



*Salvador Dalí's home overlooking Port Lligat, Spain, with its iconic perched egg. Photo P. Galetto.*

## **European Travels**

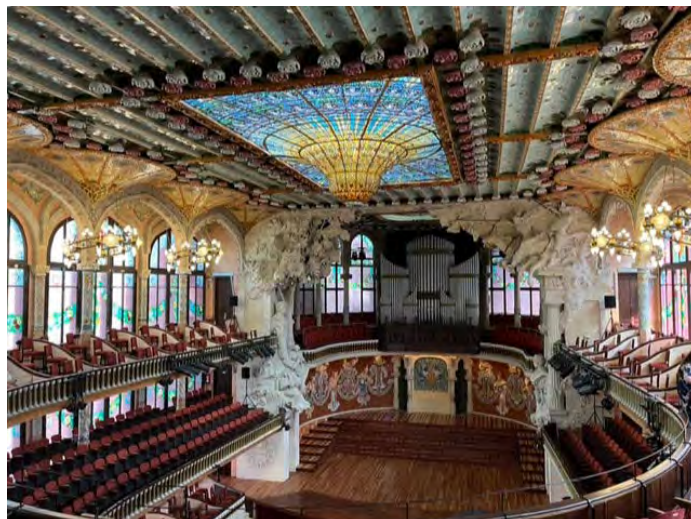
*Our columnist shares some outdoor – and inside – adventures from her recent trip abroad.*

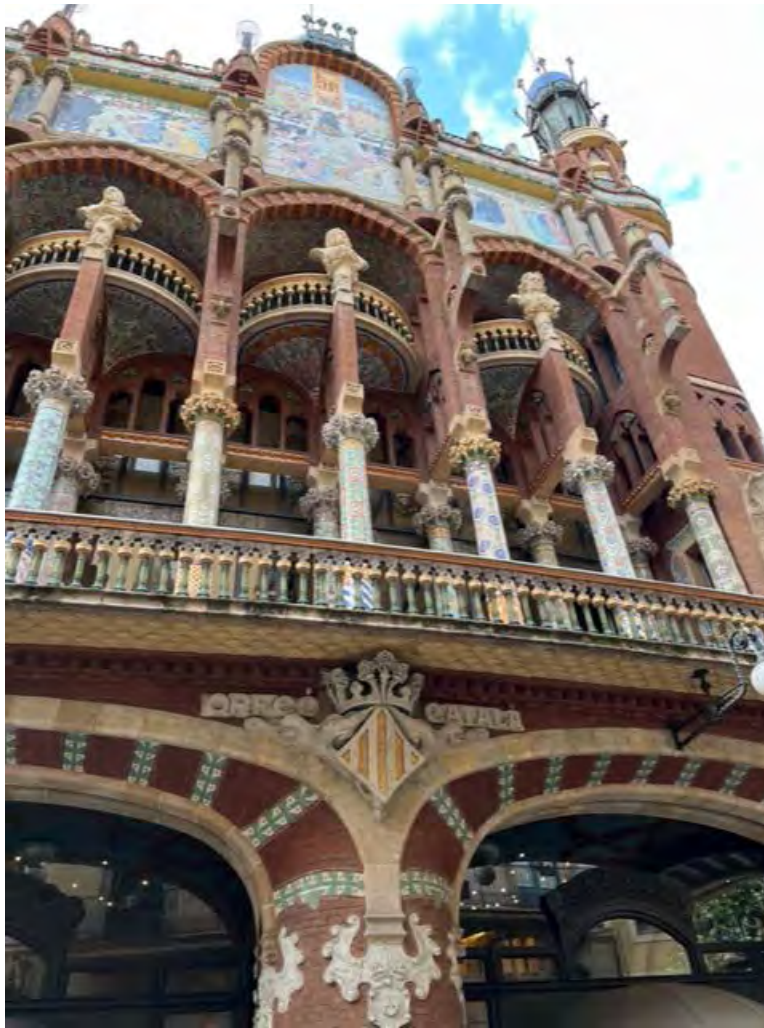
By J. Morton Galetto

I travel a great deal and rarely tell you about my adventures. But I'm compelled to share my latest trip primarily because of its finale.

