



Reflections of Mountains

by Roy Taylor

Start

Introduction

One summer in the early 1970s I set off on a small motorcycle and headed for Morocco, as many of us did in those days. We were searching for places that had the touch of centuries on them, places that had not succumbed to the rush and bustle of modernity.

I only had a small bike, all I could afford then, and there were hardly any motorways down through France, so progress was slow. It took me two weeks to reach the Spanish border. From Central France down I had found that I did not, after all, need to go so far in my search, for it was right here in 20th Century Europe. I found ancient hilltop villages, narrow winding roads that zigzagged over the hills and around mountains, a relaxed way of life, and friendly people.

I reached Carcassonne early one summer morning, with a light mist on the plain hiding the modern city. From the road over the Montagnes Noir I could see the old city poking above the mist in all its medieval glory. It seemed that I had stepped through a time-warp. I was hooked, and the road to Morocco was forgotten.

It was the beginning of a life-long love of the south-west of France. I explored the region for most of that summer, basing myself in Carcassonne, for I found those places I craved, places with the touch of centuries upon them. The tourist scramble has mostly bypassed it.

Recently, my thoughts have turned to all the people I met there, or at that time, and realised that though the places remained unchanged, we ourselves were changing, and something of ourselves was being lost instead. Those times, and ourselves at those times, have become mere shadows on a mist that dissipated as soon as we turned our backs on it.

So, before my memories fade into that mist, I have put down this ragbag of recollections of some people I met one summer in the early 1970s while on the road to Morocco. Not many pictures, just lots of people.

Roy Taylor Autumn 2004

This is an unstructured collection of reminiscences for nobody but myself, and dedicated to all the people I met while touring south-west France one summer in the early 1970s. If your story is here, I thank you for being part of my early life, and apologise if the passage of time has smoothed off some of the details.

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Contents

<i>The First of Us All</i>		<i>Grand Tour I</i>
<i>Calais, Gateway to the East</i>	<i>Shanghai</i>	<i>It Comes with the Uniform</i>
<i>The First of the Ruby Fluid</i>	<i>The Stars Like Dust</i>	<i>Grand Tour II</i>
<i>French Lessons</i>	<i>A Darkling Sky</i>	<i>Russia</i>
<i>Just a Load of Mountains</i>	<i>Stars that Move</i>	<i>Pork Chops</i>
<i>The Good Doctor</i>	<i>Reflections of Mountains</i>	<i>Uninvited Guests</i>
<i>Starlit in Goa</i>	<i>Empires in the Sand</i>	<i>Praying Mantis</i>
<i>The Kindness of Strangers</i>	<i>A Chicken Dinner for Mr. Exec</i>	Exit

The First of Us All

He first left England for the Normandy beaches in 1944. He said he walked all the way to Germany to kill Hitler. On the way, France got into his soul. After he was demobbed in 1947 he spent every summer in France riding a motorbike with sidecar and camping in an army surplus tent. He was 66 when I met him in 1972 on the municipal campsite in Carcassonne.

You might think that trekking the foothills of the Himalayas with an adventure holiday company is pretty hot stuff. Well, this guy was the father of us all. He had to take his own supplies through war-torn Europe for a summer camping. He bartered his way south, swapping things he brought from England for petrol. Often he slept in various war surplus trucks and jeeps that got left behind when the war front passed on. It must have seemed like another planet.

At one place he got interrogated by armed members of the French Resistance, who thought he might have been a war criminal trying to escape to the Spanish border. Their obvious disappointment was soon forgotten when they realised that this crazy Englishman really was a camper and that normality was returning after a decade of war and deprivation. The best wine of the village was broken out and a spontaneous festival was held.

Calais, Gateway to the East

Calais was a strange place. Most of us passed through the port, whether for a summer holiday or stepping out on the road to the East. There were some 'hippies' living on the campsite free. They had a way of getting through a hole in the fence. Real revolutionary stuff. They too went travelling - on the ferry to Calais, then the rest of the summer on the local campsite. One of them could make exotic visa stamps with a potato (you cut it in half then carved the design on the exposed face). He'd probably read the same article in Oz magazine that I had. He'd stamp your passport with fake visas for a few francs. Back home you could impress your stay-at-home friends.

'Marakech, man? That's for tourists. Nah, we bin... where was that place Dave? Upside of the Khyber, or was it the Hindu Kush? Man, so many places. Look, my passport's full of places.'

The visas were stamped with a potato, and the suntan came from a summer just across the Channel in Calais.

Shanghai

People who have really travelled have their eyes focused on horizons only they can see. Unlikely people. A neighbour of mine was a 52-year-old clerk who worked at the local waterworks. Someone you wouldn't notice if there was a room full of them.

Turned out he'd just retired from the merchant navy. He had a collection of thousands of photographs. He'd been in Shanghai during the Chinese Revolution. And other places. He had the geography of modern history stamped on his soul. Now here he was, a clerk in the local waterworks.

