



POSTCARD FROM *Provence* Carol Drinkwater on life in the sunny south

I have always loved seaside towns out of season. Memories remain of childhood trips to magnificent Victorian resorts in Britain where I sat hunched in teashops after a brisk walk along the blustery front.

The Côte d'Azur first attracted British tourists as a winter watering hole in the 1880s. The vogue to vacation here during the summer months came later, during the Roaring Twenties – the Jazz Age – when the south of France was hailed as the ultimate in hot season destinations. Outdoor swimming pools were constructed and sunbathing became the rage.

So it is rather hard to define what 'out of season' means down here. The mild winters, Christmas time and beyond still attract certain crowds while families pack themselves onto beaches during July and August. But when the raging kick has gone out of the sun, we Provençaux residents take our coast back and these are the months

I love best; the transitional months such as autumn, with its mellow sun and fruitfulness.

From September onwards, one of our joys is swimming off a deserted bay as the sun sets. It is the season of figs and our trees are laden. Wrapped in our towels after a dip in the salty Mediterranean, we enjoy slices of deliciously sweet home-made fig tart baked with apples not stolen by our marauding wild boars.

Along with the tourists, the swallows have flown, much-missed, but other companions remain. This morning as we drank mugs of coffee, sweetened with honey from our hives, out on the terrace in milk-warm sunshine, a pair of large red damselflies landed on our telephone wire. They dallied awhile, their delicate wings spread wide, glinting in the amber light – such exquisite insects.

Soon after purchasing this rundown olive farm, we discovered a stagnant pond. The dogs paddled there and then trod dripping mud everywhere. For hygiene's sake, we filled it in but I regret that now. The southern damselfly, a slender, electric blue-and-black arthropod that hovers above the swimming pool, is under threat due to loss of habitat. So when funds allow, we are intending to create a natural stream on the land, sourced from underground water fed by snowmelt from the Alps, where these beauties can lay their eggs and flourish in tranquillity.

Inland from the coast, the grape, followed a month later by the olive harvests, are in preparation.

Expectations are high: this will be *'une très bonne année'* – 'a year to remember'. I smile, I hear this prediction almost every year. We have no vineyards of our own but we lend a hand with the *vendange* on a friend's fine boutique estate. Like us,

Robert harvests manually. He has two assistants plus Michel and I. The work is rigorous; my nails are broken and grimed with earth and my back aches as I fall exhausted into bed. I pick generous bunches, choosing the finest, settle the black grapes into brimming baskets, but do not haul them, leaving that to the men. I love the native camaraderie of such occasions, the meals enjoyed, the tradition and celebration, and while the grapes are fermenting, Robert's team assists us with our olive harvest.

By Christmas, our olives have been pressed into green-gold oil and the tourists have returned. Now is a season of sharing, of quaffing wines pressed from local produce, gorging on meals dressed with local olive oil and, after these glorious autumnal months, I am happy to see the coast buzzing once more. 🍷

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Carol Drinkwater is the best-selling author of *The Olive Farm* series. The books are inspired by life on her Provence olive farm. Find out more at www.carol-drinkwater.com

ILLUSTRATION: TIM WESSON

Answers to Quick Quiz on page 83: Louis XIV; Phrases about snow: Un chien de traîneau - A sled dog; Le ski nordique - Cross-country skiing; Faire de la luge - To go sledding; Une raquette - A snowshoe; Une planche à neige - A snowboard; Une motoneige - A snowmobile.