



POSTCARD FROM *Provence*

Carol Drinkwater on life in the sunny south

I love the sea. The consistent lick and roll of waves lapping on to the shore soothes me and puts concerns into perspective. Gazing towards an endless horizon while staring at turquoise-blue water is my meditation. It is why I searched so long for my ‘House by the Sea’.

Once we discovered our rundown olive farm here in the south of France overlooking the Mediterranean, I found peace. I had come ‘home’. In the early days, I would be up at dawn and go down to the beach, with not another soul in sight. The rising sun had not yet warmed the sand and that first step into cold, foamy waves sent a shock through my limbs until I had immersed myself and was happily swimming into the slanting sunbeams spreading like an opening fan across the water’s surface. Afterwards, dripping in towels, with wet hair and salted skin, I would climb the winding roads back to the farm, stopping to buy warm baguettes and croissants along the way. By the time I was ascending the drive, Michel had percolated the coffee and I would shower, hungry for breakfast, all set for the challenges of house repair. Those were the days!

What happened? The cracked old swimming pool in the front garden that we inherited with this crazy estate was repaired and filled. If I fancy a dip now, I go down the *terre cuite*-tiled stairs and slip into our own chlorinated basin of crystal blue water. It is sufficiently large to offer exercise and to keep us and our guests cool throughout the hot months. I love the pool and am deeply grateful for it, but it is not quite the same as having sand between the toes and the scent of seaweed on the skin.

While looking out across moonlit waters, deep in thought, a glass of chilled wine at my fingertips and

the cicadas silent after a raucous day, I asked myself where that longing had gone, that call of the sea. Before we moved here, when I was an actress living an urban life, I would fly off to scuba dive all the oceans of the world and windsurf at the shores of the Mediterranean.

And now? If I clambered on to a windsurfing board, I would wobble and fall within seconds; if I kitted myself out in diving gear and penetrated the water’s surface, I would probably sink like an iron bell. Yet I hanker anew to be out there, mingling with fish and coral.

“How about a whale watching trip?” suggests Michel. I have regularly spotted pods of dolphins round the islands, but never whales. Do they inhabit these northern Mediterranean shores? Yes; whales are a rare sight, but they are here. Even better, this wide expanse of sea that fringes the Riviera, Tuscany

and Corsica makes up the Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals, funded by France, Monaco and Italy. When I began to investigate, I discovered that whales have inhabited these waters at least since Roman times. A dozen or

so miles from us, over the border into Italy, was Costa Balenae, a Roman nomenclature meaning ‘the coast of whales’.

Now I have a new interest, or rather my passion for conservation and love of the sea have been united. Ninety thousand watery square kilometres to be explored, teeming with marine flora and fauna, in an area that extends south as far as the northern coast of Sardinia.

So, if you don’t hear from me again, it means I shall be aboard a research vessel, camera and notebook at the ready, setting sail from Nice on the lookout for whales. 🐳

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Carol Drinkwater is the best-selling author of *The Olive Farm* series, including the latest instalment *Return to the Olive Farm*. Contact Carol at www.caroldrinkwater.com

ILLUSTRATION: TIM WESSON

ANSWERS TO QUICK QUIZ ON PAGE 85: RAYMOND BLANC; POËLER – TO FRY; RIS DE VEAU – SWEETBREADS; MOULINER – TO PUREE; A SSAISONNER – TO SEASON; UNE NAPPE – A TABLECLOTH; 1 (C), 2 (A), 3 (B), 4 (A)