

Boar Hunting in France



After a superb week spent boar hunting in Southwest France and returning to a frost bound non hunting day back in Northumberland, I feel enormously privileged to have experienced the authentic French 'chasse a courre' and lucky to have emerged unscathed after a 30mph near collision with a 65-kilo boar!

My wife, Sarah and I received a rather unpromising looking brown envelope through the post one October day, written in green ink in an unfamiliar hand. Intrigued, on reading it was an invitation out of the blue from Remi, who lives near Bordeaux and whom we had met several years ago when he arranged a day's boar hunting for us. He keeps a pack of beagles and spends most of his days in the pine wooded flat country along the coast by Cap Ferret. Yet like a lot of countrymen,

he enjoys all forms of hunting with hounds, whether it be for fox, hare, boar, stag or roe deer.

"I would like to invite you both for a week's boar hunting in either January or February, accommodation arranged, horses provided".

Let me think about that for a nano second before I even look at the diary and give it an overwhelming "Yes, I'm sure we could manage that!"

The beautiful pack of thirty couple of 'poitevin' hounds had been brought seven hours by road from central France and were joined by another pack of twenty couple from an hour or two south. Among them one could see English and Welsh foxhound blood, of which they were proud for the added bone and strength of head. The Vautrait de Banassat is a private pack owned by Monsieur Rene Klebothe and

hunted by his son Erik. They keep four hundred and fifty hounds at kennels, along with thirty-two horses. Their annual vet bills are eye watering. Set amid 12,000 hectares of oak woodland, it is the most unbelievable set up. The Vautrait de Landes is kennelled closer by and owned by Monsieur Henault, whom we had met on our first trip, so it was a great introduction knowing some familiar faces.

On the first day we joined Remi and his team of 4x4 followers just after dawn and headed for our roadside woodland rendezvous. It was a great hunting cabin community hall with around one hundred foot followers getting stuck into flame grilled pork belly baguette rolls. It was washed down with some good red Bordeaux. A tremendous start and I could get used to this. We then piled into the vehicles and drove the sandy tracks in the woodland looking for fresh boar tracks. Everyone then re-gathered to report all sightings of boar tracks to the Master. He was some guy, about late seventies, tough as old boots, adorned in his faded green thigh length coat meeting his leather thigh length boots, topped with a beige hunting cap. He had been gored in the thigh, decades previously by a boar and had been lucky to survive, so we were told. I could well believe it. No-one spoke any English, so we just followed the most likely looking field master equivalent and headed for the trees.

My horse, Hilton, had never hunted before but was strong and incredibly fit. The vulcanised snaffle bit did not even register, and it was like putting a wine gum in his mouth, as he roared through the woods at the fastest trot imaginable and just would not canter except in heavy boggy ground.





Sarah's, she was later told, was a four year-old thoroughbred however they both did a superb job.

It was a very difficult country to cross and the hounds split, several hunts ensued and multiple boar cannoned from side to side, although at the end we accounted for one, whilst the other led thirty-five couples towards the dunes and the beach. The end of the day saw all hounds gathered and held back five yards as the boar was honoured by a fanfare of music, from the eight hunt Masters and huntsmen. Unbelievable ceremony and as

ancient as French hunting. Les Honneurs of the boar's foot was presented to Sarah by the Master as the music finished and the hounds descended onto the boar's carcass as their reward. M.Klebothe told me that today had not been the best and that Tuesday's hunt would be more simple. I could not care less, as we were still buzzing with it all and the enormous privilege of being so honoured and welcomed as guests.

Straight back to the hunting cabin, adorned with stuffed quarry of all descriptions hanging from the rafters, with a roaring fire, roasting enormous sides of beef, pastis and ricard providing the cloudy yellow grog of SW France we got stuck in and chatted with gusto (probably in unintelligible hunting français). Typically, one of the car followers just happened to own a substantial St Emilion vineyard, as you do, so there was no shortage of excellent red to wash down the barely cooked flame grilled beef. We were in hunting heaven.

Day 2 saw simply the most exciting hunt I think I have ever had. After an all-night storm, all traces of boar were washed away and it was, windy, wet and cold. The reports from the recce squad, Remi and crew, sounded dismal. That all changed though when, within five minutes of moving off, they found a sixty-five kilo boar, which smashed through the woods to our left. If you can imagine just over one hundred hounds giving tongue providing the most incredible music, as you felt the blood rise, tightened your girth and just got carried into the fastest two hour run I have ever had. We saw the boar six times, just in front, over to the right, hounds so hard on him we thought it could not last for much longer and for me terrifyingly, my close encounter.

All riders galloped through the woods, and horns were blowing from all sides, the rain lashing in and hounds in full cry. So we stuck to the Master, knowing we would lose the chase in seconds if we let up. Three green coats ahead of Sarah through the pine trees, me ten yards behind, this time with a more useful bit in the mouth, going flat out when I noticed to my front right what can only be described as a black hairy armoured car, with tusks, going at 30mph heading on a diverging parallel to my horse. A quick reckoning of angles and speed indicated a side on collision with the escaping boar, no time, I reined the horse's head right so it could eyeball the piggy little eyes and not be spooked unawares, which brought

the hindquarters a touch sideways as the boar did a last minute jink and away past and under my horses tail and off to my left. Etiquette probably forbids a holler but it just came out anyway and we all turned and back into it, horns blaring, hound orchestra in full swing. I am almost breathless thinking about it now!!

On and on we went, the boar darting across rides, two hundred yards ahead, hounds well in touch, until we skidded to a halt on the banks of a twenty metre wide, deep river in full flow. Our bold quarry leapt straight in and swam across, followed by half the pack. We had to ride two miles upstream to cross by a bridge and try to keep up. The finale was an escaped boar after a two hour breakneck run, three damaged hounds who had obviously caught up with him, and two red faced and utterly ecstatic Brits on heaving horses.

So that was French hunting. Absolutely brilliant. Everyone was equally involved, foot, car, mounted followers all together taking part in this ancient and noble sport at the absolute heart of their community, from which our traditional British hunting largely inherited its method and ritual. The generosity, welcome and just fantastic crack of these French hunting folk crosses all divides of our two nations and the similarities are too many and varied to describe further.

We were presented with the Vautrait de Landes hunt stock pins and left with full hearts, full bellies, sore legs and some mild chafing, hoping soon to return.

Vive La Chasse!

ED SWALES

