

Bicycle Gourmet's



Secret

Treasures of France

by Christopher Strong

Introduction



TREASURE

What's the first thing you think of when you hear that word? Gold? Silver? Pirate Swag? Spanish Galleons loaded with the riches of Kings? Diamonds? Glittering one-of-a-kind marvels carved by nature over millions of years? Transforming light into an unimaginable palette of dazzling color? Certainly ,these are classic examples of treasure.

But treasure,like a taste for whipping cream in yer coffee(mine)is a subjective call. A(non-bicycle)gourmet's might be:"truffles."While winos(The refined kind,bien sur)could be expected to imitate Pavlov's dogs at the prospect of a first growth Bordeaux. A Chef's take would certainly be the invention of a new dish. Archeologists go postal finding chunks of history hidden under the dust of centuries.



The architects and designers treasure vote would undoubtedly go to Gaudi's Sagrada Familia.



For most Americans, Mt. Rushmore is a National Treasure.



While in Japan, certain people are designated Living National Treasures. Truly a progressive (and, dare we say) logical way of recognizing exceptional people and their contributions before they're six feet under.



Imagine if Elvis had been awarded "L.N.T." status. Would it have improved his self-image? Cut down on the drugs? Would he have lived longer? God only knows. And, as usual, he's as talkative as the sphinx.



Bottom line: Whether your concept of treasure is Human, material, or all of the above, the common thread is rare. **All treasures are rare.** Thus-often difficult (sometimes expensive) to find.

My meanderings through the French Country backroads have gifted me with every possible variety of treasures. Human.Senic.Culinary.Cultural.Historic. And occasionally bizzare! (C'est la vie. N'est ce pas?) Usually with several "flavors" simultaneously.

So – no lists.No"bullet points"of the most ab/fab/brill/ groovy/cool treasures you must not miss!

Jus' the straight up,no b.s.,approved for family viewing adventures of an ordinary guy. Who dropped off the key. And got himself free.

Chapter One

UH...so....Why France?

Good question. I'm not the only one who's dreamt of cycling the French country backroads. And, certainly not the only one who's done it spontaneously with no fixed itinerary. But, in all modesty, I may be the only one to do it five months a year for ten years (and counting!) to film a television series. And, as a result, now lives in the country of his dreams.

Like most life-changing events,my show -**Bicycle Gourmet's Treasures of France** – began as the classic dream. To trade predictability for spontaniety.I was am, a filmmaker/photographer/author.(and composer/performer.)I had a good life in the "Excited States."

Successful business. Regular clients. Good friends. Great scenery and climate. Fantastic Art and Culture. Incredible wine. Perfect! Except for one thing.

Spontaniety. The possibility to let life pass through you, rather than just (comfortably) passing through life.

Unlike most people,(notably my Brother)I love"not knowing." Ok - I don't love cold/wet/tried/hungry and poor. And, not having just fallen off the back of a turnip truck, I try to put myself in the best possible situation to avoid those "blue meanies."

What I do love, is waking up each morning in a beautiful place, with a friendly climate and people, following whatever country road strikes my fancy. Not knowing what the day will bring. or where/how it will end. Since I've always been a cyclist, no "deep thought" was required as to how I should realize this dream.

And so, one day, heeding Tracy Chapman's plaintive whine - "if not now - when?", I put my clients in the hands of my colleagues, bought the best bike I could find, and a one way ticket to "La Belle France."

What I didn't know at the get-go – but soon discovered – is that France has more variety than any country I've seen. (OK – New Zealand – Been there. Done that. Going back for the tee-shirt) It's equal to France in terms of landscape variety, but like the Excited States, is not even a pimple on the face of history. France done got it all! Natural beauty. History. Culture. Tradition. The whole nine yards.

France is divided into 22 regions. Each one with a different combo of landscape /food/wine/attitude/ history. This is what makes France such a "dream" destination. It's really 22 separate "countries", all in a space just slightly larger than California. Every 50 kms. - a new cheese. A new wine. A new landscape. Now that's VARIETY! N'est ce pas?