One of my dear friends moved to a village in Southern France, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. A few weeks ago my husband and I went to explore her area in the Aude, Occitania region. We used Barcelona, Spain as our gateway city, an opportunity to once again visit the famed architecture of Europe's largest metropolis on the Mediterranean coast.

Barcelona has nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites and the buildings are eye candy to be sure. Our focus was on the Modernisme Catalan Art Nouveau/Jugendstil architectural movement in which nature themes abound, especially in tile work and decorative motifs. We toured the Palau de la Musica Catalana and the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, designed by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, teacher of famed architect Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926).





*The interior and exterior of the Palau de la Música Catalana, Barcelona, Spain, built in 1905-08, seats 2200, designed by architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner, teacher of Antoni Gaudí. Photo J. Morton Galetto.*

Later we toured Gaudí's Sagrada Família which has been under construction since 1882, with an anticipated optimistic completion date of 2026 in honor of the centennial of Gaudí's passing. COVID and the complexities of construction leave people hopeful yet doubtful that this completion date can be achieved. We also visited the Casa Batlló, a very large home that was renovated by



Gaudí to become one of the world's most famous residences. Each of the façade's balconies look like theater masks. Its roof looks much like the scales of a dragon, thought to be a symbol of the dragon slain by Catalonia's Saint George. All of the aforementioned structures are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.



*Designed by Antoni Gaudí, this house was built originally in 1877 without electric. Josep Batlló commissioned to have it demolished and rebuilt by Gaudí. Gaudí chose to renovate the home instead. Photo J. Morton Galetto.*

Readers should not think that we were so wowed by the grandeur of these

places that we neglected going to Mercado de La Boqueria, eating tapas, or strolling the famous La Rambla. During my stint at Weight Watchers they taught me that you “eat to live,” not the opposite. I’m quite intentionally a very poor learner, a very good cook and better eater. So yes, we ate our way through Europe.

On our way to southern France we traveled along the Mediterranean coastline in Spain to arrive at Girona’s Port Lligat – home of Salvador Dali, an abode that he abandoned upon his wife Gala’s death. Dali lived and worked there from 1930-1982. The tour was fascinating. The house was filled with some of his eccentricities, which is what one might expect considering the genre of his work and his flamboyant personality. In the foyer we were greeted by a taxidermy-mounted polar bear holding a lamp, festooned in medieval bling and guarding a rack of canes.

Dali designed a pulley system for his studio that enabled paintings to be raised and lowered through a slotted floor so that he could paint at any level from a seated position. His huge canvasses needed to exit the studio via large second story windows from which they could be lowered for transport. After his wife’s death, the painting he

was working on was left unfinished on this massive easel. In fact the entire home and its studio remained as it was upon his saddened departure.



We watched home movies of the artist at play and we walked around the pool with its harem-like cabana. His life seemed as surreal as his paintings. We bid goodbye to the marvelous views of the Port Lligat's cove and drove off to my friend's French village.

Rumbling down the street where our friend lives we blasted La Marseillaise, France's national anthem, triumphantly over our car's sound system. We wanted her to know that we approved of her Francophile convictions and that we were friendly, playful Americans honoring the French.

During our stay there we had a grand time exploring the markets and driving through the neighboring villages. The village of Espéraza holds a market on Sunday that was quite lively with a throwback feel of the 60s and a flower-power atmosphere. Cheeses, produce, and artisan products of every nature seemed to be on offer.

On Monday we went to the larger village of Mirepoix where one of the region's largest markets is held in a medieval square dating from the 1200s. There vendors are surrounded by a backdrop of timber-framed houses (called colombage) and deep arcades with exposed beams, and they offer a similar variety of goods in a slightly more staid atmosphere.





Tuesday we visited Domaine du Grès Vaillant, an organic winery and former 13<sup>th</sup> century monastery. This 17-acre property is worked solely by people and horse-drawn equipment. It is the highest vineyard in the Languedoc region at the foot of the Pyrenees.

Midweek we took a side trip to Lourdes, famous for its healing waters. There pilgrims abounded; the streets were lined with wheeled chairs that resembled chariots, complete with a volunteer puller, pusher, and occupant. It was explained to us that these people came in search of a cure to their afflictions. Up to six million each year visit this grotto, where a peasant girl witnessed the Virgin Mary 18 times in 1858. Since then nearly 70 miracles have been officially declared by the Roman Catholic church, four since 1978. Regardless of your spirituality there is no denying the allure of and need for hope.

