

France (& Spain) - 2005

Introduction: A year ago at the end of our Tuscany outing with the "old Lockheed gang" we decided that the next group outing would be to take boats on the Midi du Canal in southern France. Steve Mende lead the planning and 15 of us signed up - meaning two canal boats. Eventually, it became 14 after Tim cancelled out. Steve and Klump volunteered as captains of the two boats and by lottery we drew cabins. D&I ended up on the 6-passenger boat, which meant that boat had one unused cabin that worked out nicely for storage. These canal boats are not large but also not as cramped as I expected. As time passed the plans jelled further with the Carvalhos and ourselves deciding to do some touring by car after the one week canal trip. Plus we learned that Emma Rapley would be getting married in Spain 5 days or so after we got off the canal boat so that made a nice excuse for some additional goofing around.

A bit about the Canal du Midi. The purpose of the canal was to connect the Mediterranean with the Atlantic without have to go around Spain and Portugal and though the Straits of Gibraltar. The goal was economic in terms of shipping goods more rapidly and also in terms of avoiding Spanish pirates. Such a canal was talked about as early as 742 BC but it was the XVII century before someone took on building it. This was accomplished in 12 years beginning in 1669. It was profitable for 200 years and carried freight until the 1970's. It's only function now is for recreation. Many original engineering feats were performed to accomplish it and they can be seen today. For example to provide water for the canal the largest artificial reservoir in the world was completed in 1672. To get across rivers, aqueducts (canal bridges) were constructed; 49 of them. To get through one hill a tunnel was cut for the canal. And many other items, examples of which we saw as we cruised along (at 6 km/hr). We only did a small portion of the canal but it still involved dozen of locks.

Meanwhile, we/I had an interesting twist before leaving on the trip. I had originally only been able to get seats on the SFO-London route (the most important one in terms of trying to get some rest) and off and on I checked the web to see if we could get seats for the return London-SFO leg. A couple days before departing, when I checked it showed our return itinerary to be "changed" and upon looking at it a bit it was an impossible itinerary. Instead of leaving Valencia at 6:50 AM, making a 50 minute connection in Madrid, and then a 2+ hour connection in Heathrow it showed us leaving at like 11 AM while making the old connections in Madrid and London. Clearly impossible. A call to BA enabled a lady to see "my" problem and fix it, putting us on a plane from Valencia at 6:50 AM just like before but with a different flight number! Plus we were able to get seats together on the London-SFO leg with one being a window (I didn't pursue if the wing would be in the way of my looking for icebergs having been happy enough to get some reasonable seats). Weird situation and one wonders if I hadn't happened to log on what would have happened - perhaps they would have caught it at SFO; perhaps not.

We picked the best time of year to go - early June, which meant likely good weather but before the European holiday season of July and August. Another nice feature would be very long sunlight days since our return to the US was on 20 June. And, as it turned out our selection was right on what with excellent weather throughout almost all of the trip.

Thursday-1: Carvalhos drove to our house and left their car. Betty took us all to the airport. Since the flight was at 4:40 PM I even spent a half-day at the lab. Checked in easily, had good seats, flew to London; and I got one of the best overnight airplane rests ever - mainly because of the nicely adjustable head rests on the British Airways plane. The service in general was better than United or American.

Friday-1: Some time at Heathrow and then a short flight to Paris. The plane was a bit late but not bad. Upon arrival in Paris, we followed the agreed upon instructions and called a number for an airport shuttle. It took quite awhile for it to come to us and then a real long time getting into central Paris due to the very heavy (Friday afternoon commuter) traffic. But we made it. Checked into our hotel and then went to dinner at a nearby place the hotel folks had recommended. Quite nice meal (rack of lamb for me and the house specialty, that was Italian, for D). After dinner we did a bunch of walking along the Seine and into neighborhoods near by - our hotel had been picked to be near the train station and the Seine, just down from Notre Dame.

An aside on trip planning. We, mainly Jeannie and I, did lots of planning from home using books and the Internet. First airplanes, then trains (Paris to Beziers and Perppigon to Valencia), and then a rental car. We even made hotel bookings for every night. This seemed advisable since there were four of us; and it worked out quite well.

