

## 20100902 – Culture Overdose

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Thursday – another very blue sky day, but at least it's not too hot – just nice as they say.

We're off for our dose of culture. Being in the Loire Valley I suppose we have to make the effort and visit at least one Chateaux. So, it's the nearest big one which is Chenonceau, just 30 miles away. Well it's 3 stories of bedrooms; four poster beds, that the kings of England seem to have done some romping in; big fireplaces; more tapestries than posters on a tube station, I suppose they'd be the flat screen TV's of the day; nude paintings galore – I suppose they'd have been their pornography of the day – given their obsession with beds, affairs and interbreeding.



The gardens are all very pretty but just a travesty of repetitive geometric shapes. Didn't they realize that nature abhors straight lines, triangle and perfect spheres.

Mind you the kitchen garden farm is very impressive, very colourful and growing a vast range of flowers and vegetables. Wendy thinks she fancies an allotment – more signs of senility

creeping up. I've no problem with that though as long as I don't get roped into it and it doesn't increase my daily intake of healthy eating, it's a pity you can't grow junk food. Mind you I suppose we'd only grow weeds as she'd never be there.

Well that's it now we've seen a Chateaux, give us a bird hide any day.

Call at a supermarket on the way back for some wine – amazing how you can run out of wine in France. Massive queues everywhere so I go to the empty aisle for people with scanners – very sophisticated. Our hostess, god knows why they call them that as it conjures up such a smiling welcoming individual, is chatting to someone else and much too busy to serve me. So in my usual friendly style I say hello and she then begrudgingly but at a snails pace she starts to serve me. So I say hello again, a bit louder and wave my hands about. The hand waving speeds her up a bit but she points out that it's a scanner lane. Then two years of listening to French



CD's pays off and the perfect phrase for "but there's no one here" pops out. Fortunately I resist trying to say the word for lazy.

In the evening we have a few drinks on the patio with the last remaining English couple.

Friday – more blue sky. It's real excitement over breakfast as some-one, she'll remain nameless, is scanning the horizon and has seen this really colourful bird with long beak and a crest. It's a Hoopoe – see photo.



Lazy day around the caravan avoiding the heat and the sun. We're the only ones left, the whole place to ourselves. It's a great site.

Saturday – more blue sky. Up and out early, well 10:00. There's the prospect of a market at Loche, which seems to motivate Wendy. So off we troop for more excitement. After the market we visit the Chateaux grounds but I'm not paying 7E to see a crumbling wreck.

I have a leisurely bike ride into the village and buy a little wine and some gundgy sticky pads in the hope of sticking the number plate back on the caravan – god knows why they didn't use screws, they may rust but at least your number plate doesn't drop off.

Then it the usual dinner on the patio and a smidgen of wine. This giant bird disturbs our evening meal, it's either an Alabtross or an Osprey☺. It's big and black.

Sunday – more heat and sun. Lazy sort of day although in the afternoon we take down the awning, not a swearword uttered and then get packed up ready for moving tomorrow. We're a bit reluctant to move as this is a great site, free wifi on pitch, massive pitch. We've been spoilt here and are going to have a shock when we get to a site with more normal pitch sizes, but need to move on and see other places. Plus the forecast for next weeks not brilliant – as they say "a change is as good as a rest to a one eyed donkey".

## 20100906 – On The Move

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Monday – in between rain showers we set off down south in search of more sun and warmth.

Drive down to Jonzac – about 150 miles. End up on an overnight campsite in a proper little French enclave. They all come out to watch the Brit maneuver the caravan in with his mover, just like a bunch of natives seeing a mirror for the first time. At least they nod politely and look on in awe. Later on they all shuffle off for a game of bingo –

nobody asks us thank god. Then in the morning, in their finest terry toweling dressing gowns and slippers, they're out walking their dogs – you guessed it toy French poodles.

Tuesday – grey skies and showers. Whilst Wendy gets ready I nip off to get some diesel – it's the only way I can keep sane when we're setting off, it just drives me nuts to watch the performance.

Now it's 9:05 in the morning and I arrive at the main supermarket garage. Guess what? Yes they're only just considering opening up to the queue of cars. But first they have to insert the paper towels; install the fire extinguishers; do a stock take of all the gas bottles; then do it again to make sure he's got it right; oh and then they let the CUSTOMERS in. Can you believe it a petrol station missing the mornings passing trade, god only knows what time they close but a betting man would say 17:00. Remember it's France and stop being shocked.

After a 4 hour drive we arrive in brilliant sunshine at Messanges in Des Landes, in the bottom Southwest of France just above Spain.

