

ONE MOTORHOME, TWO BIKES, THREE LITRES OF GAS, & FOUR CAMERAS

A Christmas jaunt with Gilbert Park

I have been a landscape photographer for many years and as my technique has changed so too has the equipment I use. I now take mostly panoramic photographs that I use for calendars and to sell separately. Because of the diversity of environments I photograph, I have acquired a fair amount of gear over the years. I am fortunate in having both film and digital equipment so I can choose the best medium to use depending on where I am and what I am doing.

This year both Maire and I were able to take some extra days off around Christmas and New Year and have ten days away. We decided to spend Christmas in our campervan, a Hymer Exsis. Only our start and finish points were predetermined, Portsmouth to St Malo on the way out and Bilbao on the return. The Exsis has a bike rack and we have added to it a Gaslow system for cooking, heating, and refrigeration. For this trip we also took two sets of mud and snow mats, snow chains and a shovel – just in case. There is one lockable locker that I am allocated to



store my camera gear in.

Off the boat and we were on our way to central France. Sunrise was late (9.30am) and as it approached I itched for the first picture, taken from the cab of the 'van.

The kilometres and day wore on and we faced our first problem of a shortage of water, everywhere was frozen. For the rest of the trip we asked for water either at a

- 1** Near Figols de Tresp
- 2** Medieval bridge, Cahors
- 3** Ainsa from the river
- 4** Christmas decorations in Cahors