Bicycle Gourmet's **SECRET** Treasures of France

Chapter Two

THOSE FAB FROGS

The greatest "Treasure of France" for me, are the French people. (And, isn't that true wherever you are?) It's the people that make the place. And the French people make France a place of genuine hospitality.



And, no -they're not arrogant. The word is -proud. With good reason. And, happily, neither are they bland. They love ya - or they hate ya.

No -"Gee, I guess they're ok." Which is what I especially LOVE! Because I HATE mediocre! "Maybes" JUST WASTE YOUR TIME. "Yes" or "No", equally desirable for the same reason. "Yes" means: "Come on in!" "No" means: "Knock on the next door." OK- that's my rant.(thanks for hangin' in!)

As you might expect, there is a (sometimes)unspoken rivalry between city and country French.(Happily, not as extreme as the Montagues and the Capulets!)

The mantra of country froggies is that city folk are cold, distant, speedy money grubbers, disconnected from reality. The city dwellers response, while overtly complimentary, is delivered in the same tone you would adopt attempting to explain television to a cave man.

Once, discussing photography with country folk, I described Eugene Atget's classic book:"A Vision of Paris." Which is totally night scenes of deserted streets.Their comment: "Paris sans Parisians.....Quelle reve! ("Paris without Parisiens....what a dream!")

Bottom Line: My welcome in Paris has been equal in warmth and friendliness to my country encounters. And although I am travelling by bike on the home turf of the World's most celebrated bike race – I'm willing to bet (at least one glass o' wine) that your experience will be the same.

UNLESS ...

you're in a store "just looking."Then, they will zap you with a zillion watts of pouty disdain. And should you be foolish enough to attempt a question - their (much superior to you) reply will be on the order of:"Excuse a moi...mais.. votre accent c'est tres, tres bizzzzzzzare" as they turn and offer you a V.I.P. view of their backside.

Chapter Three

FRESH N'REAL

My next great French Treasure is a consciousness. Shared by city and country dwellers alike. It is the concept of "terroir." A respect for the land that approaches reverence for the French. Whose pride in their country is unquestionably reflected in it's products. This has lead to a growing awareness of wherever possible, treating the land with respect, not chemicals.



This consciousness, understandably, has made French opposition to genetically modified foods the most vocal in Europe. And, as you might recall, attracted Worldwide attention when a farmer named Jose Bouve(pro-"Bo- Vay") drove his tractor into a Macdonalds.



Not to suggest that every French table is Organic, "Bio" and chemical free. But the height of French culinary pleasure (and pride) is chowing down on something "sans chimique" (without chemicals) from the garden.

However, mistakenly, most French describe any food not grown with chemicals as "Bio." (biologically grown.) When in fact, it is simply "Organic." "Biologic" is the next step up from "Organic." While "Organic" simply provides a chemical free growth environment with companion plantings. (such as marigolds next to tomatoes) "Biologic" Agriculture actively aids plant growth by applying herbally derived manures in concert with moon phases. Something farmers have done for centuries.

Obviously the World of commerce is all over "Bio" like a cheap suit. Resulting, inevitably, in products with one (usually minor) "Bio" ingredient. Thus rationalizing a higher price.



CHAPTER FOUR

The First Second Word

When someone says: "French".....what's the first second word that comes to mind? "Fashion?" Maybe. "Film?" Uh,could be. "**WINE?**" Yes sir, you betcha! That be the first second word describing France. How could it not be with vines covering so much o' the whole enchilada?

From time to time France gives the World a movie/music star/sports hero. But the "gift" of French wine is constant and (happily) consistent. (Curiously,the World's premier wine magazine, and wine's most influential critic,are both American.)

On the World markets, French wine faces stiff competition from producers in other countries. Many of whom are either French, and/or have adopted the French model. Regardless of taste/price, there is one element French wines have that World wines do not. **Authenticity.** Because of A.O.C.(Appellation Origine Controle) – The government system of wine designation/control.

