

I've looked at clouds from both sides now  
From up and down and still somehow  
It's cloud illusions I recall  
I really don't know clouds at all  
-Joni Mitchell

## **Chapter 4: Clouds, Cathars & Crusaders**

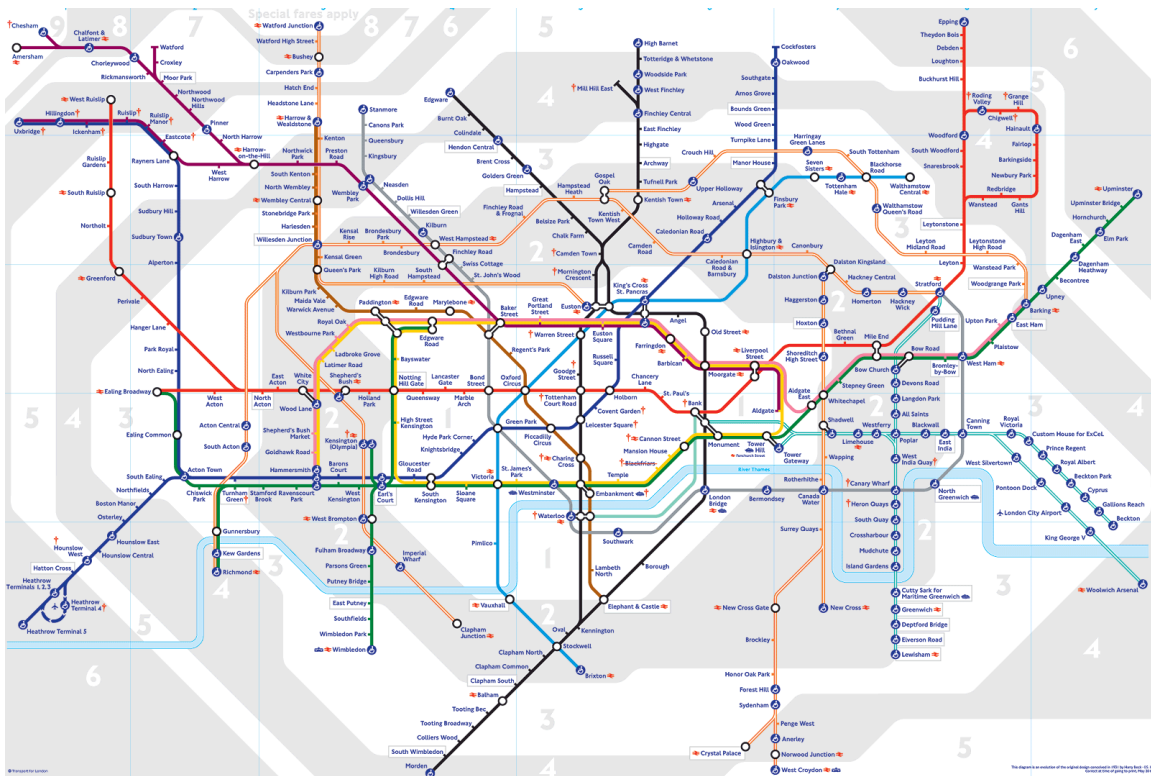
### A Dickens Christmas

We had a difficult time driving back into London, nearly getting stranded on the M1 in the middle of nowhere in 30 degree weather. But just as despair and frostbite were beginning to set in, traffic finally cleared and the next thing we knew we were standing outside London's Victoria station. It was now 9:00 PM and we had to figure out where to sleep that night, having not counted on making it all the way to London that evening. We didn't have a place to stay arranged. And as we had become accustomed to the nicer parts of town, we hopefully headed for our old Knightsbridge digs. Matteo was very nice but explained that some friends of theirs were arriving in a few days to stay in their basement flat, so we were going to have to find something else. We argued the point but... We then turned to my friend Steve, who I knew from the same Chicago training school as Ross. But he was expecting his mother that week, who was coming down to London to do her Christmas shopping.

*"For Christsakes Steve, tell Mom to stay in a hotel, we're in a bit of a pinch here"*

Then mom changed her plans (hopefully not on our account) and we had a place to stay for a couple days after all. We met up with Steve and his wife Linda, along with several other friends of theirs, for a raccous night in the Clarence Pub across Whitehall Road from Number 10 Downing St. After 8 or 9 pints of ale apiece, we were all loudly signing English folk songs and making merry trying to wake the Prime Minister.

