

# **Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz**

**As Tourists and Naturists through Europe Part 1**



## **Chapter 22**

**August 2010 - October 2011**

# As Tourists and Naturists through Europe (Part 1)

## Germany: along half-timbered houses and lovely rivers

On August 5, 2010, we docked with the car-ferry Huckleberry-Finn at [Rostock](#) harbour, after a calm 5 ½ hours journey from Sweden. Already when the ferry approached the town, we came across some impressive windjammers and other old sailing yachts. Only now, we learned about the big event “[Hanse Sail](#)” that started just today and expected one million visitors. Instantly we knew why we hadn’t been able to find a place to stay around Rostock. Instead we continued along a pleasantly quiet freeway to Schwerin, about 70km to the southwest.

### Schwerin: a very impressive town

Late evening we arrive at our pre-booked Etap-Hotel on the outskirts of [Schwerin](#). The € 29.- for an en-suite double room with Wi-Fi were a real bargain. The next morning, we took a bus to the town centre but dismounted spontaneously a bit before, as we sighted the stately castle. We approached it through a newly arranged park that features various modern



elements, often with functionality like benches. It is dotted with various ponds, some of them in modern shape, but those near the castle have rather traditional layout. The castle has a big number of turrets and combines various architectural styles. As it sits on an island in Lake Schwerin, it sometimes reflects beautifully in the water.

Only a bridge separates the old town from the castle. Schwerin counts about 100’000 inhabitants and has quite a sizeable town centre with several big squares. Everything is very well restored, but: it could have come out differently! In the sixties, the town-hall had plans to scrap the entire centre and replace it by prefabricated apartment buildings. Luckily, the former GDR government didn’t have sufficient funds to go ahead. In the beginning of the eighties, smooth renovation started and after Germany re-unified, the restoration of Schwerin’s old town got in full swing. Now, visitors find a very pleasant city with a harmonious mix of half-timbered houses as well as nicely restored buildings of different epochs and cobblestoned squares and alleys.

After three days in Schwerin, we continued to [Uelzen](#), a pretty town with many half-timbered buildings of North German red brick gothic architecture. It was very pleasant to wander around the streets but even though we arrived here by car, the true reason to

visit, was the [railway station](#). As a face lifting effort for the Expo 2000, the initial building had been re-decorated by Friedensreich Hundertwasser. In typical Hundertwasser style, everything is very colourful and playful with hardly any straight lines. Unfortunately, the artist died shortly before the completion of Uelzen’s station

Later we drove through the sparsely populated region of the Lüneburger Heide and past many small charming villages, some of which have rather odd names, like Meinkot (myshit).

### Touring around the Harz-region

Soon we came to the [Harz](#) region, where we knocked on some houses with a sign ‘rooms to let’. In the end we got a lovely attic apartment overlooking [Wernigerode](#), a very beautiful and therefore touristy town.

Although Wernigerode has some 35’000 inhabitants, its bustling well preserved old town gives more of a village feel. The large centre consists of mainly half-timbered houses and most of them are two- to three storey buildings. It was striking, how harmonious and uniform the architecture was, though the decorating elements were quite diverse. Right on the market square, the beautiful town hall tries to upstage the other buildings. With its two characteristic turrets, it’s easily

comprehensible why locals dub it “Spielhaus” (play house). Also quite elaborate is the castle that sits enthroned above town.

Wernigerode was already a beauty before WWII and thereafter it got one of the GDR’s showcase towns. During that period it was a popular holiday destination for East Germans, as they only had a very limited choice to go abroad. Our landlord, as well as other locals, agreed that life wasn’t that bad during GDR times, they just didn’t have freedom. Many East-Germans were apparently rather disappointed when they visited Western Germany after the iron curtain had collapsed. The illegally consumed FRG TV channels gave them the impression that everything must be much better on the other side of the border – and now they didn’t find roads paved with gold. Especially people from privileged places like Wernigerode were quite puzzled how shabby some quarters in the West looked like. Nobody wanted to turn back the clock but meanwhile, many realized that they paid a price for the gained freedom and that some things were better dealt with in the old system. Twenty years after re-unification, prices and wages are still a bit lower in the east but in general there is not much difference anymore, except that the newly formed German states have a bigger proportion of new freeways and fresh paint.



The inner German border used to cross the Harz Mountains. Commemorative plaques are the only reminders of that period, of which many don’t even spend a thought now, when looking at the peaceful landscape on either side.

The neighbouring town of [Goslar](#) is already past the former zonal boundary. It’s a bit more urbanized, yet in many ways quite similar to Wernigerode. Goslar has also a fair share of beautiful half-timbered houses but those are intercepted by many slated houses. So far, we had only seen slated roofs, but here in Goslar, entire façades were covered with slates. Often they were handcrafted with very ornate patterns. As impressive as this craftwork is, the dark grey colour of the slated buildings gave us a rather depressing overall picture.

While wandering around, we came across restaurant “die Butterhanne” that offered profiteroles for the small appetite. Right on cue, we thought and attempted to order a big one for Heinz (€ 4.50) and a small one (€ 3.50) for Brigitte. However, after the waitress cautioned us that even their small profiterole is quite big, we downgraded our order to two small ones. The “modest” portions we got served were just slightly bigger than our heads and filled with no more than ½ a litre of whipped cream...

Back in Wernigerode, we talked to our landlords again. They told us that the town was always bustling with restaurants and street cafes during GDR times. Though the offerings may not have been that sophisticated, the food was still of good quality and prices had been such that everybody could afford them. This meant that all eateries were packed every evening, which is not the case anymore today.

Surely, we also ventured out to several nice spots in the Harz region, as recommended by our landlords. Various myths tell about witches and devils, which comes in handy for the tourist industry. After a brief visit to **Gernrodes** Cuckoo clock, the largest outside the Black Forest, we visited the so called “[devils wall](#)” near Weddersleben. It’s an impressive 8km long Sandstone wall that has been pushed up by nature – respectively by the devil, as the saga tells. It looks awkward how the wall that in several sections is more than 10m high, appears like fragmented single stones, leaning downhill towards the village beneath it.

Up in the Harz Mountains, we reached the “Hexentanzplatz” (witches dance floor). It’s another place of myth but the sculpture depicting a witch definitely goes with the time: she wears Birkenstock sandals. From up there, we overlooked the dramatic Bodetal gorge. The legend incorporates the other side of this valley and there’s another touristy view point named “Rosstrappe” (horse shoe imprint). Our drive back led through beautiful green Harz landscape, past many lodges and restaurants snuggled into gorges or narrow valleys.

## Along the 'German half-timbered house road'

After three intense days we left Wernigerode and followed a part of what the tourist brochure calls ‘[German half-timbered house road](#)’ (Fachwerkstrasse). All together, there are 7 sections of this road zigzagging across Germany. Of course, it would take ages to visit all these places and we realized how many really pretty villages and towns can be found throughout the country. Therefore, we just picked a few along our way. Uslar was one of the smaller, but still very beautiful ones we stopped.

The same afternoon, we crossed quite a few mountain ranges and in the evening, we ended in [Hannoversch Münden](#). This pretty town of 25'000 inhabitants nestles between three rivers. Its picturesque old town is packed with old leaning half-timbered town houses. Hann. Münden is a fortified town with parts of the city walls and some watch-towers still in place. As many other towns, also Hann. Münden has a stately town hall. It's not a half-timbered- but a stone building, with an eye-catching entrance and window. We were lucky to get a small studio-flat for the night, which was right in the centre. It was on the third floor in one of these old leaning half-timbered houses. Although it had been renovated to modern standard, the uneven floor had not been corrected. Every room had different levels and often furniture needed to be supported by wedges to place it even. It was very charming though we always had to mind our heads not to leave imprints on the ceiling-beams and door-frames.



Before we left on the next morning, we had breakfast at one of the many bakeries with, what Krauts call "Stehcafé". That's a German institution we like indeed: many bakery shops have a smaller or bigger corner, either with a stand-up bar or tables, where clients can consume the baked items and order some coffee along with it. Such was our daily cheap breakfast fix.

Whilst driving further south along the 'half-timbered house road', we visited two more jewels: [Fritzlar](#) and [Alsfeld](#). They were both equally charming, but unfortunately, we had to invest in new umbrellas that day; probably the Weather God decided, we need a brainwash... On the positive side, we took the opportunity to view another half-timbered house from the inside: one where they serve coffee and cake. This was a nice change to our daily sundaes in one of the many Italian ice cream parlours.

Overnight, we stayed in [Marburg](#), a nice town of 80'000 people, situated on the Lahn River. The old town is sitting on a hillside above the new part and above all towers Marburg's castle, majestically guarding the many half-timbered houses at its feet. In the evening, everybody headed to the atmospherically illuminated old town, the place to be out and about!

## **A few days along the River Moselle**

We continued to Koblenz, from where we took the turn-off into the Mosel or [Moselle valley](#). It is a popular holiday area with very steep hills above the river banks. Those are often cultivated with grape yards, on higher and steeper locations than reasonable. The entire area is very scenic and dotted with romantic castles, ruins and villages. We were going to spend a few days here and started looking for those "Zimmer frei" (rooms) signs that are so plentiful in most villages along the Moselle River. As it was early afternoon, we were hopeful to find accommodation in the appealing village of [Alken](#), not only on a nice location, but also with this and that amenity. After an hour of getting refused everywhere, we scaled back our wishes...Meanwhile we had learned that there was a popular happening this weekend and so, we finally looked in another village. In the end we were lucky; we found a pleasant room in a nice house in Niederfell.

On the next day, the weather was just perfect and so we took advantage and visited the area. While we drove along the Moselle, there were a noticeable number of large boats. Among them, many mini-cruise-liners or excursion boats, but most of all: amazingly long freighters. Those vessels were neither wide, nor high or deep, but they could measure up to 110m in length. The length was probably only restricted by the Moselle River's countless narrow river loops and locks. The captain and his crew usually had their car, and sometimes also a leisure boat, on deck.

