

Well, what an eventful first six weeks, mostly marred by the weather!

After a very busy three weeks' preparation in the Camargue, staying with the wonderful and mainly unflappable André Palatre at the Mas de Tourblanque in Gageron, near Arles, the English and French young people all arrived on the same day on Monday 28 April. It was a getting to know each other period, very busy for some and less so for others. The horses were all assembled and the two, Pelous and Nandin that were, sadly, not considered suitable for one reason or another were replaced by Picasso and another Quito, now dubbed Hugo. Tack was fitted, more was bought and, most importantly, the travelling kitchen was set up boasting a fridge/freezer and cooker, powered by the generator (when no mains electricity available) and gas respectively. We were joined by SLL's Shirley Malblanc and Pascale Sefelin both of whose help was invaluable. One of SLL's web designers, Sheila Cosma and her husband, Dan, were at our departure ceremony as was our Isabelle Segura. Sheila has since been to see the team near Cahors in the Lot and even rode with the afternoon group. SLL's Robert Adams brought the young people over with Liam McCormick on 28 April. We were delighted to have among our guests on 5 May, the British Consul in Marseilles, Frederic Lecoin from the Fondation d'entreprise France Télévisions, Dr Luc Hoffmann, Mr and Mrs Bruno Pourchet from the Haras Nationaux, as well as the dignitaries from the Maison du Cheval Camargue and the Association des Eleveurs des Chevaux de Race Camargue. We were absolutely thrilled too that 2 out of the 5 RDA centres came down to the Camargue for 5 May – the Elisabeth Curtis Centre RDA and Barrow Farm RDA. Many thanks to all for coming.

In early May, we left the Camargue after our departure ceremony at the Mas de la Cure (Maison du Cheval Camargue) in good sunshine to be then met by rain, rain and more rain, the odd hail storm and skies turned yellow by sand blown over from the Sahara.

Quite unprecedented weather for this part of France at this time of the year across the Bouches du Rhone in Provence, the Gard and The Herault in the Languedoc Roussillon, and the Tarn, Aveyron and Tarn-et-Garonne in the Midi-Pyrénées. Tomorrow, 16 June, we leave for the Lot-et-Garonne before getting to the Dordogne in the Aquitaine region. The team - and especially the young people - has been remarkable, putting up stoically, with erecting tents in soggy ground, soaked clothes and sopping feet - all with mainly good humour - and even, for Vicki, finding a colony of ants in her suitcase!

As for the horses, they are resigned to whatever comes along, whether it be weather-wise, motor bikes which try and spook them, fast cars or screeching lorries. When the rain pours down, the riders don their ponchos which cover them and the saddles and bridles. We had to get the osteopath as Mogador has been limping from time to time. Quattro, our mascot, is still not able to be ridden due to his hind hooves not being shoeable yet, but is becoming more and more of a camp 'pet' – he simply loves attention and simply loves clover. This is great for Xavier, Mehdi and Jakki as they have a horse around while they are on the ground.

Poor little Mickaël, after a spell in hospital in the town of Albi, he has had to be repatriated to Lorient, because of a previously undiagnosed heart problem. He may well have to undergo heart surgery and therefore may not be able to join us again. This has saddened us all as he was a good friend, a good rider and had a very good Franco-British spirit – his English was coming along very well too and he is missed greatly. We are in touch with La Sauvegarde 56 as to his progress and, of course, wish for his return among us.

Chris Booth decided that horses weren't his thing so returned to England. On Saturday 21 June, we have a friend of Luke's joining us called Andrew Clark and we are all excited to meet him.

We are delighted to say that Vanessa Pailhou, who accompanied Jakki in 2005 from the Charente onwards to England, has joined us again as a joint ATE. We are delighted to have her among us. Pierre de la Barre de Nanteuil, who was also with Jakki in 2005, drove Vanessa over. We have seen Pierre a couple of times for the odd weekend. Wish he could join us more permanently, but he is working in the South of France now, in La Ciotat.

Rachel, Luke and Cynthia have suffered with tooth problems; Vicki and Ludo, with chesty coughs.

Shiva, Marie and Mehdi's dog, had to make an emergency visit to the vet after an incident with a car – luckily Shiva is fine. Nana, Jakki's dog, is very loud and barky (Vicki's words – she's helping Jakki write this), but that's not unusual. However, Ludo's deep voice seems to have an effect as she stops barking when he tells her to. Ludo is specially partial to the '*bonbons bureau*'. The office sweets that Jakki keeps in the bureau – the groom's quarters in the Equi-Trek Trailer.

Alexi misses Mickaël and a smile from Adeline cheers us all up.

Xavier keeps the girls in good order, all while not dampening their high spirits. Cerys occasionally objects and retaliates.

Cynthia is a water baby – we can't keep her out of swimming pools – when the odd campsite has one.

Washing machines are hotly fought over – first come first served – some don't obey this rule!!

The riders are becoming more and more competent and now gallop happily without being too scared – even letting out the odd screech of pleasure. The horses are often in their enclosure next to the tents and seem to enjoy the happiness around the camp. Luke's determination – one might even call it complete single-mindedness - to get Muscadeu ready for RDA use as promised to Terri Cornner who came out for the 5 May departure

ceremony at the Mas de la Cure of the Elisabeth Curtis Centre – can drive the girls barmy. However, we do encourage initiative! They all have plenty of that.

Alexi sings along in tune happily and as for his English, his favourite phrase is: “*Where’s John? He’s in the kitchen*”.

Xavier and Jakki have noticed that Rachel, Cerys and Vicki need a bit of help with their map-reading skills. Vicki objects to her being included in the list... We haven’t had to ask the young French people to map-read, so we don’t know their skills.

The food continues to be delicious, despite the very difficult conditions that our kind cook(s) endure.

Invincible, the RDA lorry so kindly loaned to SLL White Horses, got stuck in the mud (for the 2nd time), so we have to learn to not drive Invincible onto grass when it has been raining for such a long time. While we’re on the subject of Invincible, we were amazed, as was the kind garage man who helped us fit the new parts to the clutch, how quickly DAF sent us the spare parts we needed – from Eindhoven in Holland to a small hamlet by the Tarn river in just 3 days – and they were the right parts to boot, though very costly.

Anita has so far managed to keep on target which is wonderful. Some mornings the English young people ride and the French do the afternoon shift and vice versa on other days. Lunchtime rendezvous are when they swap over. A seven o’clock morning start gets less enthusiasm – even groans - than a nine or ten start – understandably.

Dominic (Dandridge) and Sadie (Kaye) come out every month to film for the much hoped for documentary and they are due back at the end of June for a couple of days. Catherine (Legras) came out for 2 weeks to film and we all enjoyed her company. Bilingual, French but living in Dublin, she was a great asset and very popular to all, she also rode and filmed from horseback. We can’t wait to see that footage – but will have to be patient! Dom and Sadie will see it first.

People have welcomed us from the start to an extent which has been extremely touching. Some are *old friends* of Jakki’s, as she had stayed with them on the 2005 ride and it was lovely seeing them all again as well as looking forward to seeing other *old friends* we shall be staying with, this time again. Others are new friends. Amongst old and new, we have been given village receptions (by Lucien Croz at Montredon Labessonié) and by Veronika and Jos at Buzenac-Bas we were all treated to a wonderful dinner in their wonderful home and warmth all round. To boot, they gave us breakfast too – the best croissants anyone had ever had.

Well that’s all for now – the horses have just arrived. It’s finally sunny and nearly time for tea.

Jakki