Steve and his wife lived in a little village named Chesham Bucks. It was a charming little place, but as the very last stop on the Metropolitan line of the expansive London Underground, it's primary virtue was offering slightly more affordable housing to a young couple than anything closer in. After a hazy hour on the Tube we arrived at about 2AM. They owned a little English row house with a tiny garden in the back. The English dream.



As we were all still well sauced, it seemed like a terrific idea to get into Steve's Mezcal Tequila until 3AM. The resulting hangover was not a big problem for we world travellers who just slept it off. It was a slightly bigger problem for Steve and Linda, who both had to be back on the Tube and heading to work early in the morning. Oops. Our only obligation that day was the theater. Linda had secured us inexpensive front row seats to the perpetually sold out musical *Phantom of the Opera* through a work connection.

During our remaining time in London, we took advantage of several more cultural experiences such as the Tate Gallery with a marvelous free guided tour to the J.W. Turner exhibit. He is one of my favorite painters. Art history is so fascinating when you have someone who knows all the relevant history and the sometimes juicy period soap operas that framed the artist's creative expression. What looks like a painting of a ship at sea to the layperson might actually a powerful social commentary or editorial barb. In those days, art was often the only viable, socially acceptable, and sometimes even legal, means of expressing a controversial opinion or idea to a wider audience. Turner used his art to comment on social evils such as slavery and to illuminate the march of history as he witnessed the dawn of the industrial revolution that would change all life on earth.

Eventually, Steve's mom did turn up to do her Christmas shopping and we were turned out again like *Oliver Twist* into the cold Winter streets of London Town. You might wonder why we didn't just go to a hotel, or even a youth hostel. And in hindsight, I would ask the same question. But this was London and we had nearly a year still left on our trip and a very finite amount of money to do it with. London lodging just wasn't in the budget.



So we went back to Knightsbridge to see if the other travelers had cleared out of Jennifer and Matteo's, but they were still warmly ensconced in "our" flat. So hopeful had we been that they would have vacated it by then, that we had even bought some hot dinner on our way there that we had hoped to enjoy all safe and warm. Instead we had to turn back to the streets with a shiver, heads hung low, our dinner now cold. It was now about 6PM and dark out. We sat down on the freezing sidewalk to eat and think. Some of the older, more refined residents of Knightsbridge happened by us on their way home. They took us in with obvious horror. The urban blight and poverty which they had only read about in their newspapers had finally come to their comely neighborhood and landed right on their front stoop. We burned with shame. There followed a scene similar to the one at the end of Part I of *Gone With the Wind* where I shook my fist at the heavens and struck my breast, swearing that I would work, cheat or steal but I would never, never be

viewed with such disdain and pity by the residents of Knightsbridge again! Or so I imagined.

Out of options, we set out for the airport a full day early. The plan was to find a nice carpeted corner of Heathrow to curl up in and read books for a day with Australian traveler-like stoicism. Upon arrival though, we discovered that there is no such place at Heathrow. No comfy lounge rooms or carpeted gate areas. There are only huge, cold, crowded halls with uncomfortable chairs. And we weren't *that* Australian.

This led us to plan C. Plan C was to get Air France to switch our flight up to tonight if there was still space available. Great idea, but they said that since we had discount tickets, absolutely no changes of any kind were possible. No No No! But again glancing around the industrial gloom of Heathrow and the paucity of reposing options, I wasn't about to be discouraged quite so easily by a simple no. So I calmly queued up in line again. My hope was that next time that I reached the front, I would get a different reservation agent who might take a more favorable view of the situation. This was a bit risky because a) I might get the same agent again, which would be awkward or b) if the first one even saw me in line again they might become suspicious and prepare their colleagues before I had a chance to persuade a naive one. Of course, on the other hand, we had nothing to lose. There were only four agents in somewhat close proximity to each other. I planned to keep trying until I had tried every agent. Amazingly, it paid off. One of them changed the ticket for us, not because they didn't know better but because they knew that if we didn't get out that night, we might get caught by the storm that was coming in the next day. And sure enough, the next night, not only was there was a blizzard at Heathrow which cancelled or delayed every flight, but Air France actually went on strike. I read about all of these events over a lovely glass of red wine in Toulouse, thinking "tch, poor blighters."