The Liebig castle and some picturesque villages, as Hatzenport and Treis, were reflecting beautifully in the river, whereas the ruins of Thurant-Castle sit majestically high above the village of Alken. [Cochem](#) is also very nice, but also very touristy. It was already difficult to find parking and thereafter we had to squeeze through the crowds. We wonder how this must look like in autumn, when there are many more tourists, as we were told. People flock to Cochem because of its narrow cobble stoned streets lined with pretty half-timbered houses and its castle, the medieval Reichsburg, enthroning over the town.

The same day, we also drove to the castle "[Burg Eltz](#)". It was a long but lovely drive over farmland and the castle seemed to be much further away from the Moselle than it really is. In fact, we soon got the impression we were up on a plateau and not only the Moselle, but also Eltz River were hidden as if they were in canyons. Finally, through a gap in the forested hillside, we could look down to the lonely Eltz castle that guards the river below.

After two days, we based ourselves in another B&B, this time in [Ediger-Eller](#), another touristy village. As everywhere along the Moselle, there was an abundance of restaurants, too many that they all could survive with locals only. All served rather big portions but with a bit of evaluation, it was also possible to find good quality. Many visitors to this region are attracted by local wines and some of them are probably less choosy what they eat with it.

Grapeyards are abounding even on the steepest hills above the riverbanks. [Calmont](#), with an incline recorded of 65°, claims to be “*the world’s steepest*” grapeyard. It is not only very dangerous, but of course, also very strenuous, to tend the vines on such steep terrain. Many farmers had already given up cultivating but to keep that special character of this region, the government lured them back into wine production with subsidies. It’s somehow crazy, because the government pays also a hefty price to solve alcohol related problems. On the hills above the Moselle, special monorail systems had been installed. They are simplified monorails with a kind of small tractors and narrow little carriages. Thanks to the subsidies, every Moselle-farmer could afford a monorail and that’s how the harvested grapes are brought down to the valley nowadays.



A walk between the grapeyards above the Moselle is very rewarding and offers astonishing views over the narrow river bends. It’s interesting to watch the long river vessels navigating through. Viewing the small clusters of houses in the villages from above, let us see nothing but unanimously grey slated roofs with here and there, a church tower sticking somewhere out between them.

After two days, on August 17<sup>th</sup>, we continued south-westwards and had a brief look-around **Traben-Trarbach** with its impressive bridge gate with two towers.

A bit further upriver we reached [Bernkastel-Kues](#), another delightful town along the Moselle. It is most charming with its big array of half-timbered houses lining the narrow cobbled streets, lanes and squares. The inhabitants demonstrate a big passion for details when it comes to decorating their houses. There were flowers and figurines everywhere and paint was not only used to keep those old beams shiny, but also to put medieval lyric poems on façades. Almost every company nameplate was made of wrought-ironwork.

## Saarburg & Trier

We continued to [Saarburg](#), where we stayed for two nights. It’s a nice town nestled above the River Saar. Another stream, the Leukbach, flows through the centre. Right between the houses it cascades over quite a high waterfall, powering water wheels at its bottom. In the old days they had been used to grind grain and oil. Saarburg castle towers on a promontory near the old town and is nicely illuminated at night.

On the next day we took a train to nearby [Trier](#). This city of 100’000 was initially founded by the Romans under the name of Augusta Treverorum and claims to be Germany’s oldest. It’s striking Porta Nigra (Black Gate) is the Roman city walls only remaining gate. Many other relicts of the Roman empire can still be seen around the city, as e.g. an amphitheatre, the imperial bath, the Barbara bath and a Roman bridge. The very pretty town centre has a good blend of half-timbered houses, baroque and art nouveau style buildings. We also came across quite a big number of squares, churches and palaces. Trier is not only a magnet for tourists, but also for students due to its university and for shoppers because of the many stores.

We were surprised how rarely credit cards were being accepted throughout Germany. Neither restaurants nor shops or small hotels were taking cards – all they wanted was cash!

Also internet access, which was readily available throughout Scandinavia, even in Youth Hostels, could hardly be found in any accommodation we stayed in Germany. Ironically, only the cheapest place offered both!

## Traversing the Black-Forest

To reach the [Black Forest](#), we decided to short-cut via the French Alsace region. We sailed back into Germany on a car-ferry crossing the Rhine, which was, to our surprise, even for free. We aimed for Route 500 that is called ‘Schwarzwald Hochstrasse’ (Black Forest’s elevated- or ridge road). What we hoped for, was a minor road with little traffic, but what we found was a major road with lots of traffic, as it’s very popular with tourists either on push-, motor-bikes or with cars.

Nevertheless, especially along the northern road section, we had often vast views over the Black Forest's mountain ridges and beautiful landscapes.

Overnight we found ourselves again a small B&B. It was in [Schiltach](#), an incredibly picturesque village that wasn't even overrun by tourists. It sits on a mountain slope at the confluence of two rivers. Its cobble stoned village centre consists of almost half-timbered houses only, some dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For breakfast, we raided a bakery as usually, before we went on our way, again in beautiful weather.

Our first stop was at [Triberg](#), only famous because of the world's largest cuckoo clock. In fact, it's on a house with a large tourist shop. There is a window above a big clock and every quarter of an hour the shutters swing open. A wooden bird pops out and bows to his audience that should become his owner's good clients, chirping the obligatory cuckoo. Inside the shop, this sound echoes hundred fold, as the walls are loaded by such clocks. Most were made in wood and had carvings of any sort. We felt it was mostly kitsch, but seeing some price tags could prove us doubters wrong!



Triberg itself is not a very appealing village, but its many cuckoo-clock shops serve as tourist magnet. At least there is a waterfall in a nice natural setting above the village and as most people come here to spend money, it's taken advantage of, as an entrance fee is charged to see it. We rather spent our money on a last ice-cream before heading on.

Only in the middle and south of the Black Forest, a few typical Black Forest farmhouses could be found. Often, their or their stable's roofs were covered with solar panels. Good farmers grow what's getting them subsidies and if it's corn, it's corn, but if it's solar panels, it's solar panels and they don't even need fertilizer...

Our last stop in Germany was in [Titisee](#) on the lake of the same name. The sheer size of the parking lot did suggest a major tourist attraction. And that's what it was – but nothing else! Admittedly, the location of all those tourist hotels, tourist eateries and tourist shops right on the lake is quite nice, but there are many other lakes just as nice, but without the tourist traps. We made the best of it: headed for a big slice of black forest cake and then drove off to Switzerland to attend the birthday party of Heinz' sister.

Certainly, our two week's trip through Germany had been much more rewarding than we had hoped for. Along minor roads, away from those autobahns, we experienced a lovely culturally rich country, with picturesque landscapes and many charming villages and towns.

## Via France to southern Spain

Our stage in Switzerland was very brief and shortly after visiting our parents and sisters, we continued travelling. We made a quick stop in Erstfeld, to visit a construction site for the new [Gotthard-Base-Tunnel](#). With 57km it shall become the world's longest tunnel upon its completion around 2016. Next we continued on the breathtaking Furka Pass road. A few kilometres after the summit, we visited the artificial [ice-cave](#) drilled into Rhone-Glacier. After reaching the Wallis, we stayed at a nice B&B in Obergesteln and enjoyed a superb game-meal in a nearby hotel. On the next morning, we continued through the valley and headed via Martigny for France. Another breathtaking pass road led us over Col de Montets to Chamonix. From there, we continued to the nice town St. Jean de Maurienne, where we stayed overnight. On the next day we conquered Col de la Croix de Fer and Col de Menée, that elevated to 2'067m, respectively 1'457m above sea level. Before we got down into the valley near Nonières, we passed an area of quite special eroded cliffs that looked like stone pillars. Then we had a short look around Chatillon en Diois and Die before reaching Crest, where we stayed overnight.

On the next morning, September 10<sup>th</sup> it was only a short drive to [Domaine de la Sablière](#), a nice naturist ground 7 km outside Barjac near the Ardèche Valley. We rented a mobile home and enjoyed six sunny autumn days at this very natural naturist camp ground in the Cèze valley, a place we always like to come back to.

On September 16<sup>th</sup>, we continued westwards through the spectacular Gorge de la Vis and later had a good look around the pretty village of Olargues. Overnight we stayed in a hotel in the centre of Mazamet. That night, we had the last French gourmet meal before we headed over the Pyrenees to [Spain](#).

Using the new Tunnel de Vielha, we soon passed various Spanish ski resorts along route N230. For a while it rained very hard and we were glad to reach Bernabarre where we found a room in a good hostel. The next morning, it was only a short distance until we reached a highlight: we came through the truly spectacular gorge of the Rio Esera. Here, the stone layers had folded up almost vertically with only a small gap through which the rivulet flows. Later, we by-passed Zaragoza in the north west and only turned south after Ejea de los Caballeros. Through pastoral landscape and many small villages we reached Molina de Aragón, where we spent the night.

The lady at the reception of the hotel explained that we had just landed in the coldest village all over Spain, and it did feel cooler here than in previous places indeed. Although Molina is not between mountains at all (but on 1000 m above sea level) the record low was a chilly -28°C.

Remnants of a Moorish fortress with several intact watch towers guard over the nice town, though the houses inside the walls have all disappeared. The present town lies entirely outside these walls, though just below the fortress (Alcazar). In the evening, Molina was a very happening village, although it only has 3'500 inhabitants. It felt very Spanish with everyone coming out and about. Never the less, neither here, nor in other inland villages of similar size, we had noticed any big supermarkets, let alone a shopping centre! The villages we know along the coastline all have big branches of various supermarket chains. Does this mean, touristy places get more spoilt for choice than lonely inland villages?



Next day, we continued along route CM210 southwards. The landscape remained rural and rocky, sometimes flat, sometimes hilly. Sometimes we passed a wind farm or a solar panel power plant, if it wasn't traditional olive, grain or sunflower farming. Late afternoon, we arrived in the Sierra de Segura, where we found a nice hotel-room in Orcera. This is a white washed village glued to the hill. Together with its neighbouring village Segura de Sierra, they looked almost like typical Andalusian villages and that's where we went next. It was a spectacular drive through the mountains, where big patches of pine forest had been replaced by olive plantations. After descending from Puerto del Pinar that reached 1'600m above sea-level, we soon hit the Mediterranean coast. As of here, it rained very hard for our last 100 km, except at our destination Vera Playa. Even in Vera it still rained, but Natsun was definitely OUR PLACE IN THE SUN!

