

A typically French mountain panorama on the descent from the Col de la Croix Haute in the Dauphin Alps. The village of le Percy-Monestier basks in the sun, with a back-cloth of distant peaks, their snow-filled crevices gleaming through the afternoon haze.

FRANCE ON A SHOE - STRING

MEMORIES OF 2,000 MILES THROUGH THE LAND OF HOSPITALITY

by MICHAEL
BROWN



Study in haphazard architectural beauty at Marvejols, on the Route d'Auvergne. This is a fine example of the ancient French town that is so attractive in its air of gentle decay. As an inducement to tourists, the uneven roofs make a piquant contrast with the Dome of Discovery.

IT was, admittedly, a substantial shoe-string—£35 per head (four persons) for sixteen days, exclusive of cross-Channel charges. As it happened, we could have done it on £30 per head, but the annual holiday is no time for cheeseparings. "It's shockingly expensive" called the occupants of a car at Dover as they passed us coming off the ferry on which we were to cross. It isn't.

Earlier in the year I had decided to tour France economically. Frenchmen do it, and the French are a frugal race; I could not believe that the ordinary Frenchman would be prepared to spend on his holiday a sum that was outrageous by the standards he set for the rest of the year. We would therefore "go French" (one pays for the privilege of going international), armed with *Les Auberges de France* and determined not to speak English unless we had to, for the summer holiday abroad is excellent linguistic education. Armed, also, with the list of hotels in the French *logis* scheme (fixed prices, fixed standards), and a pile of routes supplied by M. Maurice Vignon, of the French tourist office in London, who had assured us that by following any of them we should, as desired, "see the real France."

M. Vignon gets top marks for his Route d'Auvergne, which is outlined on the map. By general consent it was enjoyed much more than the celebrated tourist route we follow-

ed back from the Mediterranean. The mountains, particularly, were a delight. It is true that the cols lack height by comparison with the famous ones, and the peaks also. But the gradients are sometimes steeper and the bends less well engineered, with the result that fast climbing is good, exciting fun. The slopes themselves, plenty steep enough for grandeur, were mostly clothed by pines through which the streams far below glint like fish in the sunlight, and the crowning glory was the yellow broom, an offset for pine green if you like, which was massed everywhere that it could get a hold. Nothing in the sunbaked Alpine slopes gave rise to such gasps of pleasure as this. A laurel wreath might also be awarded to Mont Dore, the mountain resort west of Clermont Ferrand. Reached by a climb of spacious glory, this resort remains much more French than international

The Club des Sans-club handbook never let us down, and hotel memories are most vivid. They varied from the celebrated (in French eyes, if not internationally) to the unknown except to *les routiers*, but they were all cheap and admirable. In the first category might be placed the Ecu de France at Lâon and the roadside Auberge de la Reinette near Brignolles, also the Château Vert at Grau d'Agde, of which more later. In the second category no better example could be quoted than Chez Camillou, somewhere high up in the Auvergnés near Aumont. Chez Camillou is a family-run halt for *les routiers*. It has a dining room, a bar and two bedrooms for guests; the lavatory is "down the garden." The garage is the vast cellar under the house, into which your car must nuzzle amongst wine casks and farming impedimenta; that is, provided you have decided to risk the steep passage down from the road to the entrance. Keep a weather eye on the rock outcrops!

We arrived at Chez Camillou at 6 p.m. on a Monday, and drank Cinzanos on the roadside bench while Madame cooked a dinner; her daughter had cycled down to Aumont for the veal. It was an enormous, beautifully cooked meal, and afterwards we chatted to the family, made a fuss of Bichene the dog, and then went to bed in perfect linen and comfort. All night the *rossignols* sang; they had come out, said Madame, to greet the sun, which was shining for the first time in many weeks.

