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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2017)**



#### **THE FORT ABOVE THE GAVE DE PAU RIVER - LOURDESA**

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **July 2017** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website:*

*<http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

## (203) “This and That” - 30 July 2017

### *In Portugal*

Why are walled cities so attractive? Because there is no blurring and fudging of city to suburb to countryside. Ancient beauty is contained and concentrated. It's clarity of definition. Clear boundaries. What children like and need morally. To know where they are.

I have just made four chicken pies. One each for two meals. Meat walled in pastry. No blurring of flavour into mere vegetables. Flavour is concentrated and contained. It's clarity of definition. Clear boundaries. Just what the palate of a septuagenarian priest likes and needs. To know where he is taste-wise.

### **Two cathedrals in Coimbra**

Our destination on leaving *Aveiro* was *Obidos*, one of the most perfect of walled cities. Up until *Obidos*, *Cartagena* in Colombia was our favourite. We thoroughly walked and enjoyed that lovely city as a stopover on our trip by freighter back to Europe from Australia four years ago.

On the way to *Obidos* by car we stopped to clamber up, down and around the city of *Coimbra*. Like Oxford, Cambridge and Salamanca it is an ancient and prestigious university town, full of lovely buildings.

We viewed a few of these with delight, including the old and new Cathedrals. The old was begun in the twelfth century. Its crenelated walls and fortress like appearance bear witness to troubled times. Once inside its antiquity shivered our timbers and refused to be negated by the embellishments, adornments and additions of subsequent centuries. The early 13th century cloisters, which mark the transition from Romanesque to Gothic are austere peaceful.

The new Cathedral, originally a Jesuit church, was built slowly throughout the 17th century. All of a piece and at unity in itself it seemed almost too perfectly proportioned compared to the old Cathedral. Several dazzlingly gilded wooden retables lifted our spirits, but the severe, ordered rationality of the Jesuits breathed through the building more troubling than shivering our timbers with pleasure.

The Jesuits were expelled from Portugal in 1759 and cathedral status was transferred from the smaller old Cathedral to the new in 1772.

### **Street art**

In *Coimbra* we encountered a pair of skilled *calceteiros* at work repairing pavements. Pavements in Portugal, as well as in its overseas territories and Brazil, are works of art. They are made into mosaics from small, flat limestone and basalt cobbles or *tessera*. The black and white small stones are skilfully arranged into interesting and often intricate patterns. That such labour-intensive public amenities continue to be maintained and produced is astonishing and a credit to the Portuguese people.

These Portuguese pavements are under threat however. Laying them out is fiddly, time consuming, low-paid and unpopular. Skilled *calceteiros* are becoming hard to find. Moreover in wet weather the stones become slippery. Cheaper and safer alternatives like concrete and bitumen begin to appear more attractive, for all their ugliness.

### **Underwater canyons and giant waves**

From *Coimbra* we pressed on towards *Obidos* by way of a seaside resort called *Nazaré*. It was only at this point in our journey that we discovered we had an extra hour to play with. We could not understand why the time on our parking ticket did not match the time on my watch. It was the owner of a nearby gun shop who put us right.

*Nazaré* has a wide and very beautiful Atlantic ocean beach. We walked the sea front looking for a restaurant with a menu to entice us in for dinner. Not famished enough to be readily enticed we settled instead for a monster ice cream each. This we ate as the sun began to set over a deceptively tranquil ocean.

Just off shore lies the underwater *Nazaré Canyon*. This is a 16,000 feet deep and 140 mile long trench. It creates interference between incoming Atlantic rollers turning some into huge waves. In 2011 a surfer rode one measuring 78 feet from trough to crest. A few years later another rode one considered at the time the largest wave ever ridden.

## (202) “This and That” - 23 July 2017

### *In Portugal*

We travelled the length of Portugal ignorant of its language. It brought us one great boon. We could listen to and be dazzled only by each other. The car radio was never turned on. Nor hotel television sets.

### **Whingeing, whining, carping, complaining**

It really was a boon, for I no longer enjoy news and current affairs broadcasts. They are such a dispiriting torrent of whingeing, whining, carping, complaining, fingerpoint-ing, fault-finding and relished victimhood.

Journalists who despise the Christian faith are indistinguishable from the baleful, Puritan ministers of old. The sort who set penitents’ stools in front of their pulpits upon which to perch sinners for public humiliation, castigation and coerced expressions of guilt and sorrow. News and current affairs programmes are awash with a secular pharisaism as ugly as its religious forebears.

