

19/6/8 France Yet Again

Well it's our 3rd trip to France. Fortunately this time it's for 4 weeks and then escape before Bastille day and the notorious French holidays.

We're off to Cognac region for 10 days and then spend the rest of the time near the coast in the Vendee. We also have our new bikes with us so we should get in some decent rides and spend less time driving around.

Thursday 19/6/8

Pleasant trip to Dover, arrived early and those kind people at P&O let us catch the earlier ferry. Good crossing and then drove down as far as Rouen before looking for an Inn for the night. SatNav recommended a Formula1, only E31, however toilet was not en-suite, I suspect it was in a shed around the back - bring your own newspaper - what do you expect for E31!

Anyway after many no room at the Inn messages SatNav finally comes up with an Etap for E43. Bit basic but clean and had en-suite, just what you need for the night. Then a problem with toilet not flushing. But within 30 seconds a "Monsieur Fixer" was there to put the problem right - fantastic service I can think of many 4 and 5 stars where it would be hours if not days before someone turns up.

We decide to go out for dinner. What an experience "Wendy du Belthorn" decides to have steak. After a mouthful of the first steak she needs major dental work as her teeth have been ground down by 0.5" and her jaw is aching. So I explain the problem and we try another. That reduces her teeth to mere stubs, and her jaw aches that much she can't moan for days. So we send that back and try the ham, at least that's tolerable - more muttering from "wendy du Belthorn" about the French; young kids who have no idea how to cook and the final accolade of the worst meal of her life - even worse than the Spread Eagle last week!!!

Important tips when complaining in a foreign country - remain calm; stick to English it puts them on a back foot; wave hands around a lot (they seem to understand that better) and don't give in.

Friday 20/6/8

Long drive down France. Being tight we decide to try avoiding the auto-route. Not too bad speed wise although the large towns are a nightmare. After 4 hours we desperately search for toilets / lunch. But it's lunch time and all the supermarkets are closed. So it's either go to the hairdresser and have your hair done or buy a lawn mower, in order to use the toilets. Now this may seem a bit weird and obscure but to those of you that have been paying attention during my epic rants you will know that the only shops that are always open are hairdresser (1 per 20 inhabitants) or lawnmower shops.

We finally come across an open supermarket, but they have no public toilets. However the kind lady at reception, who doesn't speak a word of English, kindly whisks Wendy off to the staff toilets - don't let me hear any of you calling the French Xenophobic, lazy or arrogant!!!!

Finally arrive at site and it's glorious sunshine and 26c. Fortunately I have a bottle of wine so I can sit and relax.

Saturday 21/6/8

Wendy has done battle with a mossy in the night and its bit her just under the eye so she looks like she has done a round with Mike Tyson. Kurt – you'll be pleased to know the New Scientist is not only a good read but it also is a great mossy killer.

We have the whole campsite and swimming pool to ourselves. It is probably one of the nicest and most relaxing sites we have been to. No noise apart from birds, toads and cockerels'.

Lazy day. Clear blue sky, temperature 32c. Sit around and in the pool. It's too hot – typical English always moaning about the weather.

Today is music day in France so most of the towns / villages have a music concert of sorts on in the evening.

After a lazy day in which we become almost comatose we go to the local village for their rendition. Unfortunately it's a bit like amateur night down at the "wheel Tappers and Shunters Social Club". There's even a lunatic from England reading a poem out in English – very embarrassing. But an interesting experience.

Sunday 22/6/8

Wake up to another sunny day hot and heavy. Off for an early morning bike ride and then we sit around the pool. More reading, computers, dipping in the pool to keep cool and just generally relaxing. At long last I'm getting time for reading.

Wendy's decided it's too hot and is struggling to cope. You just can't win. Anyway we hear it's rain and storms in England so that should make her feel better.

Can we cope with this much relaxation?

Monday (I think) 23/6/8

It's a bit cold today, only 26c! Clear blue sky but at least there is a breeze and it's not muggy. We've decided that it's best to do things early morning or evening so it's off to Matha (local) town on the bikes. It takes an hour there and an hour back. Of course being Monday most of the shops are shut but we manage to get what we went for. I'm thinking of selling Wendy's bike and replacing it with a pair of walking boots as she seems to get off and walk more than she rides. But at least we made it back in the grueling heat.

Now we're sat around the pool having lunch. Wendy is getting into this French stuff yourself at lunch philosophy, I'm sticking to an apple or orange. I'm dressed like something out of the foreign legion, well

covered up against the sun. But we both keep dipping in the pool to keep cool – yes even Wendy. Outdoor life is great, starting to take all meals outside now as it is so warm.

This evening we may go into “St Jean something French or other” and try and pick up emails etc at the local McDonalds. Then again we may not.

Dire news on the wine front, Wendy actually enjoyed a glass of Red. Anyway I’ve made a note of it – Cote de Blayes - and will avoid it in future.

Tuesday 24/6/8

It’s forecast to be cloudy today so we head off to Cognac to visit the town but more importantly to visit the cognac houses (water of life they call it). It turns out to be a really hot but heavy day – 33c.