## Back in Natsun at Vera Playa

It was September 20, 2010, when we arrived at [Natsun's](#) reception. We got a warm welcome by the owners Hedi & Jan and were lucky that they could give us the same apartment we have had before. So, we could again enjoy the superb vistas that come with many of Natsun's holiday flats. We also appreciated to have again the company of the nice neighbours, with whom we had stayed in touch during our 1½ years in the Far North.

As some of the little things we had left in the apartment, were still in place, we felt instantly at home again. However, we had to fetch the bulk of our "treasures" like baking oven, shaker or some additional decoration- and furnishing elements from the cellar; a very perspiring job with temperatures around 30°C! How glad we were, that our balcony had meanwhile been supplemented with a shade providing pergola.

Weather-wise we were very lucky, as we got spoilt not only with an exceptionally warm autumn, but also with an exceptionally warm and sunny winter and spring. In Andalusia it's commonly possible to swim in the sea until November, sometimes even till New Year. However this year, October-temperatures were in general still as high as they are meant to be during August.

Up to mid October, Natsun was almost fully booked but



then the period until New Year got rather quiet. Afterwards, it got packed, mainly with pensioners escaping the colder winter in central and northern Europe. Paradoxically, they all seek the sun but choose the coldest months of the year to stay here.

Although it was one of the best winters we have experienced in Andalusia, it was interrupted by some two weeks of unusually cold weather. During this period, day temperatures barely rose above 5°C and we had several thunderstorms followed by heavy hail, which is rather unusual for this region. One evening, the landscape got even covered in snow. Ironically, it was just during this cold spell, when several friends sent us e-mails, pointing out how jealous they are that we can spend winter in (what they believe is) such a mild climate! No reason to complain anyway; on some January days, it was warm enough to walk along the beach in the buff.

Force of habit brings back the same people every winter and therefore many know each other which results for many in a busy social life. Be it on the beach, around the car park or on walks, we constantly met acquaintances and had small talks. Often we invited somebody for coffee or dinner or were being invited, other times we went out for dinner together. This often involved some painful compromising, as most winter-escapees tend to have dinner at a time when Spaniards just finished their lunch, whereas we prefer to eat late.

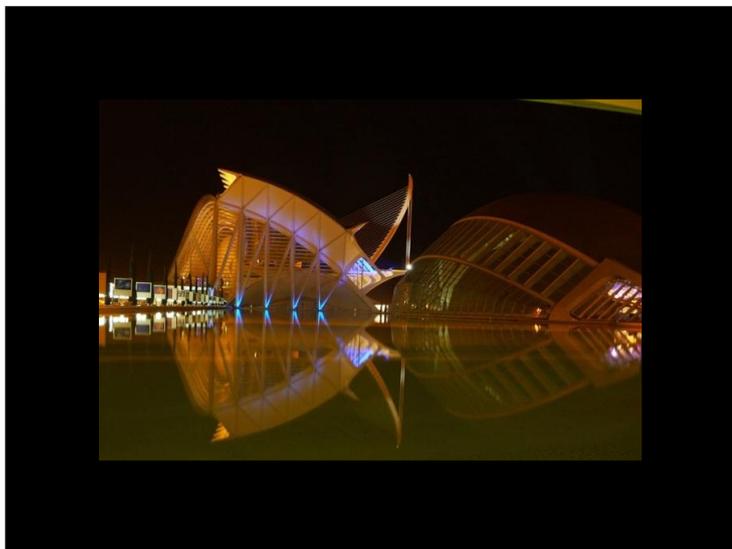
## Side trip away from the beach

Several times, we ventured out to admire the early arrival of spring. Our biggest excursion led us for a few days to Valencia, some 400km north east of Vera. As we wanted to see more almond blossom, we chose a small inland route. We came across hilly landscapes, where the otherwise arid ground was teeming with wildflowers. In some areas, the almond trees had already finished blooming but on higher altitude, like between Caravaca and Jumilla Pass, big orchards appeared like huge pink or white carpets of flowers. Somewhere along this way, we passed the construction site of a large solar farm and learned later that the bulk of it was paid for by several regional governments from Switzerland.

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2011, we arrived at the Ibis Hotel at the outskirts of Valencia. Although our hotel was only 5km from the centre and had a bus stop at its doorstep, it wasn't as easy as we hoped for, to commute to the city. Even though Spaniards go out and about all night long, public transport in Spanish cities (including Madrid and Barcelona) seems almost inexistent after 10 pm. Somehow it's logical and doesn't bother locals, as they go out for tapas between 7 and 10pm, then look for dinner between 9pm and midnight, go for a stroll and then flock to the disco, which opens sometime between 2 and 3 am. So, by the time they want to go home, they easily find a morning bus or train... Our solution was; we took the last bus back shortly after 10pm, and then looked for dinner in a restaurant around our hotel.

The locals were very helpful when we asked, with our limited Spanish, for directions or the right bus. They went out of their way to help us finding our destinations. One man even gave us a ride in his car to get us quicker to a metro station, which was on his way. Funnily enough, he drove a Dacia-car that was identical to ours, both in model and colour.

## Futuristic buildings of the "Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias"



First and foremost we had come to Valencia to admire the impressively futuristic buildings of the "[Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias](#)", the modern City of Arts and Sciences. This architectural masterpiece was designed by famous, Valencia born architect Santiago Calatrava, who studied in his hometown and in Zurich. To create a green lung for the city of 800'000, the river Turia was redirected further away from the centre. The old riverbed was converted into a huge park across the entire city. A small, but still about 2km long section of this park was used to erect the "Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias (CAC)". This array of ultra modern buildings is a real feast for any architecture buff and amazes visitors young and old. It consists of four impressive buildings, supplemented by two other extravagant structures;

a huge metallic archway called “Umbracle” and the harp-shaped bridge “Puente de l'Assut de l'Or”. Starting in the north west of the “CAC” is the 70m high “Palacio de las Artes Reina Sofía” (Art palace Queen Sofia). It houses opera and theatre halls. This impressive building has roughly the shape of an egg but with carvings and edges. The most striking part is the so called feather, a 230m long structure that swings over the roof.

Then comes a smaller extravagant building, shaped like an eye that blinks out of a reflecting pond: “el Hemisfèric”. It houses an IMAX theatre, with the cinema dome appearing as a pupil. Upon its completion in 1998 it was the first building of the CAC.

The next superb edifice to the south, is dedicated to another member of the Spanish Royal Family: “Museo de las Ciencias Príncipe Felipe”, the science museum. Its interactive exhibition space occupies 26'000m<sup>2</sup>. Some 20'000m<sup>2</sup> of glass were used to build this complex. With 220 metres in length, 80 metres width and 55 metres height, it's the largest structure of the four. Swiss might recognize a huge steel and glass Toblerone in it.

The latest addition is “El Ágora”, an ample hall used for exhibitions and other events. Though it was officially opened in 2009, it was still not entirely completed in March 2011. It is dark blue and its shape resembles a gargantuan upright shell that can open and close (its roof).

Just behind it, is the oceanographic museum and aquarium “Oceanogràfic” which houses over 500 species from aquatic environments. Only those paying the entrance fee can see the most emblematic building of the oceanographic museum which was designed by Felix Candela.

Elsewhere, we could wander around freely between all the other futuristic buildings of the “Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias” without entry- or other control. This is worthwhile at any given time and we found the dawn and evening hours especially charming, as the entire “ciudad” is beautifully illuminated.

## Historic and crazy Valencia

After we only visited the “CAC” and a restaurant on our first evening, we used the bulk of the next day to explore [Valencia's](#) historic city centre. We were wondering how large city buses squeeze through the narrow lanes, with an abundance of cars parked on both sides. Once we reached the centre by bus, we wandered around the city on foot. The old town lies on the drained river bed of the Turia and the old bridges carry the traffic now above the city park, instead over the water. All across the city, we admired many well restored historic buildings. Among them were the central market and the “Mercado de Colon”, both with elaborate market halls. Also very pretty are the post office, the railway station and of course, countless churches and the mandatory bullfight arena. There are still bold city gates and an impressive town hall, plus various squares, nicely decorated with flowers.



Currently, the town was buffing up for the “[Fallas](#)”, Valencia's famous carnival. Entire streets were being decorated with illuminations similar to Christmas lighting. Some streets have modest illumination, but others are competing for the title of the street with the most extravagant Fallas-decoration. Those areas go over the top and build impressive castle-like archways, with hundred thousands of colourful lights covering entire streets. We witnessed how the frames with the tiny light bulbs were being put up along the pavements. They looked like wrought ironwork, creating a very tall, tunnel-like ornament, spanning the streets. Specialists from Italy were presently putting them up, so we were a bit too early to see the illuminated castles and streets at night.

However, mid afternoon we were caught by a pitfall of the “Fallas”: the “Mascleta”. Suddenly we were stuck in a mighty concourse of people, with no possibility to escape. Somehow, the masses seemed to wait for something. A big square was closed off with a tall fence, surrounded by ambulances. We couldn't see what was in its middle. Our attempts to ask the bystanders what they were waiting for, was not that successful; the first answer was: „sprechen sie Deutsch?“ (do you

speak German). It was another clueless trapped tourist. An old Lady's answer was a bit more revealing. Short and sweet she said: "bum bum, bum bum" whereby she gesticulated with her arms. Little later we heard and felt what she meant. The "Mascleta" is nothing else than a daylight firework. It's all about noise! A fierce concert of coordinated firecrackers and gunpowder.

Every year, between March 1<sup>st</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> the "Mascleta" is held daily at 2 pm on the Plaza del Ayuntamiento. The big "bum bum" is a very popular event and draws big crowds. Although there is obviously not that much to see during a daylight firework, a little Spanish Lady complained that we stood in her sight. Well, we couldn't get out of her way anyway, as it was too crowded to move back or forth. What the locals consider to be the highlight comes at the end of the 20 minutes spectacle: the "terremoto" that literally translates to earthquake. In fact, for at least 5 minutes, the manmade explosions escalated that much, the ground, as well as the bodies of everyone present, were vibrating. It was almost painful, but the crowd cheered and applauded.