French Lessons

At the end of a summer's travelling I rested up at a campsite by the sea near Calais. In the tent next to me was an 11-year-old boy camping with a school-teacher. Teech had told the boy's parents that he went camping every summer in France. Well, Calais is in France, just. The boy's parents asked Teech to take the boy camping too. However, the boy didn't get much use of the tent as Teech brought young ladies back to practice his French. This involved half an hour of whispered conversation plus some earnest grunting.

'Do you speak French?' I asked the boy.

'Nah,' he replied dismissively, 'It seems to be awfully tiring.'

The First of the Ruby Fluid

My first taste of wine was on my first camping trip to France, almost a lifetime ago. I could hardly afford to buy it. My budget was £1 per day (about \$1.50 or 10 francs). Besides, the taste hadn't found me yet. It wasn't helped by the first bottle I bought. It cost 1.50 francs and had a ceramic stopper wired to the top. 90 cents was for the returnable deposit on the bottle. You can imagine how a 60 cent bottle of wine must have tasted.

The only way to drink it was to open it and leave it in the sun for a couple of hours. Then you had to invite other people over to help you drink it, as a whole bottle to yourself could leave you with serious gastric problems. The taste is difficult to describe. Somewhere between paint stripper and shoe polish I guess. A bad bottle was a bit like raspberry-flavoured napalm. It eventually got banned under some chemical warfare treaty.

Just a Load of Mountains

It's a municipal campsite in central France. The back of the campsite opens to a small lake. The water is still. The merest suggestion of mist hangs over the surface. Poplar trees cast long reflections. I'm the only one here in early June. A family pull in for the night. Mum, Dad, and two pre-school kids. They're friendly and chatty.

'We've just come up from Perpignan,' Dad offers. 'Wonderful beaches down there, wonderful.'

'That's right, pet,' says Mum. 'Just right for the kids, the beaches. Perfect.'

'Wonderful. Perfect,' muses Dad. 'Couldn't have wished for better beaches, could we luv?'

'No pet. Wonderful beaches.'

'Which way did you come back?' I asked, half afraid to disturb their thoughts of paradise.

'Quillan, Carcassonne, then straight up' said Dad.

'Then you must have come along just north of the Pyrenees. What are they like? I'm heading that way myself.'

'Dreadful,' said Dad.

'Awful, boring,' Mum added. 'Narrow winding roads, barren mountains, and broken down villages that could do with a lick of paint. Oh, but those beaches. All that sand. Perfect for the kids.'

'Aye, luv. Wonderful beaches. Wouldn't give you tuppence for the rest though. Just a load of mountains.'

The Good Doctor

We were boiling up a can of something for dinner when this guy came along on a bicycle, ringing the bell and shouting: 'Make room, we've arrived.' He was followed by a slightly bemused youth of 16, also on a bicycle. They unpacked a tube tent, the only one I've ever seen in the flesh. You pass a rope through the tent and tie each end to a tree, about 4 feet from the ground. You peg out the tube so it makes a triangular cross-section. That's it, that's your tent.

Turns out our friend is a doctor from Florida on tour with his son for the summer. The boy was going on to college in the autumn and the doctor wanted a last chance to get to know his son as a boy.

'When he gets back from college he'll be all grown up,' said dad wistfully.

From what I saw, the good doctor learnt more about himself that summer on the road.

'I'm 56,' he told me, 'When will I ever get to do this again?'

This was over 30 years ago, so the boy will be in his mid-forties. I wonder if I'll ever meet that boy, now grown up, with a son of his own on the road for the summer, for to know the boy better.

I wonder the same about all those travellers of the 1960s and 1970s, but I don't see their kids on the road touring. Did their parents fail to inspire them with their tales of starlit beaches in Goa? Of riding the mountains of North Africa on a donkey? Or do they go on hill-trekking holidays to Nepal with everything organised for them? There's more adventure closer to home than in being shepherded around by a holiday courier, even if it is the Himalayas. ->>

The Good Doctor (contd)

It's a sad fact that at the turn of the century the roads east are closed off and too dangerous. The 1960s and 1970s saw an open road, from the Atlantic almost to the Pacific, a longer road than anything found anywhere else, one that passed through cultures ancient and modern. Now you can't even get out of Europe without getting shot at.

Maybe the grandchildren, having heard of grandma and grandpa's adventures in the 1960s will be inspired to find a way east via southern Russia and the Silk Road. I suspect the desire is part of a cycle, for the 1920's saw a similar movement, see Herman Hesse's books. And wasn't there just such an interest in the 1860s?

The good doctor only had a summer of adventure once near the end of his working life, but the spirit that drove him is latent in us all. Have you promised yourself a summer off? That career and 9-5 job may still be there when you get back. If it isn't, then it wasn't worth having in the first place.

Reflections of Mountains

He'd walked in and pitched tent. He lay down and just stared up at the leaves on the trees. I offered some food. I'd done too much and neither of us was hungry anyway. He said thanks and came over. Bread was broken and dipped in the saucepan. Wine was poured and drunk.

'Been travelling?' I asked.

He nodded, and mopped up his food with some bread. 'Morocco,' he said simply.

'Marakech?'

