

I was trying to restrain my sporty Seat Leon ( Spanish made) from travelling too fast around the medieval walled city of Carcassonne when my eye was caught by the sight of a familiar sign. That can't be right I thought. But sure enough there was an orange triangular sign with the image of a hopping kangaroo and the message " Kangourou next 2 km". No, there are not any wild kangaroos in south west France. At least as far as I know. The sign was showing the way to Le Parc Australien, three minutes drive from the cite Medievale, where there was an Australian theme park with kangaroos, emus, boomerang throwing contests and something billed as Les Australies Folies, two hours of non-stop animation.<sup>1</sup>

I'm sorry but I can't satisfy my reader's curiosity about this Australian show, you can check their website, but there was no getting away from the Australian presence in this Languedoc-Roussillon corner of France. This was the home of rugby in France.<sup>2</sup> The local *L'Independent* daily newspaper, which carried more sport than most Australian dailies, devoted pages to the rugby drama.<sup>3</sup> The local teams like Carcassonne, Pia, Limoux, Lezignan, Lyon and Toulouse all had Australian players in their teams. Peter FitzSimons, the writer and rugby player, first heard about my cousin Nancy Wake, when he was having a drink in a village cafe while playing for Toulouse. He ended up writing Nancy Wake's biography.<sup>4</sup> At my wife's French class her tutor, Dominique, told her that an important Australian had died today. My wife thought it must be the PM or some one like that. It was Steve Irwin. It was very likely that the French had never heard of John Howard but they certainly knew about Steve Irwin.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Parc Australien*, Chemin des Bartavelles, 11090, Carcassonne, [www.leparcaustralien.com](http://www.leparcaustralien.com)

<sup>2</sup> *The Green Guide, Languedoc Rousillon Tarn Gorges*, Michelin Travel Publications, 2005, pp 96-97

<sup>3</sup> *L'Independent*, Rugby a X111, special Championnat, 2 October 2006

<sup>4</sup> *Nancy Wake*, Peter FitzSimons, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2001, pp 1

My wife and I were spending six weeks in the Corbieres, part of the largest wine growing district in France, more than 200,000 hectares,<sup>5</sup> during the wine harvest. We were staying at Villerouge la Cremade, just south of Lezignan, where a Sydney couple had a large house that provided comfortable accommodation for short and long-term stays.

On the Ryanair flight coming out from Stansted in the UK, a fellow passenger, a New Zealander, told us that the Corbieres was the main source of the Paris government's supply. It was bought for state occasions and was served with meals at state hospitals. Wine was seen as being part of the patient's medication, depending on his or her condition. This was not the first time I had heard of Corbieres wine. When living in digs in London during the fifties, Corbieres as part of the Aude, was seen as a source of cheap table wine that tasted foul but had a big enough punch to get drunk on one bottle. Since then Les Appellation d'Origine Controlee de L'Aude has tidied up its act. Each wine-growing district in the Aude now has its own appellation, setting a standard and making sure that the wine producers meet that standard. The Corbieres wine we tasted was smoother and friendlier than many of the similar wines back home. My wife was especially attracted to the Fitou red although she was not normally a red drinker. I was surprised by our discovery of blanquette, a sparkling wine with its own appellation made in the Limoux district. It was much better than the average champagne.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The World Atlas of Wine*, Hugh Johnson, Mitchell Beazley Publishers, 1971, pp 124-125

<sup>6</sup> *Autour des tours de Carcassonne*, 2006-2007 Office Municipal de Tourisme, 28 rue de Verdun, 11890 Carcassonne, Cedex 9, [www.carcassonne-tourisme.com](http://www.carcassonne-tourisme.com)  
*Les A.O.C du Languedoc*, CIVL-BP 221 11102 Narbonne Cedex, [www.languedoc-wines.com](http://www.languedoc-wines.com)