### French Lessons

Lori's sister Linda and her husband Tom had been living in Toulouse for about a year at this point. They had a great apartment downtown. Their 3-year old girl Margaret was lots of fun too (and possibly the most photographed child in the world prior to the digital age). Toulouse is a lovely southern French city that has a unique history that is still very evident in the architecture and the flavor of the place. Yet, relative to many other parts of France, there is relatively little tourism. Very little English is spoken, even by the young people, as English is the lingua franca of the tourism industry. This all adds to Toulouse's elemental French character and makes you feel more

immersed in the culture. This is nice on the one hand, but certainly added to Tom and Linda's assimilation woes given that they arrived speaking no French whatsoever. That was okay for Tom who's company conversed in English and who mainly socialized with expatriates outside of work. It was a lot tougher for Linda who had to navigate all of the rest of life from school for Margaret, shopping, hair cuts, landlord issues, etc. entirely in French. Things did not always go smoothly there.

### The One True Church

Toulouse was once the capital city of a separate nation state called Languedoc. It would likely still be so today, the people speaking Occitan, not French, but for a crusade brought by Pope Innocent III to wipe out the Cathars who inhabited the region. The Cathar People believed in a very separate notion of Monotheism and rejected many aspects of the Old Testament. They were drawn to Languedoc because of the region's tolerance for unorthodox ideas. Under their influence, Languedoc became a highly civilized part of Western Europe. Toulouse was more opulent and intellectually advanced than Paris by the 12th century (of course maybe that isn't saying much since the 12th century was very much the *bring out your dead* part of the dark ages). Still, Dante originally planned to write the *Divine Comedy* in Occitan rather than Italian.

In an attempt to reign in this competing theology, a series of 12th century popes set about eliminating it. At first, it was through peaceful means such as debates and edicts, but when that proved a bit slow and ineffectual, they simply decided to destroy it with one of the most savage of all the medieval wars. In what became known as the Albigensian Crusade, the combined armies of the Pope and France destroyed the Cathar people and their religion entirely. This was the only time in history a Christian crusade was ever led against fellow Europeans. Eradicating heresy was naturally the justification for the genocide, it always is. It's astonishing how often in history those with the most money and weapons are also those that know God's wishes the best. But more secular motivations, such as land and power, were also on their minds. The Cathars were besieged and overwhelmed from the start, but they still proved to be incredibly resilient. Toward the end, they gathered in *Citadelles du Vertige* which are defensive castle strongholds built on craggy, inaccessible mountain tops. Today these are some of Europe's most moving medieval ruins, due to their beauty and their abandoned, eirey presence. They are one of those places that can make you feel as though someone is watching you as you explore them. And perhaps they are.



One cloudless December day, Lori and I sat all alone atop the most magnificent Citadelle du Vertige of all, Montségur, gazing out over the glistening snow-covered valleys of Languedoc a thousand feet below. Montségur was the last, doomed stronghold of the Cathars and thought to be impregnable. 500 Cathars had somehow forged a bleak existence in this small, inhospitable fortress that you could easily throw a stone from one end to the other. Picture 50 people living in a small New York apartment, except without heat, fresh water, food or escape, and you have some idea. Eventually, after the crusaders had eliminated every other pocket of resistance they came for Montségur. Miraculously, they held out for nine long months.



Montségur was finally brought to submission by a catapult. Getting the catapult erected close enough to be effective had been the Papal army's primary problem. But some hired Basque climbers astoundingly scaled the sheer vertical walls at night, in January, a climbing feat that would be very difficult to duplicate even today with modern climbing equipment and techniques. There they established the needed toe hold for the high catapult. Once that was done, the fortress fell quickly. On March 16, the remaining 200 Cathars, the last sizable population in Europe, were marched down the mountain and burned alive in a field known as Prat dels Crematz or "Field of the Burned." Men, women and children, because they believed in the wrong kind of god.

And we wonder today how it is that people can be so mean to one another. Jesus.