### **The Venice of Portugal**

Our first night in Portugal was spent in *Aveiro*. Because of its system of canals it is known as the Venice of Portugal. It’s notable for the production of salt and seaweed.

To get there we passed through beautiful and often mountainous country, well vined and sometimes forested. Towards the end, to make up time, we resorted to the fast toll way. Only much later did we realise that we had an extra hour to play with. Portugal, unlike Spain and France, appears to keep the same time as England.

We potted around the pleasing city by car searching, with difficulty, for a park and somewhere to stay. Diana at last noticed the small picture of a bed above a doorway next to a pasteria and restaurant near the railway station. Against my inclinations, for I suspected a sordid room infested with bed bugs and a dire communal bathroom, Diana went into the pasteria to enquire. Success. We ended up in an elegant room at the top of a lovely, curved wooden staircase. It had a fine *en suite* bathroom with its own hall way and was very reasonably priced. Once settled in we found a nearby restaurant on the verge of closing for the night. Its accommodating proprietor ushered us in and served a large impromptu meal of steak, egg, chips, rice and salad. The only Portuguese elements were my beer, a bowl of olives and the modest bill.

The next day we once more headed south on minor roads. Our tom tom directed us along not a few of the tiny cobbled streets of charming but slightly shabby villages. The day before we had stopped in the middle of one to sit in the shade of a bus shelter for a picnic of melon, avocado and crusty bread. Small, bent ancients walked past with their hands behind their back, affecting not to notice us, while doubtless recording every detail of what we were about. Over the walls of small gardens tumbled colourful bougainvillea. Fig and citrus trees abounded.

### **Feathered and unfeathered scavengers**

Our first stop after *Aveiro* was *Praia da Mira* a fishing village with a surprisingly fine sandy beach. It is fast becoming a favoured tourist destination. We arrived as the last of the morning’s fishing nets were being hauled in by great tractors on the beach. The sea was crowded with scavenging gulls and the beach with scavenging locals. Brightly coloured, tall-prowed, traditional wooden boats called *xavega* (propeller powered these days), set out to sea with yards and yards of rope and nets. They make a large circle feeding out first the yards of rope and then the nets. After

their return tractors winch both sides of the net to shore. Those we observed were well filled with smallish, glittering, flicking silver fish, many of them discarded by the fishermen to be collected by gulls and locals. The smallest fish are caught by the head in the nets requiring much effort to clear.

On the pavement above the beach, beside a memorial to lost fishermen, is a simple blue and white striped fisherman's chapel. Artfully decorated it was beautifully peaceful inside. A litter of spent matches on the floor before a bank of devotional candles were like cigarette butts on the pavement outside a pub. With one important difference. Love and devotion's detritus is wholly forgivable and acceptable.

## (201) "This and That" - 16 July 2017

### *On the way to Portugal*

*Salamanca* was but a beautiful diversion. Our goal and destination was Portugal. Not by way of the main highway from *Salamanca* though. We took a lesser route, stopping first at *Vitagdno* where we delighted in shuffling old men in berets and caps, shops selling local produce and the narrow streets of a country town untouched by tourism.

### **Cork oak cuckoos**

The countryside all the way to the border was sparsely populated and, for the most part, arable. Acres and acres of short stemmed wheat, ripe for harvest. Stonier areas were dotted with cork oak and grazing cattle. At a stop to investigate the cork oaks we heard the only cuckoo of our summer. It was singing in English.

A long and winding descent brought us to the substantial border river *Aguedo*, just above its confluence with the mightier river *Douro*. Before crossing we stopped to have lunch and a brief nap in crisp, sunny weather, overlooking the river. We admired the industry of the Portuguese. Every square metre of hill on their side of the border was covered with neat rows of olive trees and vines.

### **Experiencing Portugal in Africa**

It was good to arrive in Portugal. Diana had visited before, I not. My love of all things Portuguese derives from holidays in Moçambique. Brought up on Rhodesian bush mission stations we holidayed in the coastal Moçambique town *Beira*. We stayed in the *Miramar*, a small family hotel. The smell of mosquito repellent in our rooms and taste of the dining room's repellent cabbage soup remain with me.

We loved *Beira*, revelling in the Latin way of life as lived under a hot, steamy, tropical African sun. My father, brother and I regularly visited the docks to watch the loading and unloading of freighters. In those happy days docks were open to all and sundry. My sister enjoyed local Portuguese Lotharios eyeing her up and down appreciatively. Our parents delighted in wine they could not afford at home. Their favourite was a late harvest *Grandjo*. I was able to relive their pleasure in it on this trip.

