

Tue 1st September – Villeneuve-sur-Lot – Toulouse via Agen and Auch



Our start on Tuesday was a cool one so we decided to leave the roof up for the trip to Agen. This was another less than impressive town except for the fact that it lies on the Garonne river, and probably our least favourite of the trip. It is striking though how wide the Dordogne and Garonne are so far inland but I guess this is what makes them such attractive rivers, both making any river in the UK look decidedly puny in comparison. A strange thing happened when we set out. I noticed a little noise coming from 1st gear, extra bearing noise perhaps. Stranger still, as we parked in Agen, I reversed into a space and found myself unable to move the gear lever back out of reverse. Having stopped the engine, I wiggled the car back and forth a bit and eventually managed to get it out of gear. Not a good sign! We did our walk around Agen and found the town OK. It wasn't what you would call beautiful but kind of neutral. So we found the car and set off on our way to Auch. Being conscious of the gearbox by now, I noticed more noises, this time "rattles" (sounded a bit like loose exhaust mounts under the car), which got progressively worse. We got as far as Layrac when, pulling away from some lights, the rattles were so bad, we took the heart breaking decision to stop and call the depannage.



Waiting for RAC European breakdown was a short affair. They apologised profusely for what promised to be a 45 minute wait that turned out to be only 20 minutes, barely enough time for me to look up the French for exhaust, prop, shaft and gearbox. As expected, nothing could be done at the roadside and we were therefore transported to a local garage to get the car on the ramp. It was a strange experience really at the garage, after some wait of over an hour with no information and nobody working on the car, which we found out several days later was their lunch break, during which, everything stops, except of the rescue

service.

The appointed mechanics separately asked me what was wrong (maybe they are not on speaking terms), with the second only asking me after he had apparently performed a comprehensive check on the engine, which was of course fine.

All this "checking" we only heard and could not see. Anyway, eventually the news came back that the gearbox was knackered, something I told them I suspected 2h previously, obviously in very poor French. In my defence, the accent is quite strong in this part of France and something I got used to by the



1 The Travelling Strawberry

time we left. And so it was that our lean, green, dream machine was swapped for the "Travelling Strawberry", a ridiculously underpowered Renault Twingo.



Once we had got over the shock of it all, we decided that "things are what they are, and whatever will be, will be" (this in fact is the motto of the book I was currently reading and can highly recommend: "The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared" by Jonas Jonasson. Note from Magda: "Please do not

waste your time watching the film! But the book is great!"). So we immediately determined that the events of the morning were not going to ruin our holiday. We did however, for reasons of time, decide to leave Auch out of our tour and head directly for Toulouse.

Wed 2nd September – Toulouse to Montpazier via Montauban and Cahors

Having arrived much later than planned on the previous evening, we had no option but to leave our exploration of Toulouse until Wednesday morning, and boy were we rewarded. If you have been to Toulouse, I guess you will know what I mean. Toulouse is not beautiful wide open spaces with sandstone buildings like Bordeaux, but it does have its own distinct and extremely appealing character and is clearly a refined city of some wealth.



I am still not quite sure if Magda agrees with me but Toulouse is now my favourite French city and I can very easily imagine it being my local city. So far, for me, in terms of property search, being close to Toulouse is no bad thing and I believe that the countryside surrounding Toulouse is more picturesque than that surrounding Bordeaux. That said, it's only a hunch really but the big take away is that the "draw" of living in France is increasing. Not everywhere is picture postcard, like in any country, but in general, I like what I see. Yes there is the

language barrier, but after a week here it is already less of a barrier and I am understanding virtually everything, even if not speaking too fluently.



After a very pleasant walk in Toulouse we started to head north, taking in Mantauban and Cahors, the latter far more inspiring than the former, sitting at the end of a gorge which made you feel you were somewhere in the wild

west. In fairness, Mantauban had just suffered a terrible storm with trees fallen on cars and carnage everywhere, the same torrential storm we had experienced in Villeneuve-sur-Lot two days earlier but clearly much stronger winds in this area.

On the way into Montauban, we saw plum / prune orchards literally flattened, trees down everywhere and a fair amount of damage to cars and buildings. Some parts even looked like they had been swept by tornadoes although we never found out whether that was indeed the case. So despite one of the attractions of living in this region of France being the relative dependability of having four distinct seasons, clearly one is not immune to extremes.



Montauban, whilst historic and not unpleasant, did not wow us, plus we arrived late so all the restaurants refused to feed us lunch, despite it only being 2:10 pm. C'est la vie en France.

Cahors was an interesting mix of very old and commercial newness, with a bustling high street catering for most shopping needs. Cahors sits inside one of the multiple U-bends of the river Lot amidst hills cut but the river. A prominent feature is the bridge on the east side of the town, which offer many a photo opportunity.

The third stint of our driving day took us to Monpazier, which oddly enough is featured in the photo at the top of page 72 of August Tr Action, which I just happen to have with me.