After two months on the road, our home in Toulouse was very welcome. We could sightsee around southwestern France during the day and be drinking wine with family and cooking in a real kitchen by night. It definitely took care of any weary travel blues we might have been nursing. Another day trip took us to Carcassonne, the largest and most well preserved medieval walled city in Europe. We were basically the only people there which added considerably to the mystery and romance. During the summer season, Carcassonne can resemble Disneyland with its crowds, junky souvenir shops and ice cream stands. Off season travel has its own downsides, but wow does it allow you to better imagine and recreate the magic of historical sites like that.

### Bozos du Boeuf

As an incredible wedding gift to us, Linda and Tom sent us to Cordes Sur Ciel (Cordes In the Sky) for the night. Cordes (pronounced: Cord) really defies description, but I should try. The town sits on a solitary hill above a flat plain and low valleys on all sides. The Cordes sur Ciel name comes from when clouds fill the surrounding valleys and the village appears to be floating in the sky. It was built during the Albigensian Crusades as a sentinel for the Count of Toulouse. They could use the high vantage point to communicate with far away towns using signal fires. It is one of a handful of perfectly preserved medieval towns left in Europe and one of the smaller, more intimate ones at that. The narrow, twisting, cobblestone streets descend through old city gates in a charming maze, crisscrossed by pathways, and passages. The central square has an inspiring view that has served as the meditative overlook of notable thinkers such as Albert Camus, and me.



We stayed in the Hotel du Viuex Cordes, which made Fodor's short list of hotels to stay at and restaurants to eat in, in all of France. So a first for the likes of us. Our chamber was up a circular stone stairway past a real medieval suit of armor. The room had a astonishing view as well. The hotel restaurant was the crown jewel, especially given that we were used to living off peanut butter sandwiches and pastries bought at the store. We sat down that evening to a 7-course meal that probably surpassed any dining experience we had experienced up to that point in our lives with it's sheer exquisiteness, subtlety, length and formality. It was a bit of a stretch for our unsophisticated, American palates with some of the shell fish, pates, and adventurous cheeses. But we ate every bite, or nearly. I had to help Lori with one of the cheeses because she said it tasted like an old boot, with an egg in it, buried under a barn." But of course the French consider that to be a great delicacy. Our only regret was not having a photograph of each course, so beautiful was the presentation. This was the age before mobile phones and Instagramming food. At the time, had we taken flash photographs of each course, our young servers who were already barely able to keep from giggling at us might have lost it completely at our Americaness. Every time they brought a course out to us and announced it in French, we would both respond by nodding appreciatively, but idiotically, and saying "hmmnn" in an approving tone of voice, but also one which betrayed the fact that we had no earthly idea what had just been placed in front of us. We were the only people in the restaurant that night and I swear by the end of our meal the waiters must have been taking turns to see who could say the most ridiculous thing in French without cracking up.

**Waiter:** "This is dog feces with a reduction sauce of dirty motor oil."

**Tom & Lori:** "Hmmmnn. Oui!"

Once again, being somewhere notably fairy-tale like in the off season helped to preserve the magic. No amount of warm weather could compensate for the experience of being the only tourists in such places. It helps one imagine what travel must have been like before the jet airplane brought the world so close together.

On the way back to Toulouse, we visited the nearby town of Albi with it's fortress cathedral which was built immediately after the Albigenesian Crusade to both proclaim Rome's dominance and to serve as a fortress if the need ever arose again. The cathedral reportedly houses the largest organ in France. That's some organ, let me tell you. Albi is also the hometown of Henri Toulouse-Latrec and has a tremendous museum of his work.



## Don't Point That At Me

As this trip was many years before video cameras made the leap from large awkward contraption to ubiquitous hand held device, and TikTok was still 40 years in the future – it was actually a bit awkward to try to capture some of the magic on Tom and Linda's video camcorder without being an even more embarrassing American stereotype. But we gave it a go as suripticiously as we could. In those days, people were so unused to being videoed they automatically (and quite idiotically) just started waving at the camera in a hyper-fast parade wave motion as if they were greeting some distant civilization rather than just capturing a moment for their own use. For some reason, that was just how you did it back when the technology was first introduced in the 1950s and 60s, and we hadn't evolved much by the 90s. So somewhere in my garage is a VHS tape, that I can't play, with Lori manically waving at me from a village at the top of a mountain in France.

I should get that shit on TikTok.