

A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread & Radiotelegraphy?

It all happened in one weekend

Saturday-Sunday, May 3-4, 2008

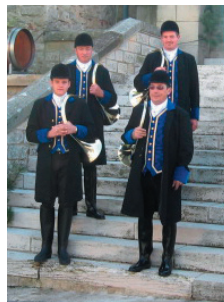
Our weekend provided experiences beyond expectations. On Saturday we had planned to make a trip to Brive-la-Gaillarde, a city about 90 minutes north of us, to visit a ham radio couple that Bob had contacted via the internet well before our trip. Complications arose when we spotted the Vin de Cahors Wine Festival in nearby Albas, a beautiful river town about ten minutes from our house, which was also happening on Saturday. We decided to attempt to do both, since we weren't due in Brive until about 4PM. So, it was off to the wine festival at 9:00.

The festival celebrates the wines of this region of France which are world famous. The vintners of the Vin de Cahors region converge on Albas and inhabit various houses along the steep streets of Albas, where visitors can come by for a taste. Unfortunately, the real action didn't begin until around 5PM, so we missed all that, but a good reason to return.

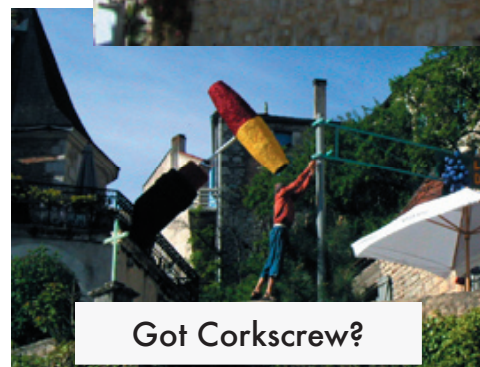
We caught the opening ceremonies of the festival including a dedication at the local church followed by a procession which was initiated by a fanfare played on antique posthorn bugles, similar to modern French horns (see below) but with no valves. This was followed by a musical treat in the form of an 18 piece band called Les Armagnacs, who had a most delightful sound, playing *paso dobles* (Spanish two step marches) in a pleasant, light, and listenable style. Upon conversing with one of their trumpet players, Bob received a complimentary CD of the band. It was only the beginning of the generosity we experienced this weekend.



Les Armagnacs band



Lunch with 9 bottles per table



Got Corkscrew?

Brive Radio Community Treats Us Royally

Bob had made email contact with a husband-wife radio ham team in Brive a month before we left. To our surprise, Mauricette (Mau, pronounced "Mo") invited us up for an overnight stay and dinner at their "radio shack" near Brive. We arrived during their radio club meeting in town, and since the meeting was in French, we went downtown to shop and see the sights. When we got back, we were introduced the "apertif" hour (happy hour but a lot more French) – blackberry liquer mixed with dry white wine. Dominique, visiting from near Paris, brought a pressed pork roll with fila dough. Phillippe wisecracked to Carol (after asking for a glass of water) "Drink up, we have no water at our house....only wine!" That should have been a sign.

We followed Mau to their house outside Brive. Of course, the first thing Bob noticed was their 60 foot crank-up tower with huge antenna atop. How else would you find the place? Upon arrival, it was more wine. Phillippe poured us a drink we all thought was champagne, but isn't called champagne, because it's not from the Champagne region? Got that? In the midst of this, Phillippe rang a bell and three neighbors showed up (with their own wine) to greet us.

Mau (F8BPN) is a serious ham operator with several operating awards. Her specialty is radio telegraphy (Morse code) and she can copy (understand) over 300 characters (letters) per minute. She also is a serious cook. Dinner included salad vert, foie gras et confit of duck, from-age, and a fruit dessert. After dinner, which started at 10:00 PM, Phillippe served schnapps made by his grandfather in 1918 from the Alsace region (so near Germany, it was Germany several times). This libation could have peeled anything off the roof of your mouth. At 1:00 AM, we were ready for sleep, except Bob, who took a spin at their radio and made several USA contacts. The amazing thing is we had no hangover.

We are still in awe of the generosity of Mau and Phillippe and the French community in general after this wonderful experience.



Two Caves, One Big Castle with a Twist, and Sarlat

We arose Sunday morning to a light breakfast of breads from the local area, coffee (which is mostly espresso here), and fig and prune jam. Mau and Phillippe gave us a tour of their cellar (called a "cave" in French) which houses about 100 wine bottles, various vegetables, and Mau's stash of grease for cooking (this is "haute grease", the classiest form, used in French cooking). After our goodbyes, we traveled to Sarlat for some sights and Carol bought a seriously French outfit. Also, note our pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Coneheads (below). Remember, Beldar (of Saturday Night Live fame) always told everyone "we are from... France!"

We continued to the Chateau Montfort, perhaps the most photographed castle in France. The Chateau, built in the 1200s by Simon du Montfort (or just captured by Simon) is located on the bluffs of the Dargogne River, and hangs more and more over the river bluff with every year of the erosion of the limestone it clings to. Simon apparently didn't care for the original decor when he took the castle in 1214, so he burned everything to the ground and started over. Now, here's the ironic twist. Simon was a big time Crusader, leading troops to the Holy Land to retake it from Arabic control. So who owns it now? An Emir from Dubai, we are told.

The final stop was at the Grottes du Cougnac, two limestone caves which house breathtaking formations and humbling displays of art by ancient peoples of this region. The tours, unfortunately, were in French. At least "stalagtite" and "stalagmite" are the same in both languages.