Saturday-1: Up and to the train station. We had checked it out a bit the night before, by the way. Onto the high-speed train we went at 8:40 AM, after a coffee and pastry at the train station. Fun to watch it go much, much faster than the cars on the highway next to it as it is able to go up to like 180 mph (or some high number). Only stopped once and we were to Beziers by like 12:20 PM. The rest of the gang had spent the night there getting to town in a wide variety of ways. Bumped into the Caturas who were just returning their rental car and they led us to the boat renters spot where we could leave luggage before we headed off towards the grocery store where folks were doing some shopping. Meant them and they had gotten all the needed items for the initial phase of the boat trip. Ate a relaxing/good lunch, did the formalities of getting our boats and a bit of training, and were off in the late afternoon.

The game plan was to go westward ending up at Carcassonne. Immediately out of Beziers one goes across the best canal bridge of the trip (the canal going over a river via a specially built water bridge). Very impressive. A chap from the rental place went with each boat to get us through the first lock (teaching us how) and then we were off on our own. Quite soon we came to the next highlight - a series of locks that climb a hill. It is called the Fonserannes Staircase and is quite a challenge to negotiate. Luckily the canal boats are made to handle banging the sides of the lock gates as well as the sides of the canal!

In retrospect it would have been quite nice to have done the spectacular staircase and canal bridge later in the trip when we were more familiar with the boat and with locks and thus could have enjoyed them more.

We were too late to go through the next lock (in fact had we had worried about getting through the staircase) so tied up for the night. Walked to where we though we could get dinner but they weren't serving. Walked back to the staircase to examine all aspects of it more thoroughly including an

adjacent ramp/inclined plane, called a waterslope, where bigger boats used to be moved up and down in like a portable bathtub of water. Back to the boat and had some of the food, and lots of the drinks, that had been purchased earlier more for lunches than for dinner.

Sunday-1: Next morning we set off through some locks and then stopped at an interesting looking village (probably Colombiers). Besides snooping around the goal was to go to a grocery store to restock our supplies. Turned out they were on the third, and last, day of a sort of food and crafts fair in a wonderful old building that was once a winery. We spent a lot of time there sampling wines and meats and cheeses and on and on, and procuring products as well. Even did some beer tasting from a local chap who does it rather than wine. A super, and lucky, happening. Oh yes, we also did our supermarket activity, procuring sausages and other items for an evening BBQ. Eventually we also ate lunch there at outside tables serving fine seafood. Onward we then (eventually) went, but not very far! During this leg, or maybe the next day, is when we went through the Malpas Tunnel. I was driving the boat and made it OK but it was a bit scary since I had my dark glasses on and when we got into the tunnel I couldn't see very well. The tunnel is 160 meters long. It was built in the 17th century by hand in 10 days, using thousands of people. Not much paperwork back then I bet.

That night we tied up in a nice spot, got out the new (another aside in a minute) BBQ and did our sausages - 3 different types. We had more than enough for all 14 of us so it took quite awhile to cook them, partially because the fire was less hot than desired. Nice eating on the boat deck/top along with plenty of drinking and chatting. Weather was perfect.

The aside about the BBQ is that during a variety of e-mail exchanges with the boat rental folks we had established that as extras we'd have towels for everyone and a BBQ. When getting the boats we kept reminding them of these facts but made little progress in getting them. Eventually we set off without them but with the promise they would show up down the canal a bit. Sure enough, after we tied up for the first night a fellow showed up with them. The BBQ was brand new and still in its original box so we got to assemble it with the few tools we had, mainly Loren's all purpose item, before using it.

Actually, it seems like that afternoon was also when we went for a hike/walk up the mountainside to see a couple of things. First was Etang de Montady, built in the 13th century by monks to drain marshes to its center. This makes for an area of pie shaped fields that has been farmed in this manner ever since. The pie shaped fields are on hillsides wherein the center of the pie is at the lowest point. I've not described it well but have some nice photos and found it quite interesting. The other item was the Oppidum d'Ensrune, which is an 800 BC archeological site that has digging and a museum to see. An audio guide (poorly done) plus some English on signs got us around this quite interesting place. About a half dozen or so of the gang made this outing.

It was rather amusing to see how very little we had progressed from Beziers.

