

Bilbao, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2003

I awoke at first light this morning to look out at the 'confectionery' that is the Guggenheim Museum right outside my hotel window - the first impression was like broad shavings of white chocolate that you see standing on end in swirls atop a fancy iced cake. I lay in bed, (and then in the bath) just looking at it.

I needed the experience to be good after spending nearly eight hours getting here from Eddy's place in London. EasyJet is easy in name only. God forbid they ever have a real emergency with those youths in orange-stitched brown denim skirts who patrol the cabin with chocolate bars, cheese crackers and tepid tea ("sandwiches are 'orf!"). It took nearly two hours sitting on the aircraft without air (-conditioning) at Stansted while they searched for one mystery bag, and then tried to work out why there was one more passenger than shown on the manifest. The French air traffic controllers weighed in with another thirty minutes delay for the short passage over Brittany, and then we bounced around and revved the engines over Bilbao in lightning and rain for a few turns waiting for a fierce thunderstorm to pass.

What a spectacular new airport and road system to town! But no food at the inn at midnight after I finally arrived at this ultra contemporary hotel, Domine. Like work-a-day times of old, I enjoyed a room service club sandwich and coffee - propped up on large pillows in the bed watching CNN till I fell asleep.

I'm hobbling this afternoon with aching legs and lumbar region after conscientiously taking in the whole 'audiophone' tour of the Guggenheim structure, and three floors of exhibits. But a most memorable day and highly recommended – really worth the 4 euros hiring charge. The tissue paper-thick titanium, limestone and glass surfaces; the atrium and gallery spaces; external ponds and canopies; and the setting in a river valley of lush green are only the start. The permanent exhibits team with a major exhibition "Gravity and Grace" of Alexander Calder's sculptures, stabiles and mobiles, dating from the Thirties. Jeffrey Koon's four-storey high "Puppy" sculpture in the forecourt is sprouting 60,000 blooming lobelias, impatiens, marigolds and begonias – a concept for Gerhard to replicate (albeit on a smaller scale) one of these days.

Not knowing the local language and the menus, I'm having trouble eating in the traditional little bars and restaurants that abound. Cowardly, I resorted to tapas for lunch in the hotel before taking a long walk along the river to look at the old town. The heavens opened just two minutes from the hotel, so that was it for the day (and this visit).

This morning I walked in another direction to the bus terminal where I bought a ticket for the two hour-ride to the French border tomorrow morning to catch the TGV to Bordeaux - for just 7 euros. I feel like a backpacker! And I've saved enough money on the now cancelled car transfer to splurge on dinner and a good wine with Anne and Trev in St Emilion tomorrow night.

*Postscript – in France :*

. . . . bus ride easy . . . TGV to Bordeaux even easier . . . but no connecting train at the platform to St Emilion . . . 'cancelled'. The French rail workers were on strike again. Milling crowds, long queues, no English spoken, no signs, no hope of dinner overlooking the vineyards in St Emilion tonight . . . for a time. Eventually I plucked up courage to speak (gesticulate) to the Anglophobic and aggressive looking taxi drivers, chain-smoking in little groups waiting for non-existent fares. And I got to the hotel in St Emilion before Anne and Trev! (They were down the hill waiting for me at the station!).

Fingers stained brown with the juice from unripened walnuts growing on the farm, I am now settled in the rose covered stone cottage in Cadouin – my home for the next four weeks. Already a victim to the call of the local food markets – my first purchase was a slice of Cantade de Montagne cheese (aged for twelve months in the earth) – which had to be thrown away – or else be carted away by the flies that it attracted. Annie's delicious rabbit stew nearly didn't happen last night because none of us could bring ourselves to chop the head off the skinned animal that we saw at the weekly marché in Sarlat. And of course, I've already indulged my passion for tomatoes - with the biggest, ugliest, juiciest beefsteaks you could imagine – none of those perfectly round and red variety still attached to a vine for moi!.