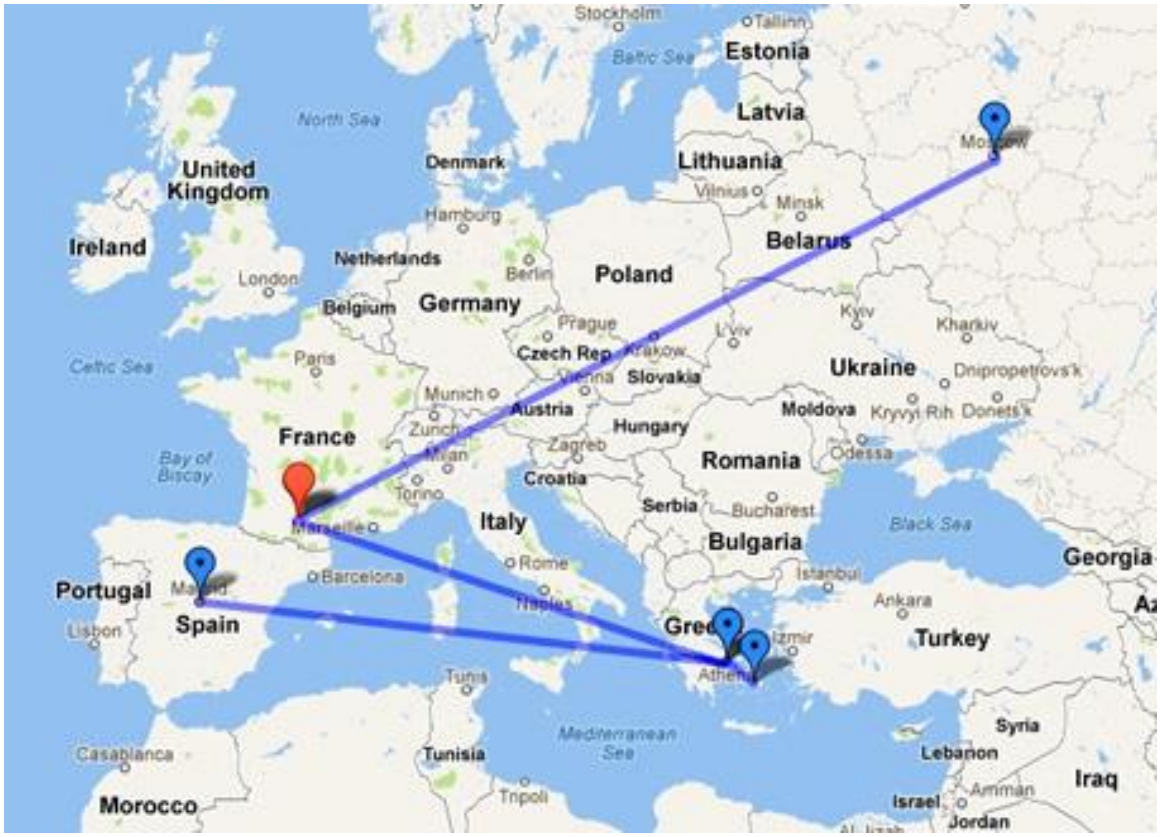
POSTCARD 28 FROM ROBINA: LAVAUR, TUESDAY, JULY 24, 2012



From Madrid, where I wrote my last postcard, I flew to Athens for a couple of days, then took the ferry to Paros for a week at Tao's Center in the Greek Isles. From Paros it was back to Athens for my flight to Toulouse and a week at Lama Zopa Rinpoche's center in the south of France. Next stop: Moscow.

My old friend Panos met me at Athens airport, a two-hour-plus flight from Madrid. Twenty years ago, when we worked together for Lama Zopa Rinpoche's study group in Athens, Gonpo Ling, named after Six-armed Mahakala, I'd ride on the back of his big bike. Vaguely expecting the bike again I was wondering how we'd squeeze me and my bag onto it, but he came in his old rickety car instead.

This time I was in Greece on the invitation of Tao's Center on the island of Paros. Tao's (not Buddhist) had invited me for 10 days, which gave me the opportunity to spend a few days in Athens beforehand with Panos and two other students of Rinpoche's, Angeliki and Giannis. We met during my first time in Greece, in 1992, when Ingrid Braun, a German nun who'd offered her place – also on Paros – to Rinpoche, got Rinpoche's go ahead for me to stay there for a year to try to grow the place. I was not impressed! I'm a city girl: a year on a windswept, hot, dry island! I accepted reluctantly. But what buoyed me a little was Rinpoche's encouraging me to "go to Athens and start a center" – something like that. Rinpoche wrote a postcard to someone he knew there and asked her to help me get it going. It seems she found a place, put the word out, and 30 people turned up. We moved on from there.

Me and pleasure-seeking tourists boarding the ferry at Piraeus, just outside of Athens, for the four-hour trip to Paros. Photo Panos Chartalos.

