



# ROADSIDE FRANCE

Photographs  
by Richard Starr

A Digital Revision  
Of An  
Analog Gallery Show



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PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY  
RICHARD STARR

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To Ella, from Dad.

Photographs in this book are presented in the sequence they were taken.  
Please see the last page for the itinerary and maps.



**Stop! Don't read the small print. Here's a short version of what it says. Read it, then look at the photographs. If you like them and are interested in the trivia, then go ahead, read the details!**

**Short Version:** About thirty years ago I took a bike trip in France and shot pictures. I learned to print color in the darkroom and had a gallery show. Recently, I scanned the negatives and reworked the pictures in digital form. They came out nice. Here they are.

#### **The Details:**

#### **The Trip and the original Gallery Show**

In 1985, almost thirty years ago, a young lady and I put our bicycles on an airplane and got off at Paris. It was raining so we hopped a train south for the sunny Dordogne region, known for beautiful scenery, excellent food and the fascinating relics of prehistoric man. The rest of the trip was similarly impromptu; we slept in chateaux and cheap hotels, ate in Michelin three star restaurants and roadside cafes. We cycled from the Dordogne River Valley to the River Lot Valley, then over the high Causse country to the Gorge Du Tarne. Then we hopped a bus to Nevers where we cycled along the Loire toward Orleans. It was an amazing three weeks full of color, tastes and adventure.

Of course, I took a lot of pictures. Most were of the, "Our bicycles in front of Rocamadour" type. But I also made images that appealed to me as a photographer. I'd stop beside the road to take a photo, or even pedal back a mile or two to capture an image that called to me.

The relationship ended a couple of weeks after we got home, but I had great memories and lots of photographs. I realized that there were enough interesting images to consider putting together a gallery show of prints. I sent some out to be enlarged and was disappointed with what came back. Having struggled for years in darkrooms to artfully print black and white photographs, I saw that if I wanted full control of my work, I would have to learn to print color. So I did.

After many months of experimenting, developing a degree of technical ability and artistic smarts, I hung eighteen photographs in a French restaurant in town. Because most of the images were made from or near my bicycle, I called the show Roadside France.

It was reasonably well received and I showed it in two more neighborhood venues. I think I sold one print, or maybe two. Then I put the photographs away and I did not look at them for decades.

#### **Digitization**

Years before the trip in question I spent two full summers solo on a bicycle in Europe. The Kodachrome slides from those trips had gone missing in our house. Not long ago, the slides somehow materialized in a closet, behind my shirts. I did not want them wandering off again so I dug out my old high resolution film scanner and digitized all eight hundred over the course of a couple of months.

I was feeling pretty good about that project when I thought, "why not scan those Roadside France negatives?" The idea excited me. I could revisit a whole body of work using methods that did not even exist the first time around. What would the results be like?

Digital photography is different from the traditional system in a number of essential ways. For me, the big one is that you have a lot more power to improve an image. You can make huge changes in brightness, contrast, color and saturation, and that's just the beginning. There are computer tricks that let you retouch, sharpen and bring out detail in ways that were unheard of in the darkroom. You can add or remove objects from a photograph, make a slender woman inhumanly skinny and put things where they never were. On the cover of National Geographic Magazine, they once moved a Great Pyramid to a new spot in the desert and caught hell for it. In the popular culture, "Photoshopping" suggests modifying something to alter its reality, often for purposes of deception. In fact, Photoshop is a complex and versatile computer program, THE essential tool for serious photographers. About twelve years ago I realized that it really was a complete replacement for the darkroom. I was sold.



That's me, a bit road-weary.



Rocamadour, from across the valley. My bike is on the right.

The digital "workflow" is very different from what happens in a darkroom. It's like comparing writing on a word processor to pecking at a typewriter. In chemical photography, the image goes from the negative or slide directly to the print. You can darken or brighten sections of the image by waving your hands around under the enlarger, called burning and dodging. If you want to change anything in a subsequent print, you have to reproduce everything you did previously except for the one or two improvements you desire, like when you had to retype an entire term paper to correct a few errors. But in a digital world, you can modify a finished image any way you like, and save it as a new version. Evolving a digital print is essentially an additive process, and changes can be totally reversible. If you save every iteration in the development of an image, you can go back to any point and embark in a different direction. It's just like making changes in an essay on a word processor. So perfecting a print is easier and much less costly. Maybe not quicker though, at least not for me. The way I work, I "bash" at an image, sometimes for months, before I think I have it right. Only on a computer would such perseverance be practical.