Monday-1: Extensive breakfast, as is always typical of the Actons and I gather of the Klumpers as well, then progressed westward. Seems like this may have been a day I did a lot of driving, or maybe it was the next day. Checked out a village (probably Capestang) by walking around it, buying some stamps, etc and then had lunch with some of the gang we bumped into who were wandering around as well. Quite good pizza in a relaxing place. Actually, basically all of our meals

in France were relaxing, sometimes almost too much so. Continued westward and then made a decision to take a side trip down a different canal to Narbonne or even beyond it to the Mediterranean. This canal had do-it-yourself electric locks where you punch in the right buttons to have the lock function for going up or down. Worked pretty well although one time it got mixed up and Klump had to effectively reset things. Didn't reach Narbonne or even real close to it as we pulled up to one lock at 6:55 and were told that since the lock closes at 7 PM and we wouldn't be through it by then we could go no further. Yes, this was a person-controlled lock. So, that defined our nightspot for that evening and not a great one. We 6 from our boat went into a town and found a place to eat. Asian food that was actually pretty good and a very enjoyable chap running the place. We were the only customers and he paid us a lot of friendly attention. Folks thought the coconut ice cream, served in a half (small) coconut shell, was especially fun and even I liked it.

Tuesday-1: Another good breakfast followed by a walk into town to buy a few groceries. Then we headed back north through those do-it-yourself locks. We were getting pretty good at it by now. At the last one, however, things got all confused (electronically) with a boat going the other direction and no one could get it fixed/reset. Called for help via a phone they have there and eventually a fellow came out, produced a key, opened the controls, reset something, and all was well. So it was back to Canal du Midi and more westward progress. Lunch in a village (Le Somaile) where I had perhaps my best food of the trip, something halfway between fish stew and fish in a heavy sauce; call ragout or something like that. Excellent. Bob had it the next day at a different place and said it was good but not nearly as good as mine had been. This village has a wonderful old bookstore but it was closed. Stopping for lunch when many shops in the village are closed for their lunch break had its drawbacks but also since the locks are closed for lunch one likes to be in relatively good sync with them in order to make some progress each day. That night we tied up at a fine place and just snacked for dinner, these large late lunches doing their thing.

Wednesday-1: We cruised along on this stretch of the canal that goes for 54 km without a lock. I'll admit to not remembering many particulars and maybe some of what I said happened on Tuesday was really on Wednesday. The essence of the canal adventure was that you somewhat lost track of time. I personally, Dawna felt a bit different, was never even the slightest bit bored what with there always being a different view around the corner and a different "challenge" of missing oncoming boats, going through narrow and low slots under bridges, avoiding overhanging branches, and just cruising along in fine weather. One highlight that day was a lock where an artist had made all sorts of interesting/strange items, many of which were animated, and put them around the lock area for folks to look at (and procure).

Thursday-1: This morning we finally had a less elaborate breakfast, just eating some cereal. Then we 6 headed out to walk to a village or two. After a couple kilometers we were in a very nice village, named Blomac. A small winery was open and we did tastings (yes it was like 10 AM) and procuring (good stuff). After checking this village out slowly we walked like 5 km to Pulcheric. Saw an old church/cathedral from the outside only and a quite elaborate and interesting cemetery from the inside. Hunted rather hard for lunch and eventually found a spot and had a quite reasonable meal. I had duck that was almost like pulled pork in texture. Serene was getting tired of walking by now, and it was hot out, so we took the shortest way back rather than going over to where the artistic lock area was. Got back to our boat in the early afternoon and continued onward. Dinner at a restaurant that night, perhaps in Trebes. Lots of folks had casselot but D had a steak and

I had stuffed pork in a berry sauce, with my meal being the better one. The meal took it's usually 2-3 hours, like from 7:30 to 10:00 PM and it was still somewhat light out when we hit the hay.