## Back to Vera Playa

After two eventful days, we chose another inland route to get back. Our first stop was at "el Pou clar", an amazingly clear spring near Ontinyent which was made accessible by steep steps. Continuing along our way, we soon passed the village of **Bocairent** that sits proudly on a hilltop. The valley below it is dotted with medieval caves and proof of ancient settlements.

On small roads, we made our way to the **Sierra de Espuña**. Again, many trees were in full blossom and the landscape was very spectacular as well. Visibility wasn't that good due to dark clouds, however, the almond tree's black trunks were contrasting beautifully.

As we reached Lorca, it started to rain and so we interrupted our journey and had dinner, after browsing through the new shopping centre. It was quite late by the time we got back to our apartment in Vera Playa. Meanwhile, it was dry and the neighbours told us that the sky had looked frightening, but didn't unload here. In fact, it had even been sunny until 4 pm. This was not an unusual phenomenon. During our time here it was often sunny in Vera Playa but rained only 5km away.

Already during autumn we noticed that most foreign long term visitors and residents seem to avoid Vera Playa's beach on long weekends, while it's heavily frequented by locals. As soon as the Spaniards are back at work, the "extranjeros" (foreigners) flock back to the beach. We're not sure whether some visitors are worried the local's bite (or look something off). To us, it's somehow shocking to realize how many long-term visitors rather moan about the locals and their way of life, than attempting to learn at least a few words of their guest-country's language. That some of them even vote for the populist right wing movements in their home countries is quite worrying!



We're still impressed how border- and fenceless Vera Playa's vast naturist zone is integrated within the surrounding textile-resorts, and how smooth nudes and prudes mingle with each other. In that respect, the Spanish society is certainly among the most tolerant on earth. Therefore, it's no problem that the (now former) Spanish President Zapatero owns a holiday apartment in a textile resort at Vera Playa, surrounded by nudist resorts and the nudist beach.

## Pitfalls

The fenceless transition between textile and naturist resorts, together with the tolerant society, is certainly one of Vera Playa's big assets, but it's unfortunately too often misused by ruthless real estate dealers who sell apartments in textile urbanisations to naturists, and vice versa. Reliable advice and commissions are a contradiction in itself, and in countries like Spain, where, after a long history of dictatorship, corruption is naturally not fully eliminated yet, the situation is even worse.

Some other pitfalls are apartments and holiday-houses sold without proper building-permissions. Normally, nothing happens, but sometimes the government states an example and dismantles one of those buildings where the permit was paid with bribes. If the current owners bought the house without being aware of the legal situation, they might get a compensation for the loss of their home. Never the less, the Spanish Justice works rather slow and we read about some foreigners who's case was still not settled seven years after their house got dismantled by the force of law!

## Changes

Renting is a pretty hassle free way of enjoying the spirit of Vera Playa. Only the pool separates Natsun, the place where we stayed, from the beach. Therefore, most apartments enjoy beautiful sea-view. On the (odd) days, when big waves' crush in, the sea becomes even more spectacular. It's astonishing to see, how quick some 30 meters of beach can vanish in the sea, sometimes (hopefully) to be brought back a few days, weeks or month later, if mother nature is in the right mood! That's probably the most dramatic rearrangement we noticed in Vera Playa, but otherwise not much has changed during the past two years, indeed.

The real-estate crisis has finally caught up with this part of Andalucía as well, but at least the vast number of holiday apartments that were already under construction two years ago, were not left as unfinished building, but are slowly but steadily completed. The big Consum supermarket that borders the "Zona Naturista" got a little extended and is now quality-wise even more above the other supermarkets around here. Vera's Intermarché closed down and was replaced with a "Iceland by Overseas", a British retailer in Spain, which employs English speaking staff only. A few products can really not be found anywhere else, but more than 80% of their offerings are exactly those, you find in any Spanish supermarket, but with a British wrapping that comes with a small 20% - 200% surcharge or so - even Paella!

The number of cheap Chinese shops also increased during the last few years. If there is a general strike in Spain, strike guards make sure that everybody, including foreign shop-owners, join in. A day ahead of a big general-strike, a frustrated Chinese shop-keeper said to us: "somehow it's crazy; in China, I may run into problems if I join a strike, here in Spain, I may run into problems if I DON'T join in, it's no better here, just the other way round!"

Most of Vera Playa's urbanisations are fenced; Natsun is a rare, but nice exception. Therefore, it feels pretty much like a seaside-place overlooking the beach and not like a ghetto behind walls. At Natsun, many guests return annually and in comparison to most other places, it's reasonably well occupied year round. Consequently, it has much more security than any fence would offer. Most German winter-escapees we know, initially felt attracted by one of the fenced naturist urbanisations nearby, but within two years, all looked somewhere else, as they felt like being in a rather empty ghetto looking at walls!



Our time at Natsun vanished quickly; the weather was again very boring. Good weather persisted that often, we sometimes used even nice days to do something inside. Spring in Vera is usually sunny and warm, though, it can often be very windy, but this spring was just calm all the time. Only during the long weekends, the weather didn't cooperate that much. Never the less, during "Semana Santa" (Easter week), the beach was sometimes almost as crowded as during peak summer. Only a few days later, the beach was quiet again, which means; a few hundred bathers frequented the nudist-beach during the week, maybe 1000 on the weekends. The textile section, on the other hand, remained near empty up to August. If the sun can't reach the bum, it's just too cold for sunbathing in spring. Only those who bear it all, seem to tan and warm-up quickly under the Andalusian pre-season sun!

## Leaving Vera Playa

With many good memories, we left Vera Playa on May 22<sup>th</sup> 2011, after waving good bye to Hedi and Jan, Natsun's owners. We followed the spectacular coastal road to Águilas, from where we moved inland to Lorca. Only 10 days ago, a 5.4 magnitude earthquake had shaken this town and caused some buildings in the centre to collapse. Of course, media coverage had concentrated on the 9 fatalities and on the buildings with the most visible damage, leaving the impression, the entire town lies in rubble. However, as we passed Lorca's outskirts, we didn't notice any earthquake damage. Due to the narrow roads between Spanish townhouses, there is unfortunately little space to escape, if a quake causes something to fall down.

Now we continued along the country-roads RM711 and CM3203 northwards. The further away we got from the coast, the greener the landscape. The scenery was appealing all along our way and many villages and hamlets are very pretty to look at from a distance. However, if you have to drive through them, it's often a matter of Good Luck to remain on the through-road, as even those are often unmarked and too narrow to be easily recognizable as "main road". If you fail, you will most probably jam your car in the narrow maze of those typical Spanish villages and towns, as happened to us in Caravaca de la Cruz. Even with our small car, there was no way to take some T-junctions without forwarding and backtracking several times. This is also challenging for pedestrians but it's at least easy to ask them for advice, as long as they are trapped between your car and a building.

As we reached the impressive mountain ranges near Socovos, the arid landscape was slowly getting dotted with trees. More and more poppy and gorse could be seen lining the road.

Shortly before Ayna, we reached the spectacular view-point “mirador de los infiernos”, overlooking the deep gorge carved by Rio Mundo. The village Ayna with its surrounding red mountains, was gleaming in the warm evening sun. Soon thereafter we reached a high plateau and started looking for accommodation. There were quite a few appealing villages with many places to eat, but unfortunately no places to stay. Finally, we took a room in a hostel by the roadside near Balazote, which turned out not to be very good value for money.

The next morning we continued towards Cuenca, again on minor roads, which are normally up to high standard all over Spain. Huge irrigation systems made the here totally flat landscape very fertile and giant fields were intensely farmed. Also wind generators could be seen all over. Again, there were red poppies gleaming every now and then in the fields. This pastoral scenery was very colourful and looked most dramatic around the stark blue “Embalse de Alarcon”, an artificial lake near Valverde de Jucar. It was not only the different plants that coloured the picture like an artist’s palette, but also the red soil that had brighter and darker shades in the same acre.



Soon, the landscape changed again and we reached a spectacular gorge just before Valeria. As we were getting hungry, we asked in a village for a place to eat. We were being referred to an exceptionally good restaurant on a nearby campground, a place we had probably never stopped by ourselves.

During lunch, a thunderstorm raged outside, but by the time we continued along CM210, we could admire the rock formations in the “[Hoz de Beteta](#)” mountains under blue sky again. Only later, we got a short (natural) carwash. Though it was still quite early, we took this as a heavenly sign to stay overnight at Molina de Aragón, a village where we knew a good hotel and a superb restaurant. As the weather was again perfect, we could now admire the Alcazar, the remnants of an old fortress, in the best sunlight and had time to stroll again around the historical village, which we had already visited a few months ago.

The next morning we continued northwards. As the road reached the Aragon Province, the road-number changed, as is common between Spanish Provinces, so CM 210 became A202 and it got much narrower. Approaching from another fertile high plateau, we came down to Nuevalos, a village that sits majestically above the artificial lake “Embalse de la Tranquera”.

Approaching Zarazoga, we took some 40km of freeway which led us steeply down to a plain. Even after leaving the “autovia” A2 near Calatorao, the road along Rio Jalón was still very busy at first. However, it was flanked by white sandstone cliffs and very scenic. Around Sadaba, the landscape was again very flat and rice was grown, attracting storks which we saw nesting on power masts.

## Approaching the Pyrenees

Along road A127, we reached “Sos del Rey Católico”, from where we suddenly were offered breathtaking views over several valleys to the peaks of the Pyrenees; some still snow covered. Before reaching France, we were now going to zigzag for a day through this mountain-range that separates the two countries.

On road number A1601, we passed the ruins of the “Ermita San Jacobo” one of many abandoned settlements. Today’s Spaniards certainly want to live where the crowds are and not in remote settlements, as foreign immigrants often prefer. Around “Embalse de Yesa”, smooth outwashes could be seen that appeared almost like gunned concrete.

