

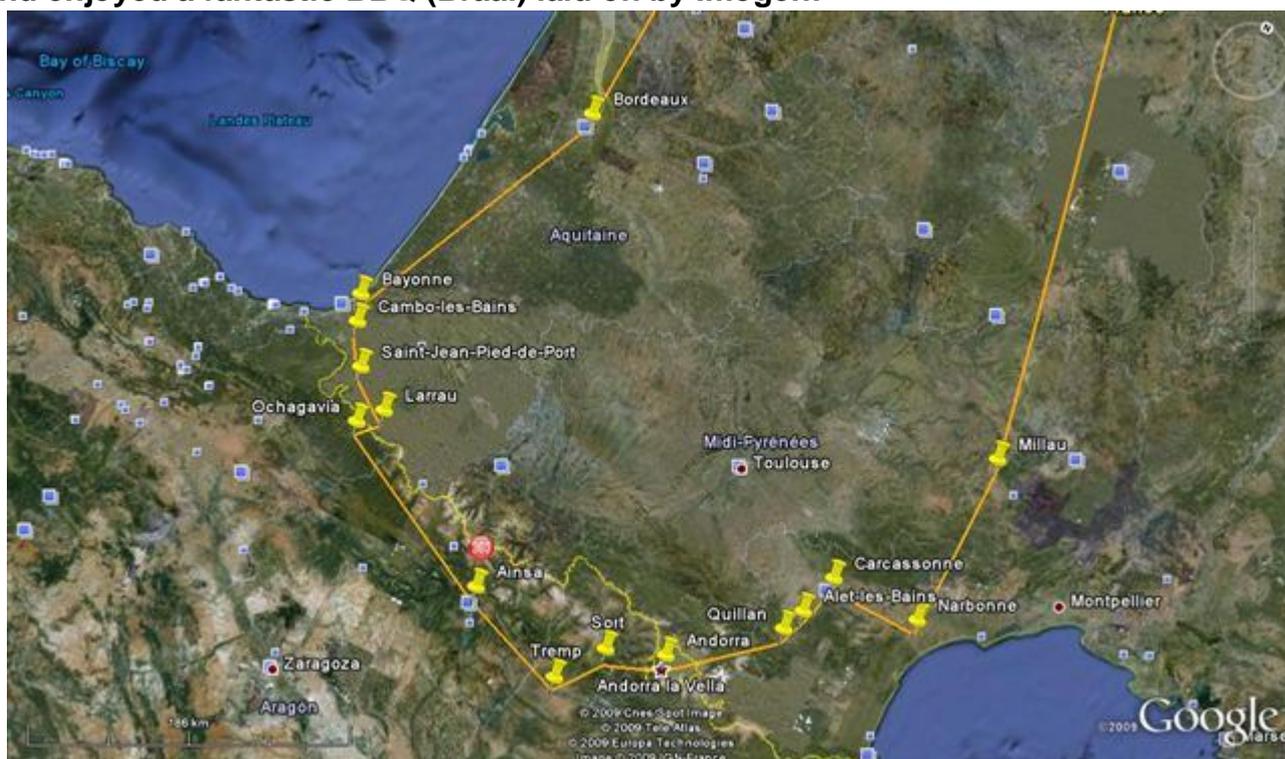
Pyrenees 2009

Thanks to Andy for the travel report.

It started once again at around 18:00 on Tuesday night the 7th April 2009 when Lou and Tweedie, and Mike arrived at my house, Lou and Tweedie had driven down from Manchester and Mike from Leeds. The plan was to sleep over and head for Dover at 04:30 the next morning, meeting Mark, Andy, Lorna, Steve and Janet at the services on the M25, and then all heading to Dover for the 08:30 Ferry to Calais! Needless to say my driveway looked like Land Rovers are us that night! The drive to Dover went smoothly, and we arrived in plenty of time only to be told that due to bad weather all ferries were delayed by an hour, this meant that we were now due to sail at 09:30 and as France is an hour behind us we would only be arriving at 11:30 their time, and then had to drive 350 miles to the farm that we were going to be staying at that evening!

But hey that's what this is all about!

Faced by typical European weather we headed for La Peyratte in the middle of France, this was to be our 1st stop on this trip and Tweedie's Cousin had kindly offered to let us stay at his place that evening, we arrived at around 9pm and cracked open the beers and enjoyed a fantastic BBQ (Braai) laid on by Imogen!



We managed to secure a place in the barn for the 1st night and tested out our camper cots and new mattresses, managed to have very warm and cosy night!

The next day we were off to St Jean Pied de Port to camp, this was to be the first stop in the mountains and 350 miles further South from the farm, the plan was not to book any camp sites and just turn up in a village and find something, fortunately this worked in our favour every day as we always found somewhere to stay, this also meant we were not tied down to a particular destination on any particular day!

Unfortunately between the farm and St. Jean both Lou and Tweedie and Steve and Janet filled up with cheap Diesel from a Super U filling station and broke down, Lou and Tweedie managed to get their Landy fixed but the fuel unfortunately managed to blow Steve's fuel injection system and the vehicle had to be recovered and ten days later is still in France and is likely to be there for a further two weeks before it is recovered to the UK, Steve managed to secure a hire car through his insurance and joined us later on the trip.



We took time out while Steve was getting things sorted with the RAC breakdown service to explore the village and stop off for a cup of coffee before bidding farewell the Steve and Janet for the time being and heading for the mountains to ride the mountain roads and passes!

Back on the road again the weather was closing in and we began to realise that we were a bit early in the season for mountain passes as there were a lot of closed roads due to snow and mud slides, we passed a few collapsed roads as well and couldn't help but wonder if the weight of three fully loaded Land Rovers would be enough to collapse an already fragile mountain pass!