Because of my family connections with this part of France I tried to find some of Nancy's old comrades. The resistance movement was well remembered in this part of France. At the old Roman city of Narbonne there was a large stone slab near the town centre with the inscription Aux martyrs de la resistance et de la deportation 1940-1945. When we visited the Goya Museum at Castres we accidentally found a collection of guns. They were the weapons of Rene Gayral (1919-1999) who joined the Resistance in 1942. Some of the weapons on display were those he used to fight the Germans. His son had donated the collection to the museum after his father's death.<sup>7</sup> Nancy Wake had spent the first part of her war in this region smuggling Allied airmen and others across the Pyrenees into Spain. She was helped by the Cathar people, a fiercely independent tribe of locals who were part French and part Spanish with their own language and way of life. Strictly speaking they weren't Cathars. Their origins pre-dated Christianity and saw the Romans arrive to plant the first vines. The Cathars, Greek for pure ones, were a Christian-like movement who were opposed to the Catholic Church. Pope Innocent the third who was crowned pope on the 22 February 1198 was worried about the Cathars from the start of his papacy. He saw them as a heretical group that threatened the stability of the Holy Roman Church. In 1209 Pope Innocent declared war on the Cathars, the first crusade organised by the Church against fellow Europeans. The fact that the crusaders were no longer killing Muslims did not lessen their zeal for their task. At Beziers alone 20,000 people were killed defending a small band of local Cathars. When one of the Crusader captains asked his general how would his soldiers tell the difference between Catholic and Cathar, he was told kill them all, God will know the difference.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Musee Goya, Museum of Spanish Art*, Hotel de Ville, BP 406- 81108 Castres cedex-Tarn-France,

Those long ago atrocities committed against an innocent people were not forgotten. It bred in the people of Languedoc-Roussillon a fierce pride that today is demonstrated on the rugby field. While the rest of France tended to shrug its shoulders and tried to find the best way of surviving during the German occupation, the people of Languedoc-Roussillon fought back. They provided Nancy with the network that allowed her to get the Allied airmen out of France and when her time ran out with the Gestapo hot on her heels, provided her with a way across the mountains. Having climbed the Chateau de Peyrepertuse and the Chateau de Queribus, the Cathar castles that dot the French/ Spanish border, I have acquired a new respect for my cousin's physical accomplishments. Today she takes a well-earned rest at the Star and Garter service people's home near Richmond Park, London. But her mind is still fresh with the memories of those mountains and those mountain people.

The Corbieres wine harvest was in full swing with tractors, grape wagons and grape harvesters when we arrived among the vines. There were road signs to warn motorists about the harvest but the narrow roads and tight little villages made for some hair-raising moments as we rounded blind corners to be confronted with a huge harvester machines that took up the width of the road. In our small village of less than 500 people. There was one large harvester. As the average size of a vineyard was less than 10 hectares I was surprised that the village needed such a huge machine that must have represented an investment of about 100,000 Euros. Then I was told that wine production was supported by a government subsidy. It was government policy to encourage people to stay in their villages. Without the subsidy the people would drift into the cities and the villages would die. The Paris government was still very much

running things. Not only in the villages but in the towns and cities. It was Paris that decided where the autoroutes and TGV (high speed rail network)<sup>9</sup> were going to go and it was Paris that paid for the large sea-going trawlers we saw at Sete which were part of the local fleet, mostly fishing in the Mediterranean.

France is still nominally a Catholic country. On Sunday heavy commercial traffic is supposed to be reduced to the minimum. We saw Sunday as a window of opportunity to use the autoroute, anything to avoid the terror of the weekday when the A 9 to Montpellier was like the Le Mans raceway. Driving in this part of France was not easy. Apart from the obstacles created by the harvest, there was the constant flow of commercial traffic with truck drivers from all points of the compass. God help the poor local driver when one of these juggernauts strayed off the autoroute and tried to find its way on the endless roundabouts to a local address. We saw one semi-trailer from Portugal trying to negotiate a roundabout outside Narbonne. The driver threw up his hands in disgust. The vehicle was simply too big for the road.

France's Catholicism was best represented by its cathedrals. The one in Albi was one of the most spectacular I have ever seen. The Italian Renaissance ceiling was as good as the Sistine Chapel and there were fewer people trying to look at it.<sup>10</sup> Some of the cathedral ceiling decorations in the Aude were influenced by the Moors. At La Bastide St-Louis, the "new town" of Carcassonne, the local cathedral had Moorish lines in its dark vaulted ceiling. Of course the Moors had made an important contribution to the culture of the region. There was the story of Madame Carcas, a

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<sup>8</sup> *The Cathars*, Sean Martin, Pocket Essentials, Harpenden, Herts. UK, 2005, pp 13

<sup>9</sup> There is a high speed train connection between Narbonne and the Spanish border currently under construction