General Aside: We amateurs had a variety of boating "bad" experiences. One hits the sides of locks quite easily and although the lock and boat are made for this interaction it can still do some damage to the boat bumpers. Like we knocked a couple of the bumpers off at different times but were always able to catch them and rerig things. Jumping/getting off the boat to handle the ropes for going through the locks was not without harm. Loren fell twice and skinned himself up a bit and I took one fall and skinned my knee up rather badly. I think the problem was a mixture of not realizing the boat was still slowly moving plus maybe misjudging how far down the ground was due to my bifocals. Anyway, we got more cautious and less harmed as time went on. Loren got a rope burn and Dawna did as well. Meanwhile, early in my driving experience I avoided a large boat coming at us in the middle of the channel by running into overhanging tree limbs which I didn't realize were as strong as they were and poor Klump got hit in the face and his glasses poked into his eye socket and he had a real shiner. Heck - my fault and I'd have done much better a couple days later in the same situation. That interaction with tree also did some damage to the already damaged boat railing. Then there is the saga of the stakes and hammer. You have two stakes so that if you wanted to stop at spots where you can't tie the ropes to a post you can put down stakes and tie up to them. Turns out that even if the stake seems fine when you pound them into the ground they gradually loosen as boats go by and cause your boat to rock a bit and pull on the ropes. We ended up losing both of our stakes (each at a different time – slow learners)! Meanwhile, between stake loss #1 and #2, the head fell off our hammer, yes into the water it went. That one wasn't our fault darn it, just a faulty hammer although perhaps we should have noticed it was getting loose. We'll eventually learn if these boat mishaps cost us some extra money or are just anticipated to a modest extent. As of this typing we've not received a bill for the damage. Other mishaps - a stuck toilet that we eventually got unstuck, some lights that didn't work, and so it goes. Sort of roughing it one might surmise.

Friday-2: More cruising. I remember one triple lock where the lock keeper had a good time making things a bit difficult for a group who were even poorer at getting through locks than we (now) were. Don't recall any other particulars other than several canal bridges and other interesting features including villages with fine (church) bell towers and some fortresses. That night we tied up in Carcassonne. This berth actually cost some money. We explored the downtown area a bit, and then met up with the whole gang for a last night dinner at a spot the "kid" who took our money at the docking suggested to us. It was not great, my fish being OK but nothing special. We had one nasty waiter/chef who distracted from the evening but one nice waitress who made up for it as best she could. However, it was a fun evening with the whole gang together, discussing experiences, and talking of where one might go next year, as well as who might arrange it. We did some packing that night and more the next morning.

Saturday-2: Finished packing and putting the boats into shape and then folks split to go their different ways. Some stayed to settle up for the boat, at least to first order, while Dawna and I got a cab to the airport where we picked up our rental car. Took a fair while to do this, but not unusual when in foreign countries it seems to me. It was a nice diesel Peugeot and performed well for us for the next several days, so I had made a good choice over the Internet. Off we and the Caaravalhos went to the see Le Cite, the fortress that is the main attraction of Carcassonne. Spent several hours

there including a just Ok lunch and a nice English-language tour of the fortress. Some of the rest of our gang was on the tour as well, although this had not been planned. Overall Le Cite is a very impressive place, said to be the perfect medieval city, Europe's greatest medieval fortress, and things like that. The downside is it had major reconstruction in 1844 and various parts are really not at all like the original.

Got in the car about 4 PM and headed for Provence, Dawna at the wheel and all of us navigating, but primarily myself. Took a good highway but not the toll road, as we wanted to see some countryside and villages. Basically went back near all the spots we had been to/near on the canal but this time in an hour rather than a week! Saw some beautiful countryside and had a quite a time going through the city of Sete as it was an enormous harbor city with lots of working fishing boats, etc. We hadn't realized it but later read that it is the largest Mediterranean fishing port in France and the biggest commercial port after Marseille. Fun, but slow, so it was a bit after 9 PM when we got to our hotel in Arles. Nicely upgraded hotel rooms at a good price and we even had a view of the Rhone River out our window. Went off to find some food before it got too late and ended up at a fine small place with a very enjoyable waitress. Seems like I had some good duck here, in fact maybe it was here where it seemed like the consistency of pulled pork; who knows/remembers. To bed late and tired after a quite full day.

Sunday-2: Carvalhos actually slept in a bit. After a modest breakfast we walked the town to see all the sights and things in general. The primary sights are Roman ruins, a fine coliseum and ancient theatre. Excellent items. Had a nothing special quicky lunch and then got the car and went to a couple of neighboring villages. First was Les Baux de Provence, which is situated on a steep hill/mountain side in a spectacular way. All the village buildings are now tourist shops, which distracts from some of it but it is still quite spectacular and fun. From there we went to St. Remy, of Van Gogh fame, and looked around a bit, finally taking an alternative route back to the hotel. A bit of cleanup and relaxing and then to dinner. I had Bouillabaisse, which was overwhelming and not actually wonderful, but I had wanted to try it in Provence where it gets such high marks.