### Dusty Roadside

A digital version of Roadside France! One photographer friend suggested that I NOT look at the original prints until I'd finished resurrecting the whole opus digitally. That would allow me to use my current esthetic sensibilities on the same raw materials. Comparing the new results with the old would be even more interesting.

The original negatives were both in good and in terrible condition. Good because the color was still fresh and intense thirty years later, once worked up with Photoshop. Bad because the negatives were dirty, covered with hundreds of tiny spots that appeared white in the scanned positive image. Physically cleaning the negatives made no difference. In the old days, prints always required some manual "spotting" with dye on a fine bush, no matter how careful you were to control dust in the darkroom. I remember tediously spotting the original prints but this was magnitudes worse. I suspect it was deterioration due to cheap drugstore processing all those years ago. Or maybe mold. Except, that is, for the scratches, which are always a result of careless handling. I was able to eliminate some of the spots with special software in Photoshop but that often degraded the image, especially in foliage. To get good results, I had to do hours of manual restoration on the photographs, mostly using Photoshop's clone tool. It was very satisfying to see smooth, clean pictures emerge, like looking at familiar scenes through newly washed windows. So, not only was this an esthetic revisit to the photographs, it was a major restoration project as well. Once a repair was done, it didn't need to be repeated, unlike hand spotting multiple identical darkroom prints.

### How should they look?

Working with those old images was like meeting close friends I hadn't seen in years. I felt I was treading familiar creative paths. Sometimes I remembered precise decisions about how to crop a photo or where brightness or color needed to be adjusted. Or at least I thought I did. But, no longer constrained by the limitations of chemical photography, I was free to see them as new pictures. My goal wasn't to reproduce the old prints but to make the best new print I could. I really didn't look at the originals until very late in the process.

I even went over the whole set of negatives and found one fine image that I'd overlooked years ago. How could I have missed it? Included here, it is the one of stained glass at the Cathedral at Conques.

Most of the photographs were easy to work with. The judgment and skills I had acquired from darkroom work and over ten years of digital photography were easy to apply. Cropping decisions were, for the most part, obvious. Color editing is another story. Working with negatives, you have no reference point for color values, as there would be in working from slides. A negative looks nothing like the original scene so you just have to play with it until it looks right. There are a few tricks to get you into the ballpark, particularly if the image has an area that is obviously a neutral gray. Even so, it is interesting to tweak colors, where a minor adjustment can make a huge difference in how a photo feels.

There were a couple of images that went through major color revision as I worked on them. One is the Fishing on the Loire photograph. I remembered the original as being almost a bluish gray monotone, low key and very moody. I kept coming back to the digital version until I found a color regime that showed a wide variety of hues and gave the scene a feeling of diffuse early evening sunlight. It turned out to be very different from the original print. Much better, I think.

Another is the Alabaster Window from a church in Germigny des Pres. Without reference to the original, I made the sculpted wall quite yellow with the translucent alabaster panels slightly blue. It was strong and visually stunning. Through time, I tamed the yellow bit by bit until I saw the original print, which showed the carved wall as almost gray as it must have been in reality. In the current version, I left it slightly yellow and gave the window an almost neutral luminosity. It works for me.



There was one fine image that I couldn't include in the original show. It is a photo of the flower-covered wall of a stone building. There's a window with two very white shutters. The left shutter showed some tone and very subtle detail between boards, but the right one was dead white. It hurt the eyes to look at it. In the darkroom, there was no way I could bring up detail in that small shutter without affecting adjacent areas of the image, so the photo had to be dropped. On the computer, I worked at digging out the structure but it just wasn't there in the digital scan. I tried killing the brightness a little, but it just looked dirty. The eye wanted the detail as in the other shutter. I was sure that it was in the negative. Color negative film can record a huge range of brightness, much broader than printing paper or a computer monitor can display, and it usually manages to hold detail in overexposed areas. I put the negative back in the scanner and selected just the shutter so the machine would expose only for that bright area. Sure enough, there were the boards! I composited the good shutter into the photograph and it looked great. I am happy to include it here. Digital photography to the rescue!

