

Carcassonne, Toulouse, Andorra, and Llivia

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1 Carcassonne and Toulouse

So, I was supposed to leave Nice on Tuesday evening, but the flight was canceled because the pilots were on strike. (This is a common thing in France—especially right after the summer vacations. I mean, why go on strike when you’re already on vacation right?) It turned out that this was a fortunate turn of events for me, for the most part. I missed out on another half day at the Nice observatory, which was not good as I still had several things I wanted to discuss and others there that I wanted to meet. However, it meant that I didn’t have to take a flight to Paris, then back down to Toulouse, then later rent a car in order to go visit Andorra. Instead, I got a refund for my ticket (at least that’s what orbitz said) and I rented a car. So, we’ll start there.

They didn’t have the compact car that I’d asked for. Instead I got a large car. I had mixed feelings about this car. It was kind of a micro-van. Not a minivan (I own one of these, and this car was not that), but it was some Peugeot that seated five, plus had two pull-out seats in the back. If you were willing to give up your trunk, you could seat seven. It was pretty practical and it handled well, but it was fairly large, and I was in Europe. It took me about 1/2 hour to get used to driving a manual transmission again.

Driving from Nice to Toulouse was both uneventful and eventful—relatively long stretches of uneventfulness punctuated by heart-racing eventfulness. The terrain was fairly interesting. I the freeway runs up on a plateau across provence. Most of the cities were tucked into valleys along the way, but the freeway was typically above them. There were occasional cities up on the sides of the numerous hills in along the way. But, I knew that there was a decent amount of elevation between where I was and where the Mediterranean was a few tens of kilometers to the south. There were frequent rest areas (like every 10 km or so—very unlike where I live in Illinois and where I grew up in Utah where 100 miles is a more typical distance between rest areas). There were also frequent toll booths—which took me quite a while to figure out.

For those who plan to drive along the French freeways, be sure to avoid the really tall toll booths that are designed to accommodate trucks. I pulled into one (the truck behind my quickly swerved into a different lane—apparently anticipating my eventual difficulties) and pushed the button and So, I

pushed the call button to explain that I pulled into the wrong voie (path) and that I didn't know how to proceed since there wasn't a place for me to put my money. The person on the line didn't really understand my French (this is not a common conversation topic for me) and didn't really understand my English either. So, like any right minded person would do, she spoke louder. Eventually, I figured out that she was saying "EN HAUTE" and "UUUUP". I looked up, saw the ticket above my head, opened the door and took it and wondered how much trouble I was going to get into since the last toll booth had a place to put coins, this one gave out tickets. (A nice girl at the counter of the next rest stop—10km—explained that I wouldn't go to jail, but that I would just insert the ticket into the slot at the next booth and it would tell me what I owed (no penalty, what a bonus).

I drove through the vicinity of Aix (-en-Provence), Arles, Nîmes, Montpellier (a very cool town), and Narbonne—where I finally took the road that would take me to Toulouse (instead of Barcelona, which was closer, and tempting). Between Narbonne and Toulouse was Carcassonne. Aside from being a board game, Carcassonne is a well-preserved fortified, medieval town right next to a regular town by the same name (though apparently human settlements date back like 5k years). I took a brief detour into town. Trying to find a place to park I ended up in the regular part of town, realizing very quickly that it would be both challenging to fit my car down the streets (which I had no choice but to do) and interesting to explore (which I didn't have time to do). After parking my car I started walking back toward the old town, chickened out of the walk, went back to the car to try to find a new place to park that was closer to the old town. Well, I did find a place to park, but in order to get there I essentially had to drive most of the way back to the freeway and try re-entry from there.

Carcassonne was really cool. You can walk around the fortified perimeter of the city, climbing up and down through various entrances and pathways—both narrow and broad. You can shoot imaginary arrows through the battlements down on the satellite dishes of the nearby neighborhoods. The cobblestoned streets are nice and crooked. There are also several shops where you can buy useless trinkets, and a Best Western hotel. There are several restaurants out in the open air, at least one of which you can get a quick sandwich to eat American style (in the driver seat of the car on your way to your next destination).

Back on the road to Toulouse it was getting dark, but the countryside was still visible, with the foothills to the Pyrenees visible to the south and various other undulations of the terrain on all sides. The whole region, especially back toward Nice, reminded me of California. A bit less mountainous, but the vegetation and relatively dry climate were similar (truth be told, however, it is California that has a Mediterranean climate). Pulling into Toulouse itself, getting closer to the center of town, where my hotel was located, and driving around on increasingly narrow streets that were increasingly crowded with pedestrians it finally dawned on me (forgive me—I had been driving for about 7 hours) that a hotel in the middle of an ancient city might not have a large, welcoming entrance where I can pull my car in, then check in, then find some place to park in their vast parking lot. So, I did my fourth or fifth round through the

city streets until I found an entrance to a parking garage. I only brushed the antenna of my car against the ceiling twice on my way to the 4th level below ground. Fortunately, for the rest of the week I could park my car at IRAP (the science center where I would be meeting for the next couple of days).