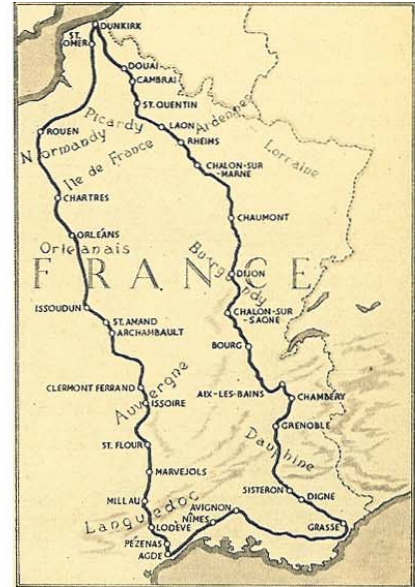
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How charming the French are! During the whole of the tour we heard not a surly comment, nor were we the object of a single discourtesy. I would award high marks in this respect to the waitress at the Château Vert at Gnu d'Agde, whose jolly comments at first proved very difficult of understanding. Her pronunciation of *maintenant* gave us the clue, for it was roughly as an Englishman might pronounce it who knew no French; with that as a basis linguistic relations were established, and we were looked after incomparably during a four-day stay *en pension*. The Château Vert is a lovely place. It has a great courtyard at the rear in which pines are planted, and palms. There are flowers everywhere. There are also a stage, and two concrete courts for dancing. The roofed and low-arched hotel portion, facing this scene, contains the bar and dining tables, and other tables stand under the trees. Dining with the staff and holidaymakers was great fun, one of the pleasantest occasions of a pleasant stay; we sampled dishes that we should not have dreamed of ordering *a la carte*, and profited thereby. And on two nights we enjoyed dancing to a quintet of first-class ability, with a violinist who played tangoes as if her soul responded specially to that bewitching rhythm. The lovely south! Our waitress, asking us where we had been, said that she knew Dunkirk—tragically, for her husband was killed there. It was cold—she shuddered expressively—and she was glad to come back to the Mediterranean.

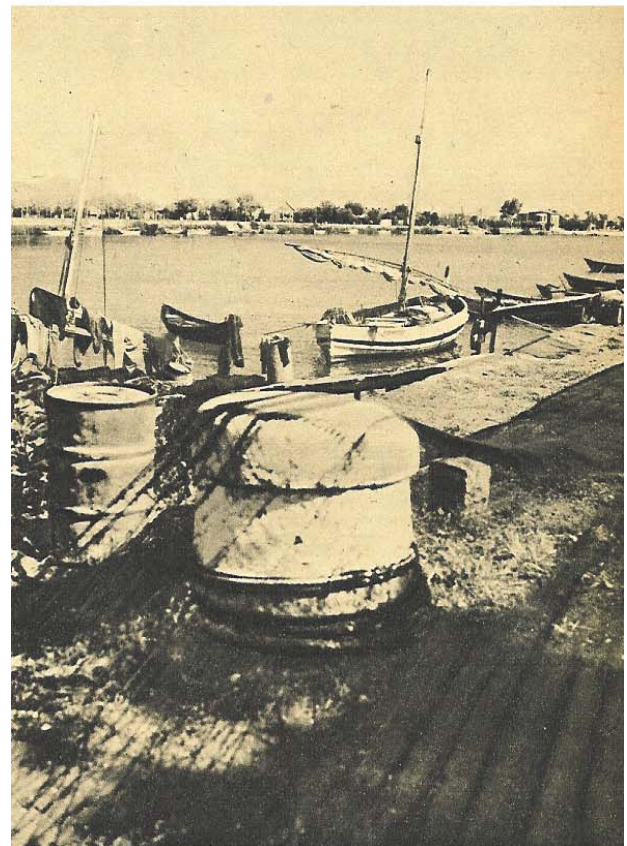
Grau d'Agde is a fishing village with a *plage*. We were the only English there during our stay, and gained a little celebrity as a result. In the shops they asked us to tell our countrymen that the *plage* was an excellent one, and that Grau d'Agde welcomed *les étrangers*. That is all truth, and perhaps rather less than more. I shall return to Grau d'Agde.