<sup>10</sup> op cit *The Green Guide* pp 108-117

Saracen, who defended the walled city of Carcassonne from the Catholic Charlemagne by killing a pig and dumping its over the ramparts convincing Charlemagne that the people he had under seige were so well fed that they could afford to throw away a perfectly good pig. According to the story Charlemagne withdrew. But it was just a story, another urban myth. There were Saracens in charge at Carcassonne, this was about 719, but being good Muslims they would have nothing to do with pigs. And Charlemagne was not in the neighbourhood at the time. Charlemagne did march on Spain but that was in 801, conquering Moorish interests with his Christian force of arms.<sup>11</sup>

Today's Muslims moved freely in the community. Despite President Chirac's prohibition stopping students from wearing headscarves and veils there were a number of Muslims on the streets and in the supermarkets wearing headscarves. I was not aware of any friction although there was graffiti in various places saying racists out. Probably the most important development in race relations to take place during our six-week stay in south west France was the release of the Rachid Bouchareb's film *Ingienes*. Bouchareb, 47, was born in France of Algerian parents. He had been planning to make his film for 10 years. He was quoted in the *International Herald Tribune* European edition as saying:

" I wanted above all to resolve my own history and that of some of my family, like my great-grandfather who fought for France in World War 1, and an uncle, who was in

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<sup>11</sup> *Walled City of Carcassonne*, tourism leaflet, Cite de Carcassonne, 1 rue Viollet-le-Duc , 11000, Carcassonne, and information supplied by walled city guides.

the French Army in Indochina. All this formed part of the history of my family and the history of France."<sup>12</sup>

The film tells the story 200,000 French soldiers liberating the Cote d'Azur in 1944. About 65 per cent of these French soldiers were from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal and other French colonies. The film follows the fortunes of four soldiers all from North Africa. The film shows French white officers telling the native north Africans that they should be proud to serve France and France in turn would be proud of them. However when the colonist soldiers were discharged they received half the benefits that were awarded to their European comrades. President Chirac was given a private screening of the film and when he was told that the native veterans were awarded a half pension he ordered that they should be paid the same pension as the white French veterans.

Bouchareb told the *International Herald Tribune* that he hoped the film would restore a people's pride in themselves and go some way to reconciliation. He was particularly concerned about the second generation of African immigrants who were born in France and were left with no history or sense of belonging. President Chirac's executive order to pay the full pension may go some way to healing old wounds. But President Chirac was nearing the end of his presidency. The April 2007 presidential election will decide if France will go socialist with Segolene Royal or conservative with Nicholas Sarkosky. If the votes of Languedoc-Roussillon count for anything, then I think it is more than likely that France will vote socialist. The conservative Finance Minister, Thierry Breton, sees the 35-hour week as one of the key issues. The

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<sup>12</sup> *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, Paris, 28 September 2006, pp 2

35-hour week was introduced in 1999. Breton believes that the short week is costing the country dearly. He claims that the shorten work week has added something like 100 billion Euros to the national debt.<sup>13</sup>

But the people of Languedoc-Roussillon are not really listening. It is custom and practise to have a long lunch. At the supermarket service station in Lezignan, the lady attendant disappeared at 12 noon sharp and didn't reappear until two or sometimes three. That didn't mean you couldn't buy fuel. You had to use your credit card. The use of automated fuel pumps resulted in one strange encounter when I found myself being addressed by a talking fuel pump, in French of course. Post Offices throughout the region kept odd hours especially in the villages. Some were opened only in the morning and others only in the afternoon. The great Intermarche supermarket chain decided to celebrate its birthday by keeping its doors open on Sunday. It was seen as a great concession to customers.

Segolene Royal is not a strong unionist but she is unlikely to change the official work week. She has described it as "formidable social progress for a majority of salaried workers."<sup>14</sup> Royal has not yet released her detailed manifesto but where-ever she went in Languedoc-Roussillon region before she became the official socialist candidate she was warmly welcomed. The Aude has deep socialist roots that go back to the French Revolution. In the early 1900s the vintners gathered in the main square of Narbonne to protest the government's inaction of a farming issue. The government sent in troops to control the crowd. A number of local people were killed including a mayor. For many years, in the eighties and nineties, the mayor of Montpellier was a communist.