Monday-2: Breakfast "on time", bought some fruit, and then hit the road heading basically northwest. First target was the nearby Pont de Gard, an old Roman Adequate that Rick Steves credits with being France's greatest Roman ruin. It was built in 19 BC as part of a system to transport high quality water to Nimes. It has three tiers of Roman arches supporting the water channel and is extremely impressive. We spent a long time there, partly because the layout was such that after we had parked on one side of the river we couldn't walk over to the other due to construction work that was in process of happening so had to drive around through a village and back again to get to the other side. Over there we learned that the museum with a fine set of exhibits on how the Romans did all their water moving/works wouldn't be open until late afternoon, so we missed it (but also didn't use another 1-2 hours which probably turned out to be a good thing). We did, however, really look over the PdG from all angles and elevations and that took quite awhile.

Next stop was to get some lunch/picnic food at a supermarket but they were closed for noon break, and close rather long and at different times in different towns so we kept missing them but finally got some stuff. The next target was a spectacular new bridge near Milau. It was very neat but we never did find the museum that tells all about it; again maybe just as well given the time of day. It is

the highest bridge in Europe and has very modern/beautiful lines. Then off on small roads towards our beds in Sarlat. Stopped for a picnic lunch/dinner and then headed onwards as it began to rain. And it rained heavily which made driving somewhat dangerous and definitely stopped the countryside viewing. Tried to call the B&B folks to assure them we were coming, just late, from a telephone booth in the rain. Failed so we pushed onward. Had a challenge getting to the B&B but the directions we had gotten over the internet were accurate so we found it at the edge of town down a side street near a dead-end. The folks were waiting for us and made us feel very comfortable as we drug things in through the rain. Once settled we four sat in the living room and shared a bottle of wine - great homey end of yet another busy day.

The couple who run this 3 room B&B are English and most of their guests are people who speak English and thus feel comfortable there. A quite nice place and quite nice host and hostess. Another welcomed sleep.

Tuesday-2: Quite nice B&B breakfast including excellent scrambled eggs, plenty of coffee, and general chatting. Then we headed out to see the most popular of the ancient caves filled with cave paintings that are 1500 or so years old (Font-de-Gaume and stated to be the last cave in Europe with prehistoric (polychrome) painting still open to the public). Our hosts, and ourselves, were skeptical if we'd get in as they only allow a limited number per day, but we were able to get a reservation for early afternoon, albeit only on a French speaking tour since the English one that was earlier was fully booked. Went into town and looked around - the prehistory museum was closed for some unknown reason so we didn't get to do that. Did do lunch. Then we went back and did the tour of Font-de-Gaume. The tour leader did a reasonable amount of English so it was quite enjoyable. And the cave painting themselves are spectacular. These ancient artists made use of the natural rock shapes to give a 3-D effect to their drawings that was absolutely excellent. A winner. Next stop was at Lascaux-II. This is a recently made cave that is an exact copy of the adjacent real Lascaux cave, which itself is the most famous of all these ancient caves in the south of France but no longer open to the public. Again a French tour and certainly good but I enjoyed the 3-D aspects of Font-de-Gaume more than the 2-D drawings at Lascaux-II. Drove on tiny roads through wonderful countryside looking at everything and enjoying it a bunch. By the way, Fois gras (goose liver pate) is a big deal in this area and I enjoyed it a couple times but the others didn't especially.

Back to our B&B for a bit of cleanup-rest and then walked into the village to check it out and have dinner. Tis a wonderful village, probably the best we saw in France although we gather that if one is there in July/August you'd be so bumper to bumper with people you're likely to not enjoy it so much. But this was June and we thoroughly enjoyed walking all around it and having a fine dinner at an outside table (haven't said it earlier but the vast majority of all our meals were at outside tables).