Unfortunately due to mud slides and snow this next pass was closed and the weather had really turned nasty so we decided to head back down the mountain and try and find shelter somewhere!

We found a Gite in the village of Larrau and booked in for the night, it was raining far too hard to set up camp and absolutely freezing; we were still halfway up the mountain at this stage and welcomed the warm stove and dry beds!

We were soon tucking into whatever tins and provisions we had left and were off to bed at around 9pm. Once again French cheese, bread wine and beer were order of the day! The next morning all dry and well rested we headed out of France over the Pyrenees and made our way into Spain, heading for the village of Ainsa where we were due to campo that night, the snow on the French side of the Pyrenees was amazing and we had to stop for photos, but as we came out on the Spanish side, all the snow had disappeared and we were faced with green mountain sides and sunshine, it was amazing!



We arrived in Ainsa in Spain and set up camp for the night, there was a medieval village close to the campsite and we set about exploring this as soon as the camp was up.

The next morning we decided to head across to Andorra as we had heard from Steve and Janet and they were waiting there for us there with their hire car, still keen to drive mountain tracks as much as possible we plotted a route across country making use of minor roads and tracks as much as possible and headed for Andorra! A plan which was to prove very testing and certainly test our metal!!!

The number of old villages built on top of the mountains was simply amazing; you had to admire the people that built them.

The wheels almost came off when we found an old track leading us down to a village and decided to follow it down to the river, the problem was that the track was largely un-used and very muddy and slippery, the other factor in all of this was that it was on the face of a mountain and if you slid off, they would probably have a hard time recovering your body and vehicle, so you can imagine my nerves when the Landy started sliding towards the edge even though it was in diff lock low range 1st gear!! No where to go from here really, and you had to over ride instinct and accelerate to pull the back in line with the front wheels!!

At the bottom of the hill near the river we discovered that the only way out was back up the slippery slope we had just come down!!

Arriving in Andorra we met up with Steve and Janet again who had been there since the day before and had secured places in the local campsite for us, we had stayed here before on the Landy Rally in 2007 and quickly set up camp and then headed down to the restaurant for the famous mixed grill and suckling pig roast, it also gave Steve our medic time to patch up Tweedie who had almost cut his finger off in Larrau while chopping wood with an axe, and in typical Tweedie fashion had duck taped it back on!! As we say "You can fix anything with spit, grit and gaffer tape!!"



Back at camp after dinner and in true Andorra style, where booze is around £1.50 per litre compared to £15.00 back in the UK, and you are allowed to buy 80-96% proof alcohol, things were starting to get out of hand, and Steve was determined to make us all drink his Absynthe which came in a washing up bottle and Lorna took the cake by buying 96% proof paint stripper, which we tried to drink, but later decided it was best put to use lighting the camp fire, worked a treat, just don't stand too close!!

Mike then got in on the act and started downing 96% proof "paint stripper" with Tabasco sauce!! This proved to be one step too far and the whole game was put to an end due to medical reasons!!



The next morning and all slightly hung over we decided that finding really deep snow and rolling around in it would cure most hang overs, so Steve led the way to a ski resort and we all proceeded to act like big kids for the rest of the day!

Alas all good things must come to an end and the next morning we headed back up over the mountains and into France again, we were about to say good bye to the snow forever or so we thought and stopped on the top of the pass for a few quick photos before heading down the other side, through the Andorran border and into France!!

We were heading to a village called Alet Les Dains about 20 miles from Carcassonne and had to negotiate a few mountain passes again to get there, the plan was to camp there and then head to Carcassonne the following morning, the village was hundreds of years old and VERY SPOOKY, I took a walk around by myself to get a few photos and never saw a single person, we were convinced it was a village of vampires, and the

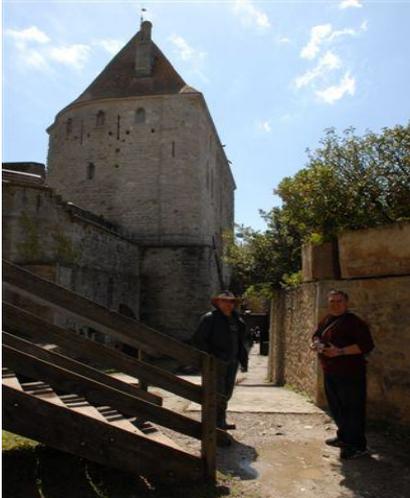
boys were all sleeping with machetes and axes under their pillows that night.....it was really eyrie!!

The next morning we were all woken by the frantic ringing of Church bells and figured this was to warn the vampires that the sun was coming up and get then back indoors, anyway this was also our cue to get packed in record time and head for Carcassonne PDQ!!



Via a wine farm of course to buy more wine and have a tour of the Vineyard.... Well we have priorities you know!!....

We camped just outside Carcassonne and spent the day exploring the old village this is the only remaining medieval village left in Europe and is almost 100% authentic, I was a bit disappointed by the fact that it had been so commercialized, but I guess they have to pay for its up keep somehow....never the less it is still an awesome place to visit!



Carcassonne was really the last stop of our trip and it was now time to head for Calais and get back to the UK, the Fisherman that had been blocking the French ports for the last few days had got tired of being cold and wet in their boats and this was our sign to head for good old Blighty.....but not before we crossed the Millau Viaduct!!

With the trip all but over we speeding towards Calais on clear sunny roads when suddenly while going up a hill the traffic came to a screeching halt caused by what we thought was just heavy rain, when suddenly we were all in an incredible white out, with hail and sleet crashing down causing cars to slip and slide everywhere, but by this time we had had enough and were no strangers to a bit of snow and sleet, promptly geared down, manoeuvred around all the stationary and wheel spinning cars, and pulled away.... We made the ferry with 30 seconds to spare!!!