2Cahors

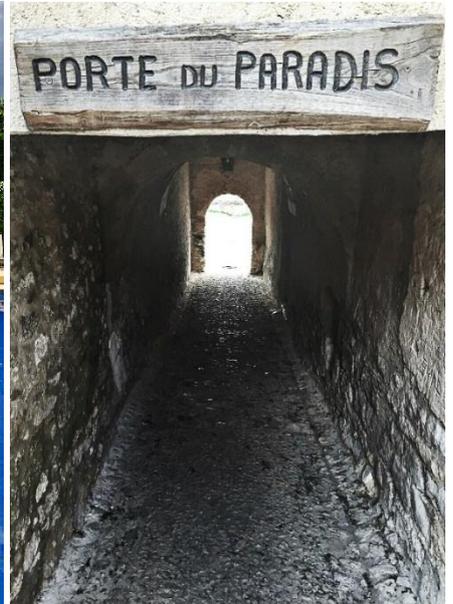
Spooky.

Monpazier turned out to be our favourite location of the whole trip. Good job we had planned to spend two days here!

Thu 3rd September - Monpazier

No touring today. Just mooching around and relaxing with my Magdalena in gorgeous Monpazier (Magda christened this her “cherry on the cake”). Few words can describe this bastide village, so here it is in pictures.





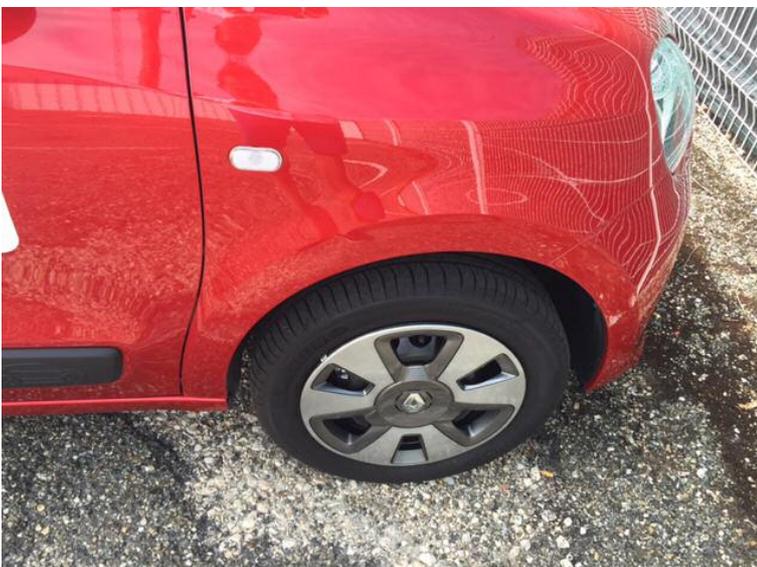


Friday 4th September – Monpazier to Brive-la-Gaillarde

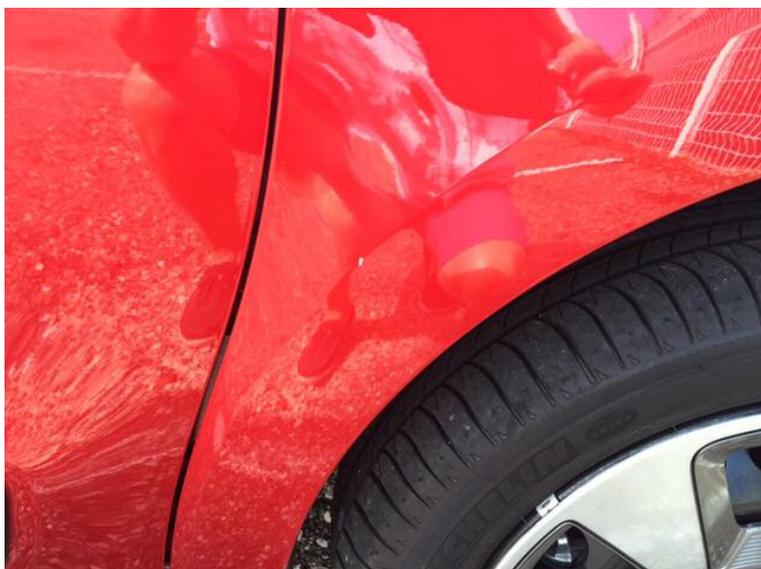


Leaving Monpazier wasn't easy, not only because we were leaving something close to paradise, but also because we had to back track quite some way to give the Travelling Strawberry back before continuing on our tour. We said our goodbyes to our new favorite place in France (and probably the world) and headed for the dreaded Agen garage we had the misfortune to find ourselves in a few days before.

If we had thought the breakdown was a challenge, it was nothing compared to returning the hire car. First off, we arrived just after midday. Those who know rural France will immediately know that this is lunchtime and lunchtime is sacrosanct. Of course, we were nowhere near anywhere that actually served lunch but it did mean that the depannage was closed. We were quite sure the company personnel saw us and knew we had only come to return the car, but open they would not. So we took ourselves off for a walk along one of the picturesque canals nearby and reflected on French lifestyles. When we returned at just before 2pm, it was frustrating to see someone else in the queue in front of us. Eventually however, we started the process of returning the car. "Simple it should be" I hear you say; simple it was not. See if you can see anything wrong in the photo below:



See anything? No? Look closer ...