Two photographs would not come together on the computer for me.

One was taken in a huge ceramics warehouse in the pottery-making region on the Loire at Bléneau, near Briare and Gien. The space is empty but for a few stacks of dishes, a six foot tall vase in the far right corner of the building and a woman in a blue dress sweeping the floor in the other corner. The building had a set of clerestory windows in the roof peak which projected a stripe of sunlight down the far wall and across the floor. That photo was included in the original show but I just couldn't get it right on the computer. I messed with it for days with no success. It was too grainy, the light never seemed right, the composition was boring. I was frustrated and confused.

The other image shows curved trees reflected in the River Lot, and I could find no way to make it interesting or attractive. Why had I included it the original show?

It was time to check out the original prints.

### Looking at the originals

The framed originals were stashed in a closet behind the headboard of our bed. A number of them were missing, but the ones I needed were there.

The pottery warehouse print made total sense. In the new version, I had cropped off the stacked dishes in the foreground to emphasize the vase and woman, which is my current sensibility... take it out if it's not needed. Including them gave the image depth and context. It made all the difference.

The original version of of Trees by the River Lot also made sense. Somehow, within the constraints of chemical photography, I had been able to make the shadows work and the surrounding trees frame the scene nicely.

One problem was that the spot removing software had made the tree foliage look unnatural. It mistook the real highlights for dust spots and filled them in so the leafy areas looked flat and boring. So I went back to the original scan and removed the spots entirely by hand. Then I found a color and light balance that emphasized the bent trees, the reflections and the shadows. Next I tried to bring out the clouds and to make the sky more blue. This revealed multiple dust spots, far too many to do a convincing restoration. So here's a confession: I replaced the entire sky with one from a photo I took in Hawaii last summer. Those clouds came from half-way around the world and almost thirty years later, but that perfect sky completed the picture. Maybe it's akin to moving pyramids, but for me, the photo is closer to the truth. The final version tells me why it caught my eye it in the first place. I've become quite fond of it.

The originals had one more surprise in store for me. I had looked forward to working on the Sunflowers photo digitally. Finally, I would get the brilliance that was out of reach with chemical prints. I spent a lot of time on the digital version and was pretty satisfied with how it looked. When the originals came out, I saw that the framed darkroom print was cropped very differently from the almost full-negative digital version. The full image feels panoramic, with millions of sunflowers as far as the eye can see, with a chateau and a tower on the distant ridge. Nice. But the cropped version may be a stronger photograph. The patterns of flower heads lead the eye through the picture to the chateau and clouds in the sky. It has grace and rhythm. I had completely forgotten this fine treatment of the image. I like them both, so there's a two page spread of the full image in the book, and the cropped version on the back cover where it works very well.

In general, the original prints look somewhat laid back by today's standards. The colors are less intense than my digital interpretation of the same images, which became more saturated as I reworked them through many revisions. The original poppies, for example, were flatter, less bold, but they stand up well. They have a charm and subtlety to them that was pleasing. I think I could duplicate the original prints digitally, but the digital versions developed tonal subtlety that I don't think I could have produced in the darkroom. It didn't take me long to realize that I love the ability to produce intense images, eye catching visions that were just not possible in the color darkroom of thirty years ago.



## The cameras

Traveling by bicycle required that everything we needed fit in a few small packs that would not weigh us down. Luckily, miniature 35mm cameras were in style back then. I wanted two, one loaded with 200 speed color negative film for outdoor photos, and another with 1000 speed film for low light pictures. For those indoor shots I used an Olympus XA, a brilliantly designed rangefinder camera that easily fit in a shirt pocket, yet made full frame 35mm images. You set the f/stop, and it electronically gave the correct shutter speed, which is called aperture priority metering. For outdoor use, I carried a Petri Color 35, slightly larger than the XA and heavier, but still really small. Totally mechanical, it featured a coupled "match-needle" exposure meter. You set both the f/stop and the shutter speed in the viewfinder to match the meter needle; easy, quick and accurate. The Petri looked a little like a shrunken Leica M3. Both cameras had excellent f/2.8 35mm lenses and made beautiful photographs.

