

FRANCE, PYRENEES & NORTHERN SPAIN

September 2023

The immigration officer slid back the window of his booth the absolute minimum to take my passport from me and swiftly shut it again. The weather was distinctly sub-aqua as I arrived in St Malo but at least he was considerate and didn't ask me to take my helmet off. I rode south in the hope that I'd leave the torrential rain behind and my hopes were soon fulfilled. Dark rain clouds gave way to blue skies and the temperature slowly climbed throughout the morning.



In a little over an hour I was embracing proper motorcycling roads, punctuated by petite 18th Century villages, then once again along the banks of the Loire and south to remarkable Richelieu. I don't remember the roads being so straight as they were that morning before the welcome undulating, sweeping roads of the Haute Limousin. I firmly expected to see herds of celebrated Limousin cattle in the sloping roadside fields but not one put in an appearance. As William McGonagall wrote (*to be read in a Scottish accent*):

"On yonder hill there stood a coo. It's no' there noo. It must'a shifted."

Sporting bright orange hi viz jackets the Sunday shooters would have looked more natural peering down a hole at the side of the road. As it was, they were off into the forest to end the life of some natural being. I'm told that discipline is non-existent in the French hunting fraternity, with a shoot at anything that moves approach. I know this to be true from personal experience when a companion was peppered with shot on a walking trip in Corsica.

The black shiny road repair looked innocuous enough as I took an uphill bend and it was pure instinct when I put a foot out to recover a two-wheel slide. It took a little longer to recover my composure. Memories of the North Coast of Scotland last year came flooding back reminding me of the day I tackled gale force winds and ended up with my bike on its side and me leant against a grass bank.

I wasn't alone in parting company with my bike that day. The whole trip was so dire that I chose not to write a blog. The other highlights being food poisoning that left me in bed for day and narrowly avoiding the side of a campervan that pulled out in front of me across the road. This trip was going so much better. **Read more overleaf...**



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Leaving the Haute Limousin behind I tackled the hills and river valleys of the upper reaches of the Dordogne before venturing through the Auvergne. The medieval towns with ornate bridges stood the testament of time and would have whisked me back had it not been for the 21st Century fashion adorning the town's inhabitants.

The limestone cliffs of the Grand Causses towered above the town of Millau wedged in their midst. It was plainly obvious why the French had built a road viaduct to relieve the town of unrelenting traffic and what a magnificent edifice it is.

The Gorge de la Doubie was entirely in the wrong direction but it was an opportunity to sample the local topography before riding up onto the scrub plains of the High Cevennes and heading south once more under blue skies and ever increasing temperatures. Approaching Carcassonne via the hills to the north a hazy silhouette of the Pyrenees appeared on the horizon in the afternoon heat.



I returned to my room before dinner to write but bizarrely there were no ceiling lights. I made a humorous complaint that puzzled reception and the outcome was that I was supplied with a jug and a torch pointing up to the ceiling. It reflected back down quite well.

Heading into the Pyrenees from Carcassonne on a day that would combine my two passions of motorcycling and mountains was a great introduction to the delights to be served up over the coming days.

The gigantic, orange, upturned umbrella secured to the front of the tractor was something of a puzzle as it crossed the road in front of me but as it drove between rows of almond trees its purpose became obvious. Traditionally gangs of farm workers would lay down sheets before shaking the trees. This contraption wraps itself around under the branches and grips the trunk before shaking it vigorously.

I'd initially been venturing along the mountain roads on the Spanish side but the highlight was a route through the Haute Pyrenees in wonderful sunshine, over seven passes, including the Col du Tourmalet back in France surpassing any superlative or cliché that might come to mind.



Read more overleaf...



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Col d'Aubisque

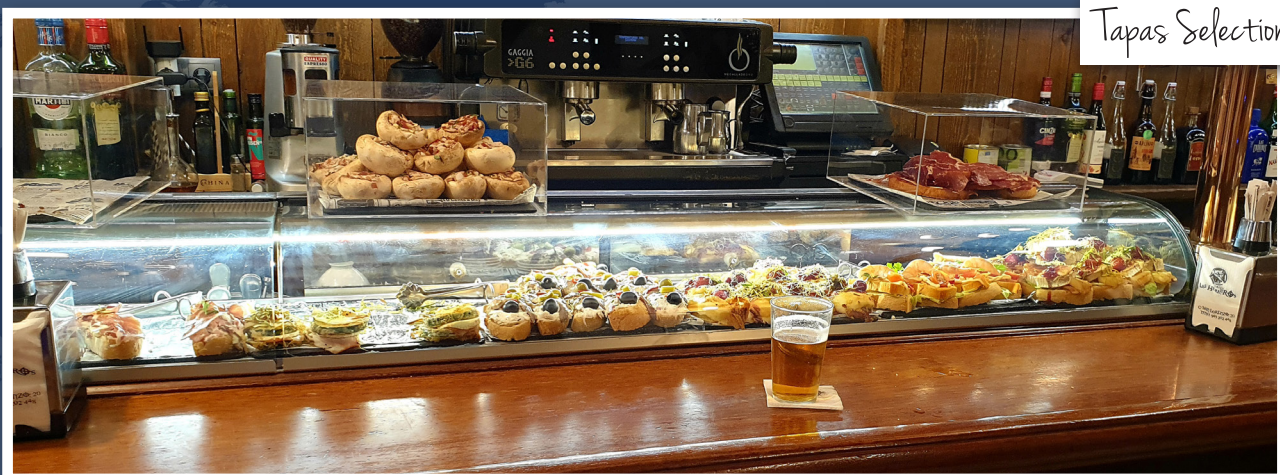


My final day in the Pyrenees involved an enforced detour, that took me high into the mountains, well above the tree line. The road was barely the width of a car and no more than a tarmac track. I felt a real sense of remoteness and occasionally exposure where the side of the road fell steeply away. Three golden eagles soared effortlessly above on mountain thermals and weary cyclists walked uphill with many more kilometres still to complete. Coasting downhill, to conserve fuel, the next challenge was to find a filling station. Once found I was on a fast sweeping road out of the Pyrenees and down to Pamplona.

The tapas selection stretched for 20 metres along the bar with some very inviting options and one or two questionable choices. The benefit of staying in a city centre provides the opportunity to sample tapas as an alternative to a late Spanish meal.

It was barely 15 minutes after I'd left Pamplona that I was climbing a winding road into the Cantabrian mountains, where I would ride for the next day and a half before boarding the Santander ferry.

A most enjoyable trip testifying that "dreams really do come true".



Tapas Selection



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