On our return trip we visited Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges. A tiny acropolis village surrounded by and built atop of Roman ruins, it is wholly dominated by the Sainte-Marie cathedral which ascends from the town's center - yet another UNESCO site. The church's construction spans the 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries and houses an impressive 16<sup>th</sup> century organ. There



we saw an exhibit of Roman ruins. Then we toured the cathedral and its 66 carved walnut and oak choir boxes (1535) that were built to sequester the canons during their religious services. The choir boxes are so isolated that it is like a wooden church within a larger stone edifice.



*The cathedral of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, France towers over its community and dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by: Laurent Jégou, Flickr.*

*(please scroll down)*



*Sainte-Marie cathedral with its hand carved choir boxes and famed pipe organ in the background.*

What is a visit to France without seeing a castle? As we were beginning to wind down our visit our friend whisked us off to Carcassonne, a hilltop town famous for its medieval citadel, complete with watchtowers, fortifications, a cathedral, restaurants, and many artisan shops. Much of the current Cité was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and today it has 47 permanent residents. It pre- and post-dates Roman occupation and is also a UNESCO site, drawing some 3 million visitors annually. One of the largest remaining walled cities in Europe, it is situated near the River Aude.



What amazing experiences I have shared, and yet with all of these wonderful destinations you may find it surprising that we saved the best 'til last.

As you may know, I'm a bit of a vulture fancier and give presentations about their life history. "Vulture Culture" was featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer and you have likely read some of my vulture articles. I have seen the white-backed and lappet-faced vultures in Tanzania but not the Eurasian griffon that is found in northern Africa and, yes, in the Pyrenees of southern France. So when my friend informed us that we could travel to nearby a vulture observatory I was jubilant.

In "Vulture Culture" I relay a story of a 52-year-old woman who fell to her death in the French Pyrenees and

within 45 minutes was consumed by Eurasian griffon vultures, something I was not planning on reenacting! However I worried that karma might bite me, since I have long stressed that scavengery surely saved the family funeral costs, or at very least embalming fees, because all that remained were her bones, clothes, and shoes. These birds rarely feed on anything but carrion, so I decided that if I could stay on my feet it was unlikely that I would be mistaken for lunch.

Concurrent to our restoration of eagles here in Southern NJ, beginning in the late 80s France was also embarking on a restoration project of the Eurasian griffon vultures, or in French *le vautour fauve*. Much like the United States' eagles, vultures were pursued by hunters and farmers who left out poisoned bait for them. As a result the species was thought to be extinct between 1940 and the late 60s. So misunderstood.





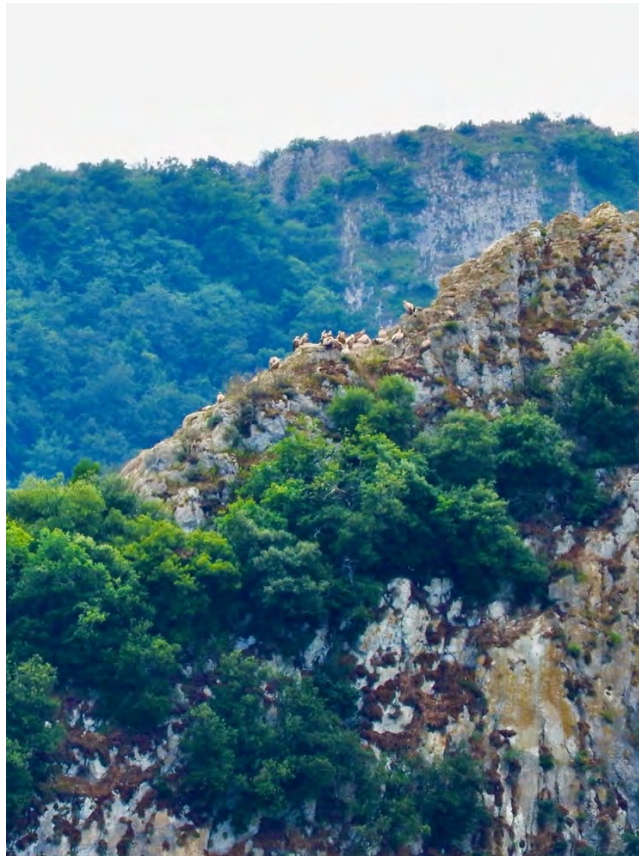
*The Eurasian griffon uses its powerful hooked beak to tear flesh from carrion. It's feathers are short on its nape and head to stay cleaner when eating upon a carcass. Photo by V Lennart Tange, Flickr.*