Though the era of digital photography is only about 15 years old, it's a revolution so complete that, for many of us, it is hard to remember the limitations and expenses of shooting film. With all the power built into our fancy new cameras, one might forget that a full frame 35 millimeter film camera, even a tiny one, could pack so much information on that small piece of film. There's a lot of discussion about film versus digital, but it is clear to me that the images on 200 speed Kodacolor negatives, digitized with my 4000 dots per inch Polaroid scanner are at least as good as photos from my modern 16 megapixel micro 4/3 digital camera. Those two inexpensive little film cameras were very capable even by today's standards.

Most of today's cameras have zoom lenses that let you take wide angle shots or take a closeup of a bird in a tree a hundred feet away. Back then, zoom lenses had not yet appeared on small cameras, and those for the big ones weren't very good. Both my little gems had fixed 35mm focal length lenses, giving a moderately wide angle field of view, which I like. But with no zoom option, you worked with what you had and sometimes you had to "cheat" a little.

Many photographers insist that the final version of an image should be precisely composed in the camera viewfinder, allowing for little or no cropping later. Some insist that their images fit in a frame of fixed aspect ratio, which means only one shape for all their photographs. I respect that kind of discipline, but I can't work that way.

How does this relate to tiny non-zoom 35mm cameras? With these cameras, the only way to take a telephoto shot of something far away, was to crop the negative later. This "cheat" is exactly like using a telephoto or zoom lens, but you lose quality. In most cases, with a good lens, there's enough information in the film to get away with it. Above, I described how I made a more powerful image from a small part of the Sunflower negative. The result shows some grain, but is still pretty sharp. I think it works. The Sunflower photo isn't the only image in this collection that was made by big time cropping to improve the impact of a finished photograph. Yes, you do what you can with what you have. Is that really "cheating"?

In my world, the guy with the camera and the person doing the finished print are separate people. Both, of course, are me, but shooting and printing are very different roles, especially when the acts are thirty years apart. I've stood in the darkroom in awe of the person who caught that "decisive moment", or despised the shabby job he did messing up what could have been a great shot. This schizophrenic dichotomy is the nature of art photography. When I have a camera in my hands, sometimes I work quickly, intuitively, grabbing impressions that might pan out later. I might take just a moment to impulsively compose an image, or shoot every possible angle. Yes, sometimes I do take the time to accurately compose in the camera. But in fact, I'd rather give that darkroom (or Photoshop) guy lots of options. Often, the fellow in the darkroom (or at the computer) finds things the camera fellow wasn't even consciously aware of. Sometimes it's luck, but I think a good "found" image is more than just good fortune.

Even working in digital, I sometimes crop away a large part of an image, paying the price of lost photographic quality. I don't mind film grain, or its digital equivalent, noise, if the subject is sharp and carries the photograph. The 1000 speed film I used on the trip is, by nature, pretty grainy, even in full negative images, and I've sometimes cropped those, making them seem even more grainy. But I think they work and in some cases the grain enhances the impact.

## Location, Location, Location

Where was each photograph taken? After almost 30 years, my memory is a bit rusty so some detective work was called for. Three Google apps- Image Search, Maps and Earth - were indispensable. These are tools that would have been considered science fiction back then. It's a good thing I'm somewhat obsessive for this was a long and frustrating task.

In some cases, the subject of the photos made it easy. Bridges are pretty distinctive. The old stone bridge at Entraygues was obvious on a web page of ancient French bridges. The one at Gien was quick to identify on Google Images, when searching for bridges on the Loire. I knew that the Fishing photograph was taken from an unforgettable bridge that carries a canal over the Loire, so it could only be the one at Briare.