This "fidelity"to a specific location means that a Pinot Noir from Beaune,must be produced from those grapes alone, and grown within the Beaune appellation. This assures the consumer that this pinot is an authentic reflection of Beaune's soil and climate.



World wines, on the other hand, have no such restrictions. And because wine is such a huge business, the Multinationals who churn out container carloads plus o' vino, focus on the taste/price balance, relative to each market. And, if their grapes in any year are not "ab/fab", they'll be "enhanced" in the cellar. ("Better drinking through chemistry".....NOT!)

There is even a wine producers "hotline" offering market specific additive info. "OK – So you want to produce a Chardonnay for low end Japanese consumers..Since they like a banana flavor on the finish, you need to add yeast b-957."

Regardless of whether you're "into" wine, or just grabbed a bottle out of desperation because "booze-be-us" was outa beer – there are French wine **treasures** to be found in every region and at every price point. Kinda like deciding which car to buy, innit? Too many options! That's why I, your ever helpful, faithful pal and freakin' fountain o' froggie info am gonna – as usual – give ya the straight skinny.

The French Wine treasures that really rock my boat, aren't in the wine guides. They haven't been reviewed by the "gurus of taste." Like the best Scots' Whiskey, they're not exported. And for the same reason. The locals drink it all up!

They're the wines of (usually) small, independant producers and local wine co-ops. I find them in the usual way. I TRAVEL! And when I see a "wine sign", I glide in for "un petite degustation." (a little taste) And you, dear reader can do the same.

The "Ma n' Pa" winos, you can, (and should!) discover on yer own. To get ya started with the other possibility, here be three BG recommended co-ops.

Dontcha be forgettin' that wine co-ops are not bound by the restrictions of A.O.C. Which means that grapes can be blended solely for maximum flavor. Without any origin/location considerations.

This makes for some truly memorable, and truly "one of a kind" cuvees (blends of the best grapes)

Alllllrighty then.....Here we go!

(You do know how to use Google maps.....right?)

- Cave Cooperative du **CONDOM** -

Gers region – SouthWest. (foie gras country.)

- Cave Cooperative du **LUMIERE** –

Provence region – South. In the Luberon National park between Cavaillon and Apt.

- Cave cooperative du **NOVES** –

Provence region – South. Last village before Avignon on the South(left)side of the Durance river.

At all of these spots,you'll find wine advertised "en vrac" and/or "en detail" – meaning – "In bulk." Bring your own 3,5,or 10 litre container and fill up.(Some co-ops will sell you just a litre, but 3 is usually the minimum.)

Expect to fork out anywhere from 1.25 to 1.75 per litre. Depending on the variety/strength.

And if you're REALLY ready to step off the beaten wine path,why not try.....

DA BG's Ultimate Wine Treasure Tour!

(disclaimer: This tour is not for the faint of liver.)

You will need a camping car/large van crammed with empty (but not for long) plastic containers. A designated driver/and/or several terabytes of restraint,resistance and resolve.(ie – If you can resist anything except temptation – best to pass on this adventure.)

The Next Step...

Start in the South.(Languedoc, Provence)Where the grapes are filled with sugar first.



Next, follow the harvest. ("le Vendange") Arriving at the vigneron's cellar door in this period, gives you an excellent chance of scoring a "win/win" deal. As the new grapes come in, the old grapes, at "kinfolk price" must go out. Into your waiting containers!

And the prevailing festive mood of this event usually results in an invite to chow down/raise a glass or three with the assembled multitude. This, dear reader, is the "United Nations of Wine." If you're lucky enough to get up close n' personal here, you'll meet all ages, all lifestyles, from all over.



The curtain falls on this carnival of culture, commerce, history, tradition and merriment sometime (depending always on the weather, bien sur) around the last two weeks in October in Alsace with the "Vendage Tardive." (Late harvest.)

These are the grapes destined for sweet wine. Left on the vines as long as possible to increase their sugar content.