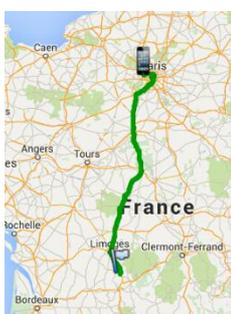


The size of this incredibly small paint chip was approximately 1mm by 0.75mm. The miniscular nature of it however did not deter the depannage manager from demanding 300 Euros for the cost of repairs. At this point, I have to admit, I lost it more than slightly. In my best French, I told the manager where to go and stormed outside to call the RAC, who told me this was a common scam well known in rural France, which far from placating me resulted in me demanding how the RAC could have hired a car from such a dispicable outfit, for which the resulting scam I am now personally liable with apparently no leg to

stand on. Long story short, after threats of police from us and a lecture on how the “damn foreigners come to France and steal our profits” from them, and a full two hours of arguing, we managed to settle on 100 Euros, which by that time seemed a bargain just to get out of the place. Be warned.

Next hire car hopefully should not be so troublesome and is one we can return in Paris. We missed out our planned visits to Salat-le-Caneda and Montignac owing to our four hour delay, and headed via Perigueux instead to Brive-la-Gaillarde. A few drinks and two very nice pizzas later, we turned in ready for our long drive back to Paris next day.

Saturday 5th September – Brive-la-Gaillarde to Paris



Nothing special about motorway driving in France really, except even this is somehow more pleasant, less frantic, smoother and defintiely quicker than motorway driving back home. We arrive in Paris just before about 3pm to drop the car off in plenty of time. Except ...

So Paris is different. Paris is busy. And today, there are roadworks everywhere, traffic jams everywhere and it's all a bit stressful. Ariving at the car hire place in Gard du Nord, we're quite relieved that we're handing the car back. Handing the car back however is

easier said than done as the office of the car hire company where we are dropping the car off was closed. No instructions. Called the number, no answer. The car hire place, as with so many, is actually within a car park, and the attendant offered to relieve us of the keys! Hmmm. However, the car park is a totally separate company from the car hire, so given our last expreience with a hire car in France, to say we were reluctant to leave the car with him was an understatement. After a very difficult conversation (his French had a heavy Morrocan accent, one I am not familiar with, that's my excuse anyway), and after a quick internet check, we decided to head to the next nearest depot, a mere 5 km away. So we set off, and immediately hit traffic, BIG traffic. 15 minutes passed, 30, 45 and it became apparent we would not make it to the other depot on time which closed at 4pm. There was however another one, only another 3 km further, which closed at 5pm, so we diverted. Another 45 minutes later we arrived at that address only to find that office had closed two years previously. So now



we had no choice but to return once again to the first place we had gone to at Gard du Nord. After even more arguing, we decided to park the car in the car park (at which you are obliged to leave the keys with the car park attendant otherwise you cannot park) and post the ticket through the hire company's letter box, much to the disdain of the carpark attendant. This was after we had taken goodness knows how many photos to prove we left the car in the car park, without any minute dents or scratches, should the need for such evidence arise.

As you can imagine, by this time, we were pretty fed up. We were relieved to leave the car behind us, despite having all our heavy luggage to carry (which we only just could) and the rain which had just started, and headed for the Metro.



That evening it felt like it was all over (and it was in terms of difficulties!). We had a very pleasant evening with Pam and Dave and Gabe (who had since Monday hurt his ankle playing rugby – hope it's better now Gabe) before the next days Eurostar back home.



Epilogue

The TR was to be repatriated, when, we did not know. Eventually word came through that it would arrive back at the depot in Kent on Tuesday 29th September. As many of you know, I travel out to Helsinki every week at the moment, leaving on a Monday and arriving back home on a Thursday so I made a point of advising the RAC this fact, together with the fact that there was no way they would be able to deliver it on a large transporter owing to our remote location, and that they would need a small flatbed instead. So I had just got to gate 7 of terminal 3 at Heathrow on Monday 28th, the day before the car was due back in the country, with about 5 minutes to go before boarding, when Magda called saying the car had arrived and
the



guy couldn't get the articulated transporter through the gates to our road! Aaaarrrrggghhh!!!!!! We did manage to get it in the garage that evening, but only after some very fast and manic phone calls to our amazing neighbours Alwyn, Sarah, Ned, Erin, Mick and Christopher who helped Magda push the TR the last ¼ mile home: I owe each one of them a big thank you and a bottle of something nice.

Finally it came to be then that the TR was back home. In the words of Vinnie Jones, "it's been emotional".

It should have ended there but unfortunately, despite my best attempts to leave the car weather proof back in Agen that fateful Monday, some "Charlie" had though it a good idea to open both windows and leave them open during some quite heavy rain. So, door trims ruined and owner's manual also ruined. I am still I contact with the RAC on this matter.

At the time of writing, the gearbox is out and with Darryl at Racetorations for a rebuild, and this will be the topic of my next article. With regard the holiday however, you now know it all.

Despite everything, I still love the TR, I still love France, and I love Magdalena even more for putting up with it all!

Jules