Some years later, when I was teaching in *Harare*, I had a girl friend who taught in the border town *Mutare*. On my weekend visits we'd drive into Moçambique through glorious blossom-scented orange orchards (when in season), to a town called *Vila de Manica*. There we'd nibble olives, chunks of peri peri beef, peri peri prawns and cashews with nogs of delicious Portuguese bread while drinking *Manica* beer beside the swimming pool. We'd return home with great wicker demijohns of wine sealed with a huge club of plaster of Paris, undeclared at the border.

### **A bull fight in Vila de Manica**

I attended my only bull fight in *Vila de Manica*. The Portuguese don't kill the bulls, they simply madden them with javelins stuck into and left dangling from their hides.

Headly days. A pleasing contrast to the conservative, upright, uptight white Rhodesia. Nor was Moçambique a racist society. Intermarriage was encouraged not frowned upon and black people could rise to the top of the professions or civil service. Too few did however. Disparity of wealth and apathy about black education and advancement, under Salazar's dictatorship, made the birth of a liberation movement inevitable. Holidays there, however, left me with a nostalgic love of all things Portuguese.

Once in Portugal we zig zagged along un-trafficked roads through hilly, stony and unprosperous seeming countryside. Every likely patch of soil appeared either to be cultivated or to have once been cultivated. Olive trees and vines predominated. Most fields and vineyards were walled or more usually tumble-down-walled. We travelled high above deep river valleys enjoying frequent splendid views.

Later we dropped down into the famous *Douro* river valley. 557 miles in length it is the Iberian peninsula's third longest river. The section along which we drove is deep in a valley of terraced vineyards clinging to often near vertical slopes. The grapes are destined for Port, either the wine itself or as *aguardente*, the spirit that fortifies the wine. I regret not buying more to bring back.

## **(200) “This and That” - 9 July 2017**

### *On the way to Portugal*

Diana loves navigating. I love driving. So on holiday I'm in charge of the steering wheel (except when drowsiness necessitates a 20 minute nap). Diana plots the course. It's the recipe for both a happy journey and a good marriage. Whoever's in the driver's seat goes only where directed.

### **Driving and being driven**

As we drive Diana pours over large scale road maps spread out on her knees, constantly zooms the satellite navigator's map in and out, comments on the scenery and feeds me dried fruit to ward off sleep and to keep bodily motions as regular and smooth as the vehicle's.

Her relationship with the sat-nav is close but not servile. She contemptuously ignores its instructions as often as she follows them. Usually to our cost. Wherever possible we avoid motorways. We prefer to potter along interesting secondary and tertiary roads. To help do this we choose the sat-nav's shortest rather than fastest proffered route. It means that in small villages we bump along cobbled or rutted streets so narrow we have to fold in the car's ear-lug mirrors to squeeze through. It saves a metre or two's distance.

### **The Tour de France**

Before we left our hosts' lovely home in the tiny village of *Hitte*, close to the spa town *Bagnères-de-Bigorre* in the Pyrenean foothills, we were taken on a spectacular drive up and over the *Col du Tourmalet*. The road is beautifully tarred and sign-posted because it is one of the most famous climbs in the *Tour de France*. The Pyrenees were first included in the race in 1910. Since then the *Col du Tourmalet* has been a part of the course well over 80 times. At close to 7000 feet above sea level it is the highest paved mountain pass in the French, though not the Spanish, Pyrenees. At the top we got out for a walk in crisp sunshine. Patches of snow still lingered underfoot.

We left for Spain at midday by way of *Pau*, stopping briefly for a picnic lunch by a madly rushing river in a deep valley. We then resumed a beautiful, winding drive over and through the mountains. Lush valleys, stark snow-streaked peaks, lakes, tunnels and hairpin bends. Then finally into Spain through a long, last tunnel.

Speed was necessary. We were booked into a hotel in Salamanca. So 450 miles to cover in half a day. The Spanish countryside was not as lush as the French, though widely cultivated. We

bypassed cities and towns dimly remembered from school history lessons: *Pamplona*, *Burgos* and *Valladolid*. We arrived as darkness fell shortly after a thunder storm. After signing into the hotel, and a restorative shower we went for a chill, brief, late night walk. Lovely and mysterious to be in an ancient, strange city washed clean by rain.

### **Salamanca**

The next morning we walked the old part of the city for several hours. The buildings are an orange-toned sandstone and especially lovely is the all but perfect *Plaza Mayor*. Completed in 1755 it is a perfectly proportioned city square originally constructed to be used for bull fighting, which it was for a hundred years. Now it is the city's heart and is used for public gatherings. It is lined with restaurants, tourist shops, ice cream parlours and the like.