Toulouse itself was quite interesting. It has a very unique appearance. Many of the buildings are red or pink colored (giving it at least one nickname of the “Pink City” (La Ville Rose). The tree-lined canal du Midi starts here in this area and helps make the connection between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean (tree-lined for the time being, it sounds like there is some sort of disease that may require removing all of the trees). The city is quite large (over 1M inhabitants) and has a considerable amount of historical significance. I also gather that it is the French equivalent to the Silicon Valley. I bought a couple of the two-pocket, zippered coin purses that I stock up on whenever I visit France from an open air market, walked along the river (not as pleasant as I would have hoped—there seemed to be a lot of counter-culture culture hanging out there).

The basilica was a bit underwhelming when compared with other places I’ve visited—Strasbourg (my normalization constant), Metz, Paris. But, it was different and different is good. It was also an interesting experience to see how different doner kebabs are in different parts of the country. In the south they often called them doner kebab gallettes—which were basically regular kebabs with fries all wrapped in a tortilla and put in a sandwich press. They are OK, but I still prefer the fluffy-bread version with red and white sauce that I was introduced to on my mission in the 90’s. I wonder if Americans would accept regional differences in standard fare like this—probably not, at least at first (and France isn’t really that big of a region, yet the variations are relatively large).

2 Andorra

Next morning, on to Andorra. I woke up and took the METRO out to IRAP to pick up my car. One of the scientists I had met there was on the bus with me. He mentioned that I might be disappointed by Andorra, explaining that because they don’t have the same taxes as France, the French use Andorra as a place to buy alcohol and tobacco. This is much like how Evanston, WY is the fireworks outlet for Utahns (and there are several other places in the US where fireworks or other such shops are inches from the state border—not to mention grain elevators near municipal boundaries where high school kids who are forbidden to dance can host a senior prom).

The night before I had recurring nightmares of driving the car off the edge of a cliff or roll down the side of a steep mountain because of narrow winding roads or something. I had to keep telling myself that these were just the Pyrenees and not the Himalayas, or the Andes, or even the Rockies—and I grew up driving in the Rockies. Still, I was a bit spooked by the experience—I was a bit out of practice driving in mountains since Illinois... well, it’s Illinois.

I began driving toward Andorra. The countryside was interesting, it re-

mind me a lot of eastern Montana. There were occasional foothills that separated one valley from the next. But, on the whole the landscape was a rolling plateau of sorts. Google told me that I should expect about a 2.5 hour drive. However, I was making very good time going maybe 130 kmh through the Midi. I was relieved as it seemed that all my anxiety was a complete waste of thought. Eventually the freeway ended and the road turned into a local highway, the speed limit fell somewhat. As I kept driving I noted that the distance to my destination matched the speed limit for most of the way to Andorra. Google told me the total time, my first impression was that it was off by an hour. However, a windy single lane road up a mountainside can slow one down. Indeed, most of the time to get to the border was spent on the last few tens of kilometers.

I passed through the famous grotto area of the south of France where there were many cave paintings. I thought about stopping, but pressed on so that I would be sure to hit Llívia. I passed through several small villages. Ax les Termes was a notable one. Some villages were placed up on the hillsides. The road kept getting more narrow, more windy, and more slow. But the scenery became more and more fantastic as I went. It was then that I fully recognized the Pyrenees as a real mountain range—all craggy and tall with narrow winding roads perfect for rolling a car down and with sheer drops perfect for driving off. At least now being in the situation I could see that the road was well traveled and things were fine, even if I was driving a stick shift, which was annoying when I was behind slow people and trucks.

Eventually I was on roads that were doing hairpin turns up the mountainsides. This must be the area where they film all the car commercials. I took several pictures just because it was cool to be there. Finally, I arrived at the Andorra border crossing (which is situated well inside of France). I drove through the border crossing, not entirely sure if I was supposed to stop or not. I guess not. I arrived at the city near the border El Pas de la Casa. What a dump. At least that was my first impression. The whole facade of the city was warehouse-style stores with supplies for all your smoking or drinking needs. It really was like the firework stands on state borders.

Oh well, I thought, at least I'm here. I had some options: 1) move on to Llívia and call it a day, 2) take the free highway and go across Andorra to see some of the interior of the country, or 3) pay a toll to use the tunnel that was 100m behind me to see the deep interior of the country. I chose the tunnel. I came out the other side and... holy cow, this place is awesome. The whole country had the feel of a ski resort (because, let's face it, that's what it is). There were small not-quite-villages along the road and occasional gas stations.