Get set up on site (free WiFi on pitch☺) in a little German enclave. Yes we're surrounded by Germans. But they're so sociable and helpful, within 30 minutes we've all had a chat and discussed the merits of German Beer and the good old Reinheits Gebot. They can even understand my 40 year old German. This just doesn't happen with the French they merely peer at you like some creatures from another planet and go back into their little huddles – mind you discussing the E numbers in a bottle of French beer is enough to turn anyone sour and autistic.

After a sweltering sunny afternoon the storm predicted by our German neighbours arrives in the evening. Thunder, lightning, a bit of rain and one enormous gust of wind – rips off a French awning, but worst of all interrupts East Enders by blowing the satellite dish over. Then of course the inevitable happens when you're in a third world country, the power keeps dropping out; then it drops out all together. Bear in mind that this is only a minor thunder storm, similar to an everyday occurrence in Belthorn – good to know we get some things right.

Thank god for battery power.

Help Wifi's down! Send aid, along with some toilet seats and a DVD of Tuesday nights East Enders, ASAP.

Wednesday – miserable grey day with rain on and off. Opportunity to do some work and then in the afternoon I have to go to find the supermarkets for Wendy's weekly shop. Turns out quite sunny so I get to drink coffee and do the web thingy.

Thursday – sun and cloud. After lunch set off for a 3 hour bike ride down to the beach. Great cycle tracks round here. Pop into a café to avoid a rain shower and have a coffee

(we sure know how to live over here), so slump down into some comfy settees and wait, and wait, and wait, by which time it's stopped raining so we save E4 – bloody lazy.

We cycle into all the campsites around here looking for an alternative, but by the time you've found a spot that is roomy; sunny and not infested with trees; can pick up wifi; can see Astra 2D, aka East Enders - there's probably only about 4 such spots in the whole of France.

Meanwhile wifi on current site is driving me nuts. It's free but they give you a 3 hour ticket, well to be fair they get so sick of me they give me several 3 hour tickets, but it's just so frustrating, especially when you're booking a flight, you're disconnected and have to start all over again. If it's free why do they even bother? It just creates work and provides a crap experience – bring out the guillotine!

Friday – nice sunny day. We're moving. Wifi's driven me nuts and we're feeling a bit too claustrophobic after our Loire site.

Pack up and drive 3 minutes down the road to a site that seems to tick all the boxes and the pitches are enormous with few people around – anti-French-social.

In the afternoon we have a great 3 hour bike ride to Vieux Bocartes. Cycle round a lovely lake and watch a cormorant dive and come up with an eel in his beak. It's as long as he is. He then spends 5 minutes trying to swallow it without letting go. Eventually gets it down, mind you I notice he didn't chew it 54 times like my Grandad always said you should.

Last of the big spenders we stop for coffee, tea and the pleasure of a surly waitress – my only tip would have been smile.

Visit the tourist info office on our ride. Now of course you'd expect these places to be keen to help tourists and encourage them to see and stay in the area. That's why we stood at the desk for ages whilst they finished their little chat, probably about their sexual exploits last night; then with the same smacked arse of a face of the waitress they serve us; not in the least bit helpful or pleasant; and then to top it all I catch the other two sniggering at my French. Get the guillotine out. Never mind every dog has his day I fill in a satisfaction survey and decide to take it round to the town hall and complain, rather than let those lazy good for nothings tearing it up.

The town halls even worse, we stand at the desk waiting to be served, and wait, and wait, and wait whilst everyone just mills around successfully ignoring us. Why should I be so silly and think that anyone in the town hall cares that their tourist info office is such a waste of space. Never mind I have the email of the regional tourist office; am currently searching for that Sakorsky geezers email; and of course have the time.



Saturday – lovely sunny day. By now I've discovered that when they said they have free wifi on pitch, what they didn't tell you was it drops out every 2-3 minutes. I complain, what a waste of time that is. I am told there's no problem, perhaps it the leaves (probably those pesky British Rail leaves have blown over here) or the wind – perhaps it's just France. But don't despair it works pretty well in the evening if there's no wind or I go and sit around the pool where there's no trees.

After lunch we have a great bike ride down to the lake at Soustons. Cycle paths through the Forest all the way. We're feeling flush again, I lash out on a coffee whilst we sit by the lake and watch two Grey Herons and two big White Egrets. I can see we need to invest in yet another pair of small lightweight binoculars. On the way back we spot a crested tit and great tit, a much more pleasant sight than some of the topless eyesores we've seen in the past two days.