OK – let's say you ARE loaded for wine adventure. Let's say you do fill your heart, your containers and your digital camera until the last cork is popped. What then? If you're not a European (or a zillionaire) shipping gignormous quantities of wine back to East Essex/East Akron is not going to be (ahem) "cost effective" is it?

Where are ya gonna go with a winter's plus worth o'the best French grape juice? Italy? Spain? Greece? Portugal? I'm thinkin'.....it could work. Lemme know!



More *Bicycle Gourmet* [visual](#) Treasures [HERE](#)

Chapter FIVE - THE ATTRACTION OF AGE

After food, wine, and hospitality, the French "Treasure" sought by most is its History. Particularly us folks from "over there" (North America) who, in comparison, have next to none.

On a global scale, France, bien sur, is not at the head of the class in the "how old" sweepstakes. Asian and Oriental countries were excelling in art, music, engineering and architecture(not to mention advanced basket-weaving)while Europeans were still living in caves.



But to come from a country where a 50 year old house is regarded as "old", to one where a house of 200 years is thought of as "recent" is to truly experience living history.

It's that continuity of history, it's relevance and integration in everyday life that makes French History more than just a collection of Churches and Chateaus.

I have a friend whose families roots in his village go back 500 years. Likewise, most of his friends. Normal, everyday stuff. For them.

But for those of us with no familial "French Connection" our Historical French experience can only be by osmosis. By visiting those places where History has passed. And, savoring the ambience and the artifacts of it's passing, hopefully tumble, however briefly, into it's embrace.

GET YER HUGS HERE :

1.Oppede 1e vieux.



For me, this is the classic hilltop village. Clinging to a side of the Luberon mountain range, in Provence's Luberon National Park.

Not as celebrated as its hilltop neighbours, Gordes, LaCoste and to a lesser extent, Bonnieux, Oppède le Vieux is the "real deal." Simultaneously in ruins, and in re-construction. Mostly by rich Parisiens. Other European "deep pockets" also represented.



As you might imagine, life in Oppede Le Vieux(before mod cons) was niether a bowl of cherries, a bed of roses, or a walk in the park. It was a llllong walk down, and an even LLLLonger walk back.(No midnight pizza!)

By the turn of the century (before the "war to end all wars" that didn't) there were less than a thousand (we hope happy) campers in O.L.V.

Today Oppede le Vieux is home to the usual small group of artisans who inhabit such locales the world over.

Such as the fair Celine.



Owner of the local boutique. It was she who hipped me me to the incredible frescos in the village's hilltop church.



As you can see – well worth the walk. And FREE!

There is no restaurant in Oppede le Vieux. Only "Le Petite Cafe." Which seems to have new owners every time I pass. Never ate there. So - "Bonne Chance!"



Happily, access to the centre of Oppède le Vieux is limited to foot traffic. There's a parking lot a few hundred metres below.

Getting There: The turn-off for Oppède Le Vieux, is a roundabout, three minutes or so by car after the village of MAUBEC, headed toward the village of MENERBES.

It's a right turn. If you turn left, you'll quickly find yourself in "Oppède" - the village – one short street of not very much. And not where you want to be!

2. BEHUARD .



Other than it's cozy ambience and a good restaurant, the Loire village of Behuard (an"isle"actually) at first glance seems to offer nothing exceptional.

Until you see the church. Not large or ostentatious. But situated on a rock which rises straight out of the otherwise flat Loire landscape.

Getting There: 15 kms east of Angers (pro-"on-zjay") between Savenierres and Rochefort-sur-Loire.

3. Isles D'Lerins



Scant Kilometers(20 or so) away from the trendy/spendy/pouty I'm-cooler-than-you ambience of Cannes, there are Two laid back real life **treasures**. The Isles D'Lerins. Saint Honorat and Saint Marguerite.