Church steeples and chateaux are unique as well. I was able to locate the Evening Cornfield image by the church steeple in the shot and the Sunflowers photo by the chateau in the background. Google Image searches helped me nail these, but sometimes only after several eye fatiguing hours

Another clue was the position of the shot in its strip of negatives. If a photo before or after the mystery image had one of those identifiable features, it suggested where to look on a satellite view.



Fishing photo, the full negative rough scan and a detail of the boat. You can see the decorations on the band of the hat! Shot with the Petri Color 35 and 200 speed Kodacolor film. Digitized with a Polaroid Sprintscan 4000 film scanner. The insert is close to the actual size of the 35mm negative.



The Huiles Renault location seemed to be the toughest nut to crack. I had no idea where to look and it was possible the building no longer existed. I wasn't sure of our route or where we had spent our nights, so where to start? The photograph itself offered a few hints. It was located on a steep wooded slope, which suggested a deep river valley, and the road turned left in the photo's view.

The negative was the first on the roll of film and I wasn't sure which roll preceded it. But the third frame showed a church steeple that I managed to find online in the village of Estaing, on the River Lot. It seemed likely that the photo location was between nearby Entragues, whose bridge I'd found, and Estaing. The satellite view showed a wooded section of the road in a deep river valley along the Lot that fit the bill. Assuming we were pedaling south, I looked for left turns in the road, and found one with a suspicious blip near the turn. I swooped in with Google Street View and there it was! I admit to being astounded as well as delighted! The painted sign on the wall still exists. It was fun to be able to move down the road a bit and see the front of the abandoned building. But I couldn't take the same photograph today. The small, apparently cultivated trees in the yard have grown to block the view and there's an ugly utility pole right by the building that wasn't there before.

Halfway through this search, I managed to find my trip diary. It was very sparse and I had stopped making daily entries halfway along. Oddly, I was careful to record the menu and location of every dinner we ate, which told me where we stopped each night. (We had some spectacular food, and ate in some strange restaurants. One dining room displayed many jars of preserved snakes, which does affect the appetite. We ate at the Hotel Cro Magnon in Les-Eyzies, around the corner from the cave where the eponymous man's remains were found. Our table was under a huge grape arbor, where it was routine to replace dishes that had received gifts from birds in the vines above. But I digress.) My gustatorial records resulted in an accurate, helpful plot of our route on Google Maps. (See the end page of this book.)

As I searched with Google Maps and Street View, I dipped in and out of the countryside so often I felt I'd been back to visit that beautiful part of the world again. It helped me realize how much we saw and did in just a few weeks.

## Conclusion

When I committed to this digital project, I saw it as a geek's journey, a game of comparing technologies, old and new, and so it has been. I had to overcome challenging technical issues, some as insignificant as finding a way to connect my old (scsi) film scanner to my newer (usb) computer. I had to figure out ways to restore images from deteriorated negatives. I love doing stuff like that, but it's all mechanics. Once done, I was finally ready to go to work, making the images as valid and enticing as I could. It was good to get started on what turned out to be the heart of this project.

In chemical photography, the intricate work of making a picture into a finished photograph is called printing. It's not the act of printing, which a machine can do, but the art of printing which requires a good eye and a sensitive mind. Today, some photographers who never experienced a real darkroom call it "post processing", but they apply the same esthetics and goals. In fact, an actual paper print may not be the end product of this digital activity, but to me it is "making a print" nonetheless. Some digital photographers work in a paperless darkroom, and display their amazing work only online. Huge internet photographic communities share their daily work and many more eyes see many more interesting photographs than was ever possible before. Me, I love making paper prints, physical renderings of what began as light. I like to handle them, hang them and show them off. And now there are digital books like this one. It used to be that only top professional photographers could publish a photoessay in a book. Now, high quality reproductions can be put between covers, economically, by anyone who cares to. I see it as a new way to make a print, and, even better, to present a coherent collection of images. It is a wonderful new opportunity, a gallery show in a box!

And, in your own book, you are free to write long, self-indulgent essays, even if no one is interested in reading them. It does focus the mind.