I realized that Andorra might be small, but it isn't small. It was like 45 minutes to get to the main city of Andorra la Vella and that is only 2/3 the distance to the Spanish border. It was downhill pretty much the whole way as well. It must be that Andorra is situated primarily on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees and the summit is near the French border. (Side note, I'm currently reading "The Discovery of Middle Earth" by Graham Robb—his book "The Discovery of France" was one of the most interesting books I've ever read. Anyway, Andorra apparently was on the Heraklean Way, a highway of the Celts

on a direct line from the south-west corner of Portugal to the mountain pass in the Alps taken by Hannibal on his route to Rome. Hannibal, apparently used some or much of this path.)

The capital city was fairly interesting. I parked near a grocery store and walked around for a while. There wasn't a whole lot to see in the city itself that I could tell, a few interesting buildings but mostly it was trendy shops and restaurants. The mountains completely engulfed the city. It's amazing to think that they could both fit a city here and have roads that went off in other directions besides directly back to either border. There were lots of people who looked like fashionable tourists. The shops (including the grocery store) were filled with people buying stuff, presumably to take back home. I was one of these people and I was also buying stuff to take back home—chocolate mostly.

I wasn't entirely sure how the parking worked, but I managed to get the car back out. It was getting late so I didn't venture any further south and instead headed back to the French border. On the drive back I decided to take the scenic route instead of the tunnel. The road leading over the mountains and back to France was incredible, and quite frightening at times. After a bazillion switchbacks you eventually make it up close to the ridges of the Pyrenees—presumably where there was more flat terrain to make the road. After a few minutes you work your way back down to the pass. The fear I had of driving the car off of a cliff revisited me on several occasions.

3 Llivia

After leaving Andorra, I took a right and headed East toward Llivia—that island of Spain surrounded by France. The road was exceptionally tortuous as it wound its way down the steep mountainsides. There were large trucks all along the road, driving as if nothing special were happening. Eventually I saw some train tracks appear along the side of the road and finally the whole area flattened out into a plateau—still high with mountains on all sides, but broad enough that they were in the distance rather than right outside the window. Despite the relatively short distance from Andorra to Llivia the drive still took quite a while. For much of the time the road skirted just a kilometer or two from the Spanish border. It was amazing to think that people lived up here, and had lived up here for thousands of years.

I saw a large structure up on one of the mountainsides. I thought it might be something to do with Llivia itself as it was in the right direction. It turns out that it was a solar power station located in France, but very near the small exclave. I finally made it to Llivia. There wasn't much to the town, the houses were pretty cramped together—it was much more densely populated than the small surrounding towns in France. I drove the car around some of the winding streets, snapped a couple of pictures. Most of the shops were closed and the streets were pretty empty. I climbed up a hill toward the church—the car nearly scraping the walls on both sides of the road. I briefly stopped to talk to a local (just asking the best way to extricate myself).

After following most of her directions I drove along a dirt road for a few kilometers just to see where it took me. It didn't take me much of anywhere, just past a few fields. So, I turned around, executing a 9-point turn, and headed back out of town. Now that I'd seen what I came to see, it was time to head back to Toulouse. This, of course, meant driving back up the mountainsides, nearly to the Andorran border, then back down another winding road and into the French countryside.

I was getting a bit hungry, and a little carsick given the large quantity of switchbacks that I needed to take. Amazingly, the speed limit in this area was like 60 or 80 km/h (I don't actually recall—but it was fast compared to what I deemed safe given the terrain). Cars were careening down the road like nothing was out of the ordinary. I decided to try it out and found that if you thought of yourself as a racecar driver you could do alright. Most of the turns were shallow enough to navigate with ease at the higher speed (though I'm glad I wasn't a passenger, cars sold up here must come with sickness bags). Then, when you come to a sharp turn, you slam on the brakes, make the turn, then step on it to get back up to speed.

Part way down the hill I saw a couple guys setting up a food truck. Perfect. I pulled in and asked for a crepe. The hotplate wasn't warm yet, after a couple tries, they gave up and told me to order something else. Hot dogs weren't ready yet. Ham and cheeze? OK, they could do that if I could wait while they cooked the bread (I really did catch them off guard, but it was already getting dark, I was wondering who they were expecting to pass by—except that there were tons of cars on the road, probably filled with tax free alcohol and tobacco from Andorra). The bread finished and they pulled out a package of deli ham and individually wrapped cheese—like Kraft singles. I laughed at the situation, coming all the way from Chicago to the cheese and bread capital of the world, deep in the mountains separating three different countries, including one of the most isolated in western Europe, to get a sandwich that I would have expected in one of those late-night sandwich vending machines.

I talked with the two owners for quite a while as they were preparing my food. I suggested that they could serve their hot dogs Chicago style as a way to bring some American food into their offerings. Chicago hot dogs are not only the best in the world, but they also are very different than what you would typically get in France, or anywhere in Europe for that matter. From there I kept making my way back toward Toulouse. It was dark, but the road kept getting wider and more passable as I worked my way down through the mountain villages. I eventually made it to Toulouse, missed the right exit (twice), but eventually found my way to the Marriott hotel near the airport—a taste of America before my return home.