

THE ENGLISH FAMILY HELPING TO SAVE POITOUS IN SOUTH EAST FRANCE!

We moved to France in 2014. As soon as our older children were at University, we popped the youngest, aged 9, in the car with the cat and drove 13 hours to start our new life, setting up a Gite business in France.

In England, we were always busy working and never had the time to have animals. Here, we have nearly 5 hectares of woodland. I have always loved donkeys but keeping an equine would have been impossible in England. Here, sadly, there are so many in need of saving or re-homing.

At first, we rescued the Provence donkey- brothers, aged 10 months, 2 and 3 years, from the abattoir and becoming sausages. They have the names of the 3 Musketeers because when I first saw them they were in an empty, dusty field, with nothing to eat, each one nervous, with their heads over the back of the next.

The eldest and the youngest are inseparable but as time went on, both Porthos and Aramis started to be dominant with the middle brother, Athos. We decided to find a 'D'Artagnan' for Athos.....and ended up with the beautiful Bamako, a pure race Baudet de Poitou, who arrived here pregnant. Her owner wanted to retire.

Sadly, she had not had a scan and she gave birth at full term to twin females, born dead. It is almost impossible to have living twins (only 3 or 4 pairs exist in the world) because they are not built to have multiple births. The saddest part was that Bamako had done her job and kept them alive until the end but in fact they weighed less than half of what they needed to be to survive.

I had read about the Poitou, the "Woolly Mammoth of donkeys" but in England it would never have been possible, partly due to our busy working lives, living near London but also because you just could not find one!

The Baudet du Poitou is the most ancient breed of donkey, brought to France by the Romans and sadly, now a critically endangered species. In the 1980s, there were just 44 in the world and even now, despite some brilliant conservation work, they are still in grave danger. In 2019, there were only 55 births of pure race Poitous.

After having the twins, Bamako's behaviour changed. She became depressed and unfriendly, especially with the boy donkeys. They were very forgiving and just kept insisting that she went out into the forest with them.



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Eventually, she started to copy their behaviour and act like a male donkey, boisterous etc. So, I thought that I should find her a female Poitou friend and also try to breed her one more time.

Through Les Races Mulassieres (the Association responsible for managing this breed) I was asked to take not just one but two Poitoux because their owner was dying of cancer. Anissou du Vern and Dobbie (a living twin!) arrived in truly terrible condition. Dobbie had a tumour on her neck and was pregnant. Anissou had terrible feet, with abscesses on top of abscesses and also laminitis. She was also full of worms and had a broken ear from being attacked by a stud donkey when she was younger. Her brother is the Champion Poitou Stud. Both were incredibly thin and Anissou was very afraid and had evidently been mal-treated.

Last year, despite some serious complications, we miraculously succeeded in helping two gorgeous baby girls into the world!

We were determined to do all that we could to help our two mums and so from 6 weeks before they were due, I stayed up all night to survey. By pure luck, I walked past on a Sunday at midday and found Bamako in the middle of giving birth, with the foal stuck at her waist (this is apparently quite common in the Poitou.)

We helped to deliver the foal but then found that she had absolutely no instinct to suckle or swallow. The vet arrived and gave glucose intravenously while our amazing neighbour, a sheep farmer who sells cheese, spent all afternoon teaching us how to milk mum and show the baby how to feed. We had to use a syringe to feed her mum's milk and the vet warned us she would die if we could not succeed in getting her to feed from mum because she needed more milk than we could give her with the syringe.

Bamako really wanted her foal to live and she was incredible. We all worked together in the shed and 17 hours later, just when we were sure she would die, the foal got up by herself and went to her mum to feed. Et voila!

2020 was the year 'K', as determined by the Race Mulassieres, so all the names of the foals born in that year must begin with a K. We called her Kismet de Barret. Kismet means 'destiny/written in the stars', De Barret after Pont de Barret, where we live, in recognition of our incredible neighbours who came to help, despite COVID.

Kismet is now 9 months old and thriving! An enormous woolly bully!

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We thought that Kismet's birth was tough but then in September, it got tougher!

Some weeks beforehand, I could see that Dobbie was anxious and unwell. The vet confirmed that she had an infection and decided that she had to force the labour to save the foal. Mum had no contractions at all which in the end was a blessing. It took 2 and a half hours to deliver Kiaria because she was facing the wrong way and her head was backwards. In the end, a second Vet, used to delivering cows, had to come to help and between them they succeeded.

Remarkably, Kia was alive!

Normally after 40 minutes the foal would be dead but in this case, as she had been facing the wrong way, it meant that the cord did not break and Mum's lack of contractions gave the Vets time to deal with the birth.

Kiaria is Japanese for fortunate and this bundle of joyful happiness was certainly lucky to survive. It is

as if she really wanted to live and so she just hung on and waited for help! Again, we had to teach her how to feed and supplement her feeds at first with milk and now with some special foal food. Dobbie was so traumatised and ill due to an infection after the birth that she nearly died. Luckily she lets her baby feed although she has never really bonded with her. She does not touch her or teach her or even acknowledge her very much but she does let her feed.

Donkeys learn by mimicking and so we are so lucky to have the other donkeys here because Kia learns from them and they help to look out for her.

Our third gorgeous girl, Anissou, is pregnant for September 21, so fingers crossed. She continues to fight off laminitis and colic. We decided to attempt to have a foal with her because she is genetically very rare; Category Green, Livre A.



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Obviously, they are all rare because it is an endangered species but the breed is categorised firstly into Livre A (pure race, with proof going back 7 generations) and Livre B (resulting from a special reproduction programme since the '80s to breed an approved male with a special female brought to France from Portugal with similar traits). After any births, the offspring must always be bred with an approved Poitou male and after 7 generations, it can be classed as 'pure'.

Then there are 4 categories of genetic interest: Black=less rare. Red= quite rare. Yellow=rare. Green=very rare.

Anissou is Category Green, Livre A, I was very lucky to find a suitable, approved stud, just 2 hours away, who is yellow. So genetically, if successful, this will be very important for the future of the race.

Our project had been firstly to establish our Gite business and then to rescue a couple of donkeys. Luckily the Gite business is now established and we are able, in our very small way, to help to save this incredible breed by keeping the mums in the best conditions, which sadly, some breeders do not. Now we have 2 beautiful babies who will hopefully go on to help protect this breed for the future. All our donkeys are Livre A.

It is a frighteningly expensive business if you want to do it properly and it takes up all your time but it is so tremendously rewarding! We love our Provence boys but the Poitou is so different in nature, probably because it was originally bred, like a working horse, to be close to man. They are so gentle, loving and funny, with such strong characters and definitely a sense of humour.

Sadly, the numbers remain critical and it is certainly not easy, which is why even zoos are stopping their programmes. This breed needs people to carry on helping them to survive.

Normally we pay for this work through our gite business, although this year with COVID, we have been forced to shut twice and have far fewer guests than normal. However, we are still here and we have had two successful births.

You can follow our donkeys' adventures on Facebook and Instagram [@ladromedonkeys](#)
If you are interested in finding out ways to support our donkeys, please have a look at their website: www.ladromedonkeys.com
Or come, stay in a gite and meet our beautiful furry family: www.lesbeauxchenes.com



Tracey Morgan
La Drome Donkeys
France