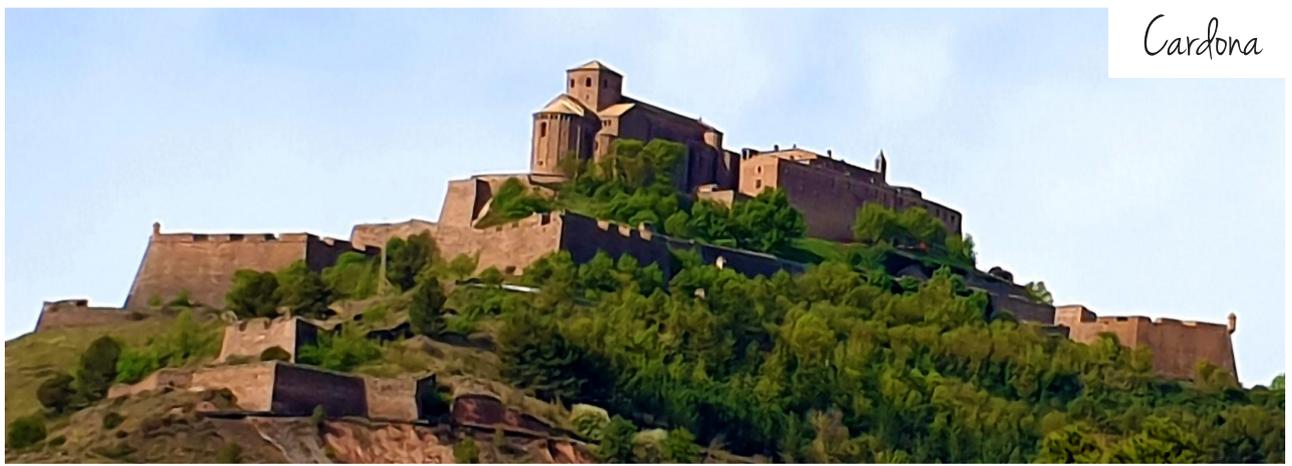


ON THE ROAD AGAIN

April 2022

Cardona



The bow of the ferry slowly yawned open as the ramp lowered and the sun's penetrating rays streamed onto the car deck. Restless drivers started their vehicles, impatient to depart into early morning France.

I was on the road again and it felt good.

I disembarked at St Malo with little fuss but then there was the usual search for fuel in rural France. Cafes provided a similar problem but a village boulangerie was doing a roaring trade for a Sunday morning. Sat in front of the l'otel, with the evening sun on my back, I was enjoying a welcome beer in Richelieu, once home to the Cardinal, a lovely old medieval town in the Loire, with a large square, surrounded by buildings on all sides that oozed warmth. I could just hear the sound of an organ being played in the church and every now and then the place came alive with motorcycles and 1950's American cars, ten gallon hats compulsory headwear. A 2CV, immaculately renovated, drew applause. I was heading for the Cantal mountains tomorrow, a bit further on from Limoge, taking my time.

My, how I'd missed travelling these past two years.

Had I been wearing a helmet cam and survived the impending collision I would have gone straight to the local Gendarmerie to deliver the footage. A 40 tonne truck, attempting an impossible overtake, down a short tree lined hill, was heading straight for me and the car in front, at great speed. I braked hard and pulled into the side of the road, fully expecting the debris of the car and the truck to hit me at great force. Somehow, the truck squeezed through and we all survived, perhaps momentarily not the outcome I was expecting.

Today's weather defied the forecast for an otherwise great ride through forested hills and green pastures in sunshine, along smooth winding roads punctuated by manicured medieval villages. Plenty of leisurely stops outside cafes and picnic areas with viewpoints. Plus, one defining moment.

Read more overleaf...

ON THE ROAD AGAIN (cont.)

Tomorrow's weather would be altogether different. The cloud tumbled over the tops of the Gorge de la Dourbie limestone escarpments as I left Millau. I'd chosen to ride this alternative but shorter route to the Gorge du Tarn, before climbing up into the cold of La Cevennes and Haute Languedoc, finally arriving in the walled Citadel of Carcassonne after an enforced detour in driving rain.

Snow was lying at low levels in the Pyrenees and any attempt to cross the mountains would have resulted in turning back, so leaving Carcassonne I was forced to ride east, close to the coast, before riding back in on the Spanish side. France and Spain have been regular destinations for me at this time of year but it was easily 10 degrees colder this trip and headline news in Spain. The Cardona Parador sat imperiously in the sky, perched high above the Catalanian plateau and the approach road wound endlessly upward until I was finally able to survey the world below. This once 12th century castle was now a warm and welcoming heritage hotel.

The helpful Spaniard at the construction barrier explained that the road was "*clothe head*" and for the second time this trip the route to my destination meant another detour. Belatedly I discovered that black polythene sacks covering road signs indicated that the road was closed further on. However, if the sign is covered over, how do you know where you're unable to go? I had to back track 20 miles over a pass and then detour but the best bit was, even though the journey was an hour longer, it was a cracking route. First down a narrow gorge and then fast, downhill sweeping roads. Quite a bonus.