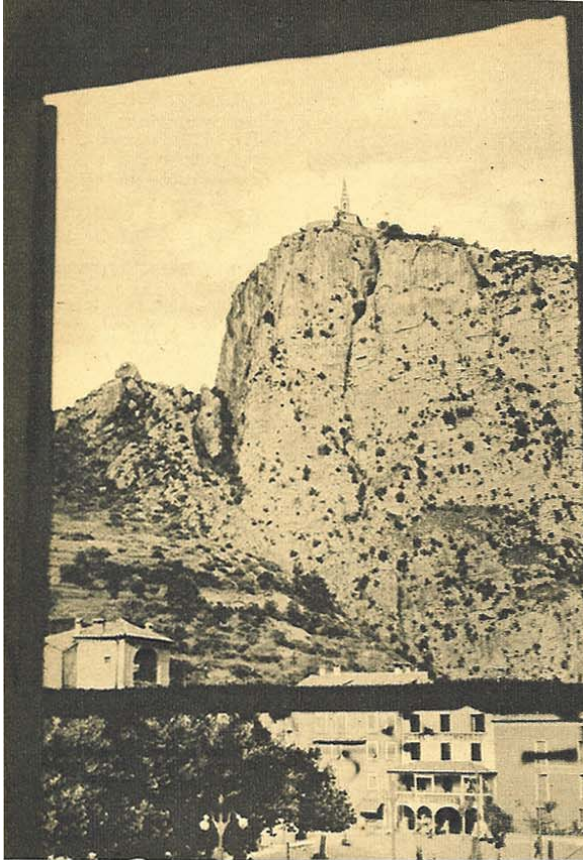
One's memories are mostly of people, and what they said,

Route followed by the author. From Issoudun to Nîmes it coincides with the recommended Route d'Auvergne. Le Grau d'Agde is on the coast due south of Agde.



Grau d'Agde under the Mediterranean sun. Lateen-rigged fishing boats lie alongside; the crew's clothing gets an airing, and the long nets (sometimes one hundred yards) are spread to dry over the bollards and along the road.





Left: View from a hotel window: The tremendous rock which dominates Castellane and is crowned by a church. From the Col de Lèques, however, the rock becomes dwarfed into a black anthill, only incidental to the general scene.

FRANCE ON A SHOE-STRING continued

Last remnants of winter snow melt on the summits of the hills near Mont Dore. The date was July, the heights are about 4,000 ft



which is a tribute to the French nation, for the people must compete with a countryside of rare beauty. When we arrived in Pézenas the boys in the *place* were playing what was obviously a local game. Our question confirmed this, and we were invited into the parlour to learn more about it. Called *le tambourin*, it is played by striking a ball with "tambourines" made of goatskin stretched tightly over a wooden circle. The protagonist's bat has a handle, the others hold their bats by the rim. The ball is struck great distances with a loud and satisfying crack, at least to youngsters. We preferred the notes that came from the trees at dusk like the clear tone of silver handbells. By this time we were drinking black coffee after dinner, and Madame, who noted our interest, was pleased to explain. They came from *les chouettes*, the owls, obviously a more melodious variety than that which screeches from my neighbour's oak trees. Molière lived in Pézenas for many years, and it is an ancient, rather grubby town, but with a fine garden containing his statue.

There was, too, the old boatman who took us across the canal at Grau d'Agde. He thought we were Americans (we were variously thought to be Swiss, Belgian, German and American, but never English, which we found mightily amusing) and, upon learning that we were British, rested on his oars and told us about the Great War. He had been in the French merchant marine, was sunk at the Dardanelles, picked up by a Turkish battleship and imprisoned with the Scots. But yes, he knew the Scots well. To prove it, he stood up in the small boat, danced a little hornpipe, the while imitating a fife rendering of "It's a long way to Tipperary." When we had difficulty in understanding him he would lapse into his few words of German, of which we knew nothing. Agreeably crazy, this sort of thing; he was our firm friend for three days.