The Aegean Sea from Tao's Center on Paros Island. Photo Tao's Center.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, one Lama Zopa Rinpoche's main gurus and one of the first lamas our small center in Athens invited to teach, in 1992. Rinpoche escaped from Tibet in 1959 and, until manifesting cancer in 2006, gave teachings around the world. Photo Wolfgang Saumweber. Panos and me (right) reliving old times. Photo Panos Chartalos

Our Gonpo Ling group during a retreat in Paros 1992. We were based in Athens, but came to Paros to do retreat (the FPMT Paros retreat center no longer exists). Bottom row, from left: Nacita Petropoulou, Angeliki Petropoulou, Hara, Kevin Kecskes; top row, from left: Panos Chartalos, Giorgos Kiousis, unknown, Giselda, Giannis Lagoudakis, me. Photo Panos Chartalos.

My main base was Paros. We organized classes and weekend retreats and I'd take the four-hour boat journey to Athens every week and spend three days there, attempting to get that group going as well. Our main event was the visit of Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, one of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's gurus. It was quite hard getting Rinpoche a visa: the government official announced bluntly that "this is the kind of person we're trying to protect our Christian civilization from"! I remember that most of my friends never told their parents that they were Buddhist. I think things have changed in the last 20 years.

After 10 days I was off to France. Back on the boat Sunday night and an early morning flight to Toulouse and back to lovely Institut Vajra Yogini.

I love coming here. I usually stay for a week or 10 days. I especially like to live in the attic bedroom, on the fourth floor: up the creaky back staircase – which I presume was the servants' entrance years ago when it functioned as the chateau for the family

of one of Toulouse-Lautrec's uncles – which becomes almost a spiral staircase for the last two floors. Good exercise, up and down several times a day! Such lovely views of the summer scenes from those windows and so pleasing for the eye: such a different environment from Greece: soft, rolling hills; rich, green grass; thick, leafy trees. Francois and Violette continue to run the place, and it seems to flourish: courses and retreats all year, many people living and working here. The resident peacock is still resident: even if you never saw him you would hear his honking calls everywhere!

At Institut Vajra Yogini looking southwest past summer flowers with the institute's chateau on my right.

The green, rolling hills of Lavaur, surrounding Institut Vajra Yogini. Photo BManzilla.

More green hills and the summer sky.

Institut Vajra Yogini's François and Violette, who run the center. Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

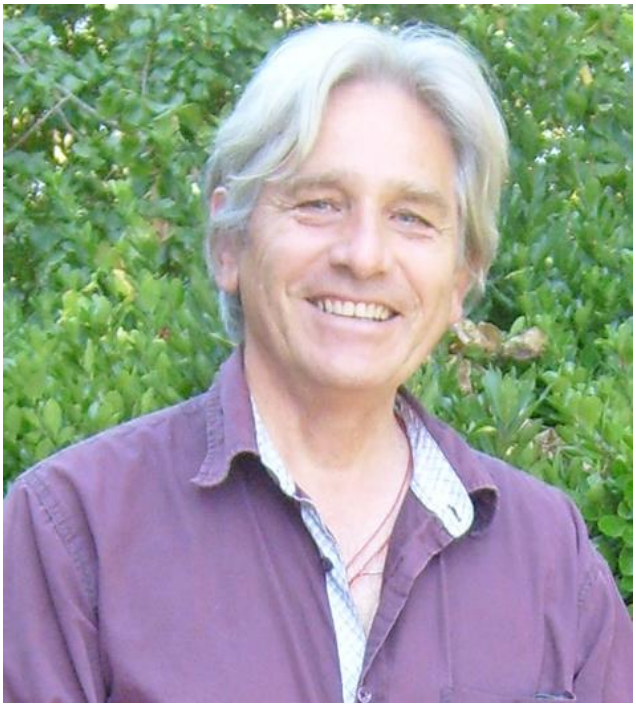
François translating my Australian English into French. Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

Alexis, one of the institute's team, who broadcasts all of their teachings live on their website. Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

The group from our annual summer retreat at the institute, in front of the center's Kadampa stupa commemorating FPMT Founder Lama Thubten Yeshe. Photo Ven. Katy Cole. And, below, the resident peacock.

Swiss artist and old friend Peter Iseli is slowly preparing for his massive thangka of Twenty-one Taras – 45 feet long. As I mentioned in postcard 13, the institute is building a special studio for this. It's almost finished and is gorgeous: such sweet light from the high windows, giving Peter huge wall space. He and his Jampa will move soon into their own apartment in the old building that was once a barn but where now people live. In the 1980s it served as the home for the FPMT nunnery Dorje Pagmo.

