

## **After the Flood – revisiting Montmirail in 1998**

When the Dentelles de Montmirail come into view, my heart misses a beat and I feel ... fear. Rising between Mont Ventoux and the hot flatlands of the Rhône, the Dentelles – the name means lacework – form a line of delicate points like the teeth of a saw.

From the vine-covered slopes below them come good Côte du Rhône wines – Gigondas, Vacqueyras, sweet Beaumes de Venise. Even to see the names on supermarket shelves gives me a tremor of anxious memory.

The sky is a perfect, silky blue, but I keep glancing around for storm clouds. There aren't any. Peaceful D233 turns off at Vacqueyras, rising through vineyards towards Hotel Montmirail.

Every place has its history, every person their memories. Every landscape has a climate. Violent storms are common all over the South, the ground cut through with gulleys and culverts, ravines, gorges and dry riverbeds waiting for a downpour. Provençal rains come fast and furious, but generally do no lasting damage.

On the afternoon of 22 September 1992, just like today, I was driving to the hotel in Montmirail, above the wine village of Vacqueyras. A bad storm had blown up over the Dentelles the previous evening. The autumn equinox usually brings tempestuous weather in the South. Now it shifted into higher gear.

Police at a 'Road Closed' barrier probably shouldn't have let me pass, but my wife and 2-year-old son were waiting for me at Montmirail. Besides, I had nowhere else to go. For six of the eight miles I laughed at their caution, though rain came down as I had never seen it before. The windscreen wipers fought a losing battle, great gusts rocked the car.

more follows ...

Now floodwater ran across the road like fording wide, shallow rivers. I leaned out of the car window trying to see the road ahead. Thunder rolled and banged around above my head. Ceaseless lightning flickered like a neon light.

At the edge of Vacqueyras the water swirled much deeper, muddier and faster, pushing the car one way and the other, the verges merging into a sea on either side. A roundabout was under water, but I drove into it anyway. Muddy liquid slurped against the door handles, yet somehow, in low gear, the car kept going forward.

The main thing was to keep the car moving, it seemed. On the other side of the roundabout the water was shallower, and I longed desperately for the right turn which would take me up to Montmirail.

The traffic lights were out, of course, and I made the right turn into ... no longer a road, but a river. An unbelievable torrent rushed down what had been the D233, sweeping branches, gravel, even furniture, towards me. I climbed, the car fighting the gushing water, but now other rivers rushed across the road, first one way, then the other. I could hardly see a thing, except water. The worst was still to come.

Round a corner the road dipped into a vale and simply vanished beneath an expanse of brown water racing down from the Dentelles across the vineyards. I did not know how deep it would be, but with heart in mouth I clung to the steering wheel and aimed for the far side. The wipers struggled against opaque brown spray. In the middle of the stream, the car was lifted and carried in the water, seemingly destined to be borne away.

Floating, enveloped by rain, and probably about to drown, for one moment I understood water in some pure, primal sense, one of the four elements, not something which comes from a tap but a limitless power. Yet somehow, the car was dashed against some obstacle beneath the surface, which the wheels gripped and so went forward, regaining the road and at last climbing out of the water.

At the hotel, I stopped the car and ran inside the building. Everything was eerily almost normal for a few minutes, except that the electricity and phones were already cut. Guests stood or sat around bleakly marvelling at the downpour, unaware of the flood outside. Even as I warned them, suddenly four feet of sludge lurched through the door and swirled around the ground floor. Outside, the water dragged tables and chairs and tubs of flowers, even concrete and brickwork over the lawn and terrace.

Rain started coming through the roof. With the only access road flooded, the building felt threatened and isolated, a dangerous place. There was no food in the hotel either – the kitchens were deep in mud. At night; we sat in a corridor, frightened to be alone. We did not know that the whole area had been totally devastated, and had appeared on news programmes all over the world.

In the morning, astonishingly, nearly all the water had gone, reduced to mud and puddles. To leave the area we made our way – after all that, the car was still going! – along any country backroads that had not been closed, through scenes of flooded devastation, villages inches deep in sludge, people standing about in despair.

Then we began to see the news. Incredible quantities of rain – 64 gallons per square yard – had fallen in under three hours. The 50,000 lightning strikes were the largest number recorded on any day anywhere in France. At the centre of the 'Zone Sinistré', in Vaison-la-Romaine, the little Ouvèze river rose 60 feet in an hour, simply hosing away an entire popular riverbank campsite, Moulin du César, and 104 houses on a new waterside estate.

Caravans and cars, several with people inside, were dashed along by the floodwater like bits of polystyrene. Some were smashed to pieces against the famous Roman bridge which crosses the Ouvèze at Vaison, others were found miles down river near Avignon. At the height of the flood, the Ouvèze was flowing over the top of the bridge, sweeping away the solid stone 17th-century parapet. The town's famous Roman sites, though, had survived almost unscathed.

In all, at least 43 people had been killed, including 12 campers and 22 residents at Vaison, though the number remains uncertain. People were washed away at Seguret, Vacqueyras, Gigondas and Beaumes. Some of the missing were never found, while 'unofficial' campers or others caught in the rain may not have been counted. Some locals claim itinerant grape harvesters sleeping by the river were left out of the figures.

Today, on the Hotel Montmirail's immaculate terrace under the big plane tree, the tables are smartly laid. A delightful spot for lunch! Yet it must be a mirage, an impossible vision – for wasn't all this washed away?

High among greenery and vines, the Montmirail has a reputation for fine cooking. "22 September was a personal disaster for me and the whole family," recalls owner Marc Nicolet, now 39. "The hotel belonged to my father, but two days after the flood he had a stroke. For four years more I had terrible worry and problems, money troubles, and looked after my sick father as well."

His father died in 1996, another victim of the flood, Marc Nicolet suggests. As well as restoring the hotel and grounds he blames a roadside wall for preventing floodwater from following its natural course into a ravine, and has replaced the wall with railings.

The drive to Vaison passes charming villages, winemakers' cellars and signs inviting passers-by to come and taste, and maybe buy.

In Vaison I asked Michel Talbot, head of Tourism at the *Mairie* (town hall), if the floods have been forgotten and all the damage put right. He was emphatic. "Except in people's minds," he said.

"In all, the storm caused about 440 million francs (£45 million) of damage, around 115 million francs in Vaison, and by now almost everything has been put right. Yet it is a past that stays alive. You had to see it to understand. It's not something one could just imagine – or forget."

Perhaps the storm's most enduring legacy is the legislation brought in afterwards, prohibiting accommodation in flood risk areas. This applies throughout France, to campsites and houses equally, and removes the onus from local authorities to refuse or permit such things.

Vaison's cobbled Roman bridge spans the Ouvèze in a single elegant arch. Far beneath its new parapet the river again looks harmless.

From a high ridge near Hotel Montmirail I looked across a glorious landscape, almost luminous in the pearly sunshine, of rolling vineyards and the hazy Cévennes hills beyond the Rhône. And suddenly realised there was no fear; instead, a sort of joy. Storms happen. It's a question of respect. For the land and its climate.

Places recover; people too. Every evening at the Hotel Montmirail, a marvellous 4-course dinner is served on the terrace. For once, I ordered a bottle of champagne and, while not forgetting those who died, drank with my wife and son (now 8) – 'To life.'

Just one other thing to do. I walked up and down the little Montmirail road, eager to find the obstacle that had prevented the car being washed away. It was a small wall over a culvert and a bank of earth running by the road. Wildflowers grow on the bank, and there's not even a trickle in the culvert.

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