Liveliest encounter was breakfast near Brignolles with two French medical students, a Danish hiker and a Sicilian *meccanico*. The Sicilian was delivering a lorry from Bologna to heaven knows where, and had picked up the others. They were drinking a bottle of *Château Neuf du Pape*, and under its influence language difficulties receded. The Dane spoke a little English, the Sicilian a travesty of the same. He also had his own particular variety of French. The French students spoke a little English, too, rather less than we spoke of French. But we got along. The Dane, armed with only



Midday on the Côte d'Azur, looking towards Cap d'Antibes. Motorists lunch in the shade of the pines, and the Fiat owner has pulled the cabriolet roof over in order to avoid a very hot seat!

currency and travellers' cheques, had nearly starved for three days owing to his inability to make himself understood and to the French habit of closing the banks with a certain haphazardness.

The Sicilian loved the English, and Manchester and Liverpool, but hated the climate. "I am," he declaimed, "one of the sun." His final gesture proved it. He plucked a great blossom from a Laurier rose that grew in the hotel forecourt, bowed and presented it to the English *mesdames* as the car left. "Long live England," he then proclaimed. "Long live Sicily," we replied, tacking on as an afterthought, in view of his profession, Alberto Ascari and Luigi Villorresi. He drew himself up with great dignity: "And..." he paused dramatically, "Nino Farina." But certainly. The M.G. swept away to an international cheer.

I had almost forgotten the M.G. It did its job excellently, showing a great liking for *supercarburant*, to which it was treated as an honoured guest of the company. On "super" it never pinked; nor did it run-on. On British Pool it does both. Once we nearly ran out of petrol and filled up with ordinary French petrol, when some pinking and running-on occurred. With this direct comparison in mind, I would put both petrols ahead of British Pool, *supercarburant* being well ahead and well worth the extra money in a high-performance car. Ordinary petrol *may* be about the same quality as Pool, for I must have had some super in the tank when we took on the single load of *carburant auto*.

We held the car down to 55 m.p.h. cruising speed over the long, straight roads of France. There is a great temptation for the British motorist to put his foot hard down and revel in such roads, but it is not wise. I believe in nursing my car on such trips, although not in some things. It must get round bends on mountains at such speeds as will keep the engine revving, even if this means hauling round with protest from the tyres. It must take French oil, too, for I do not subscribe to the notion that French oils are no diet for an M.G. If they are, the oil companies should do something about it—they are

international. And it must take load and luggage without protest (as it did). I have no room for the owner who fusses about his back springs if someone proposes to include an electric iron. But I am fully prepared to drive so that the risk of engine breakdown is at a minimum, owing to the difficulties of and time spent in replacements. The M.G. had only one failure—of a petrol gauge tank unit, when I hit a subsidence at a higher speed than I would have liked. A sharp eye is necessary on minor French roads, but it should not be thought that they are unsuitable; we used RN roads, GC roads and D roads, without complaint. Some of the lesser roads were as charming as English country lanes, their banks being massed with viper's bugloss, queen of wild flowers.

Food and drink? Touchy subjects, I recall. We drank the *vin du pays* often, occasionally the vintage bottle, and once, on special recommendation, the *vin originaire* of the champagne country. We never had a bad meal, not even an indifferent one. In the essentials of life the French have a great understanding.

Enough, the nostalgia for the red roofs of Provence becomes overwhelming. Go French; allow yourselves about 2,000 francs a head a day for expenses, which will include petrol for the run (ours was of 2,000 miles), and you will have a superb holiday. Pay the Channel charges in advance and try to forget them; they are the only unjustifiably expensive item in a French holiday this year.

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Mountain view from the Col de Lèques, which climbs up from Castellane to a height of nearly 4,000ft. It lies on Route Nationale 85 and is the main road to Digne.