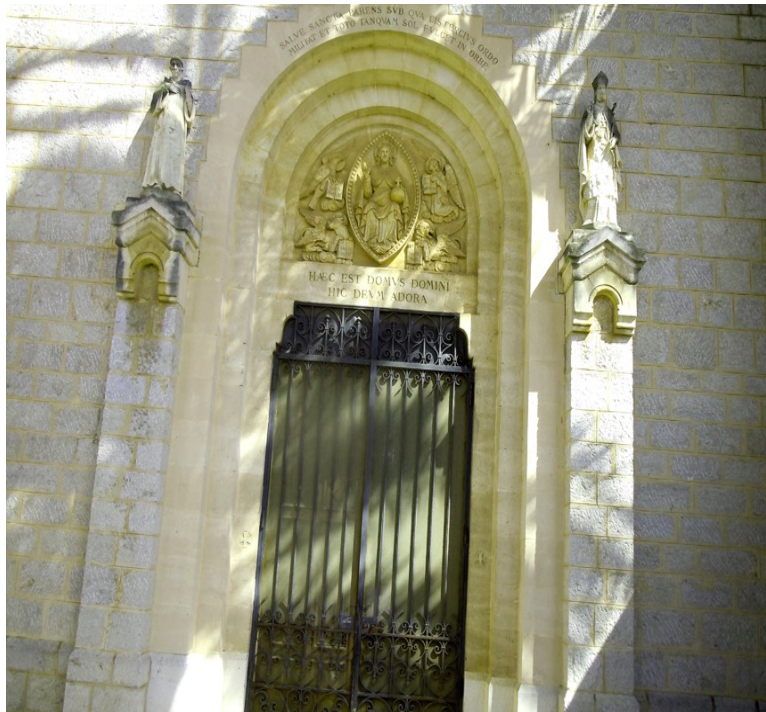
These pine studded chunks o'rock on Saint Marguerite many years past, were the location for the French film "The Man in the Iron Mask." Which, predictably spawned the now defunct restaurant: "Le Masque du Fer."

Saint Honorat's claim to fame is a monastery, where, in the time-honored tradition of monk-dom, the Holy fathers brew their divine moonshine. (Actually a \$35 +@ bottle 100% syrah) Which (quelle suprise) is for sale! Along with candles, and various other portable Holies.



After checking out one or both of these “attractions” you’ve got acres of undeveloped forest and sea to charge yer batteries. With no boutique. And no swingin’ hot spot!

Getting There: Several ferrys (no cars) a day each way leaving from the farthest away from the glitzy Hotels end of Cannes harbour. Look for the signs.



More *Bicycle Gourmet* Literary Treasures [HERE](#)

Chapter Six

SILENT HOTEL



French Hospitality, like any other, comes in two flavors: Personal and commercial. You will experience beaucoup of the personal in your daily interactions with the friendly froggies. But the commercial variety is a matter of personal taste and choice. One you'll make according to your definition of "luxury."

Is it five star-antique furnished-sunken jacuzzi-bedroom fireplace-three restaurant-wi-fi-in-every-room?

Or a cozy five room country inn, decorated by the owner's wife? With the owner behind the stove churnin' out the best local goodies on a patio with a killer view?



Something in between?

This is my friend Count Devogue's definition:

"If luxury is to be measured in the thickness of the carpets or the weight of the silver, then I think there are many places much more luxurious than ours. I think we have a very unique luxury – and that is to visit an historic place that was built by the family that is still living in it."



OK- so whatever your definition, the **Treasure** of French hospitality is not to be missed.

My definition, as you, dear reader have no doubt devined, is closer to "cozy Country Inn." Here, the commercial hospitality is decidedly personal. And, along with the killer view, comes a very rare **Treasure**. One that's impossible to find in a city, and difficult to find elsewhere. **SILENCE**. No cars, trains, boats ,planes, heavy machinery, barking dogs, or quarreling neighbours.

And it can't be jus' DA BG who's into this silence thang. Because there is an association (not a "chain") of French hotels, whose idea of luxury is to offer silence on the silver platter. They're called: "Relais du Silence."("relais, pro-"row-lay", basically translates as "Country Inn")



One of my personal favs is the **Hotel Maronne** in the exquisitely beautiful(and little travelled) Cantal region. Here, in a storybook location with no immediate neighbours(wide open space time) Alain Dekoek, and his wife serve up more silence than ya could ever use, plus great Madagascar influenced grub.(His wife's homeland.)