From Puente de la Reina de Jaca, we made a big detour along street numbers A132 and A1205, into the “Sierra de la Peña”. Again, we could often admire vast views of the mountains but also of narrow forested river valleys. Wherever we stopped, we were greeted by a concert of birdsongs and often the call of a cuckoo was poking out.

Overnight we stayed in [Jaca](#), a pleasant but touristy ski-resort with hotels abound. Its population of 14'000 triples during high season, but now it was rather quiet. The offerings of most restaurants seemed to reflect the demand created by French tourists, and therefore, the posted menus promised quite sophisticated food.

As we were heading for France, we opted for the Sushi-Restaurant that probably aims at modern Spanish city folks. Also on our last day, the sun smiled and we enjoyed another stroll through Jaca, admiring its historic sites like the Citadel and the old town, as well as its modern face, like the hyper modern indoor ice rink.

We continued through the breathtaking sceneries of the Pyrenees and passed many resort-villages that sometimes were encircled with big holiday apartment complexes. Currently, they were all deserted, but architecturally, they look very different from those along the Spanish coast. Here in the mountains, they try to blend in with the local villages. Our way led us along N260 via Biescas and beautiful Broto to Ainsa. We came across many crystal clear mountain creeks and finally followed the fairly swift and straight road A138 along Rio Cinca up to Bielsa, from where a 3,5km tunnel led us into France.

## Summer in France: no clothes, no worries

[France](#) is a very proud country, famous for its irresistible haute cuisine and its regular, countrywide strikes. The nation of roughly 60 Million inhabitants spreads over an area of 543'965 km<sup>2</sup>. It's a centralized country, governed from its capital Paris, which is surrounded by the central province "Île de France" (Island of France).

As we did already ten years ago, we had come to France to spend a naturist summer with lots of "vivre nu et manger bien". Both of us felt the urge to discover also some regions yet unknown to us and therefore, we intended to stay mainly on naturist resorts we either hadn't been at all, or not for a long time. We had researched for places offering "value for money"-deals on accommodation, so we could avoid staying in our little tent, without having our piggy bank putting its trotters up. To us, camping means nothing more than "saving, no matter the price".

So, on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, we alighted on the French side of the Bielsa-Aragnoet tunnel through the Pyrenees. It was now much more densely populated than on the Spanish side. A twisted and steep road descends into the valley and about one hour later we reached the lowlands.



### L'Eglantière: naturism and haute cuisine

We spent our first two weeks at [l'Eglantière](#), a nice naturist resort near Castelnau-Magnoac, some 20 km north of Lannemezan. With 45 ha it's a rather big place with lots of space for holidayers. The 120 campsites were not that well occupied yet, but the approximately 30 mobile-homes and chalets proved very popular. We stayed in a well equipped and very new mobile-home with a covered terrace, a large bed (1.6 x 2.0 m), as well as an electric boiler, something we appreciate much more than the usual gas appliances. Even though we always manage to stuff all our belongings into our Dacia's boot only, once unloaded, they easily filled the entire second bedroom.

As the season was just coming in swing, Eglantière's shop was not yet open. Though, as almost everywhere in France, fresh bread could be ordered. It was quietly being delivered every morning straight to our terrace, without interrupting our sleep.

Eglantière's restaurant started with a new chef and he prove to be into real gourmet cuisine. What he prepared, was of excellent quality, nicely presented and easily matched the offerings of some rewarded restaurants but at a lower price, much better than what you'd expect on a camp ground. Even an "amuse bouche" was offered before the feast. Communal meals were organized weekly; once a semi-BYO-BBQ, and once a delicious dinner, focusing on local fare. A swimming pool, some play- and sports-grounds, as well as Wi-Fi-access around their main-building complement Eglantière's offerings.

After spending a long time in southern Spain, we had to get used again to temperatures dropping much more at night. The weather here was not as boring as in Andalusia; it changed all the time and sometimes we even got a heavenly brainwash. We were quite puzzled how cold it got in the first June days; we were even urged to use the heater in our mobile-home.

We were glad, that additional sauna sessions were announced. Never mind, on most other days, there was no need to wear any clothes at all.

L'Eglantière is owned by a local family, enthusiastically and personally run by Isabelle, Xavier and their teenage children. They are assisted by a small sympathetic team, including a few working-holidayers from around the globe. Activities are often communicated in person, instead of only posting them on a black-board. On mother's day, Isabelle went around distributing roses to every woman on the ground.

As during our previous visit ten years ago, we enjoyed the extensive network of walking paths within the domain. The river Gers flows for more than a kilometre across the grounds, which consists also of meadows and forests. It seems, not many people ventured up the hill into the woods, as we saw roe deer every time we went up there. It was great to hike in the raw around this very natural place.

If we were willing to wear not only hiking boots, but also some rags, there were countless walking- or cycling possibilities on minor roads across the pastoral landscape and the surrounding hamlets. If weather permits, there are fantastic views to the Pyrenees.



## A burglar from Down Under

As l'Eglantière is big in size, but still small and intimate, it's easy to get in contact with other guests. One afternoon, when we came back from a long walk, our neighbours told us in worries about a strangely clad man they had seen roaming around our mobile home. As they watched him, he went behind another mobile home and disappeared into the bush. They were afraid it was a burglar and wanted to inform the reception.

The next morning, this stranger came back, knocking on our door. It was Brian from New Zealand who wanted to give us a surprise. He told us that he had come already the previous day, curious whether we'd recognize him in his funny outfit. Although we knew that Brian sometimes helps out at l'Eglantière, we weren't aware of his coming now.

Five years ago, we had met him and his partner Kay, when we travelled to New Zealand. They then ran "Aoraki-Naturally" a naturist ground near Lake Tekapo. From Brian we learned that we were among the last guests, before they were moving to a new property near Blenheim, where they opened "[Wai-natur](#)" their new Naturist Park. Now we sat together quite a few times, updating on many things that have happened in the meantime. One of them was the recent earthquake in Christchurch (Febr. 22, 11). Brian explained that, despite the big damage in the city centre, already the surrounding villages were unaffected. For instance the buildings at Pineglades, the club-ground only 20km out of Christchurch, are not damaged at all.

We also learned that Kay is no longer president of the Kiwi Naturist Federation but "Mrs New Zealand Naturist Magazine" instead, as she has volunteered to take on the editing of the publication "gonatural". Therefore, time doesn't permit her anymore to come along with Brian to spend winter, or summer respectively in Europe.

Our time at l'Eglantière passed quickly and towards the end of our stay the number of holidayers tripled, as there was one long week-end following the next.

## Equivocal toponyms along our way

On June 8, 2011 we continued and passed many gentle green hills along our way northwards. We stopped for lunch in the nice town of **Condom** that nestles along the currently very muddy river Baïse. Its name is actually a derivation of its old Gallo-Roman name Condatomagus and has nothing to do with what you might think... Anyway; the French call *that thing* either "préservatif" or "capote anglaise" (i.e. English hood).

Only 15km west of Condom, lies the tiny and charming village **Montréal**, one of the namesakes of Québec's biggest city. More historic half-timbered houses could be admired in nearby **Fourcès**. It has been amended to the list of France's prettiest villages "Les plus Beaux Villages de France". Along some typical tree lined alleys, we passed Ste-Foy-la-Grande in the Dordogne. Later, we stopped at the covered market square of Gontaud-de-Nogaret, where we admired its beautiful old woodwork.

## Le Portrait: small and personally

About 12km northwest of Ribérac, we reached “[Domaine Le Portrait](#)”, a small naturist camping in the Charente district. Our friends Tineke & Wim, a Dutch couple who opened this place only two years ago, welcomed us in the buff. Unfortunately, this natural approach is not a matter of course among all naturist-ground owners, but it certainly helps eliminating fears of contact with newcomers to naturism. With this self-confident approach they do set them a good example of the naturist ideals.



In 2009, we had been among Tineke & Wim’s first guests, after they had obtained legal permission to open their paradise to the public. Two years ago, they had already integrated the necessary facilities into the old farm buildings. A common room is situated in the former cow stable and the shower in the pig pen, which gives it a special touch. Only their swimming pool is all new and get’s regularly tested by the authorities. We doubt whether those inspectors would have liked the idea of integrating it into the former cesspit.

Meanwhile, quite a bit of additional luxury has been added and Tineke & Wim are working hard, to make their place even better. A nice two-person chalet had been added and that’s where we stayed. At Le Portrait, everything is “home-made” and therefore, this chalet looks quite different from the standard structures most campgrounds buy from big manufacturers. Only the compact size

is about the same. Otherwise, you see and feel that everything is of good quality and tastefully decorated.

A new sanitary block was under construction and awaited delivery of the tiles. So, if everything went well, it should have been ready before peak season.

Currently, Le Portrait offers 16 sites, the mentioned chalet, an on-site caravan plus a on-site tent. With the completion of the ablution block, the capacity will be a little bit extended and an additional camping and caravanning area had already been flattened out. As it had been unusually dry and warm this spring, no grass has been sprouting as yet. Luckily, the spreading of Wi-Fi-signals is less weather dependent, and therefore internet-connection is now available all over the campground.

Gradually, Tineke & Wim’s vision takes shape, though they still have more projects in mind. To make sure that their ideas are not put into cold storage, they regularly return to the Netherlands during the coldest months, to earn additional money for their investments.

Considering the small size of their ground, the services they offer, are not only very personal, but also outstanding. Delicious home-cooked set meals can be ordered six days a week. We’re still very impressed about the bread-list, where every item is introduced with a picture and the approximate weight, just to make sure, guests don’t buy a pig in a poke! The ordered bread is being delivered every morning to the guest’s site. Everything else can be found in the nearby village St. Séverin.

Le Portrait is embedded in pastoral landscape with many hills and it’s situated on one itself. Therefore, guests can enjoy open views in all directions. Nude walks within the ground are limited to a few hundred metres, but the surroundings offer uncountable walking and cycling possibilities between farmland and small hamlets. For us, it was a pity that we arrived too late to enjoy the cherries, but too early to see the many sunflower-fields in the bloom.

Le Portrait is a beautiful intimate place, perfect for people who want to relax and spend a few quiet weeks or days.

