

of the Cathar country and Catharism with a week's intense tuition

Danny Bidgood's article 'Speaking the lingo' (May, FPN) struck a chord with me and my wife Jane as our experiences of trying to learn French in the UK were very similar to his.

Jane had embarked on an evening class with 18 other people with various levels of skill. She had never learned French at school and was classified as a complete beginner and, with her fellow pupils moving on fast, she found it impossible to keep up and became very discouraged. Likewise, I had not opened a primer for 52 years and was very rusty: vocabulary had all but disappeared and grammar was completely forgotten. We had tried playing tapes in the car and house but found that speed and repetition didn't help now that our grey matter was nearly white!

We looked at the classified adverts in FPN and noticed there was a course near Mirepoix in



Chris and Jane Rowley with their tutor, Dominique, centre

the heartland of Cathar country. We have an ongoing interest in the history of Catharism so we decided to give the number a ring.

We discussed the course and its ability to cater for differing levels of skill Dominique

Mavrakis, and she enthused over our interest – there were Cathar sites, she said, in Montsegur, Carcassonne, Foix et al. We booked for the first week in July. We would take a holiday first before starting on our 'one-to-one' learning experience.

A Sorbonne graduate in French,

The Cathar stronghold of Quéribus is visible on its turret of bare rock long before you reach it

Dominique has taught at the Sorbonne and Alliance Française. She is a charming, lively and humorous lady but a very strict tutor! Homework is checked the following morning!

The course is held in the 'Salle Catalpa', a room in the centre of Leran. This small and charming village has an attractive square, *boulangerie*, *épicerie* and *pâtisserie*. A *poissonier* and a *boucherie* who visit once a week complete the line-up of shopkeepers on which we could practise our new skills.

The course is based on the CLE International grammar and vocabulary publications. As Jane was starting from scratch she found Dominique's merry, enthusiastic but firm tutelage of

Mirepoix we were encouraged to converse with the stallholders (presumably briefed beforehand!) while ambling between the many exciting stalls.

From time to time Dominique's friends would drop in for a drink and we were encouraged to chat with them. A particular delight was to meet the 85-year-old former village school mistress – a very bright and perceptive lady. Another friend, Mireille Tournenc, hailing from Marseille, took us to a concert at Roquefixade. The choir, performing unaccompanied, was from a technical college at Lodz and was part of an annual international festival held all over Languedoc.

As part of our learning we were taken to meet Gervaise Deminim who, with her chums Lulu and Bea, has converted a derelict tannery into a sumptuous *chambres d'hôtes*. Called *La Ferme de Leran*, it offers B&B, plus optional lunch and dinner. Time precluded a swim in the inviting pool, but we found the local three-star camping *La Serre* at Aigues Vives, just three kilometres from Leran, to be more than adequate for our two cats and caravan.

The area is packed with exciting castles, villages and towns dating from the 12th century and is of particular interest to anyone who wants to know more about Catharism and the Albigensian Crusade.

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