In 2013 it was estimated that about 500-some vultures had repopulated the Pyrenees region as a result of restoration efforts. I've not yet found a current number for the Pyrenees but between the Pyrenees and Alps it is thought that some 2,500 breeding pairs exist in France. In my friend's region, vultures resumed breeding in 2011.

The observatory that we visited was located in the commune of Bugarach, in the Aude, in the heart of the "sensitive natural area." It was established by the Département and the Aude LPO (League for Protection of Oiseaux – birds) and is situated across a road from the Falconnière cliff. At the foot of this summit is a feeding station that to the best of my knowledge was not visible to us. These raptors will feed

within about a 15-mile radius of their breeding area.

When we arrived the vultures were perched on the razor thin cliffs silhouetted against the sky. We watched them take off, soar about, and light back down on their selected precipice at random intervals.





*Vultures perch in groups along the razor-sharp cliffs of Falconnière, Bugarach, Pyrenees, France; as scavengers they are awaiting an opportunistic meal. Photo Leslie Ficcaglia.*



*Soaring vultures. Photo Leslie Ficcaglia.*

For comparison, these creatures far exceed our turkey vulture's size, which at its largest is 2 ½' tall and three pounds, with a 5 ½'- 6' wingspan. The Eurasian griffons weigh in at 14-24 pounds, stand just shy of 4', and have a massive wing span of 7-9'. They even dwarf our bald eagles' 10-pound, 6-8



foot wing span. Our California condor's wingspan and weight are equivalent, but it stands as much as six inches taller.



*Eurasian griffon vultures, in Bugarach, Pyrenees, France, have a 7 – 9-foot wingspan like that of the North American Condor. Photo by Herman Pijpers, Flickr.*

When griffons fly their necks are held in an S like shape but on the ground they are often stretched out and very prominent. Seeing them perched in rows on the cliff's summit and in clusters on grassy patches was awesome. It would have been great to watch them eating; they are said to be rather aggressive when competing for a carcass. Their threat displays are most impressive as they try to retain their place on a dead animal.



From the Bugarach viewing area it is possible to see ravens, lammergeier, cinereous and Egyptian vultures, as well as at least eight different birds of prey; we also watched a red kite, which the French call Milan royal.

The service provided by vultures as the great recyclers is irreplaceable and helps to prevent the spread of disease. Their body acids essentially purify dead flesh and their excrement is sterile. In fact they will evacuate on their legs to cool down, and additionally the uric acid will kill any bacteria that might be contracted when they stand on a carcass. In all instances when vultures have been extirpated from an area it has been considered an environmental catastrophe. So seeing their numbers restored in the Pyrenees where they were at one point extinct is a miracle of sorts. I think I should consider visiting Lourdes more often.



*The author also explored a trail adjacent to the vulture observation area. This one-time road from Rennes les Bains to Bugarach has a reconstructed Roman bridge that crosses the Blanque River. In 1992 the original Roman bridge was destroyed by flooding. Local French stone masons crafted a replica within a year of this historic loss. Photo: Judith, Flickr*

From the observation area there is a great view of the storied Peak of Bugarach. In December of 2012 large groups of apocalyptic New Age Believers intended to descend on the small village of the same name at the foot of the mountain. Somehow the location was wrapped up in the Mayan apocalypse calendar and it was believed that aliens lived within the mountain's caves. The mayor threatened to call out the French military to protect the village and its inhabitants from the influx of Doomsday believers who thought that only Bugarach would save them from judgment, since it is considered by some counter-culturists to have doors to other worlds. The reactions of the 190-some residents of the village ranged from bemused to annoyed.

Our trip surely opened doors to new worlds, but clearly not to different universes. Keeping our feet and orbits earth-bound has proved adventurous enough for us!

As we left our friend's village we played the US Marine Corps bands Star-Spangled Banner, allowing folks to know the Yankees were going home.