## Moving to the Atlantic

Using small roads through peaceful countryside, we continued west to [Blaye](#) on the Gironde estuary. As the car ferry to Lamarque runs only a few times a day, we had plenty of time to enjoy the charming town with its UNESCO World Heritage listed Citadel.

In our opinion, twenty Euros for the 3km ferry crossing were quite pricey. Even in expensive Norway we would have paid less for such a short sailing. On the bank of the Gironde River, we saw pretty fisherman’s shacks on stilts. They usually had a square net, called “Carrelet”, hanging in front of them. Now we were in the Médoc, a region famous for its

expensive grape juice. Here, the area is littered with “Chateaux”, but most have nothing to do with castles. Most Chateaux are just a marketing trick, to give sweet grapes an evocative name, after they had been converted into sour drinks... Never the less, the grape fields give the scenery a completely different touch than the vast pine forests that are planted along the Atlantic coast.

## CHM Montalivet; an entire village for naturists

It was 7 P.M. when we arrived at the [“Centre Hélio Marin” \(CHM\) in Montalivet](#) on June 11<sup>th</sup>. Reception was already closed but the night-guard handed us the keys out, much quicker than we had expected. Also the check-in process on the next morning was very swift and quite different from our previous experiences. We don't know whether this was thanks to our pre-booking, or due to CHM's new owners.

We stayed in a new mobile-home that was very compact in size but seemed bigger than it was, due to its smart layout. Apart from its open plan kitchen with attached living-dining room, it still offered two bedrooms, a bathroom, a separate toilet, plus many cupboards. However, with its 23m<sup>2</sup>, it was that compact, we constantly banged our heads or elbows somewhere. We shouldn't complain, we opted for a small, not for a big mobile-home!

CHM Monta was founded in 1950 and is among the biggest naturist camping villages in Europe. Situated right on the Atlantic, the estate of 200 hectares pine forest offers altogether about 3'500 plots for pitches, mobile-homes and chalets.

A big fraction is rented to long-term casuals or permanent tenants that own anything; from small caravans and ramshackle bungalows to huge modern mobile-homes and nice chalets. Some tenants come every week-end and every holiday and a few even stay all year around. Some permanents retain their plots sandy as they are, or pave them with flagstones, so no weed can grow. Others create neat little gardens around their leisure time dwelling.

During summer, the residents are joined by thousands of holidayers who tow a caravan, pitch up a tent or take advantage of the countless rental possibilities. During peak summer, up to 16'000 (sixteen-thousand) keen naturists flock around CHM Monta. Obviously, at some stage, they all want to eat. To satisfy their demand, around 40 shops and restaurants try to keep everyone happy. They include several bakeries, a big butcher shop, a fish-monger and a take-away that doesn't sell burgers, but an astonishing selection of well-prepared dishes, salads and desserts. Even though there is no need to wear clothing while shopping, you still need a purse, because even the nudes can be stripped off their money – business is business! No reasons to leave the holiday

village, especially as the surroundings neither have many villages, or good shops. The next “shopping centre” of similar size, with another 40 shops, can be found at [Euronat](#), the regions second huge naturist centre, less than 10km up the coast.

## Endless stretch of golden sand

It's certainly the Atlantic Ocean that draws these big crowds. Almost 250km of golden sandy beach stretches between Biarritz and the Gironde estuary north of Montalivet. There is a big difference between high tide and low tide and at

CHM Monta, the beach could exceptionally become as narrow as 10 metres, but soon thereafter 500 metres wide again. Strong currents and powerful waves bear risks to swimmers and therefore, Australian trained lifeguards supervise the beach here, with the help of surfboards, among other equipments. Coastal inland areas are sheltered from the ocean's moods by an overgrown dune. It is threatened by wind and water and in an effort to limit further damage, the dune is protected and beachgoers are required to use designated access paths, which unfortunately is often being ignored.

Walking along the beach was very rewarding and it was still not crowded at all. This applied even more to the tiny village Montalivet Plage, which mainly aims at catering for tourists. In the second half of June, the majority



of shops and restaurants were still locked and it resembled a ghost town. Even though it was still off-season, CHM Monta where we stayed, felt lively compared to there. Naturists are more likely to spend their vacation in off-season than others (going textile), who believe good weather prevails only between mid July and mid August.

In fact, during our stay, the weather was not always that sunny and sometimes no hotter than 21°C. On the other hand, we heard that it had been worse last August, but unusually hot this April, which means up to 30°C for quite a while. On the Atlantic coast, as anywhere, the weather gods don't consider school holidays, they go after their own moods.

## More facilities than one can use

Not only the beach offered huge opportunities for exercising, also within the naturist resort itself, there were several dozen kilometres of small roads, inviting for extensive walks. Strolling through the grounds of CHM Monta, we passed not only the modern area with all the amenities, but also the older section where there is no electricity, and many older bungalows, built by “pioneers” of naturism. Here the spirit and modesty of the founders still prevails, though solar panels are nowadays very common in this area. As some people told us, they don't mind the lack of power, as long as they have TV and internet. Obviously, young families seem to prefer the newer section with electricity and Wi-Fi coverage. CHM was the only place where we had to pay extra for internet access. However, there were some 40 transmitters, covering big parts of the ground.

Apart from the big shopping area in its “town-centre”, CHM also offers extensive sports fields and big children's playgrounds incorporating inflated castle bounce houses, a tall ship for climbing, plus ordinary swings and slides. Although they have now a new aqua park with water slides, there is still the old pool (French: piscine / pronounced: piss-in). To make sure nobody gets bored, holidayers just need to look on the black-board and choose any of the countless animations, tournaments or workshops; anything, from early morning yoga to late night screenings in the open-air cinema. For those who like it a bit more quiet, the big library or the “Thermes”, a wellness centre, where money buys beauty and relaxation, might be right.

Ablution blocks are abounding, even in areas where everybody has en-suite facilities. All are kept clean but a couple of them are as popular with breeding birds as the Vestmanna Bird cliffs on the Faroese Islands; only with house martins instead of puffins.

As the Médoc region doesn't offer (m)any highlights, neither culinary nor touristy, we only went out once to eat in a nice restaurant. On that evening we were joined by friends of ours, a nice and funny English couple we dubbed “Funny hat's”. As they now live permanently at CHM Monta, we met them quite a few times, even for a birthday party. From them we got to know quite a few insider-stories and we learned that this lively summer destination gets very quiet when everything, apart from reception, closes down during winter.

After two very enjoyable weeks, we left and drove through endless pine forests, later bypassing Bordeaux in the south-west. After a lunch stop at St. Symphorien, we finally got to hilly pastoral landscape with many cornfields. In the village of Villandraut we admired a romantic ruin of a big old chateau, from where we headed further east.

## Domaine Laborde; Dutch perfection paired with French charm

On June 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, we arrived at [Domaine Laborde](#), a nice naturist ground situated halfway between Monflanquin and Monpazier. It sits right at the border between the districts “Lot et Garonne” and “Dordogne”. Although the size of the ground is only a fraction of the previous place we had been, with 23 hectares it's not all that small. Presently it was still very quiet; probably the calm before the storm. Only about 20% of their 120 campsites were occupied and about half of the 30 chalets. Very soon, all the cottages were occupied, as they



could still be rented at the same off-season rate as in April, which got meanwhile a bargain.

We opted for a so-called “chalet simple” which was rather big, offered a well equipped kitchen which even had an espresso-machine, but there were no en-suite facilities. We loved the sleeping loft and the open view to the opposite hill, as our chalet was situated on a slope. Temperatures reached sizzling 37°C during our first couple of days, so we often strolled around the lower part of the site. Here, it was much shadier, as it was dotted with trees and we also found various walking tracks that led through dense forest. Pretty sights are also the three small ponds, abound with frogs and fish. Right now, nobody interrupted the reflections of the trees on the water, but this will change real soon now. Judging from the cable structure that is taut across one of the ponds, and the raft floating on another, we guess in the coming weeks, children will have a lot of fun living it up in and around the water.

## Flying in new directions

Domaine Laborde is owned by a Dutch Family and we learned that they sold their thriving factory some twenty years ago, to run this lifestyle business instead. Pictures document how the old buildings of the former farm were renovated and given a new purpose. Several new buildings were added, all matching the existing structures. Three of them incorporate full size models of dovecot turrets, for which the owners seem to have a particular passion. They invested generously and provide a big array of amenities, all in top-notch quality. Apart from an outdoor pool and Jacuzzi, guests can also take advantage of a big indoor swimming pool, heated up to 28°C. There is also a large sauna with plunge pool, a small hamam and lots of room for relaxation.

One dovecot turret serves as jumping off point for the two large water slides which disgorge the screaming daredevils into a separate pool. There is a straight 20m slide, as well as a 50m cork-screw tube. Both are popular with youngsters but sometimes tempt adults as well. Also popular is the Wi-Fi access around their main buildings.



The place offers some exceptional services, like a large covered storage for caravans, or dormitory accommodation, where campers can spend their last night. This allows them a good night sleep after packing and sacking and the possibility of an early departure, without the need to rise and shine too early!

Laborde is nicely landscaped, with big open meadows between the campsites. Everywhere, old farm equipment and art-work is placed as decoration. Tidy footpaths connect the ground that also consists of several play- and sports-yards. Even when this place will be full, there will still be lots of space for everyone.

The owners are constantly looking for things they could further improve and even during peak-season, they can't stop themselves beautifying and altering amenities. Like on July 10<sup>th</sup>; a clay tile roof

was placed over a perfect, intact corrugated eternit roof of the same colour.

This might be the Dutch perfection, paired with the owner's personal ambition. What we also liked very much was that this place also got some French charm, as the employees in the reception spoke French among other languages. One of them was a French guy who was constantly joking with everyone. He particularly loved to wind up the young Dutch working holidayers, challenging them with French. There were more than a dozen Dutch students coming in, to combine work and fun during high season. Most struggled with French, addressing everybody in Dutch, whether they knew it or not. This wasn't very well appreciated by the non-Dutch guests, among them many French!