In the evening we dine out with a little wine. God is in his heaven, all is well with the world apart from the French, we can hear the waves crashing onto the beach and there's no wind so the wifi's working. The perfect end to a perfect day.

Meanwhile that nutty pastor in Florida has backed down from burning the Koran. Amazing all that fuss. Is there such a fuss or does anybody kick off or threaten death and mayhem when Muslim fanatics burn flags or bibles?

## **20100912 – Death In The Afternoon**

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Sunday – sunny with a few clouds but nice and warm to sit out.

Today I cross off one my bucket list items. But rather than spelling it out directly I'll give you the flavor of it and save the photos for the next blog – see if you can guess.

All the tickets are sold out. We have to buy two off a ticket tout. £60 and because it doesn't start until 17:30 we have afternoon tea and cake to sustain ourselves – that's blown our budget for the rest of the trip☹.

It involves men in pearly queen sequin adorned tights. They ponce around with hands on hips; groin thrust out and back curved; silly hats; it's all very colourful. There are two bands, god knows why, one would do. The blog title gives the game away to anyone who is into literature. A man paints two red circles. Everybody gets very excited and waves their hankies about. Amazing that there's nearly as many women in the audience as men, yet no women are involved in the event. The women are more vociferous than the men.

It's outdoors, but you can buy fans to keep you cool and hire seat cushions to stop your backside aching on the concrete seats.

The basic performance is repeated 6 times. One would have been more than enough.

There are two horse involved and they have a rough time of it. Fortunately they're blind folded.

It's 7 against one. The one nearly always loses. The one is male. It consists of gratuitous cruelty to the one. Wendy was in tears and couldn't watch. It's amazing that it is tolerated in a civilized country. It's amazing it has not been banned by the EU. The one dies a slow lingering and bloody death having been killed by the poser in tights and sequins. Once dead the ears are hacked off - perhaps they're frightened the dead one can hear them all gloating. If the poser has performed well they hack off the dead one's tail as well. The dead and bloody one is then ignobly dragged around for all to see, leaving a bloody trail in the dust, before being sent to the local MacDonalds. The poser then parades around in triumph. The frenzied audience cheers and throws their hats into the arena. The poser throws the dead one's ears into the barbaric and greedy audience. It's considered a great honour to receive a dead one's ear. God knows what they do with the tail!

It was an experience but never again. It's totally barbaric and inhumane.

Answers on the back of a blood stained postcard please. See pictures tomorrow.

## **20100913 – Lessons In Customer Service**

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Monday – sunny with a few clouds but nice and warm to sit out.

Well if anyone hasn't guessed what yesterday's bucket list achievement was the photos should reveal all. Yes it was a bloody bull fight. I've always wanted to see one for myself. Quite fortunate to see one, as I expect, and hope, their days are numbered. But once is enough.

If they must try and kill the bull I think there should be a more balanced version. One on one, matador versus the bull, no helpers; no horse riders stabbing it; no sticking 6 barbs into it; no barriers to hide behind. He can try and kill while it's still fresh and frisky, at greater risk, but bear in mind the public will not be too impressed if he kills it





too soon, they'll want their money back. Perhaps it might at least come down to skill and stamina.

Amazing we don't allow circuses to have animals in them because it's considered cruel; we've banned fox hunting because it's considered cruel – never mind what a cruel pest the fox is when you wake up to see all your chickens wantonly slaughtered; yet this barbaric and gratuitously cruel spectacle is allowed to continue within the EU. Yes this is the same EU that pokes it's bureaucratic nose into the minutia of every countries business and inflicts mindless rules and laws. Could it have anything to do with my warped view that the EU is in Frances pocket and is merely an extension of Frances chauvinistic regime?

Anyway back to Monday. It's been a birders fiesta over breakfast, with Wendy gawking through binoculars while I browse the news, we've clocked a robin, blackbird, great tit (that's singular not plural), pied wagtail, tree creeper and we think a ring ouzel.



A lazy morning around the caravan catching up on a few things, including my appalling French.

Disaster strikes, we're out of wine – unforgivable and nearly impossible in this country.

Tuesday – more sun. Wendy's been moaning about an odd cloud in the sky so to help her put it into perspective we've watched the Northwest weather forecast - rain, wind and gales - that should keep her quiet for another week.

Had a great bike ride through the forest down superb cycle tracks, not a car in site. Stop for coffee in Leon, a quaint little village.