He smiled and shook his head. He didn't make any move to tell his story. That's OK. I'd spent too much time listening to other people's stories and not enough making my own. Others had gathered around. The wine was being passed from glass to glass. Our fair-haired traveller started talking.

He was taking a year out before going to university. Dad had offered to buy him a car but he asked for the money instead so he could go travelling. He'd hitched rides down to Morocco. Once there he left the roads and tourist traps and walked into the hills. He slept out under the stars, there not being any hotels, youth hostels, nor campsites yet. His walking day started in the early morning while it was still cool, and resumed in the late afternoon, resting in the shade of trees during the fierce time of day. ->>

Reflections of Mountains (contd)

He walked into a village and drew some water from a well. Somebody came over and started talking. He couldn't speak Arabic, and the villager couldn't speak English. It didn't matter. His arrival was an excuse for the whole village to have a feast. They put him up for a few days. They wouldn't take any money, so he worked with them around the village and surrounding fields. He swapped his jeans for one of those gowns the Arab men wear. He bought a donkey and improvised a frame to take his rucksack and things. So he set out for the year, a fair-haired youth roaming the mountains of North Africa on a donkey.

'Where did you get to?' somebody asked.

'Dunno,' came the reply. 'I didn't have a map.'

But he did. The same one that is inscribed on the soul of us all. Thousands of years ago we walked out of Africa and around the planet using the same map. As the youth's year ended, he turned westward and made his way back. He left his donkey at another village for a lift all the way to the ferry to Spain.

'So here I am,' he said simply.

But he wasn't. He wasn't here at all. His eyes were focused on places we couldn't see. I swear if you looked closely enough into his eyes you could still see reflections of the mountains he roamed on his donkey. And it would take a lifetime for them to fade.

Starlit in Goa

In Switzerland I met an English woman and Swiss guy who'd met on a starlit beach in Goa in the late 1960s. They had travelled with different tribes, arriving in Goa in the same season.

They both wandered away from their tribal fires at the same time for a midnight stroll along the beach. There was no moon, just a million stars blazing proud across the blackness of space. Both saw fluorescent marks on the beach moving toward them. On looking back, they both saw their own footprints glowing in the wet sand. The two sets of glowing footprints approached each other and met, merging into a blazing mass that danced across the beach. Indian Ocean waves lapped over their love radiations.

On their journey home they passed through Biblical deserts, and told of bonfires in the Negev, eating barbecued snake and lizard on a stick, and of being watched for hours by a praying mantis, an insectoid Buddha.

A Darkling Sky

I'm writing this on a campsite in the Pyrennean Mountains of southwest France. It's August. I'm the only one here. It's an out of the way kind of place. Ideal for freeing up the soul a little. And for getting through my Brautigan novels, saved for just such a place.

The sun went down an hour ago. A half moon stands high in the sky. The brightest stars are shining proud. Across this darkling sky are some very high clouds, catching just a smudge of departing daylight. They look like fluorescent ripples on a tropical ocean.

I don't know where the other campers are. Probably sitting in a campsite bar wondering how to fill tomorrow. Instead they could be here, dreaming of a starlit beach in Goa.

Empires in the Sand

A very large single-decker bus with GB plates pulls in. It parks with some very elaborate moves, like a dog flattening imaginary grass before it lies down. The bus was all one colour - that drab army olive green that goes with wars. Had a war started and somebody forgot to tell me?

While I'm thinking about wars and how to get off the planet before it comes my way, the bus got parked. A door opened. Two large middle-aged ladies got out dressed in bus-coloured shorts and shirts. I could see what the bus was for. These were empire-building memsahibs stranded in time with no empire to build. We'd given ours up. Now it was just dust, blown away on the winds of history. Where would they go now, poor things?

They spoke to nobody but each other, worrying about filling the water tanks. Somebody said they were heading for Morocco. I could see them in some hot and dusty Saharan place facing down and subduing the locals with nothing but the momentum of destiny behind them. Maybe they got to build an empire in the sand but nobody told us about it yet.

Pork Chops

We'd be woken in the morning some days at 6 by the squealing of animals. After some investigation we found that the building at the front of the campsite was an abattoir (Americans know it as a meat-packing plant, I think.) Here I was, frying up pork chops on the campsite and its cousins were being executed at dawn just up the road. I didn't exactly give up bacon, but I did the decent thing and not have it on execution day.

Russia

She said she was Russian, which seemed odd because they didn't let anybody out in those days. If that's what she wanted me to think, well, okay, it didn't shorten my life either way.

Russia had little frightened eyes and henna ringlets hanging down on her shoulders. She wore an ankle length black dress that flared from the waist. She was travelling with some guy, your average hippy of the time. He was working hard at being a hippy. He had long fair hair, beard, and droopy eyes that said 'Go with the flow, man. This year a hippy, next year a management consultant. Ya dig?'

They both looked hungry. I had that kind of face that attracted hungry hippies. I'd start cooking up a can of beef soup when some hungry hippy comes over with 'I'll tell you a story/sing a song for a plateful of that, man.' You had to end every sentence with 'man' back then. It became rather tedious after the first five hundred times.