Every morning, Heinz took delight in teasing the young girls working in the grocery shop with French, as he went to collect the pre-ordered bread. Even if our French is not perfect, it's still good enough to give them an exercise. On the other hand, we got often challenged by French holidayers, as we socialised regularly when strolling around the vast grounds. Three times French couples invited us for an apéro. Dutch usually practised their German or English with us.

## Gourmandizing and sight-seeing around Laborde

Laborde also has a take-away and a restaurant, which we heard is famous for its pizzas. When eating out, we preferred local cuisine and that way we combined sight-seeing with dining. Following a recommendation by a French couple, we once visited a “Ferme Auberge”. This term stands for a restaurant attached to a farm. Normally, they serve hearty traditional fare, made of their farmed meat and vegetables. Commonly, the portions are huge and the wine, as well as aperitif and digestive to wash it down, is included in the price – not the best of deals for teetotallers. We never have

alcohol and as we had been charged extra for water in such rustic places, we started to avoid them. However, the “Ferme Auberge de Selles” was a different affair! All drinks were charged extra and the decoration was very elegant. The portions were still generous and the ingredients consisted mainly of duck meat, fruit and vegetables from their own farm, though the presentation, as well as the preparation of the food, were rather in the style of a gourmet-restaurant. Everything was just superb!

Gourmet-style farm restaurants are an exception, but there is an abundance of gourmet-restaurants. We bought (again) one of the bibles for all gourmands venturing around France; The [Gault-Millau](#). With its help, we could pre-sort those gourmet-temples that are excellent and rather expensive, from those that are affordable but still excellent.

The area around our naturist paradise did not only offer good eating but also good sight-seeing options with many pretty villages. **Monflanquin**, only 12km south of Domaine Laborde, was the first place we visited. It is one of many fortified villages, called “bastides” in the “Lot et Garonne” and “Dordogne” districts. It enthrones a hill with a big church on top, assembling many alleys of well preserved century old houses at its feet.

Further south, we ventured around **Villeneuve sur Lot**, with 23'000 inhabitants ten times bigger than Monflanquin. There were many nice buildings to be admired, first of all the majestic church “Eglise Sainte Catherine” with its 55m tall tower. It has elaborate red brick work in Roman-Byzantine architecture. Also very charming, were the views along the Lot river, up to an almost overhanging chapel and the pretty market hall. Only a stone’s throw away, the formerly fortified village of **Pujols** occupies a hilltop. There it was rather the contemporary and floral decoration that added charm to the age-old buildings.

The region is also dotted with castles. The first one lies only a few kilometres away from Laborde: **Chateau Biron**. It stands on a promontory above a tiny settlement. Also the ruins of **Chateau Gavaudun** enthrone a promontory, just above another tiny settlement, this one with a Gault Millau awarded Restaurant. Through a pretty gorge we continued to Fumel and soon thereafter, we reached beautiful **Chateau Bonaguil**.

Back at Laborde, we enjoyed the summer weather that sometimes got almost too hot. Then we often strolled into the woods or had refreshing dips in the pool. In the evening, we sometimes took advantage of the excellent sauna. Presently, it could be enjoyed for free, but during peak-season an entrance fee will be charged to cope with the rising demand.



## Encounters

When we arrived at Laborde, there was an eerie silence. No children could be seen, only quiet naturists, who never moved about, seemingly strapped to their sun beds. After about a week this changed. Beginning of July, all chalets were taken, though the campsites were still not that well occupied. However, the place had become livelier, as most retirees escaped before the high season, just to be replaced by families with children. Not only the owners, but also many of the young working-holidayers stripped off regularly. This added to the very natural atmosphere and helped motivating adolescents to do likewise.

Most new-arrivals were from the Netherlands, but there was also another exotic from Switzerland, so we couldn’t claim anymore to be the sole representatives from this small alpine island, placed in the heart of the EU. We sat together quite a few times and although he was a passionate camper, he realized that renting a cottage might be just as good an idea, as pitching up a tent.

This was certainly true for our Belgian neighbours. As they could only stay for a short time, they’d decided it wasn’t worth bringing their caravan. They had in mind to rent a luxury chalet and were a bit disappointed at first, that all were reserved. Finally, they got a simple one as we had, without toilet. After a few days, they decided to sell their caravan, seeing that even the simplest cottage offers much more space and comfort, than the caravan they’d towed around every holiday for the last 20 years. They figured out that renting is also a fair bit cheaper, taking in account purchase-, maintenance- and storage cost for the caravan, as well as higher road tolls and petrol consumption. We could only agree.

Almost every time when we walked around the ponds, we encountered some fishermen. Most were not interested in eating their catch. They just put it back into the pool after release from the hook. Fish was abundant and it was easy to play this game with dozens of them within a short time. Manmade rules and regulations seem funny; hurting an animal can either be declared as cruelty or as sport – we doubt whether the concerned animal feels any difference in the fine print...

On the other hand, Laborde also has some animals mutilating themselves. Two Australian Cockatoos inhabit a large aviary and one of them looks now like a plucked hen, as it converted itself into a real nudist bird, revealing its grey skin. It plucked all the feathers on its chest and even some on its back. We were also astounded by hearing the two parrots talk – naturally Dutch. Another aviary held several chickens, doves and a pheasant. Then there were a few goats. As one of the employees pointed out, they serve as pigs, meaning they get all the leftovers. Obviously, the management knows that parents prefer their children to pet goats, rather than pigs.

Some of those animals got quite noisy at times but it seems, there are more than enough campers volunteering to place their caravan or tent next to those buggers. We were just glad our cabin was far away from the cock.

## Further worthwhile excursions

Wherever we drove out, we came across beautiful sunflower fields. Now was also the time when farmers harvest their crop. Therefore, we had to mingle with heavy oversized machineries on many of the small roads.

One led us to the charming village of **Castillonès** that has a pretty covered market. One morning, we went to **Villeréal** for its Wednesday market and later to **Monpazier**, a rather touristy fortified village.

There are many more worthwhile sights in the vicinity of Laborde. However, as we had in mind to revisit some of our favourite gourmet restaurants, we preferred to relocate for 4 days, even if those places were only 50km away, thus sparing us from driving back at night. As we have more time than money, we can run after another rhythm than those with less time. Therefore, we waved farewell to Laborde on July 12<sup>th</sup> and continued towards the Dordogne River. After 25km we visited the beautiful little town **Belvès**, where all roads and alleys presently had artificial flowers hanging above. These decorations had been mounted for the “**Fête Félibrée Pays d’Anaïs**” about the former culture and language of the Occitan region. It was very colourful and felt like going underneath a sky of flowers.

## Lost reservation

After another 25km drive, we arrived at **La Roque-Gageac**, an incredibly scenic village, sitting right on the Dordogne River’s shore. Here we had reserved a Bed & Breakfast back in April. However, our booking form ended in the Landlords spam mail, leading him to assume we were not interested anymore in staying at his place. On top of it, he seems to be flush with money, so our fifty Euros down payment went unnoticed. So he cancelled our reservation and promised the

room to someone else, who was poised to arrive a few days later.

After we asked the Landlord for directions to his place, he realized that he was sitting in deep yoghurt. Hurriedly, he arranged us a room in a nearby hotel for our last night - at his expenses. Though, the first 3 nights at his place were ok.

We know this region quite well and just liked to enjoy once more, dipping into its rich historic diversity, natural wonders and gastronomic delights. The latter were superb as ever, but ravages of time and Mother Nature’s forces led parts of the steep rock face straight above La Roque Gageac to crumble. Though there was only very limited damage to houses, a massive steel grid has been placed underneath the most vulnerable section.

Unfortunately, this ugly structure interrupts the charming

path through the upper part of the village. Therefore, even more tourists are forced to mingle with the traffic on the narrow main road between the row of stone-houses and the Dordogne River, as there is no space for a footpath. Even if peak season was only just starting, the river was already packed with canoes and sight-seeing barges. It was almost possible to reach the opposite shore by hopping from boat to boat, though we must admit, the “boat people” had the best of views of the pretty village nestled against its cliff.



On a sunny day, we made a long walk to **Beynac**, another hamlet that sits majestically above the Dordogne River. In some parts, there were pleasant sections of small paths along the river. Unfortunately the two kilometres along the narrow main road full of blind bends, were almost life threatening, as it was very busy with holiday traffic. After a while we came along sunflower fields. Above them, we sighted the castle of **Castelnaud-la-Chapelle**, before the path led to the shore of the Dordogne, where boats and bathers were abound, more or less at the feet of **Chateau de Milandes**. Soon we reached a bridge that offered great views through its arch, up to the mighty castle above Beynac. After a steep and sweat-inducing hike up there, we got rewarded with a meal in a nice restaurant and unlimited views down to the Dordogne valley.

## Bastille Day in Sarlat-la-Canéda

To experience the French national day, July 14<sup>th</sup>, we visited the neat and very touristy town of [Sarlat-la-Canéda](#). During the afternoon, there was not that much going on, apart from the usual masses of tourists squeezing through the narrow alleys. Once we saw a band of troubadours belting through the old town, followed by elderly war veterans who proudly displayed their medals.

Surely, we ate at a rewarded gourmet-temple once more and we were glad, we had made a booking for a table already in the morning.

Last night, after a superb meal in a surprisingly quiet restaurant, we had asked the waiter, when he thinks the season will start. Without giving much thought, he replied: “tomorrow, [Bastille Day juillet 14!](#)” It seems, he was totally right and speaking for the entire French tourist industry. Whilst we had our dinner now, the waitress had to refuse at least twice as many hungry people as she could take. We’re glad that we have learned long ago: French gastronomic restaurants always should be booked ahead. Otherwise they might not take you, even if there are some tables left. They like to know how many guests they can expect, so they can prepare some of their elaborate cooking before the hungry crowd arrives!



Tourists to the area arrived as a big bang; all at once. The firework at 11 P.M. started with another big bang. After a pretty lightshow that lasted about 20 minutes, life-entertainment in the heart of the centre continued on various places, probably all night long. We followed the flock back to our parking lot and returned to La Roque-Gageac.