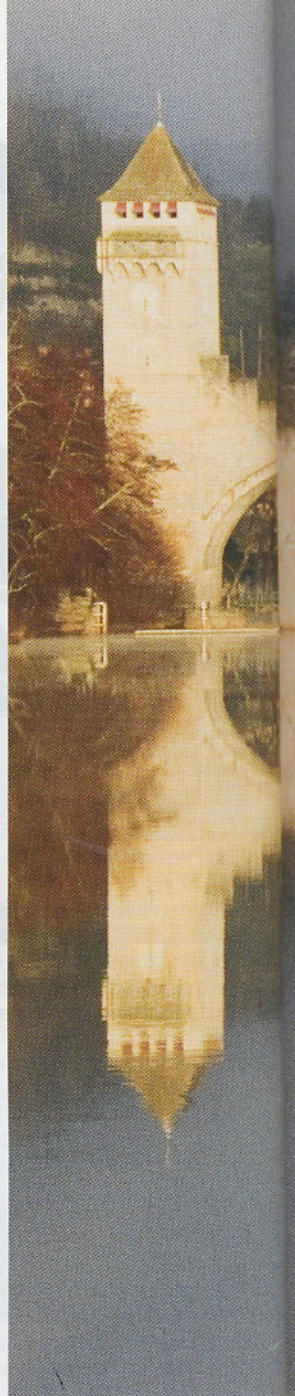


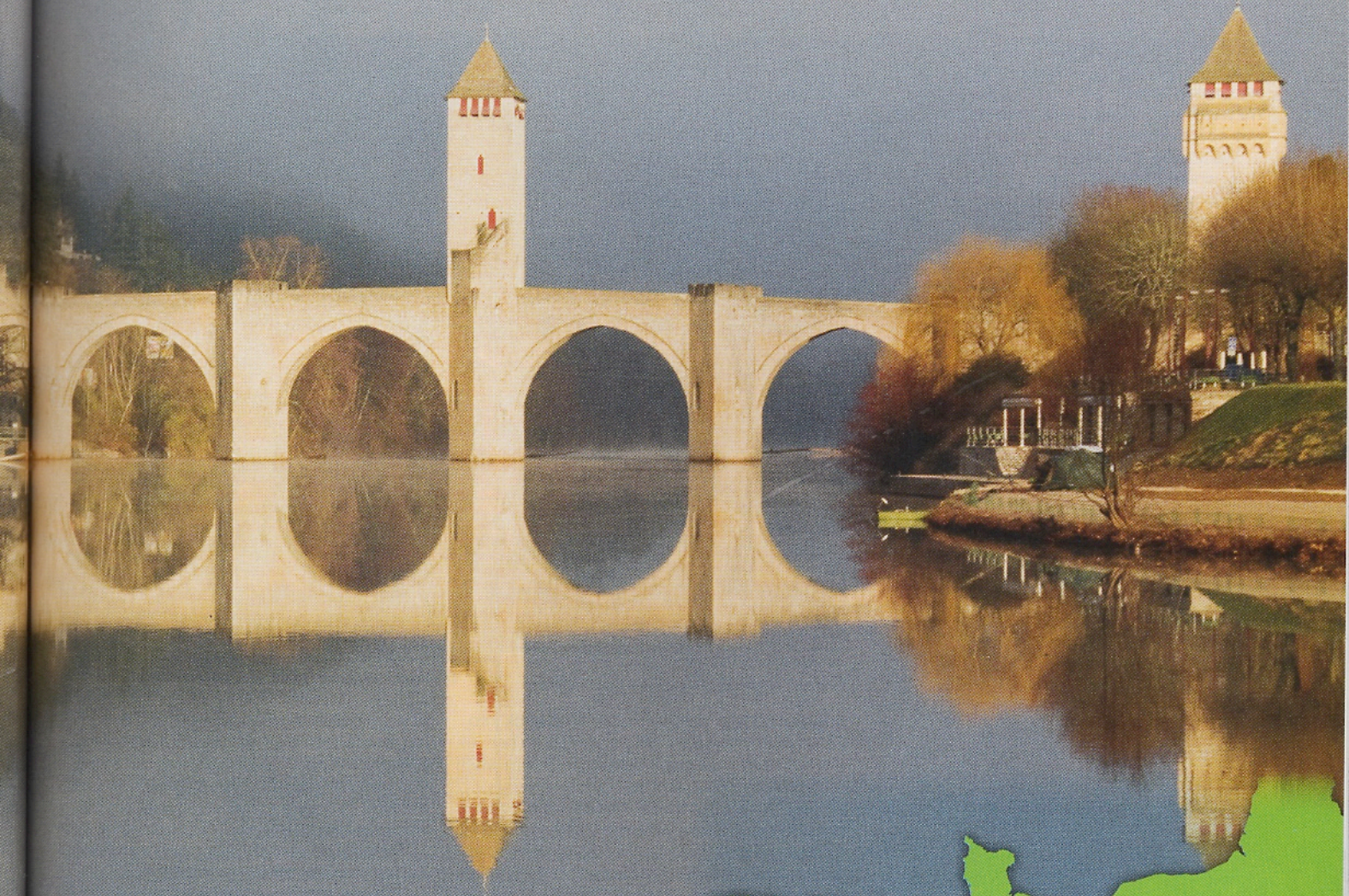
car wash or even better a cemetery (there are more of these). We landed up at the side of the River Loire outside Amboise just in time for sunset and a night shot of this quaint little town.

The next day it rained. These days we use for travelling and so off we went south where the weather was forecast to be better. We landed in the free parking area for camping cars in Cahors on the banks of the River Lot and immediately fell in love with the area. It has a wonderful medieval, fortified bridge, which is lit with sunlight for only a few hours during winter.

