

Today we went first to visit the Regional Assembly house and the Tree of Gernika and then Euskal Herria Museum, the Museum of Basque history and culture. Then we went to the gardens to see Henry Moore's "Big Figure in a Shelter", and other sculptures and down the road to see a ceramic mural copy of Picasso's picture "Guernica". The pilgrim path to Santiago goes through the centre of Guernica on their way to Bilbao. This is where we plan to go tomorrow.

News 7

We decided that half a day in Bilbao would be inadequate so went straight to campsite on the coast at Islares. Again on the Pilgrim route. Sunday was wet so went to Mass and concert in neighbouring 16th century church. Unaccompanied singing in Spanish, Basque & Italian. Next day picnicked, walked, read & slept on the beach and swam. An interesting river meandered the full length of the beach at low tide. On Tuesday we went to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. It is a spectacular building:- made of all curved surfaces mainly covered in titanium with some limestone and lots of glass! It was surrounded on one side by a water feature. The audio guide explained the architects thinking etc.

In the first gallery you walked round huge metal "mazes" which were curved in such away that you felt you were walking on a slope and had other strange effects. We enjoyed the displays of David Hockney's recent work partly because most of it was of Yorkshire. The audio guide helped us appreciate the different techniques. Most of the rest of the modern art left us cold. We then walked by the river to the old town, too late to visit the biggest covered market in Europe which, like most of the promenade, was being refurbished; but the Cathedral was open.

The Motorways round Bilbao were amazing, soaring above or plunging below the one we were on which had three recently opened tunnels.

The Mountains in Northern Spain

Good fast journey until we turned inland. We were driving along a pleasant country road when suddenly the limestone cliffs rose up on either side and we were driving along a narrow gorge with only room for the river Deva and the road for many miles. Eventually the valley widened out and we came to Potes, an ancient settlement still with traditional buildings. with narrow roads and bridges between. We camped by the River Deva and undertook some fantastic walks around the area. We visited The Monastery of Saint Toribio de Liebana where the supposed largest surviving relic of the "true" cross in the world is venerated. This was used in the service we attended; at the end of the service those who wished to could kiss the wooden remnant which was later returned to its special secure place in a side chapel. The monastery was also the home of the 8th century monk Beato who wrote and illustrated a commentary on the book of Revelation. This was copied all over Europe for the next 200 hundred years! The following day we went round a beautifully laid out local authority exhibition with excellent English audio guide which in addition to having wonderful views of the surrounding country side from the roof showed how although Beato's was carefully copied a new Latin script was introduced and the illustrations also changed as perspective and more realism and detail were introduced.

On Saturday we had planned to go up on the cable car to walk a short distance and have lunch on the mountain but were put off by the queue for the cable car and instead walked until we had a marvellous view of the mountains on four sides and met the people who had gone up on the cable car and were nearing the end of their 11 kms. walk down!

Unfortunately the cloud covered the peaks for the three following days so we abandoned the attempt and on Wednesday 4th July we moved north to camp at Ribadesella on a site sandwiched between the sea and the mountains. So far we have explored the coast one day and inland the next and just when we think it can not get any better, then it it does!!

On Tuesday we took a white-knuckle ride 5 miles up a narrow winding road, hindered by oncoming traffic and herds of cows grazing their upland pastures; the only crash barriers were those to prevent the cows falling down cliffs! However the views at the top were breath taking; across the coastal ridges to the sea on one side and to the mountain peaks on the others with lakes to walk near in the middle.

Now we are in Santander ready to catch the ferry and will stay with my brother and visit his family before returning home so its "Over and Out". Best wishes from Anne and Howard