I was wrong anyway. They brought over a bottle of wine and said how great it was down in Marakech. For a moment I thought he was going to show me a passport full of potato visas. She got up and started to dance, swaying, and tapping out a rhythm on a tambourine. More people drifted over. Hippy guy got his guitar and strummed some chords. He needn't have bothered, nobody was listening. All eyes were on Russia. She danced, spinning around the space people had left for her, first one way, then the other. Clockwise or counter clockwise, I never saw her change direction. ->>

Russia (contd)

She always seemed to look directly at me, her little frightened eyes now those of a grown woman in full seduce. Her dress flared as she whirled, revealing the most perfect legs I had ever seen. A banging rhythm crashed away inside my head, in synch with that Russian girl's tambourine.

She danced closer to the encircling crowd, teasing us with the edge of her flaring black dress. Faster she whirled, faster sang the tambourine, scattering rhythmic patterns out over the audience like rose petals in a storm. Her bare feet slapped soundlessly on the grass, sure of their progress across the ground. Sound and motion merged into one spinning conflagration that suddenly exploded and fell silent. Time stopped. The world stood and waited. The crowd stared at Russia, folded up on the ground. She had me convinced. I was revved up and ready for action. Then she got up and went off with Mr. Hippy. The crowd drifted away, wondering what exactly they had seen. My soul was burning. So was my can of beef soup.

Nobody saw them leave, but the following morning Russia had gone. In and out of our lives in a single day. I had the sweats for two full weeks. This was over thirty years ago, and I still get the sweats at the thought of that dancing Russian girl with the little frightened eyes.

Ancient Ways

Most of the accounts in this presentation are based around summers of travelling in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They weren't the last such summers, but they were the most varied. A wave of change was sweeping around us. Old places needed seeing before they became the town next door. Places like roads, tracks, hills, valleys, mountains. Places where you could hear the cry of the hunting eagle, the scuttling of small creatures in the undergrowth, and the breeze stirring the trees with rumours of far off lands. Places with the touch of centuries on them.

How do you find them today? If you can find it in a camp or tourist guide you've got the wrong place. If you have to book ahead, it's a tourist place. The only way to find the real places is to listen to those genes deep inside that once guided us across open savannah and through primeval forests to places that just felt 'right'. Our shelter might be waterproofed cotton and nylon, our food might be prepackaged, precooked, and only need five minutes boiling, but there is something about those places that just feels 'right' to the soul.

These places of ours don't have four stars, nor three, nor two. They have millions, blazing across the night sky, free of the city murk. Those stars up there are just like those that guided the first of our kind who settled this land, whose feet first trod these ancient ways across the hills when sabre tooth cats and cave bears ruled the wild.

The Stars Like Dust

It's midnight. My candles are burning low. The stars are blazing like diamonds on black velvet. For thousands of years we have stared up at the night skies and wondered. Before the invention of writing, we were making up stories to describe what we had seen. Those millennia-old stories are still with us, the mythology of pagan gods being the ancient guide to the constellations, the movement of planets, the fixing of the equinoxes, and the power of prophecy in the prediction of eclipses.

I lie back and look north-east and see the familiar stars of the Big Dipper, also known as the Plough, the Bear, and more properly as Ursa Major. Ancient cultures knew them as the Seven Sages, the Rishis, the wise teachers who taught us the secrets of astronomy. They point to the pole star Polaris and their annual rotation measures out the seasons. Now, close to the summer solstice, they lie west, for the winter solstice they'll lie eastward.

On the other side of the pole star is a large W-shaped constellation. That's Cassiopeia. Some constellations, such as this one, are easy to make out, others need a hazy night to hide the confusion of fainter stars.

Right above me is the constellation of Hercules. To his right is a bowl-shaped constellation called Corona Borealis. Both are fairly easy to make out, as is a bright young star called Vega, slightly above Hercules and to the east.

Low on the southern horizon is Scorpius with a red giant star called Antares at its heart. To the Mayans of Central America this was Mother Scorpion. To the ancient Egyptians the scorpion-tailed goddess Serquet. To the Babylonians, the goddess Ishara, "Lady of the rivers". ->>

The Stars Like Dust (contd)

When the Greek god Phaethon usurped his father Helios to drive the sun chariot across the sky, he lost control when he caught sight of Scorpius, with dire consequences for us all - the north grew warm, the snows dissolved, cities burned, and the heavens blazed from pole to pole.

Hold your fist at arm's length to the left of Antares and train your binoculars on that patch of sky. You'll see two fuzzy patches. These are clusters of thousands of stars. Some ancient cultures thought this to be the entrance to the underworld, from which there is no escape, where souls are tormented in the fires of Hades. Maybe it's just a coincidence, but in that region lies the centre of our galaxy where lurks a massive black hole.

