

In France there is no sky as blue as the one in Collioure.

From 23

It's Tuesday morning. And that means market day in Prades, 13km west along a narrow, winding road, which leads to the main highway from Perpignan, the "capital" of French Catalonia. Stalls line the town centre, diverting this way and that. It's a hive of bartering activity as grocers, bakers, and yes, even candlestick makers, wool spinners and craftspeople display their wares.

"Fromage," says a young woman, holding out a slice of cheese. "Merci," I say reaching out to take the cheese. One thing I know about the French, apart from being romantics, rude at times, yet delightfully charming, is their love of cheese and wine.

Just go to the local pizza house. First choice is a pizza of quatre fromage which, translated means a high-calorie, high-fat pizza of four different types of melted cheese.

"Is it from this area?" I ask. "Oui," she says, explaining her father-in-law made the cheese from the milk of his herd of mountain goats.

A few metres on and another stallholder offers us miel – honey, so sweet, so fresh, from pure strains of bees collecting pollen from the unique colours and blossoms of the Pyrenees. Then the aroma of the baker summons us. Pain – French sticks, big and small, white bread, brown bread, muesli bread, fruit bread, fig bread, organic bread.

Prades became our supply house, a town first mentioned in historical documents in 843 by its latin name Prata Virent, which means "green field". Nestled in the foothills of Mt Canbingou, it's where the plains meet the mountains, a landscape where colours blend, of historical abbeys and monasteries, wrought-iron entrances, pink marble pillars and ancient Catalan jewellery.

The attractions of the Catalan region are plentiful, the activities innumerable. Indeed, *Lonely Planet* says the region can compete with top European destinations such as



Tuscany. But it's the colours that lure; colours of mountain and sea, so vivid they once mesmerised the likes of artists Picasso and Henry Matisse.

For Matisse: "In France there is no sky as blue as the one in Collioure... I just have to close the shutters of my room and I have all the colours of the Mediterranean before me." And it is so true.

Just 55 minutes from Estover, where the Pyrenees meet the Mediterranean, the vivid blues of the sky and sea frame the seaside village of Collioure, the hypnotic sound of waves lapping on to sand and pebbles, the squawk of night gulls and the smell of salt attracting artists, poets and composers the world over, mingling with tourists and locals in a seaside sent from heaven.

While it is referred to as the city of painters, there is hardly a month goes by where a festival is not held honouring a rich heritage that dates back many centuries.

There are regular concerts and weekly markets of local produce and the works of

artists and craftsman, punctuated by historical tales of counts and nobility, of kings of Spain, France and Aragon and ancient trade routes of Greeks and Romans.

And there is a tradition rich in cuisine, anchovies, a prized local dish and a base for local Catalan recipes.

Restaurants aplenty line the laneways, in the shadows of chateaus and fortifications, offering local food and full-bodied wines made from vines planted on the steep slopes that surround the town.

Indeed, most towns in the region ooze character and ambience. Just 15 minutes from Estover is Villefranche de Conflent, a truly fortified city dating back to about 1100 and named as one of the most beautiful cities in France.

With trademark pink marble from the region, and impressive wrought-iron work, Villefranche de Conflent was once a key fiscal centre. Today as you walk the city, browse the entrances to galleries, shops and restaurants you experience the power and safety of

the fortifications, feeling protected, but somewhat squeezed by the stone walls and those of a second fortification, Fort Liberia, that stands a little threateningly above.

Villefranche de Conflent is also en route to some of the key attractions to the area.

One of the popular attractions is the Little Yellow Train, the highest railway in France, which leaves from just outside the fortified village. It follows a long, narrow track, travels up steep inclines, along tall narrow bridges, providing spectacular views as it reaches towns and settlements such as Font Romeu, a wonderful ski resort town, and a world-renowned centre for high-altitude training for elite athletes.