Wednesday-2: Headed south on small roads rather than the tollway. First stop was at the village of Rocamadour, which is another one built right into the hillside that is very picturesque and very touristy. We attacked it from up on top, first walking down a series of slopes and then down 143 steps. At the bottom we did the usual checking out of tourist stores, albeit rather rapidly since we had a full day ahead of us. Going back up we took an elevator instead of the stairs and then a different set of ramps. From there we went on real country roads until we got to a good sounding ancient cave, named Grotto de Peche Merle. We were able to get in on an English-speaking tour and

it was excellent both in terms of wonderful drawings and also excellent cave formations. Quite extensive. There was also a very good museum there, which we enjoyed. Had a picnic and then headed onward along the River Lot through a fine canyon. Eventually figured we'd used all our free time for the day so got on the toll road and drove to Toulouse. Managed to go straight to the hotel the Carvalhos had booked and dropped them off. For a minute their reservation was in question but it settled out OK. Then, out of town and down the toll road to Perpignan, where we had reservations for the night and train reservations to Valencia the next morning. Had an terrible time trying to get gas to fill the rental car. No humans at the few service stations we could find and the machines there would only take French bankcards. About 11 PM we gave up, found our hotel and did some reorienting of packing since we would soon be carless.

Thursday-2: Up rather early, bought gas at a spot just down the street where the hotel man had told us the night before it would be possible, and went to the train station. Had a small breakfast nearby, checked in the car, and got on the train. This train was a relatively high speed one but it stopped at every possible town so it took a long time. Lots of nice viewing of hills and of the Med (which it was going along much of the time), however, so a pretty relaxing trip actually. Got to Valencia in the late afternoon (a very picturesque train station), and took a cab to our hotel (name of Ad Hoc). We had gone through quite a search to decide on this hotel. The nominal hotel for folks coming to the wedding was a 5-star one out of town that had a golf course, etc. Not our style. Valencia is not a big tourist city so most of the in-town ones are business/American-like hotels; better, but still not our style. The Ad Hoc was next to old town, refurbished, small, and somewhat charming – a good choice. Went exploring a bit and ended up with a fun dinner where I had sole, Dawna had hake and the squid appetizer was excellent (shared by both of us).

Friday-3: Breakfast was at a local bar where we had coffee and also some excellent squid. Then walked old town seeing everything a time or two. Did the 207 steps up to the top of the cathedral tower with fine views and an excellent bell that we got to watch ring at noon. Another favorite was Llotja de la Seda, which was very Moorish in architecture, but it closed a few minutes after we got in so we didn't get to study it well. Did lots of wandering, walking, enjoying, and then a bit of resting. Got our fancy clothes on and took a cab to the wedding/reception spot. No one was there. Turns out that the time had recently been changed from 8:30 PM to 9:00 PM and we had gotten there like 8:00 PM since we were conservative on how long it would take to get a cab and how long to get to this spot out in the countryside a bit. No problem, however, for there were grounds to walk around and gradually folks showed up. Enjoyable, relatively low key, outdoor wedding followed by the reception. Good fun, lots of chatting, etc. Only downside was that the meal wasn't something super special Spanish. Went home around 2 AM.

Saturday-3: Having gotten to bed at 2:30 AM this was a day to not push. Got up eventually and the first thing we did was change hotels. When we had made our reservations at Ad Hoc we knew that they were full on Saturday night but also thought something might open up. It didn't, so they made reservations (at a quite good price) for us at a different hotel. It was actually somewhat nicer though not as interesting and it also had a lousy air conditioner. After checking in there we went to the enormous covered market and looked at all the foodstuff, buying some cheese, a salami-like item, and bread. Had a picnic lunch in a city park that wasn't great but better than nothing. Tried to go into the Llotja again but it was closing just as we got there (2 PM) for the lunch break time. Wandered around and then back to the hotel. Dawna relaxed and did some reading while I hunted

down an Internet spot. Took some trickery/effort to find one but once I found it all was well and I did e-mail for an hour for one Euro. Dinner that night was pretty good, my cod probably being better than Dawna's meal, and I've forgotten what that was. This may have been when her starter was a large bowl of tiny clams in a wonderful garlic sauce.