Overhead and slightly east, stretching north-south is a long hazy cloud that doesn't move. It's no cloud, it's the Milky Way, our home galaxy. Some of the ancients thought it was a vast celestial river, carrying the souls of the dead to paradise or perdition, to others it was a track along which Buffalo and Horse ran a race, or the cattle track of Brother Creator, or the tracks of the Creator as he wandered across the sky. To the ancient Greeks these are the scars left on the sky by Phaethon's reckless driving of the sun's chariot off its appointed course. Today, with light from our towns and cities drowning out the night sky, we cannot even see the Milky Way, though its stars are scattered like dust across the skies above us.

Stars that Move

Now put down the binoculars and just watch the sky. Those stars that move across the sky are satellites in Earth orbit. The ones moving north/south are in polar orbit, most likely Earth resources satellites, but some are spies looking down on us.

Every so often you'll see a streak of light crossing a patch of sky in a second. Those are meteors, a grain of sand on a cosmic journey, burning up at thousands of miles an hour in our atmosphere. No two trails are alike. Some burn so brightly they light up the whole of the land as brightly as a full moon. The ones that burn and burn are most likely satellites plunging Earthward at the end of their useful life. When you see a shooting star, as some call meteors, you can make a wish. Most nights you'll score three or four wishes by midnight. In mid-August stay up for the Perseid meteor shower. One year we counted 140 by midnight. I'm still spending the wishes.

Grand Tour I

A Volkswagon Dormobile (also known as a Microbus) pulls into a campsite. The occupants might be an Aussie, New Zealand, Canadian or US couple taking a year off to do the Grand Tour of Europe. They'd land in England or Holland in the autumn and buy their bus from departing tourers. Some would head south straight away. Some Aussies would head for Earls Court in London and stay for the winter. A select few would get themselves thrown out of Mr. Barry's Bar just to say they'd done it. They were a mixed bunch - students, graduates, retired couples, all taking a year off to see places. VW Dormobiles made it all possible.

Those times saw us doing the Grand Tour, taking the road to the east, riding the mountains of North Africa on a donkey, or simply taking a summer off to camp under southern skies. The era generated it's own legends - characters like Wavy Gravy, and stop-offs like the Pudding Shop.

The roads that ran to the East have gone. Afganistan, Syria, Iraq, the Balkans, are going to be too dangerous to travel for a few years yet. Maybe a new generation will find their way across southern Russia and Central Asia in the 2010s, and there'll be young people coming back from the Silk Road with reflections of mountains in their eyes. By then I'll be well into my sixties.

Maybe I should start planning. In forty years time, someone who's just a kid now will write about this old guy he met riding a motorcycle and sidecar through Samarkand. Or maybe a boy on a donkey.

Grand Tour II

Two American girls walked in. They were backpacking their way around Europe for the summer, camping rough when they could. They were 18 years old. We see few backpackers these days. Now it's air-conditioned coaches with inboard films and tv in case you get bored with views of mountains, ancient hill-top villages, and 11th century abbeys. And would anyone dream, these days, of letting their 18-year-old daughters go backpacking alone across Europe? Or anywhere else?

Uninvited Guests

Something you soon notice on camping trips are the bugs. City dwellers sometimes see bees, wasps, flies, ants, and maybe the odd beetle or so. Once they get under canvas another fauna shows itself.

Farm sites have a rich menagerie of bugs that have become used to living with the stock. When a new group of mammals appears on the scene they are only to pleased to meet the newcomers. Your tent provides a wonderful new habitat for wildlife, most of it harmless, despite its sometimes fearsome appearance. The big beetles that scuttle around at night are far more afraid of you than you of them, but judging from the screams issuing from tents on occasion, few campers believe that.

A bungalow tent provides ample room for co-habitation with small mammals, lizards, and insects. The only really nasty visitors in Europe are red ants, who will love your food, and little black scorpions, who love dark damp places. That's why we never walk around barefoot.

Snakes are usually too nervous to live anywhere near you. Your noise is enough to scare them away. Never ever chase one away with a stick, they will attack if cornered. Their bite is at least as bad as that of a wasp for an adult, much worse for children.

Over the years I've had gris (edible dormouse) sheltering from a storm, a stoat, various beetles, little lizards, snails, and some fascinating insects. The gris, like a small fat squirrel with a straight bushy tail, clung on for dear life to the support ring of the inner tent during a ferocious thunder storm. ->>

Uninvited Guests (contd)

The stoat and I tolerated each other for a few days. If I forgot to dump the rubbish bag at night, he'd thoughtfully rip open the plastic and leave my rubbish all over the ground as a reminder.

One September, in the Parc du Vercours, just west of the Rhone Valley, robins made a nuisance of themselves by darting into the tent and trashing any bags that might have had food in them. I'd come back and find two or three inside in a fine panic looking for the escape route. I always thought robins attacked each other, but these would fly around a dozen together.

Butterflies are welcome and decorous creatures to have around. One place I go to in the Pyrenees has a colony of very rare blues that are almost extinct in the rest of Europe. They fly around in clouds and settle on anything you've touched, looking for salt moisture I'm told. I'm not saying which blues, nor where. We don't want them messed around by experts and their killing jars. If you want to attract butterflies, take a leak early in the morning on some nearby shaded grass. By midmorning they'll be around for the salts. Do it away from the tent, otherwise the farm dog will think you're marking your territory and do the same on top of it. By mid-afternoon the place will smell pretty ripe.