Along more narrow and winding roads from Villefranche is the thermal spring of St Thomas, locally known as St Thomas Les Bains, where water, rich in sulphur, fluorine, silica and trace elements, leaves your skin soft and muscles liberated. Even in the coldest of winters, the outside thermal spas (just 20 minutes from Villefranche) are among the hottest in the Pyrenees. Indeed, the water temperature of 58C needs to be cooled to a more conformable level of about 38C.

And it was cold. The morning we set out it was minus 5C. There was no snow, but a layer of ice millimetres thick lining every window of our Peugeot lease car.

I put on the car heater. Then, after a while activated the windscreen wipers. Out of nowhere, came a stream of water.

The ice disappeared revealing one of the local villagers who, in a kind gesture, had fetched the water to make our life a little easier. "Merci, monsieur," I said. He nodded and smiled and said something about "Australi." A warm accepting smile in a small French village.

For more information on renting the cottage in Estover or in nearby Finestret, email anya.frans@hetnet.nl

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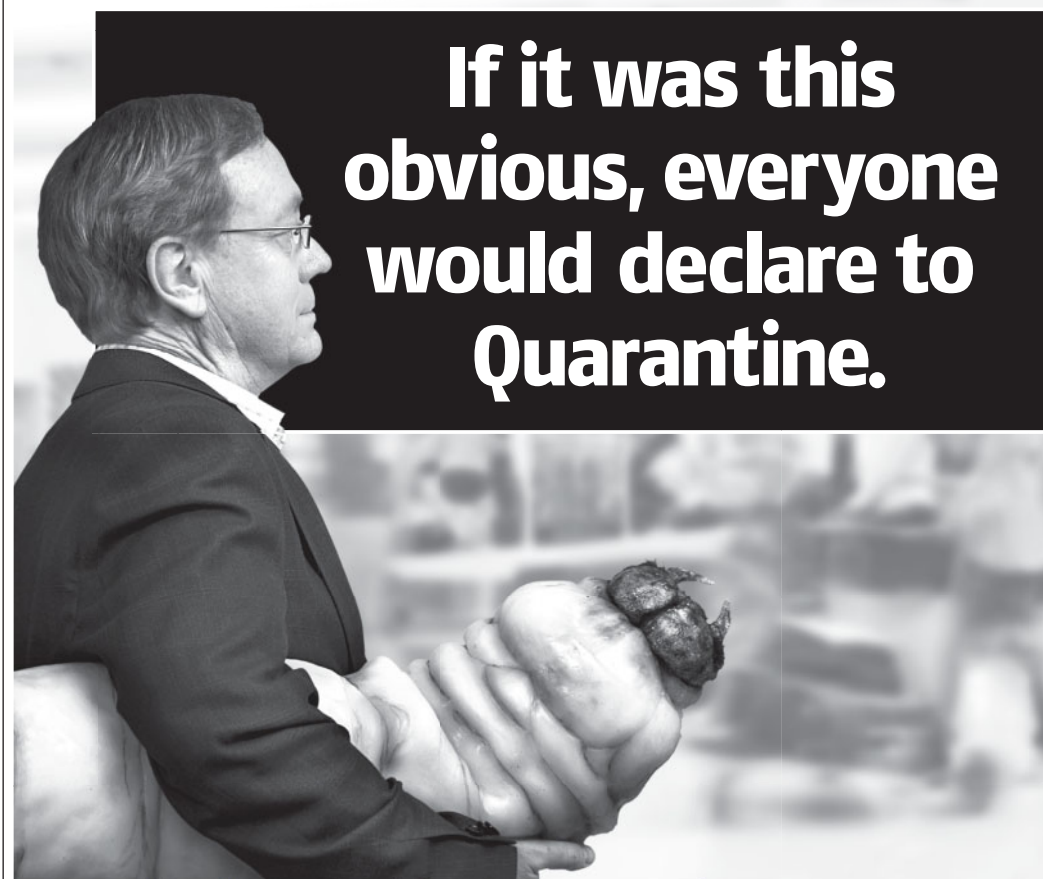
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