



## *'Jemig! We thought you were dead!'*

**Willem was stunned! He hugged me close, right there on the street outside his doorway, overcome by emotion. We hadn't a clue why he was so shocked, but it seemed like something very serious had happened since we parted company a month before, in Ax-les-Thermes.**

My partner and I, mid-way through the ritual working-vacation from Australia, had flown from Britain to Spain for an incredibly cheap package holiday on the Costa Dorada. Our plan was to return cross-country style. After a week in a high-rise block looking onto a palm-fringed beach promenade, our hitching holiday began with a ride back to Barcelona on the airport transfer bus. Memories of the Catalonian capital are blurred, but I do recall caged birds on the promenade ... then an evening sitting on a slim wooden bench, sampling from barrels of wine, stacked to the rafters.

Exiting the city, we travelled North by train to the tiny Principality of Andorra, there by chance meeting Martje and Willem, two like-minded hitchhikers from The Netherlands. After an evening together, the four of us left our mountain hostel the next morning, by





local bus, down the steep zig-zaggy road to Ax-les-Thermes at the base of the Pyrenees. Later that day we parted company (they had to hurry back to work in Holland). Before separating, we exchanged contacts and agreed to stop by their place in Rotterdam ... if we made it there.

Unknown to us, but coinciding with the start of our hitch-hiking tour, there had been frontpage news covering the killing of an Australian backpacking couple in the Andorra-France border area, where we had met our two new friends. They read about this in the Netherlands press, soon after reaching home. The report stated the only identification found on the bodies, were tickets from Andorra to Ax-les-Thermes. No wonder then, the cry from Willem: *"Oh my God, we thought you were dead!"*

We discovered our murdered countryfolk had travelled the same route, just one or two days earlier. Looking back, I understood why an elderly French lady had waved her stick at us, yelling: *"Non, non! Allez vous, allez vous!"* ... obviously berating us in no uncertain terms, calling out the dangers of hitch-hiking on the roads of France.

Martje and Willem were the essence of hospitality cum *flower power*, with long wavy locks and multi-coloured bell-bottoms. They each spoke a passable Dutch-English and schooled us in the delicate differences between Dutch and German (Willem feigning offence at my spelling his name as Wilhelm). Sitting on the floor



of their tiny apartment, we mourned our dead compatriots, our impromptu wake stocked with copious quantities of beer delivered to the door every day: milk for the maladjusted! Like millions of youths from that era, we spent most of our waking hours in a smoke haze, selecting from a remarkable range of - what was to become - iconic vinyl: *Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, Carly Simon, Kraftwerk*, and many others. That moment in time was unforgettable.

A couple of weeks later it was hard to leave for Ostend, and the ferry back to Britain. Youths of an era passing like ships in the night, never to see each other again.

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