One visitor I had in the Luberon in southern France, looked like a bunch of grass. Even the ends of its legs were slightly browned, like dry season grass. It stayed a day or so then went away. I wonder how it ever finds a mate amongst all that grass? Maybe it looks like grass but smells like a pig. ->>

Uninvited Guests (contd)

In that same place we had jumping snails on our tents. Jumping snails? Sure, we all saw them, until we noticed a child inside one tent flicking them from the other side of the fabric. Some campers went away before the child was discovered, convinced they had seen the famous jumping snails of the Luberon.

The visitor that stayed the longest was a praying mantis. They grow quite large, a good few centimetres and look frightening. I can imagine them starring in a 1950s B-movie, only the size of an elephant rather than a mouse. Ever thought what it must be like for the mouse, running around when the big bugs are your size? The praying mantis is bright green, long spindly legs, a pair of long-reaching claws at the front and a triangular-shaped head on a spindly neck. They are unusually large for a European insect, and panic is the usual reaction of the human. They are quite harmless. The praying mantis, that is. I don't know about the human.

Praying Mantis

I've yet to see one in England, but they seem quite common across the Channel. In the Cevennes one September one took up residence in my bungalow tent. It sat high up on the metal frame and ate mosquitoes all day long. At night it sometimes came onto the table where I had a candle burning in a glass globe. The mantis sat on the side of the globe and lunged with lightning speed to snatch a bug attracted to the flame. It's head bobbed around incessantly, keeping an eye on the other side of the flame in case it missed something. When I blew out the candle, the mantis resumed its station on the upper part of the tent's metal frame.

The eyes of the mantis are on two corners of its head. It's the only insect I've seen that has eyelids. The bright green bulges of its eyes, during the day, show no sign of lids, but at dusk, as the light falls, the lids open to let in more light. The eye is black, and as you move around, the head swivels to follow your movement, its eyeslits highly noticeable. I defy you to resist a shudder as you realise this insect is actually watching you. Does an insect think? Is it figuring things out, or just mechanically reacting? However, anything that eats mosquitoes is a friend of mine so I let it stay. ->>

Praying Mantis (contd)

One wet evening, as I ate inside the tent, I saw the thing watching me. Maybe it smelt my dinner. Out of curiosity, I put a piece of meat on the point of a pencil, and offered it carefully. The creature watched the approaching morsel and just as carefully took the meat and tasted it. Once the meat was consumed, the mantis searched around the pencil tip for more. I fed the thing several times after that. It preferred beef, and wouldn't take chicken. I suppose an insect fed on beef can afford to be choosy.

When the time came to leave I had to leave it on a nearby bush. It sat watching me pack. I don't know what it thought as I drove off. It didn't say much for the whole five days. I hope I didn't spoil it. Maybe it spent the rest of its life looking for beef-flavoured mosquitoes.

It Comes with the Uniform

I knew a guy in those far off days who was a real traveller. He wore the whole hippy uniform: embroidered Afghan sheepskin coat, hand-tooled leather boots, little bells around his neck, rucksack, sleeping bag, shoulder length hair, straggly beard, and a far-away expression in his eyes. He'd trek the road to India every two years, usually escorting groups of students who didn't quite have the courage to do it alone. That's okay, we're not all born adventurers. At least they did the trip instead of just talking about it.

My friend, however, felt incomplete. Despite the obvious signs, like 'I'm a hippy, man, so I must be carrying dreadful illegal substances,' he never ever got stopped and searched by police nor Customs officers. Never. Not anywhere. In fact, he was quite peeved about not having the full and intimate body search, the rubber truncheons, the five year sentence, and being dragged away to some dark and dank cell screaming his innocence. All he ever got was a friendly nod from Customs whenever he came through Dover.

On one trip, he walked through the Green Channel, and, when he didn't get called out, he stopped. He waited a few moments. Nothing. Then he turned round and went back to the Customs officer.

'Don't you want to search me?' he asked.

'Nope,' said the Customs officer with a friendly smile.

'Why not?' asked my hippy friend.

'Well, you wouldn't be stupid enough to come through here carrying anything illegal while dressed like that, now would you?'

'Of course not,' Mr. Hippy replied. ->>

It Comes with the Uniform (contd)

'In that case it's a waste of my time searching you, ennit?' said the Customs officer with the force of logic to back him up.

'Oh, right, I suppose it would be,' said my friend.

He thought for a moment, then continued his journey back home.

The last time I saw him, in the late-1980s, he had a little house in the Essex countryside, and had married an English woman he met on a track on some Nepalese mountain. They had four children, two dogs, a cat, three ducks, and a rabbit called Drongo. He works as the local milkman. To see him, you'd note only a quiet, polite, family man. Yet he has crossed deserts, trekked Himalayan kingdoms, and camped in Biblical landscapes.

