

THE AUSTRALIAN

Follow the reader: Driven to despair by online accommodation review

MARIAN MCGUINNESS THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 14, 2015 12:00AM



The August bridge and The Saint Cecile church in Albi, France. Source: istock

Cautionary travel tales have been told for centuries. Here is my 21st-century account of accommodation reviews on online travel forums.

It is midsummer. My husband and I are travelling south from Paris to the medieval city of Albi to explore Cathar and Crusader country. We've booked into a 15th-century chateau "10 minutes away and overlooking the city" with "food and wine offered on arrival at the picnic table on the front lawn". With

photos online of an arched wooden door, a medieval shield and a stone stairwell, we anticipate our French equivalent of Camelot.

Arriving in Albi, we tap the address of the chateau into the GPS. We're ready to sup on wine and cheese and savour a vista. We weave through roadworks and take the scenic route through the industrial area. Albi is no longer visible in the rear-vision mirror. The GPS states we'll arrive at our destination in 40 minutes. Oh, heck.

We slide through villages, sneak past hamlets and whisk by whatever configurations are smaller than hamlets. We drive across rivers where kayakers jockey the rapids and turn right down a bumpy track. Then come the formidable words from the GPS: "You have reached your destination. It is on the left."

Handwritten on a plank is the name of our chateau. Our hearts sink. Indeed, it is 15th century, complete with concaved walls, rubble piles and medieval weeds. There's no picnic table laden with food and wine. Instead, there's a junkyard of toys, broken chairs and a rusty barbecue next to the derelict front door, to which is pinned a note: "Dear guests, I will return at 5.15." I check my confirmation email. Yep. 2pm arrival.

I give the chateau the benefit of the doubt. But rubbing the muck off the kitchen window reveals a sink full of dirty dishes. Cobwebs festoon dust-creviced rafters. We wait until 6.30pm, but enough is enough and we trek back into Albi to a budget hotel smack-bang in the city centre.

We email the chateau owner about the inconvenience and misrepresentation and receive a rude reply. At least Albi lives up to its reputation, as we follow the footsteps of its famous sons, artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and explorer Jean-Francois de Galaup, count of La Perouse.

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