[Connect with them HERE](#)

More *Bicycle Gourmet* [Audio-Visual](#) Treasures [HERE](#)

Chapter Seven

MORE TREASURES

Our first three “treasures” are relatively close together. First up – South of Auxerre, in the village of Treigny, is Guedeleon.



This is, simultaneously, an historic and a cultural site. Here, using only 13th century tools, a dedicated group of talented volunteers are building a castle!

There's a real atmosphere of “another time” at Guedeleon. One that will definitely increase your appreciation for the modern conveniences (like water from a tap!) we take for granted.

Leaving Guedeleon, we point our starship 67kms NE to the small town (ie- bigger than a village) of Briare, on the Loire. Here, is an engineering marvel. With a recognizable name attached. The name?- Eiffel. That's right. The same guy who designed the tower that is the International symbol of Paris in particular, and France in general.



The marvel is "Le Pont du Canal." Literally—a canal bridge. So, what's the marvel? Well, the bridge is a continuation of the Loire canal. And below it, the Loire river flows. You cross the bridge either on a canal boat, or via the sidewalks on either side.

Obviously, the crossing by canal boat is the most surreal. Ever crossed a bridge in a boat with water flowing below the bridge before? Didn't think so!



Our next stop is only 28kms to the West. Just outside the village of Aubigny-sur-Nere, lies the Chateau le Verriere. It's not the biggest, oldest, or the most Historic in France. But, for me, it's one of the most attractive. In every sense of the word. Nestled in woodland and surrounded by it's own lake, the Chateau le Verriere radiates a genuine sense of calm and welcome. A large part of it, due to the current owner – Count Beurad(pro-"bear-o") Devogue. (pro-"dee-vogue-wee")

After working for 12 years in the Excited States, Count Devogue, at his Father's request returned to assume stewardship of the chateau. He is the 5th Devogue to be born within it's walls. Atipically, the chateau's restaurant, is located a few hundred metres beyond the Chateau. It too is nestled in woodland. Surrounded by birdsong and flowers. And, with a view back to the Chateau. Trust me, you

will be pleased.

Swinging down to the South, starting from Nice, heading toward Monaco, just before you pass Villefranche sur Mer, you'll tumble onto the pine studded peninsula of St.Jean Cap Ferrat. European aristocrats and International millionaires. Quiet money. Quietly ostentatious palaces melted into the pines.



So, what treasures await here? First up- The lighthouse. Located on the South-Western tip of St.Jean. It's a pine-scented (largely deserted) unofficial park with a (free) millionaire/aristocrat view of the deep blue Med.



Well worth adding to your treasure list, even tho' it is in every guidebook, is the "Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild."

More popularly known as the Rothschild Museum. This palace (and that's the only appropriate adjective) was commissioned by Beatrice Ephrussi Rothschild in 1905.

It has 7 gardens. Each with a different theme.



And the interior of the villa is, as the French say with typical understatement, "pas trop mal." (Not too bad.)



It's weird. It's wild. It's wacky. It's French! And, it's lottsa fun!!! But to get to "it", you need to head back to Nice. Then continue following the road South until you reach Montpellier. (DA BG sez: make this a minimum two day trip. TTTToooo much to see here!)

Roughly 20 kms South of Montpellier, toward the end of August in the village of Sete, there is, what San Diegans would call -"A Party. "Le Fete de la Romain Noir." Literally-"The Party of the Black Romans."

The highlight of this here treasure, is a thang called:"Le Jouet." Picture if you will...two long boats.(canoes on steroids)Each with an elevated bow, on a collision course. Imagine also, that in each elevated bow, a man with a very long pointy lance (that's like.....you know.....like..a non-sharp sword) is trying to knock his opposite number into the water by "spearing" him with his lance. That's why it's called:"Le Jouet." The Joust. Bring your camera!