Sunday-3: Our last day in Valencia and the goal was to do the two items that get high marks in the LP list of to-do's. That is, visit La Ciutat de les Arts les Ciencies complex and eat paella out at the dock area. But first we had a rather extensive breakfast buffet that came with the room on weekends. Then on foot we headed out down the Turia riverbed that is now all a park since the river was diverted elsewhere. Watching people as we went. Got to the Complex in less than an hour and spent at least that long exploring it. Very large and quite nicely done although certainly not finished yet. Modern architecture and we think they did a good job in general. They claim it is the largest such Complex in Europe and I can believe it; it includes a Palce of Fine Arts (for performances), L'Hemisferice (including IMAX), a fancy garden, a Science Museum, and a huge Ocean aquarium/zoo/performance center. Was fun to see an SXT image or two in the Science museum, but nothing from TRACE. We then headed onward towards the dock, on foot. It was hot, we made a wrong turn or two, it got hotter and Dawna's foot was acting up. Eventually got to where the Americas Cup boats were and waited for a bus or taxi. This took a long time and we finally took one bus far enough that we could then catch a different bus more quickly. Got to the dock area and the row of restaurants, picked one and had our pallela - seafood variety. Plus a pitcher of beer. Was OK but not great; but at least we accomplished it. Perhaps our anticipation of some day finding pallela as good as we had on Tenerrife at a lady's small spot is never going to be fulfilled. Or perhaps our memories of it have grown? Anyway, a nice break/rest. Within a few minutes of leaving the restaurant we caught a bus that took us basically to our hotel doorstep - always easier when one isn't trying so hard I guess. Some resting, a bunch of "serious" packing, some reading, and then to bed early since we'd be getting up early the next day. Unfortunately I didn't sleep worth a darn that night - this seems typical when I have something scheduled for early the next morning.

Monday-3: Up at 4:30 AM, checked out, caught a cab, and then got to the airport long before our flight; anticipating some coffee and a roll or something after checking in. There was one long line for all of Iberia Air, and we joined it. More lines opened up after awhile and we finally got to the counter only to learn that we should have been downstairs in a line for Iberia T-something-or-other. I guess it is like United's Ted. Down we went and the line was not too terrible. When we got to the counter, however, things weren't right with our electronic ticket and that was all we had. We were probably at the counter for a half-hour - everyone behind us gradually changed to other lines. Never did know what the real problem was but eventually got boarding passes and raced to our plane. It got to Madrid a bit late and our connection was only a 50 minute one and was way way across the airport. Hustled there, Dawna with her bad foot and all. Got there a few minutes before the plane was to take off but the gate was shut and we couldn't get them to let us on. So, back through half the airport to the Customer Service area to try to get on the next flight to London. Another painful experience as first they didn't like our electronic-only ticket, then the plane was full, then we could have one seat, and eventually we got two seats and trudged back through the airport yet again. Also, we now had boarding passes for the London-SFO leg but not the seats we had previously been assigned. Anyway, got on our plane to London and it got there basically on time. Was a weird flight, however, since the English announcements that came after the Spanish ones were not very understandable and no food or drink whatsoever was served even though it was a 1-hour flight.

After the fact we both came to the conclusion that one could have gotten something by paying for it, even water!

In Heathrow we didn't have to go real far (for a change) to our next flight. In the process we asked about seat corrections but (a) they didn't have anything else and (b) although not together we now had one window seat and one aisle so we preferred this anyway. The flight left London about a half-hour late and arrived SFO about 20 minutes late. As was the case in going SFO-London the BA folks did a quite nice job of serving things continually, everything was free including alcohol, and the flight was fine. The only drawbacks were the plane was totally full, my light didn't work, and sitting on the south side of the plane was hot whenever I tried to look out the window at icebergs, mountains, and such, but I saw some fun stuff. I even watched a movie for a change since Million Dollar Baby was showing and I had wanted to see it sometime. And, I typed a draft of much of this trip letter using my Palm and its folded keyboard. The view of SFO as we came in was excellent. Went through customs rather quickly and while waiting to get our luggage heard my name announced. Went to the customer service spot and they said our bags didn't make our flight; but they would get delivered to our house later that night or tomorrow. Oh, well, meant we could continue on our way out of the airport and met Eli for a ride home. The bags did show up within the next day, albeit a bit worse for wear as they seemed to have been handled quite roughly.

Summary: Fun trip. I enjoyed the canal part more than Dawna. The weather was perfect. Had good food, although not many great French sauces which is what I had anticipated. Outstanding cheeses and wine. Fun gang of folks. Fun to do the Valencia bit. All in all, a good outing. And we have nothing planned for the immediate future at this point in time, but will work on it. Sounds like a short outing with all 4 "kids" to Montreal in August will happen and then for a more major Fall outing we have lots of possibilities. During the summer it is a good time to stay in Cupertino because everyone else is traveling, it is hot most places, and the weather in Cupertino is good for the most part.