The city is a UNESCO world heritage site and worthily so. We wandered around it on a cool, clear morning, rejoicing in the sandstone architecture and narrow, winding streets. It is an ancient university town. Young people abounded as the city awoke around us. We were too early to get into the great cathedral, but allowed into its prayer room and so granted a hint of the magnificent interior as well as nudged to prayer. Storks guarded their great nests and gawky young on beautiful towers, turrets and belfries.

We eventually made our way to the city's Roman Bridge over the river *Tormes*. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century the bridge bore heavy traffic, being the single point of access to the city. It is now used only by pedestrians. Of the 26 arches only the 15 closest to the city are Roman in origin. Over the centuries the bridge has been restored several times after destructive floods.

River bridges are beautiful. Even many modern ones. Of course. Linking and bringing together the separated is what civilized and Christian living is all about.

## **(199) "This and That" - 2 July 2017**

### *On the way to Portugal*

Not all relics of colonialism stink. Consider Australia and New Zealand's splendid *Long Service Leave* entitlement. It allowed me an extended visit to England sufficient to meet up with and marry Diana. It was her friendship with Frank and Frances Willet that brought us to Boldre.

### **A well buttered behind**

*Long Service Leave* was introduced to Australia and New Zealand in the 1860s. It enabled civil servants to return home to England after 10 years of service. Five weeks to sail there. Three weeks of holiday. Five weeks to return. Thirteen weeks paid leave every ten years. This privilege granted to Civil Servants began to spill over into other professions in the 1950s. It is now a pretty well universal benefit.

I took nothing of my entitlement for 22 years. Added to my annual leave it meant that after my wife's death I was able to take six months fully paid leave in 2010.

In England workers are given 28 working days paid leave a year. Of these 8 are usually accounted for by public holidays. This means 4 full weeks annual holiday. Far more generous than the USA and most Far Eastern countries.

As a House for Duty priest I am granted 18 working days leave a year. With ostensibly only 3 working days to my week this adds up to 6 full weeks holiday each year. As the South Africans say, I have landed with my bum in the butter.

### **The divine placebo effect**

We left a warm Rennes early in the morning travelling fast along the toll way south to Tarbes. This is a large town notable for its proximity to Lourdes and the Pyrenees. It is also home to a friend of ours. Our sat-nav delivered us to the door of her attractive old apartment in the middle of the town. After a cooling drink she drove us to Lourdes.

It is an impressive and far less disturbing place than I expected. It was particularly moving to be part of so many devout fellow Christians. As a member of a disdained minority I feel a stranger and a sojourner on the streets of England and Australia. Not so in Lourdes. Nor were the church buildings and grotto as sickeningly sentimental as I feared they might be.

I sympathised with the thousands who must go to be healed and aren't, but then many are. If this is dismissed as simply the placebo effect it surely matters not. Built or evolved into the scheme of things by the Creator, this is no less God's work than any apparent outright 'miracle'.

### **Trinket and religious tat mongers**

The profit motive, which can corrupt anything, was notably and pleasingly absent in and around the architecturally surprising three churches. They are built on top of each other on the steep hillside above the grotto. The one in the middle is the crypt of the one on top. Nor was there any money grubbing in the huge, brutalist-concrete underground basilica. We were not asked to part with money anywhere and in the topmost church sat quietly through the last part of a well attended mass in English.

It is the town itself that is full of trinket and religious tat mongers. Little wonder. After the Holy Land and Rome, Lourdes is the most important place of Catholic pilgrimage in the world. Second only to Paris as a centre of tourism in France it receives about six million visitors a year. There is profit to be made from crowds like this. I looked wryly for charity shops selling the discarded crutches, prostheses, pills and potions of the cured. There weren't any.

### **Pyrenean panorama**

From Lourdes we followed our friend thirty or more kilometres out of town to her parents home to be watered, fed and bedded. The house overlooked great fields of wheat, well tasselled but still green. The grass along the roadside verges was verdant, tall and splashed bright red here and there with poppies. Beyond them a panoramic view of snow peaked Pyrenees. We drank a fine aperitif outside enjoying the warm evening and splendid view and then moved inside for a leisurely meal of melon, black pork fillets and ribs, broccoli au gratin, local cheeses and gateau.

Next morning our friend's father took us up and into the Pyrenees. I am a stranger to the Alps and so the Pyrenees are now my favourite mountain range. The lush valleys and deciduous trees of the lower slopes are exquisite.

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