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<sup>13</sup> op cit IHT *In France, a Minister with un-French ideas*, Roger Cohen, London, 25 October 2006 pp 2



But there is no getting away from the fact that France is deeply in debt. Simply stated it can't afford the welfare state that it has created since the end of the war. President Chirac's last attempt to free up the job market, in early 2006, to help more young people find work resulted in a student protest and the government backed down. Finance Minister Breton believes that market forces is the only way forward for France. He is not only critical of the Socialists but he also blames the French management style for the current problem. The common belief in " Vivre heureux, vivre cache" which roughly translates " to live happily, to live in hiding." In an *International Herald Tribune* story he said:

" French management has been strangely silent on the subject of the 35-hour week, and I see my role as fighting that silence."<sup>15</sup>

The people of the Languedoc-Roussillon have seen Paris governments come and go. The idea of market forces does not appear to suit their nature. They are a rugged people. Born in wind swept valleys, where the wind and stony soil are seen as essential ingredients for a good grape harvest. These people are not inclined to listen to outsiders telling them what to do in their own country. They are Cathar people who once spoke their own language and now fly the Catalan flag as much as the French tricolour.

The French are interested in Australia. In Albi the statue of La Perouse had pride of place close to the great cathedral. La Perouse was born in Albi. The Musee La

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<sup>14</sup> op cit IHT 25 October 2006

Perouse had an important collection of naval charts including La Perouse's soundings of Botany Bay. The French see us as exotics. The people of Languedoc-Roussillon see us as an important source of strong and skilful Rugby players. But don't expect a great flood of French tourists. The French prefer to tour at home. As a French lady tourist told my wife at the Abbaye Fontfroide: " France has so many beautiful things to look at." Where ever we went, be it at the Pont du Gard, Ceret, Pezenas, Cordes-s-Ciel or Albi the majority of the visitors were French, all admiring the rich legacy of their inheritance. However during Heritage Week in Narbonne I asked a Heritage guide about a local monument. He said he didn't know. He was new to the area and hadn't been fully briefed.

Australian interest in this part of France is probably best represented by the wine industry. But Australia's " flying winemakers "<sup>16</sup> have not been universally accepted. Our high tech methods and attempts at increasing production have been resented by local producers who work with small holdings and are not so interested in a strong, stupefying beverage. The local preference seems to be more for a light, smooth wine, produced in a traditional way. I must admit I preferred the French approach and think we could benefit from the introduction of a standards authority. But the Australian wine industry would have a blue fit if any government tried to go down that path.

France still places a high value in good food. Although when we visited the restaurants in the tourist honeypots we rarely got a great meal, our visits to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> British wine writer and master of wine Jancis Robinson's description of Australian involvement in the Midi during her Channel Four series *The Wine Programme* April/May 1987. In this series Jancis Robinson described European table wine as plonk and said the main source of French table wine was Languedoc-Roussillon region. She went on to say that the European Commission was trying to correct this problem by buying up the poor wine and distilling it and tightening standards.

supermarkets were much more successful. The quality of the fresh fruit and vegetables was, by and large, much better than ours and the choices at their cheese counters would put the average Coles display to shame. There is less use of pesticides and supplements in France<sup>17</sup> and the French supermarket management has introduced new ways of handling food. All fresh fish after its sold is wrapped in its own insulated foil bag to maintain its freshness and given to the customer to take to the checkout counter. Fruit and vegetables are weighed by the customers on special scales that produce a sticker with the price on it. All this reduces handling and speeds up the queue at the checkout counter.

Some of the local customs were mystifying. At the Narbonne town pool I was ready to go for a swim in my boxer style swim togs when a lifeguard came over and told me I could not go in. I was wearing the wrong swimsuit. I had to go to the pool vending machine and buy for 10 Euros a bikini style swim suit which did little for my figure but met the pool's requirements for approved swim wear. I'm still not sure why this was necessary. Two English ladies who regularly visited France told me it was for hygiene reasons. I was not so much mystified as intimidated by the French reliance on machines. The parking lot machine that issued tickets and determined how much you owed when leaving. The autoroute tollgate entry where there were no tollgate officials in sight and everything seem to work with an electric eye and another vending machine that issued a ticket when the electric eye was triggered by the car's presence. And then of course there was that talking fuel pump. These machines were all very well as long as they worked. Some times they didn't. There were a few smashed parking barriers where motorists had got frustrated with an errant machine.

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<sup>17</sup> A recent letter in the IHT from a German correspondent said that one of the reasons why European

The people of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, possessing some of the most thinly populated parts of France, have refused to accept the one size fits all policies of modern market forces planners. Their fierce independence that first attracted Nancy Wake in her personal mission to fight the boche still exists. It's a spirit that many Australians might find invigorating. If you do go make sure you take the right swim togs.

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