Henri Cartier-Bresson's book, *The Europeans* was an early and lasting inspiration for me as a photographer. A large format edition of stunning black and white prints, it contains many of his iconic photographs, some of the few true photographic classics. I was about 14 years old when a copy fell into my lap, given by a favorite aunt. I still treasure it. Bresson was the acknowledged master of street photography, the art of collecting found images, mostly of day to day life. He roamed the world with his 35 mm Leica looking to capture the "decisive moment", that blink of an eye when everything converges to make a photograph sing. His studied spontaneity and the solid painterliness of every image, the quality of light and shadow and, especially, his great affection for ordinary people, taught me everything I needed to know about what a fine photograph must be. His photographs lodged themselves in my mind.

This is what I learned: A worthy image, whatever the subject, will reward repeated viewing and make the eyes smile every time.

I have no illusions that this small collection, snapshots grabbed on a bicycle trip, resurrected on a computer, measures up to those standards. They represent a period of my life when I could be free and vagrant for weeks, even months, at a time, a great memory. The very randomness of these images celebrates the freedom of their origins. That's all pretty personal. But are they good photographs? Each viewer must decide. Do they still make my eyes smile? They do, and for me, that's enough.



Google Street View, three decades later. Note the trees, right, which have grown to obscure the original view.



Name that town! My photo and a Google Images photo identifies Estaing on the Lot.









BRETAGNE  
19<sup>F</sup>  
LE NILO

ST. OMER<sup>®</sup> CAT. II  
18<sup>F</sup>50  
LA PIÈCE

Poppies, near Montignac



Poppy Field, near Montignac





Window, near Lacave







Bent Trees on the River Lot,  
near Entraygues-sur-Truyère



Evening Cornfield, Grand-Vabre









Huiles Renault, River Lot,  
near Entraygues-sur-Truyère



FAMILIA  
RENAULT  
LES MEILLEURS







Fishing, Briare on the Loire









Previous page.  
Sunflowers, Saint-Brisson-sur-Loire

Nuclear plant. Gien (on the Loire)



Pottery Warehouse, near Gien



Alabaster Window,  
Oratory of Germigny-des-Prés





Bread, Paris

# PRIX DU PAIN

Vente en magasin et annexes

	Valeur Nutritionnelle en kilocalories à 100 g	Prix à la pièce	Le 1/2
PAIN de ...			
PAIN de ...			
PAIN PARISIEN 500 g			
PAIN de 400 g long	9.15	3.70	1.85
BAGUETTE de 250 g			
ELITE DE 200 g	12.00	2.40	1.20
FICELLE			1.20
PAIN EPIS	11.50	2.70	
PAIN DE SEIGLE	10.75	5.95	
PAIN COMPLET	10.75	5.95	
PAIN SANS SEL	long	4.80	
PAIN SANS SEL	long	2.95	
PAIN DE CAMPAGNE	11.55	5.95	
PETIT PAIN		4.45	



ELITE de 200 g 12.00 1.20

## Roadside France Route, July, 1985

(Routes between evening stops are approximate.)

- A. Paris , 300 miles by train to
- B. Brive-la-Gaillarde (first night)
- C. 29 miles to Montignac
- D. 16 miles to Les Eyzies-de-Tayac
- E. 13 miles to Sarlat-la-Caneda
- F. 22 miles to Chateau De La Treyne, Lacave
- G. 26 miles to Saint-Céré
- H. 15 miles to Chateau de Roumegouse, Rocamadour
- I. 17 miles to Labastide-Murat
- J. 20 miles to Saint-Cirq-Lapopie
- K. 50 miles to Grand-Vabre
- L. 51 miles to Entraygues-sur-Truyère
- M. 66 miles to Millau
- N. 13 miles to Le Rozier
- O. 17 miles to Château de la Caze, Sainte-Enimie
- P. 22 miles to Mende
- Q. 218 miles by bus to Nevers
- R. 60 miles to Bléneau
- S. 33 miles to Sully-sur-Loire
- T. 29 miles to Orleans
- U. 87 miles by train to Paris



Google map of the entire route



Google map of Loire portion of the trip



Google map of the southern portion of the trip



