

Ten Ladies in Carcassonne 8th May 2007

To Carcassonne's city so thrilling
10 ladies from Kent were quite willing
To seek inspiration
From Kate Mosse's creation
Or was it just a taste for high living?

Barbara Jones

It all began when we read *Labyrinth* by Kate Mosse last year. We enjoyed the tale of a quest set in Carcassonne long ago during the time of the Cathars, yet also in the present day. A story of Alais who lived in the Chateau de Comtal, and Alice who visited Languedoc in the twentieth century but felt strangely drawn to a time long ago. The town and its atmosphere were beautifully evoked and made such an impression on us that we wanted to visit it, a suggestion that I made somewhat tentatively when we discussed the book. Jean said well why not do something about it. Who could resist the challenge, I did some research and realised a visit was possible, fairly simple to organise, (Billington Travel in Riverhead did most of it), and need not be expensive. Nine others agreed and several months later off we went.

We travelled to Stansted early one March morning courtesy of Caravelle

Travel, caught a flight to Carcassonne, and arrived just after midday. We boarded the shuttle bus outside the airport, were duly deposited

at the gate of the medieval Cité and climbed the cobbled street to our hotel, Hotel du Donjon les Remparts, which belied its name and was actually clean, quite comfortable and cheap. We were in an annexe up the street from the main hotel, where there was a little reception room in which we were able to forgather for a drink before going out in the evening, gin thoughtfully supplied by Janet and Lynda, tonics from the mini-bars in our rooms.

At the end of her book Kate Mosse had outlined a "Labyrinth Walk" complete with photographs which followed a route taking in all the main events of the story in Carcassonne, and we had decided to follow her advice in all matters relating to the town – after all she does live there. So we had lovely open air lunches in the Place Marcou, explored the old cobbled streets, visited the Château Comtal, walked around the walls, and even ventured into the cemetery by the Porte Narbonnaise. And we shopped – we shopped for England. There were lovely toy shops, shops selling linen, jewellery, pictures, statues, clothes, all newly stocked for the season to come, but with few visitors as yet, very welcoming.

The highlight of our visit was undoubtedly a visit to the Hotel de la Cité, which is built on the site of the Bishop's Palace. This treat had been arranged for us with the management by Simon Kverndal, Brenda's son, who knows the hotel, having heard that we were visiting Carcassonne. We were to look around its gardens, which are by the ramparts, and have a glass of wine. We also intended to have dinner at the Brasserie Saskia, which Simon recommended. We were welcomed by the hotel manager, the charming Jacques Hamburger, who said that unfortunately Brasserie Saskia was not open as the season had not started, but they would be happy to serve us in the main dining room at no extra cost. He then melted away and left us to explore. We were shown into a cosy ante-room to the dining room, installed in comfortable chairs which had been prepared for us by a roaring log fire. Our chosen aperitif, Kir Royale was produced and then silver trays of beautiful canapés appeared. Presently we were shown to a round table decorated with roses in the dining room, and



chose our meal from an interesting menu. The food was delicious, and the local wines, which were chosen by the hotel, complemented it beautifully. Then back to the fire for coffee until the end of a wonderful evening. Dining in a good hotel is enjoyable, but to be the guest of the hotel is very special. The service was impeccable, friendly and courteous and the evening the highlight of our trip. Thank you Brenda, Simon and Simon Sherwood, his friend, whose stepfather owns the hotel.

We had dinner in the Brasserie of our hotel on Wednesday evening, and on Friday we ate in the charming Auberge des Lices, where we were served by a delightful young German girl, who impressed us with her pleasant manner and command of both French and English. Saturday morning found us homeward bound after another good breakfast in the hotel, trundling our cases noisily over the cobbles to the shuttle bus to the airport, the plane, then Stansted, where we were met by the reliable Alan, and home.

We had a really good time. Carcassonne is enchanting, the company was good, and it was the right time of year, apparently it is too crowded in the summer. Would we do it again? Yes. We have recently read "The Constant Princess", which is set in Granada, "The Island" set on an island near Crete, and I know Donna Leon writes good books set in Venice. Are we still a Book Club? Or will future books be chosen with a view to travel?

Pat Lewis