And sunscreen. If it's less than 40 degrees(celsius) during"Jouet-o-rama", it's a cold snap.

As a cyclist, I would be remiss (and that's something no one wants, right?) if I didn't share some of my cycling treasures with the assembled multitude.

So, here are a few of the best backroads/quiet/beautiful/by the river routes I've been lucky enough to stumble across:

The Canal Du Midi. Start in Toulouse.



Alsace. From 60 kms to the West, totally along the rivers, leading directly into downtown Strasbourg.(A city not to be missed.)

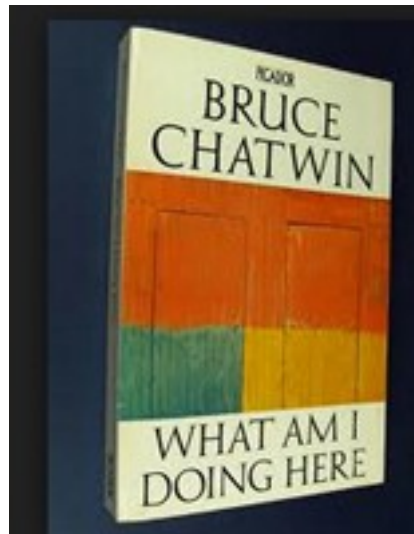




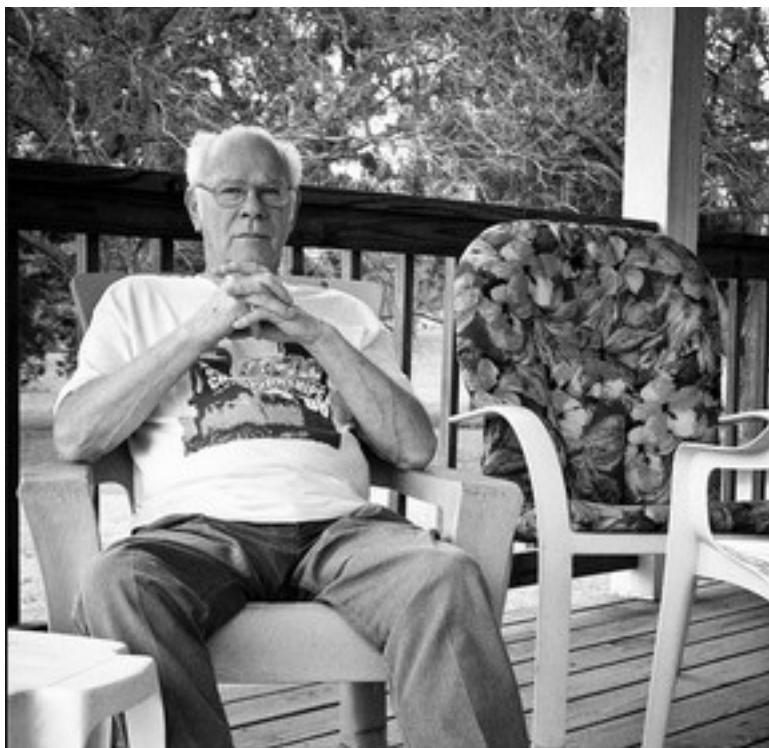
The Black Mountains. (Montagne Noir) Starting about 20kms east of

Montauban(The turn off is posted), you glide(as in no pedaling)19kms into the village of Caunes Minervois. where the wine, like the Rothschild villa is"pas trop mal."

The title of Bruce Chatwin's classic travel book poses the question-"What am I doing here?"



More to the point methinks is : ***"What am I here to do?"***



When yer sittin' on the rest home porch, sippin' soup through a straw and jonesin' for 70, will you be savoring what you did? - or regretting what you didn't?



I hope this small taste of the **Treasures of France** has increased your appetite for your adventure. Whatever, and wherever it may be!

“life is either a great adventure
or nothing”

- Helen Keller -

[Share more of DA BG's adventures](#) [HERE.](#)