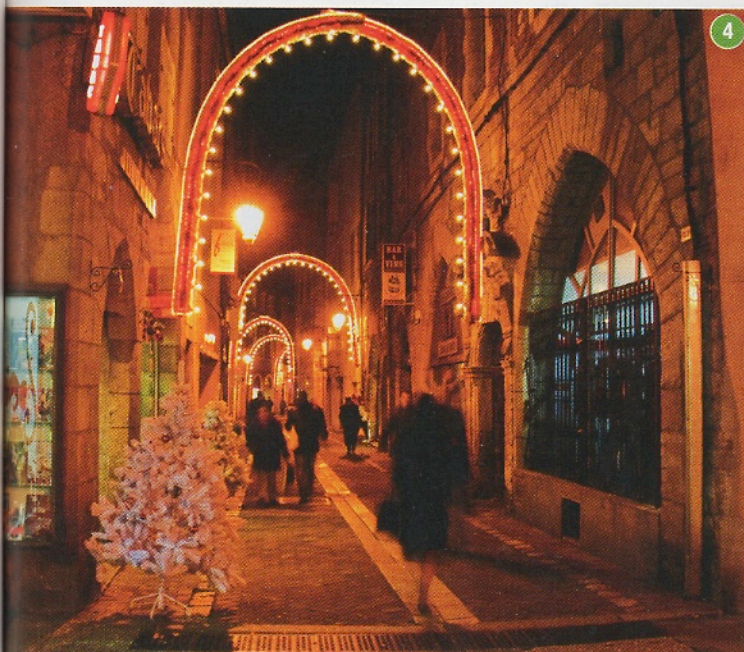
On Christmas Day we unloaded the bikes and had a wonderful sunny, if cold, ride along the banks of the river to Vers (where we had a picnic lunch) and back.

After three days at Cahors it was time to move on. The day wore on and we decided to stop at Foix. Tourist Information advised us that stopping overnight in the car park next to the cemetery was OK. The Pyrenees beckoned. So we went to Andorra, a tiny principality high up in these pretty mountains. Driving through the Principality was a depressing experience after the bright sunlight of the hills. Since we





“pictures just
outside the ‘van’”



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didn't want to shop we didn't stop except to buy diesel. We did try and buy some gas for our Gaslow system but it is not sold in Andorra. We weren't too worried since we had heard gas was now available in Spain.

We arrived at a skiing area called Grau Rois, where again there was a special, free parking area for camping cars. It was cold – very cold – every night with the temperatures going down to minus ten degrees Celsius with condensation freezing on the *inside* of the windscreen.

In the late afternoon it was time to set off up the hill to photograph the sunset. To make this safe I needed a lot of equipment, head torch, ice axe, crampons and additional clothing. In the end I needed all this – the crampons made it safe to walk down in the icy conditions and when I tripped I used the ice axe to stop the fall. At minus fifteen degrees, I needed all the extra clothing.

Where to next? Katie (the GPS) told us that



the fastest way to Bilbao was to go back into France. For once we decided to ignore her (despite her protestations to 'do a U turn when safe') and head for Spain.

Off we went and took the route through the mountains to Isona, where we wild camped on a small track next to the road. Over dinner we looked at the *Rough Guide to the Pyrenees* and studied the top 26 things to see. Amongst them was the medieval city of Ainsa. It was the right decision, leading to a spectacular drive there with the morning mist persisting in the valleys below us.

We arrived in Ainsa just after dark. Seeing the city light up as we drove there was spectacular and unforgettable. We felt good about being here. As we drove around the old city we spotted several car parks where it would be possible to stay. However, as we reached the top of the narrow road around the walled city, we suddenly came to the large car park next to the actual Top Site we had seen and, to our surprise, there were three large motorhomes there already. We stayed. As we walked around the wonderful

city, we decided not to move on the next day but to stay there for an extra night and to leave early on our last day and drive the 450km to Bilbao using the motorway to catch the ferry. We were a little anxious about gas since we had been unable to source any at all so far in Spain, and the large petrol station in Ainsa had none either.

Sunrise and sunset pictures were possible just by stepping out of the 'van and climbing up the walls. It was here I realised that perhaps the motorhome isn't after all the best accessory for a photographer. At dawn one day, Maire kindly bought me up a cup of hot streaming coffee! Bliss.

On New Year's Day, we left Ainsa on a very cold morning to drive to Zaragoza and then Bilbao using the toll road. This again was a wise decision. It was foggy and the toll road deserted. We made the ferry with ease. We stopped once on a motorway service area and, being curious, I went on the hunt for gas – none.

After ten days of glorious sunshine, no winds, no rain, and no snow, the ferry journey had all these problems – still they weren't mine! ■



5 Dusk over Plaza Mayo, Ainsa

6 Chateau at Foix

7 Le Grau Rois