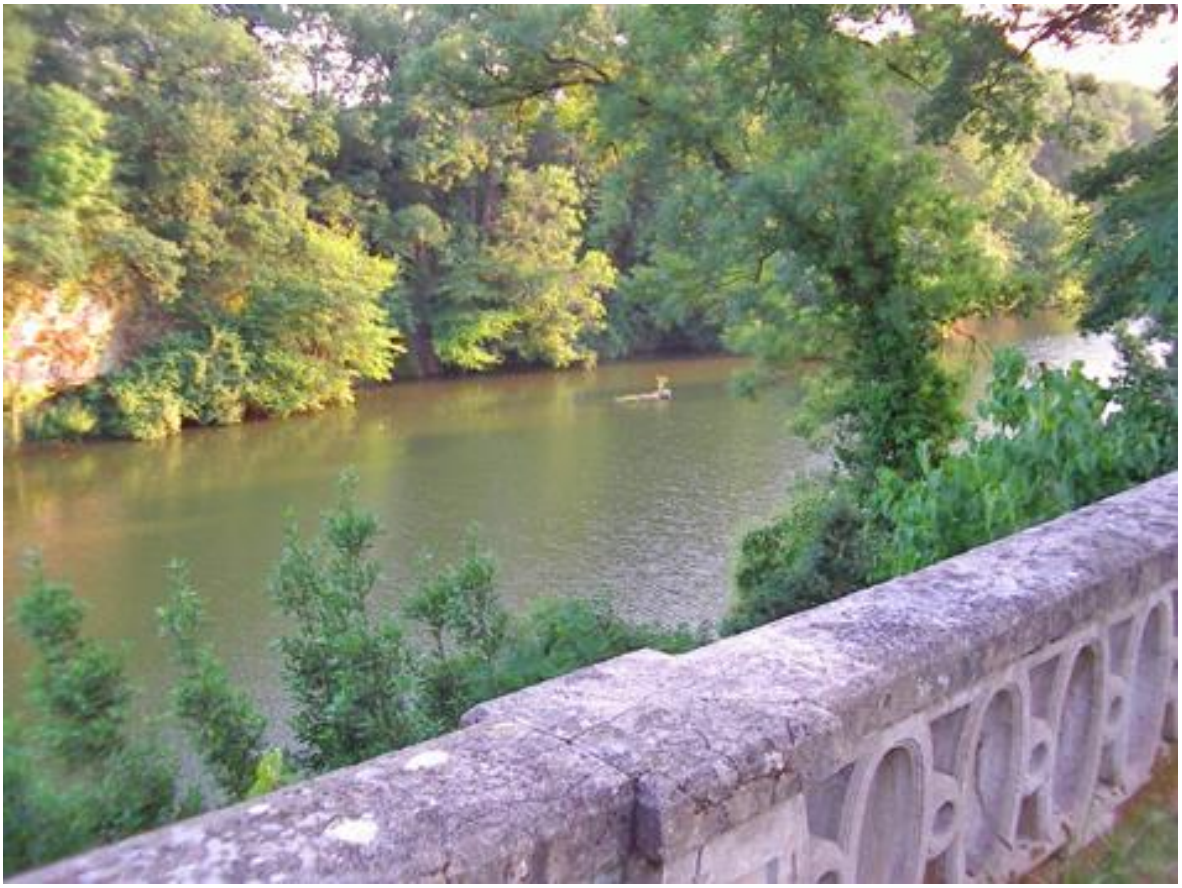
The art studio Institut Vajra Yogini is building for Swiss thangka painter Peter Iseli is almost done. Here are photos of the studio at various stages of construction. The studio will enable Peter to create a 45-foot thangka of Buddha Tara commissioned by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Photos Jean-François Bergevin/UQAM.



Peter in his new studio. Photo Jean-François Bergevin/UQAM.

At least once during my annual visits I drive over to Nalanda Monastery, 10 km or so from the institute and have lunch with the monks. The place is growing: Tendar the director showed me around and explained their long-term plans. Jampa Lhundrup, my friend from Australia who goes around the world teaching feng-shui, and Kerry Prest, an English monk, went out for lunch one day, Kerry driving, as he knows the area. And on another day I had lunch with my old friend Elisabeth Drukier, the French nun who runs the Paris FPMT center, Kalachakra. I always have a soft spot for Elisabeth: she was the one who took me down the Kopan hill to Kathmandu in February 1978 to buy cloth for my first set of robes, and it was she who helped me get dressed in them on the morning of receiving my first set of vows from Lama Zopa Rinpoche – at dawn, Tibetan New Year, February 9. She has a little house that she plans to retire to for retreat.

And in the gompa during Sojong, a purification practice monks and nuns do twice a month. Photo Nalanda Monastery. Below, the monastery is built next a river.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche, center, at Nalanda in 2011 with Institut Vajra Yogini's former, retired resident lama Geshe Tengye (on Rinpoche's right) and Geshe Tenzin Loden, the institute's current resident lama. Photo Nalanda Monastery.

I am still working on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's book about helping people at the time of death, and I had a few days to do so at the institute.

Leaving in a few days for mad, big, speedy, Moscow!