After lunch in the park around the town hall – not quite Blackburn - we head off to Martell for a tour of a Cognac House. All very interesting, especially the samples at the end. I even coughed up to sample one of their expensive Cognacs, it was so smooth but by the end of the tasting the roof of my mouth was so anesthetized I could have had a filling no problem – letter to the EU recommending top quality brandy to be used at all dentists in place of the needle. I didn’t try the very top of the range but I can only imagine how smooth that was.



Picture on the left is the 17th Century equivalent of a French Laptop as used by Mr Cognac on his travels.

tasting of these.

And on the right is just some of the many types of Cognac Martell have produced over the centuries – funny though they didn’t offer us a

Cognac is an interesting little town, very pleasant, with a nice shopping area. Wendy by now has twigged that going to the shops between 12 and 15:00 or anytime Monday or Sunday doesn’t work, so after the Martell tour its off to the shopping area. But the gods are with me. Most of the clothes shops are shut in order to prepare for the sales the following day – how lucky can you get. Suffice it to say that Wendy had a few words to say about the French being lazy.



Wednesday 25/6/8

Another blue sky day and very warm. Lazy day, yes I know they all seem to become lazy days. Laptop and books around the pool. It’s great finally getting some books read. Then later on, once it’s cooled down a bit we went for a bike ride.

Thursday 26/6/8

Yet another blue sky day. Went to Saintes today – you need the patience of one to put up with the retail therapy park there. Very quaint town with a roman amphi-theatre. It was about 33c and nothing but blue sky.

Friday 27/6/8

Yet another blue sky day. Pack up and leave what has been the best site so far, although it got a bit crowded as a second caravan came on Wednesday. It's off to the Vendee where they claim to have as much sunshine as the south of France. We shall see!

It's only 140 miles but for simplicity we take the auto-route. No point in rushing as we know they will be on lunch until 14:00 so we have a leisurely morning packing up and drinking coffee.

When we arrive they've allocated us a pitch, unusual when the site is so empty, but being British we want to see it first. We wander off for a walk around and decide we don't like the pitch. After much wandering and debate with the booking clerk we get a massive pitch with the view on the right.



As its driving day I reward myself with a bottle of wine to relax with. So it's dinner outside in great sunshine and a pleasant bottle of wine, I can see we'll be doing this every evening in Belthorn!

Saturday 28/6/8

Yet another BSD except that now the sky is even bluer. Relaxing day today exploring the site and unfortunately it's supermarket day. I think next time Wendy can go on her own, I find it too expensive ringing the Samaritans all the way from France!

Pool on site is great, just what you need in 31c. It even has a lazy river and they don't have any crazy rule about wearing skin tight swimming trunks. I still can't understand that rule. It can't be on modesty grounds as the toilets are so out in the open over here, and it certainly can't be on hygiene grounds in a 3rd world country where holes in the ground serve as toilets – yes I know I'm banging on about that again but it is somewhat barbaric.

Anyway another very pleasant day apart from having to battle with their WiFi, but at least it's free it's just so dam slow. No mobile reception here so can't ring home. Kurt – I know you'll be devastated!

Yet another book completed, at this rate I'll run out before the end of our stay (notice the word stay and not holiday).

In the evening we go to the bar for a drink with our neighbors – well you know what these caravanning types are like.



Sunday 29/6/8

Yet another BSD. It really does make a difference waking up to this and a dawn chorus from the birds.

Finally cracked the WiFi problem. Sit outside their office and log onto the main wireless router for great speed, unlike in the bar where it runs like a knackered Moufflon.

It's all go today. Long bike ride to the coast to visit a local market – more retail therapy – but at least the street café sells Paulaner. Anyway it's a good ride there and back and Wendy only gets off and walks twice, she's improving.

Then dash off to the local village there is some folk dancing on at 15:00 so off we go to see it. A proper village fete, but unfortunately there is no Morris Dancers. Mind you some French bird in typical costume and clogs (yes that's her on the right with her skirt hitched up) did try and get me up to dance with her on the stag. Two words of my French soon put her off. Typical French though they do use sticks and of course their sticks have to be longer than those used by our Morris dancers. I think they've still got a chip on their shoulder over Agincourt! But overall very entertaining and it did liven things up as per Wendy's suggestion.

It's just all so hot but we are becoming acclimatised.

Dining al fresco yet again tonight so I'm just going to crack open a bottle of wine. Unfortunately it must be Sunday as we're having meat and 3 veg, there's no escaping it. I can see that once we get back to Belthorn we'll be down to B&Q for a garden table!!

France In Summary

Well France has been really great. Hopefully we'll be back in September for 6 weeks this time. We're aiming for the South of France which should have great weather for this time of year. It's a 700+ mile drive so we will take several days to get there. We now have a 5 hour rule that says limit any travelling with the caravan to a maximum of 5 hours. We've plenty of time so why rush. Also we will stay for 6 weeks to minimize travelling backwards and forwards.

Feel a lot more relaxed about driving in France, the roads are great and generally have no language problems – as long as I don't have to speak it or understand it when spoken at break neck speed.