



LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

28 May 2013

Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

Le Petit Train Jaune – the Little Yellow Train: a magical name that conjures up thoughts of fairy tales or of the Wizard of Oz. We first came across this name from some neighbours in *Gerde* who frequently visit the eastern *Pyrénées (Pyrénées Orientales)*. Several years ago they mentioned the *Petit Train Jaune* for a wonderful day out, and we have hoped to travel on the train ever since. A recent visit by my cousin Bill from Maine gave us the perfect excuse. We decided to spend a couple of nights in the *Pyrénées Orientales*, so as to give ourselves a complete relaxed day on the train. After some internet searching, perusal of the *Logis de France* and *Michelin* guide books, and a couple of phone calls we decided to stay in *Valcebollère*, a small village in the mountains very close to the Spanish border, at the *Auberge les Écureuils* (www.aubergeecureuils.com; Inn of the Squirrels). The map shows



**Auberge les Écureuils
Valcebollère**

the route we took to drive from our village of *Gerde* to *Valcebollère* (cyan trace). The route of the train is shown by the pink trace.

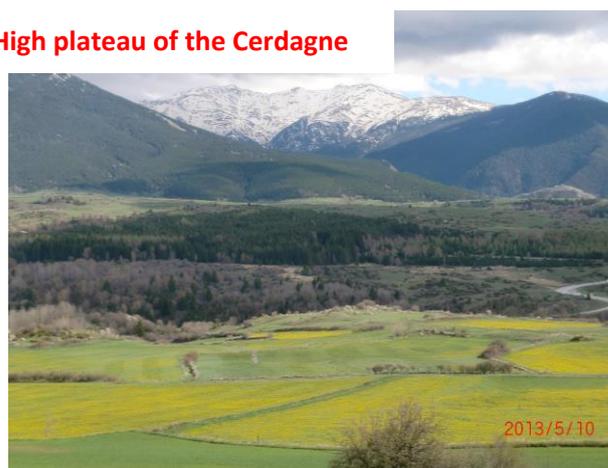
We travelled partly by *autoroute*, and partly by *routes nationales*, stopping at



Col de Puymorens

Tarascon for lunch (with a table on the banks of the River *Arriège* in spring spate, filled to the brim with snow melt after extensive rain). The road south from *Tarascon* winds as it climbs into the mountains, culminating in the climb to the *Col de Puymorens* at 1915 metres (6283 feet). There was a lot of traffic because of the May holiday period, but most of it turned right at the *col* to go to *Andorra*, and we were left in relative peace to descend to the high plateau of the *Cerdagne* at 1200 metres (3900 feet) average altitude. There was still snow beside the road, but this route is feasible even in the winter thanks to a tunnel of 4.8 km built in the 1990s although it is currently closed until November for renovations.

High plateau of the Cerdagne



Our route traversed the plateau past the extraordinary enclave of *Llivia*, a Spanish town entirely surrounded by French territory. We then climbed again to about 6000 feet to the tiny village of *Valcebollère* (with a feeling of being at the end of the world) where we found our *auberge*. And what a find! We had a very friendly welcome from the owners *Patricia* and *Étienne Lafitte*. The inn is an extensive renovated farm house with 15 charming and welcoming rooms. Ours was enormous – larger than our sitting room at home. The cuisine was of a



very high standard, courtesy of of Étienne, and we felt well spoiled during our two-day stay. In some ways the *pièce-de-resistance* was a swimming pool that had been fashioned in the cellars of the building with Moorish style tiling. Delightful. This is definitely a place to which we shall return!

We were up betimes the following morning so as to be able to catch the morning train to *Villefranche-de-Conflent*. The nearest station to *Valcebollère* is a minor whistle-stop in the village of *Osséja* about 10 km away. We turned out to be the only people there, and duly flagged down the splendidly yellow and red train (the colours of Catalonia) when it appeared around the bend. As an aside, we had purchased our tickets online in advance (www.ter-sncf.com), which turned out to have been a wise move as the station in *Osséja* was not manned.



The Little Yellow train (<http://about-france.com/tourism/yellow-train-pyrenees.htm>) is a historic metre-gauge electric railway that opened more than 100 years ago, and still provides an important regular daily service for local people, skiers and tourists. It is part of the national railway network, SNCF. It has the highest railway station (1592 metres, 5226 feet) and the only railway suspension bridge in France, and is a spectacular feat of civil engineering with numerous tunnels, bridges and viaducts. The line runs between *Latour de Carol*, just down from the *Col de Puymorens*, and



Villefranche-de-Conflent: a distance of 63 km (39 miles) and a change of level of 1165 metres (3800 feet). The train trundles along at an average speed of about 30 km/h (19 mph), giving ample opportunity for enjoying the countryside and snapping photos. Our journey started with the rolling verdant farm lands of the high *Cerdagne* plateau before diving down the spectacular narrow gorge carved by the *Têt* River to the tiny (population 250) fortified walled 'town' of *Villefranche*, now listed as a World Heritage site.



We happily filled the four-hour stopover before our return journey with walks along the river between the station and the town, exploration of the narrow *ruelles* (wynds) and boutiques. Needless to say, we also found an excellent restaurant, the *Auberge St Paul* and had a wonderful leisurely lunch on their terrace under a magnificent elm tree.

All in all it was a memorably wonderful day, and a fantastic short expedition to the *Pyrénées Orientales*!

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda.

together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus...

