



CARCASSONNE TO AVIGNON

- a magical history tour

WORDS & PHOTOS JO FERRIS

It was about the time I counted my ninth hill in one day when I questioned the tour blurb. I also decided that three years between cycling treks is a long time between wine stops.

Perhaps it was the romantic prospect of quaffing French wines and feasting on delicate cuisine while ambling through vineyards and beside canals from one chateau to the next. Having revelled in one of Hawke's Bay-based Barbara Grieve's cycling holidays before, I had gleefully rabbitied on to my virgin cycling co-hort that her fitness would be up to scratch. The emphasis is on holiday, I kept repeating - wine with baguettes at picnic lunches compulsory; banquets every night adding inches to the waistline at the mere thought. I was utterly confident even my own lack of training through Godzone's last soggy winter would be no handicap. Three hundred odd kilometres from Carcassonne to Avignon in 11 days. A snip. Heck, I'd spent four days battling head winds on the Otago Rail Trail since my last tour de France.

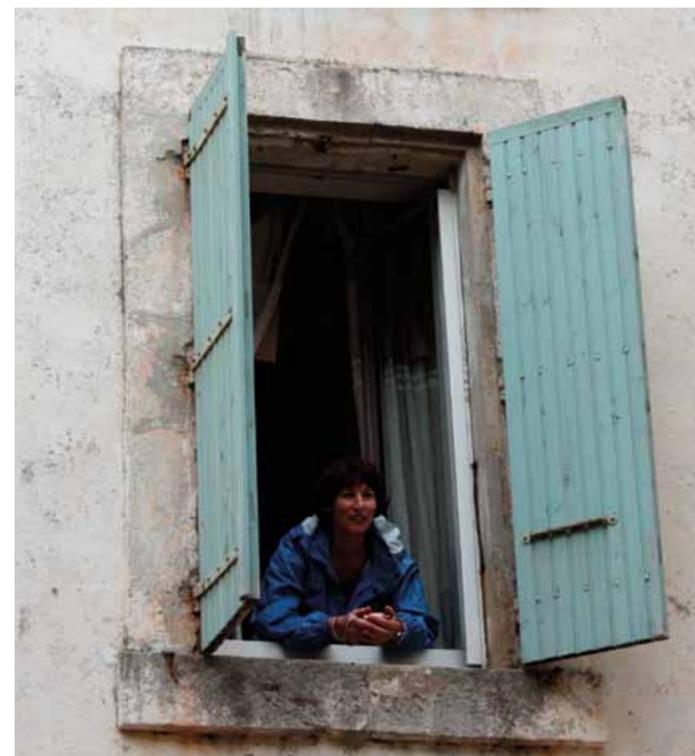
Apart from the anticipation of savouring Languedoc - albeit knowing the format, thanks to Barb's meticulous organisation - her knack for surprise still whetted the appetite for adventure. Going on tour with Barb is a magical history tour. I was particularly excited about the canoe element on day eight - floating beneath the 2000-year-old Roman aqueduct Pont du Gard. It's the most impressive of structures bridging the river Gard between Uzes and Nimes in southern France. The fact I hadn't actually paddled for 20 years was incidental. My trust in Barb is complete - travel insurance on the gold card - just in case.



It was when I received the donkey award during ‘appertifs’ on only day two that I pondered whether preparation should perhaps be rated slightly more highly. Despite being known for dotty moments, I didn’t expect it quite so soon. But then it breaks the ice when getting to know fellow cyclists. Awards are Barb’s way of grounding groups at the outset. One for laudable achievement, t’other for - well, a twitty moment! It’s like pass the parcel, Barb begins; recipients pass it on - with increasing witty banter about each day’s proceedings.