See that pot-bellied, balding, middle-aged guy supping his beer in the corner of the pub? It's just possible that the far-away look in his eyes means he once rode the mountains of North Africa on a donkey, roamed southern India with an orange robe and a begging bowl, or stood upon nameless mountains of the Hindu Kush.

Maybe your children, in the 2010s, will be returning from a journey along the Silk Road instead of that career in accountancy you had planned for them. They'll return with reflections of mountains in their eyes. If so, cherish them, for they have lived out an ancient plan, one so ancient it led us out of Africa tens of thousands of years ago and led us around the planet. It's something deep within the genes of homo sapiens, it comes with the uniform.

A Chicken Dinner for Mr. Exec

Next to me on the Carcassonne campsite was a large bungalow tent, the first I had seen. An executive-size tent. The resident family were camping for the summer. Mr. Exec had been assigned to the region and had swapped his hotel allowance for a lump sum. He bought the tent and had brought his wife and toddler with him. Apart from the canvas walls it was just like home.

Every morning Mr. Exec would come out of the front door in his suit, white shirt, sober tie and shiny black leather shoes, clutching his Mr. Exec briefcase. Wife and kid would follow. He'd give his wife a happy Mr. Exec kiss. Then he'd fix his briefcase to the pillion of a miniature 50cc motorbike and ride off to work. It sounded like a chainsaw on wheels. I wondered if he ever had to take his clients out to lunch. They'd come out of the office expecting to glide off in the Exec-mobile and instead have to straddle a mobile chainsaw.

Mr. Exec's family also had a put-upon dog that hardly ever got fed. I've never seen such a miserable looking dog in my life. Beats me why people have animals then treat them so grudgingly.

One day, Mrs. Exec brought home a chicken from the market. It was dead but you could buy live ones too. She set about doing all those disgusting things we had to do those days to get a chicken ready for the oven. The cleaned chicken was washed and placed on a table out in the open under a tree. Mrs. Exec went back into the tent. ->>

A Chicken Dinner for Mr. Exec (contd)

The dog, which had watched the proceedings from under a nearby bush, rushed forward, leapt onto the table, grabbed the chicken and retreated back to the bushes. He might have got away with it but for the delighted shrieks of the kid. He got up and toddled off after the dog, expecting a really good game for a change.

Mrs. Exec came out of the tent to find the cause of the excitement being dragged across the ground and into a dense thicket. Without a moment's hesitation she grabbed a flyswat and charged after the fast disappearing chicken. She leapt fearlessly into the thicket, slashing the undergrowth with her flyswat, and adding her own shrieks to the rising mayhem. But she had under-estimated the opposition. This was one very hungry dog. The kid was ecstatic and shrieked louder.

A couple of hungry hippies were watching from their tent. The same thought must have crossed their minds at the same time. They looked at each other briefly then joined the chase. Nothing moves faster than a hungry hippy when there's a liberated chicken on the loose.

When the first hippy got to the bushes Mrs. Exec turned and slammed him on the head with her flyswat. It's a pity this wasn't a drug-crazed hippy because he might have thought the sky had fallen on him and slunk off to contemplate patterns on the tent canvas. ->>

A Chicken Dinner for Mr. Exec (contd)

No sir, this was a hungry hippy, and a hungry hippy is meaner than a Rottweiler with toothache. He dived groundwards and crawled after the chicken. This was all too much for hippy#2. He went back to base and sat down muttering profound statements about the innate violence of social interactions.

The dog, like some canine Stearpike, knew the lay of this herbaceous Gormanghast. It had dragged Mr. Exec's dinner to a hidden lair, but hippy#1 was on the trail. Mrs. Exec saw the legs of a pair of elephant striders crawling through the thicket and must have figured out where her chicken lay. With the strength and fortitude known only to the truly desperate, she grabbed an overhanging branch and swung up and over the hippy crawling along on his belly. Just as the dog was sinking its teeth into a wing of the chicken, a screaming Amazon descended through the foliage and landed with greater accuracy than a camel lobbing a gob of spit at an infidel. Hands reached down and the chicken was saved for humanity.

Mrs. Exec pulled at the bird and hauled it up out of the thicket. It rose heavily through the foliage with a very hungry dog hanging on to a wing with grim determination. The kid was hysterical and motioned to Mummy to throw him the chicken so he could play too. ->>

A Chicken Dinner for Mr. Exec (contd)

With both hands gripping the chicken, Mrs. Exec shook the bird up and down violently, trying to loosen the dog's hold on the prize. Then, suddenly, the chicken was free as the wing tore off and the dog fell back into the undergrowth. The abrupt loss of the dog's weight overbalanced Mrs. Exec and she fell backwards into the path of the hungry hippy. With a scream she leapt up and I swear she just floated over that thicket, landing at a run on the grass. Mrs. Exec, the kid, and the chicken went into the tent and didn't show themselves until Mr. Exec came floating home on his mobile chainsaw.

The family sat down to dinner under the trees at the side of their big bungalow tent. Mrs. Exec presented a steaming pan of coq-au-vin. It's a good job Mr. Exec wasn't that mean kind of person who sits down to a chicken dinner and counts the number of limbs. If he had been, he would have believed this story even less than you do.