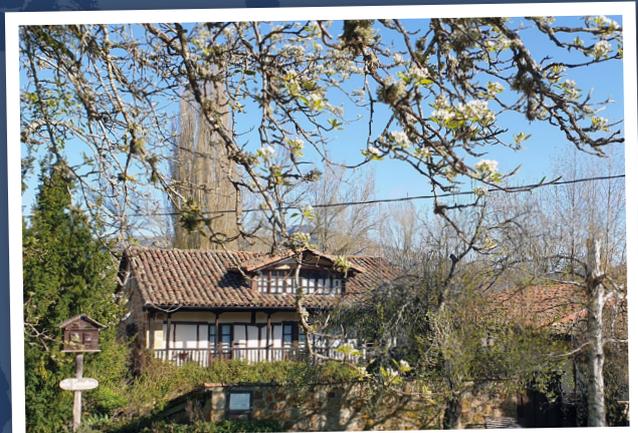
The soulless Navarra services provided a welcome break and an opportunity for both motorcycles and humans to fuel up for what was going to be a long, cold, wet day. I bypassed my intended stop in San Sebastian and headed on into Basque country, with no idea where I would sleep. Reluctant to stop and search my phone for accommodation I pressed the GPS "find" button, more in hope than expectation but soon after I was in another warm Parador on a grey damp evening. Bliss.

After yesterday's reluctance to stop, this morning's challenge was fuel and then I needed a route, in the form of a W, to eventually take me west into Cantabria and avoid an early arrival. The sign proclaimed it a Rural Hotel but it was more like a mountain hut, high on the edge of the Picos de Europa.

A really old and remote medieval building with spacious rooms for my last night. No fuss. A roaring log fire, no menu and dinner for one reserved in advance.

Today had been really good, in fact better than expected, with mountain roads and deep gorges, almost canyons, to ride. It had been dry but none too warm. Santander and the 5pm ferry to Plymouth beckoned tomorrow.

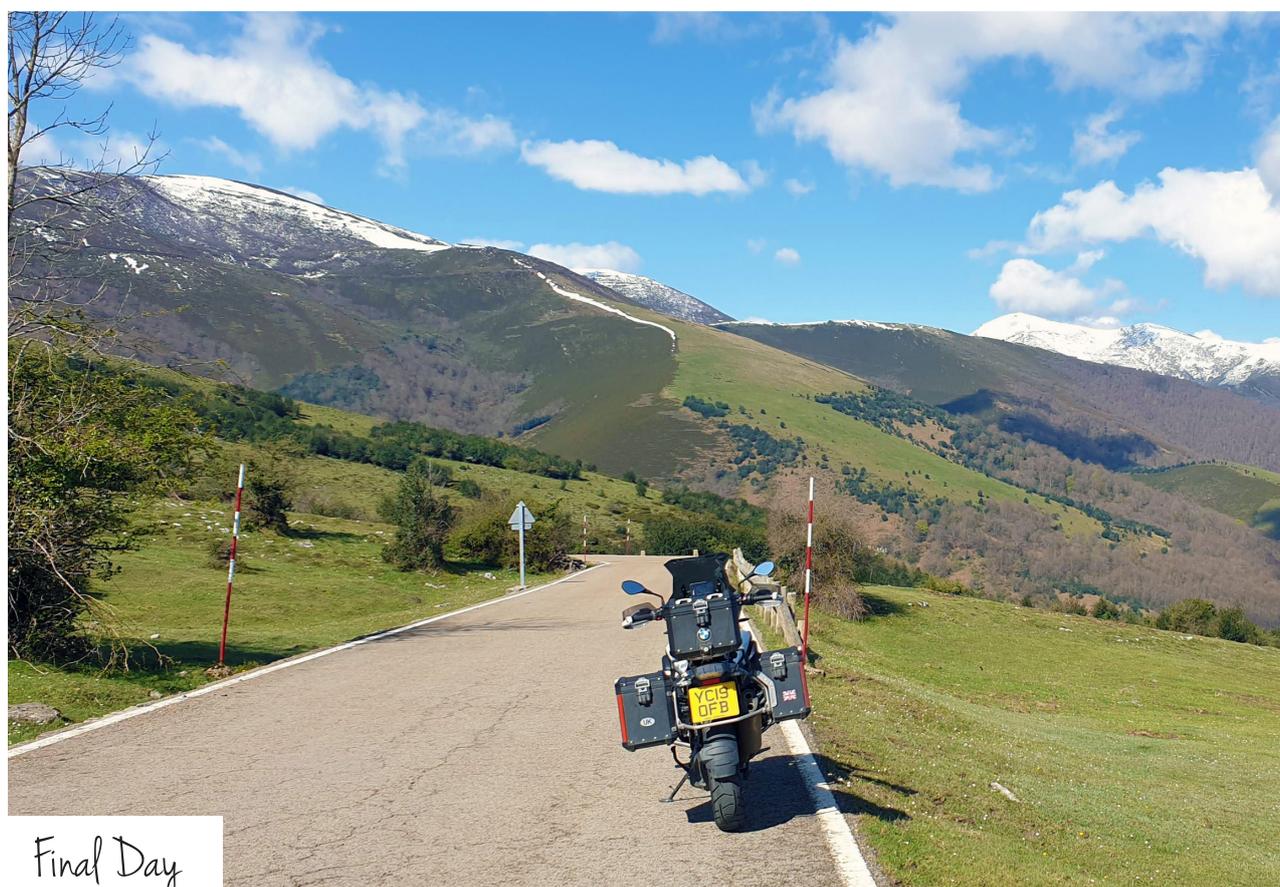
Read more overleaf...



Rural Hotel

ON THE ROAD AGAIN (cont.)

The morning sun was brightening up the day as I stood and listened to the silence, punctuated by the occasional call of a cuckoo. Perhaps the same one that had greeted me yesterday. I took my time to load the bike, reflecting on the final day and thinking it was a shame to be leaving but comforted in the knowledge that I'd soon be on the road again.



Final Day



Contact Gordon

Email gordon@linbeck.co.uk for a chat or advice on your next motorcycle adventure.