Both are coveted symbols - and the resulting pipping is like a school-yard barrage. It sparks great camaraderie too. A former teacher, Barb has an innate knack of taking a bunch of strangers, plonking them on a bicycle and leading each intrepid band Lord knows where in the name of adventure, historic appreciation and good old-fashioned fun. Even 70-year-olds become like kids again - blindly following up hill and down dale with unerring faith - despite increasing mutterings about the sanity of the course. Even when venturing up a one-way street - Barb stressing unwaveringly, “Be prepared to defend” - normally upstanding citizens cheerfully break the law; shrugging at jabbering, brow-slapping locals.

In tracking trails through the various regions of France a crow’s flight path is totally ignored. Researching each tour, Barb plots courses that weave through obscure tracks to explore fascinating countryside - through vineyards and villages; past abbeys, historic sites and chateaux - tours included. Accommodation of choice is boutique inns or hotels. Three-course feasts, washed down with local wines, are the reward for a day on the gel seat; bruises hailed as badges of honour; maps highlighted to prove to family that age is no barrier to gay abandon- that one really has cycled that far!





Languedoc's beauty and mystery is idyllic. There's a coarseness in the landscape that echoes the language of wandering troubadours from the Middle Ages, through ravages of war to the final stands before the Cathars were burned alive by armies of Pope Innocent III. The sun-baked climate can be as harsh to the fields of grapes and lavender as it can be kind to sun-worshippers who flock to the Mediterranean Sea.

Each day is an adventure - always more than you bargained for. Possibly that's because the French are - well, so French! Take the host at Fabregues who showed my co-hort and myself to our marine themed twin-share, then gave another option while directing us gaily to a plush Turkish 'queen suite'! Quelle surprise reelle!

It's the history of France that truly surprises though. Carcassonne's walled mediaeval enclave of La Cite is a like a 13th Century Disneyland, its fortress luring more than three million people a year. It's France's third most visited attraction. Lagrasse, Narbonne, Agde, Montpellier, Uzès and Avignon - the Languedoc merges Spanish, Greek and Roman history into some of the most extraordinary lessons of human endeavour since before Christ.

Gazing at the Pont du Gard, for example, it's hard to comprehend how one man could calibrate with such precision a 50-kilometre aqueduct in a gradient of 0.07 centimetres per metre. Such precision enabled 20,000 cubic metres of water to flow into Nimes without destroying the aqueduct. It carried water for around 900 years.

Floating beneath it took seconds - the 8km hike down river not too extreme; apart from the emergency path slap through branches of a stranded tree. There was only one 360-spin, a couple of nosedives into banks and some rather dodgy manoeuvres through mini rapids! Girl power survived. But here's a tip for couples contemplating a trip down river any time soon. Consider wife swapping - it saves the aftermath!

Barb's off to the Loire Valley next year (July to September) - bookings already heavy as eager beavers sign up for another dollop of fun, history, food and wine. It will be fun - hopefully flat, that's all! 🍷



Carcassonne to Avignon

Barbara Grieve leaves her farm in Hawke's Bay each autumn to guide cycling tours through France. Participants are mostly in their 50s and 60s - but there have been people as old as 80 and as young as 12. This trip started in the medieval La Cite in Carcassonne, over 11 days cycling from Lagrasse, Ornaisons, along the Canal du Midi to Narbonne with its famed Bishops' Palaces and historic Halles (markets). Other stops included La Batisse and Agde, first seeing the Ecluses de Fonseranes, a sequence of seven ancient locks that climb a 312-metre staircase.

Passing the Etang de Thau coastline by the Mediterranean Sea the tour took in Montpellier, Uzès and Collias on the Gard River to paddle for two hours and float under the Pont du Gard. The tour finished in Avignon with the historic Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes), home to various popes in the 14th and 15th centuries. Tour tickets of the palace also give entry to the bridge to nowhere - Pont Saint-Benezet or Pont d'Avignon, the bridge that once spanned the Rhone River between Avignon and Avignon Villeneuve-les-Avignon.

BARBARA GRIEVE'S CYCLING HOLIDAYS
E barbgrieve@xtra.co.nz