I've finally figured out how come a coffee takes over an hour in France. There's 15 minutes waiting to be served by which time you up and take your business elsewhere; then there's 10 minutes waiting to be served in the next cafe; 10 minutes to make a cup of coffee; 5 minutes to drink it; 10 minutes to try and catch the waiters eye for the bill; 10 minutes to prepare the bill and bring it to you table; 10 more minutes to catch the waiters eye again to pay; if you don't have the correct money, 5 minutes to bring the change. Just a mere 75 minutes for a 5 minute coffee break - don't let's rush! No wonder it takes 3 hours to have a lunch.

Meanwhile back at the site I complain about the wifi being up and down like a brides nightie and in return get an introduction to World Class Customer Service – French style. “Well it’s been alright all summer” – ergo it can’t possibly be faulty now! “No one else has complained” – the sites only 20% full and most of them are silver shufflers, hardly hard core nerds. Now they’ve not had a fire here all summer so heaven forbid there should be one, because by the time enough people have reported it the place will have burnt down. It’s just unbelievable – get the guillotine out.

Just imagine the script if overseas call centres latch onto these techniques:

“Oh your telephone / wifi/ washing machine / fridge.... has stopped working, I’m sorry to hear that” – empathise.

“Has it been alright up to now?” – get them talking about how well it’s worked.

“So why should it be faulty now?” – make them doubt their own senses.

“But no one else has reported it!” – peer pressure, make them feel stupid.

“We’ll get back to you as soon as someone else has a problem with it.” - get them off the line you’ve a target to meet and can’t be doing with wingers.

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## 20100915 – A Pair Of Great Tits

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Wednesday – very sunny.

We set for a ride down to a nature reserve that's claimed to be the major stopping off point for migrants, a bit like a bird travel lodge. On the way we stop off at Hossegor, a very swish surfers town full of expensive shops and joy of joys a market. Even find a café that understands us first time and serves quickly. That's the good bit but unfortunately they deliver the wrong tea, will we ever have a good experience?

The bird sanctuary is a massive lake / marshland. They do get some exotic birds, had we have been there a few days earlier we may have seen an Osprey. A total of 225 different species and we have to settle for a Spoonbill, Little Egret and a Moorhen (very easy to identify as it was dead). We also saw many different ducks but they weren't as still and obliging as the Moorhen. A pleasant walk but boy was it hot.

Thursday – miserable grey Belthorn day. Wendy dipped out on weekly shop yesterday but today she's in luck. I get to spend the afternoon on the net battling with some software and reading while Wendy's off enjoying herself. She struggles back with 12 bottles of an excellent 2008 St Emillion – bless.

Friday – a bit of a grey day so we have a drive out to Bayonne. What a mistake. Firstly we'd been there before and secondly there's nothing to recommend it which is probably why we forgot we'd been there in the first place. Then think we'll drive on to St Jean ...., what a waste that was nothing but traffic jam all the way.

Give up and come home for a compensatory bottle of wine, cheap but not one of the better wines this countries ever produced – never mind poor wines make you appreciate the better ones.

Saturday – hot and sunny. Real excitement today we clean the caravan, sorry no pictures. This sites a real cornucopia of wildlife. I'm sat having a coffee and a rabbit with more balls than sense comes and sits right next to me, whilst a red squirrels jumping from tree to tree. Robins perched on the bikes handlebars and thinks it's a great toilet, then we have tree creepers, wagtails, blackbirb dragging grubs out, sparrows, doves, pigeons and a pair of great tits – take that whichever way you want☺.

Sunday – hot and sunny. Spend most of the day working on a Sharepoint site for the Corps, this is real work and I have to admit the nerd in me really enjoyed it. Like most software it doesn't work, quirky, so you have to battle through it. Why isn't software like a wrist watch, works perfectly every time – one day but probably not in my lifetime. Now they reckon they've cracked optical chips and quantum computing's only five years away. Great we'll have software that can screw up and irritate you infinitely fast.



Go for a lovely bike ride down to Vieux Boceau, followed by coffee and a ride around the lake. Spot a load of cormorants and of course the French are out in force stuffing and strolling. Then in the evening I achieve rich new depths in cheap wine – E2.40 – well you never know if you never try. Give it to Wendy to make beef burgeon.

Monday – another blue sky day. After working most of the morning we drive down to this great nature reserve at Etang Noire, it's very well hidden. It consists of a raised walkway about a kilometer long around lake and marshland. Despite being great we hardly get to see any birds and only three new ones, a red breasted flycatcher and two brand new species previously unidentified☺. Yes it's a boring brown pheasant and a black fantail dove / pigeon – I'll be onto the RSPB when we get back. Actually I think we're going to take up plant watching, at least they keep still whilst you identify them!