The Kindness of Strangers

I cannot let these reminiscences finish without mentioning some people whose kindness helped me on my way through these stories.

No petrol in the middle of nowhere

It was entirely my own fault. Having read a local guide to some interesting places in the hills to the south of Carcassonne I planned a quiet Sunday jaunt. Only after I had set out did I check the fuel. I had plenty, but decided I ought to fill up at the next petrol station. This was on a Sunday morning deep in rural France. I rode deeper into the hills. The sun was blazing, I had the roads to myself, there were hardly any villages and not one of them had so much as a single petrol pump.

I checked the map and decided I had just enough to see me along the route and home. However, the map didn't tell me that distance would be almost doubled by the hilliness of the terrain. The inevitable happened. The motorbike coughed, spluttered, and stopped on a long uphill stretch. I checked the map again. I was only 10 km from a large town. Only 10km pushing a motorbike up and down hills.

After an hour of this, a Citroen 2CV came chugging down the hill in front of me. It stopped just past me and the driver got out. He asked what the problem was, in a very thick local accent. I explained as best I could in my schoolboy French about the petrol running out. He shook his head, rubbed his chin, and said something about not getting petrol anywhere on a Sunday. He then went back to his car and returned with a petrol can. He not only gave me enough petrol to see me to the nearest town, he completely filled my tank. ->>

The Kindness of Strangers (contd)

I offered him money and profuse thanks, but he wouldn't accept a penny. He went back to his little car and with a wave continued on chugging down the hill.

Just a few weeks ago, in September 2004, I took that same route with some friends in a car, and there are still no petrol stations, except for one that was closing when we found it at noon. Even today, fill up before you go touring rural France, you might not be as lucky as I was back in 1972 and be saved by the kindness of a complete stranger. He didn't have to do it, he could have just driven by.

Rained out in the Dordogne

Carcassonne was still a week or so away when I passed through the Dordogne in that glorious summer. The weather had been kind as it was still only mid-May. I did notice though, as I rode through the first day, that the vegetation was quite lush. That night, and subsequent nights, I found out why - it poured with rain every night. Over the next three days I got wetter and wetter, until everything I had was soaked through, even my boots.

Riding into a new farm campsite the farmer's wife took one look at me and insisted I stay in one of her spare rooms instead of camping out. All my things were hung out to dry in a barn, and a son showed me to a spare room. The window looked out over a small lake, the floorboards were of polished oak, the bed was a gigantic contraption of brass with noisy springs, and the mattress enveloped me as soon as I lay on it. I was not only wet through, I was totally exhausted. ->>

The Kindness of Strangers (contd)

Later, a discrete knock on the door announced a visitor. The door opened and there she stood with a tray on which was a large bowl of steaming country stew, a big hunk of freshly baked bread, and a pichet of wine. I realised then I was famished too. They left me alone for the rest of the night, and before retiring, I had a bath in the adjoining bathroom. The bath was one of those enormous enamelled tubs big enough for two, with brass taps, steaming hot water, and a cacophony of gurglings and knockings from the plumbing.

The next morning I was presented with croissants, half a baguette, and a large jar of home-made apricot jam for breakfast. Downstairs I found all my things had dried off nicely then I had to be on my way. The farmer's wife would not take a penny for her hospitality, charging me only for one night's camping.

I always meant to go back, but my touring never took me to that side of France again. I told people of that wonderful farm campsite by the side of a picturesque lake in the Dordogne and hope that the increased custom repaid for the night's board and lodging that farming family gave me free.

A tour of the mountains

Later on that summer I rode up the Rhône Valley via Carpentras, Vaison-la-Romaine, and Nyons. I headed deeper into the mountains and found myself on a gigantic campsite overlooking the town of Gap. It had been a long weary ride so I decided to stay for a few days. ->>

The Kindness of Strangers (contd)

The 'Tour de France' ran through Gap that year and I went down the hill to catch it. It was a disappointment as we had a two-hour build-up to the event, then the cyclists zoomed past in less than ten seconds.

Back at my tent, a French woman came over and asked if I'd like to have dinner with her family. I had already learnt that food is important in France and a refusal would give offence. So, somewhat bemused, I had dinner in a caravan with a family of complete strangers. Dinner in France goes on for two or three hours, as did this one. Conversation was lively, if polite, and I was invited to go touring with them the next day. I still have the photographs of places I would never have visited if it hadn't have been for the kindness of that French family.

The day after our tour they had to leave. They came over to say goodbye and that's the last I ever saw or heard of them. Why they adopted me for those two days I'll never know.

They didn't have to do it

I was a young, long-haired, bearded stranger on a motorbike, in and out of their lives in a few minutes, or one or two days. Later, when hurt by the betrayal of friends or the treacheries of colleagues, I have thought of those strangers who showed me such kindness. They didn't have to do it, they had no reason to help me, and I hope I have passed on the kindness they showed me that wonderful summer riding through rural France. I thank you all, whoever you were.