After a night in the hotel to where we had been relocated, we left the pretty Dordogne district and drove north, towards the centre of France. It was a rather rainy day and therefore we didn’t stop that often, except, of course, when we were hungry. That way, we got to look around historic **Corrèze**. The restaurant there looked almost too good, so we were afraid it would take too much time, for what should be just a quick lunch for us. In the next village, the only restaurant looked rather like a bar, but it promised a swiftly served “Menu du Jour”. Never the less, we were almost a bit puzzled when the waiter arrived with a starter shortly after we sat down, without even taking an order. What we got was plentiful and very tasty. We shouldn’t be surprised: even simple French food is usually more sophisticated than something upmarket in Spain.

## Creuse Nature; a very Dutch naturist ground

On July 16, 2011, we arrived in the Creuse district, named after the rivers Petite Creuse and Grande Creuse and checked in to the naturist campground [Creuse Nature](#). We moved into our reserved on-site caravan, which was situated near the small pond.

A big round building with a translucent dome shaped roof forms the heart of Creuse Nature. Its smart lay-out incorporates an indoor swimming-pool in its centre that is surrounded by rows of toilets, wash basins, shower room, laundry facilities, ping-pong table, bar and the restaurant including its kitchen.

Near that main building, there are an outside swimming-pool and a few sports- and play-grounds. The 100 campsites, as well as the ~25 rental options, are dotted around the forested estate. To some people, the 18 hectares seem quite big, but to us, who are fond of big grounds, it felt rather smallish. Never the less, we were glad to discover many small walking tracks, leading through the woodland that surrounds the campsites.

The small pond is teeming with fish. Visitors are not allowed to swim in there but they are welcome to fish, as long as they throw their catch back. That means; it's just another fish torturing pond. We don't like to know how many times over, the same fish has to go through the same ordeal.

We learned that during this year's exceptionally hot spring, also Creuse Nature was blessed with very dry weather and April temperatures around 30°C. As always, there is another side of the coin: if summer arrives in April, April might arrive in July and that's what we got – just as the rest of Central Europe. For the entire first of our three weeks, it was that wet and cold, a person that didn't look like a Michelin Man was either a Fata Morgana or spotted in the shower room or indoor pool. And only there, naturists could be seen, the way they are meant to be: fully naked.

As soon as temperatures rose a bit and the first sunrays blessed the ground again, the holidayers peeled off their clothes as fast as they could. Also Els and Reinier, the Dutch owners of Creuse Nature, could then be seen working in the buff, also

at the reception. To us, this natural approach is much more appealing than the constantly clad employees and owners of so many other grounds. Els and Reinier run their site very personally and often popped by for some small-talk. They have a good command of many languages including French. Unnecessarily, they felt they do us a favour, speaking German or English to us, instead of French. To most of their guests, they could speak in their native Dutch. Pity that not all announcements on the black-board were being translated from Dutch into (any) other languages – often not even into French. Some animations were offered in Dutch only. There were just enough activities to please those, who like to join in with something, but few enough that also peace and quiet could easily be found. The most remarkable were certainly the children's circus and the open-podium, where guests were invited to proof their talents.



Creuse Nature's restaurant does not serve à la carte meals but sells take-away and organises a communal dinner six days a week. They come at a very family-friendly price and hour. A pizza-vendor comes in once a week between 5 and 7 P.M. with his van. He told us, that he used to stay until 9 P.M. but soon found out that there's no business to be made with the Dutch after 7 P.M. This suits him well, as he then can move to French dominated campgrounds, where people are happy to buy their pizzas between 8 and 11 P.M. In fact, we were amazed how many Dutch families started their dinner already around 5 P.M. Habitually, we eat quite a few hours later and also when we went out for dinner to a restaurant, we didn't need to adapt our routine.

At breakfast time, however, it was a different story! Every morning, one of two mobile bakers came to the campground, selling bread from a van. This meant; if we missed to queue between 9 and 10 A.M., we had to go without Croissant and Baguette.

In the evening, our awing attracted regularly some unwanted visitors: big nervous hornets. After a few nights, we developed the skill to catch them with empty jars. As it's not their fault that we use light in the evening, we always gave them a second chance, by releasing them the next morning in the woods. However, by then they were usually quite exhausted and slow moving, so we started doubting, whether they survive their one night captivity. To find out, we released them onto a trunk which we dubbed the "hornet's sacrificial site". To our surprise, they all remained there and soon slept in peace – forever!

Due to the cold weather, we didn't talk too much to the couple who pitched up their tent on the neighbouring site. Never the less, it can be quite astonishing if you get to know which conclusions the neighbours draw about you. Shortly before they left, they told us how jealous they were, that we always have so much fun talking together, while they just read some books. Further, they were absolutely convinced we must be from the UK, as they heard us speaking English! We were unable to make head nor tail of it. Finally it sprang to our mind: they must have heard us, while we were "working" on the English edition of what you're reading now! To us, this was rather odd, as we feel, we often tweak on our sentences quite a bit, but our laughing about some funny happenings must have been more striking.

## Modern campers

Creuse Nature offers Wi-Fi access on the entire ground. This proved to be very popular and we were puzzled how many holidayers used it without worrying about security. As they feel home here, many don't even think about setting their network-location to "public place". Many connected their devices to Creuse Nature's public network with the same

settings, they usually connect to their home or company network. Thereby, they are providing everybody else connected with the possibility, to access smaller or bigger parts of their hard disk, depending on their network settings! While we were online, up to 15 (fifteen) other computers were visible within the network. Some credulous holidayers even provided everybody with a broadminded, password free access to their music-, photo- and video-libraries. As many passwords are very easy to guess anyway, it wouldn't need a rocket scientist to access not only their libraries, but their entire hard disk!

Almost every family carried at least one, but rather two or more laptops along. Quite often, people could be seen almost sneaking into their computer's screens during plain sunlight and later reading a book, at a time when it got almost dark. This is probably their way of adding at least a touch of "simple camping life". As another proof how simple life can be, some choose not to have power on their campsite. This meant; every second night, they used and re-charged their "home electronics" in the bar, to give themselves the opportunity to use it the next day again out in the woods.



What today's campers carry along is just astonishing! On previous trips, we had already seen holidayers furnishing their tents with fridges, freezers, baking- and microwave-ovens, dish-washers, air-conditioners and lately to mention deck-chairs and foldable beds... Those with a campervan or recreation vehicle, are often carrying not only a few bicycles along, but a trailer with a few motor cycles, beach-buggies or quad bikes, if not a smart-car.

Even people who rent accommodation are anything else than modest and we confess, we too, carry along far more than the bare necessities. However, we're on the road not only two, but 52 weeks per year. So we carry along laptop, printer, an espresso machine and a shaker. But at least, it all fits into our car's boot only, without folding back-seats or stuffing the car up to its ceiling. The recipe is smart compact packing and to avoid bulky items like deck chairs. We're always proud, if somebody asks us again, to picture our "modest luggage" we manage to fit into our booth.

As said; our "carry-along-household" is anything else than modest, but comparing it to what others carry, it certainly is!!! Often we see holidayers arriving not only with a small trailer, but also with a "coffin" on the roof, at their mobile home or chalet. The tip of the iceberg was a family with two children, we've seen lately. They unloaded their large van and a huge 12 m<sup>3</sup> rental-trailer, containing all they deemed necessary for a comfortable fortnight in a mobile-home. Probably they carried also the air for their inflatable crocodile and other toys along.

## **Caravanning; space is the true luxury**

We have often been asked why we didn't opt for a campervan. To us, who like to have space, this was out of question. Here in Creuse Nature, we experienced, that staying in a caravan doesn't offer lots of space either. Though, the on-site caravan we've rented, was very nice and certainly value for money. The awning had a wooden carpeted floor, and the caravan was very well appointed. It had a proper bed, a gas heater and three gas-rings. A fresh-water tank with pump provided limited tap water and a tiny fridge that didn't really merit its name, kept food at least a little bit cool.

However, it was nothing like the 15 metre wheel estate-monsters we had sometimes rented in Australia. It was an ordinary 4 metre caravan, many families tow around Europe. Therefore, dealing with its limited space was an experience in itself. First of all, there was simply no space to place all our breakfast jams on the small table. Bringing full coffee cups from the caravan out to the awning, always involved some acrobatic twisting. Before developing the necessary skills, Heinz either banged his head at the low doorframe or spilled the coffee.

Breakfast was easy, but cooking was a real challenge. To facilitate chopping of vegetable or meat, there was an almost one metre wide work space. Only, as soon as you wanted to use a pan or the sink, this board had to be lifted to uncover the sink and the gas rings. In theory, three gas burners are plenty, but as soon as we placed our frying pan, there was just no space left for any other pots.

So far, we always believed that the real campers are not interested in cooking and eating in style, when we saw them warming up tins and eating directly out of the pot. Now we realized; they are just adapting to their limited possibilities and try to avoid any additional hassles with cooking and washing up.

To us, camper's kitchens as common in Scandinavia, or shared facilities like in Youth Hostels, offers much more comfort and ample room - no comparison to a caravan! For others, "small but mine", might be more appealing than sharing space, stories and "dirt" in generous communal facilities.

## Camping: saving, no matter the cost!

Just by curiosity, we looked in the internet how much such a “home on wheels” would cost. The ~€ 20'000 for the most popular wheel estates seems to us too much money for too little comfort. How many weeks in much more spacious mobile homes or holiday cottages would this buy?

At Creuse Nature, a family with two children over 11 years old, staying in a 30 m<sup>2</sup> mobile-home, pays (during peak-season) each week only around € 150 more, than if they pitch up their tent on a powered site. The campsites here, are cheaper than in many other places. In common thinking, camping is cheap, though it is not at all! As most campsites are only occupied for a few weeks a year, camping can't be cheap, as the entire infrastructure has to be amortized within that short period. On the other hand, with good marketing, rental accommodations can be hired out for several months a year. Therefore, competitive rentals can often be found, even more so during off-season.

If the cost for all the carried camping equipments, additional road tolls and fuel consumption are taken into account, renting a mobile-home or chalet usually works out even cheaper and is certainly more comfortable, than staying in a tent or caravan.

Surely, our calculation is quite rudimentary and does not take everything in account. During the past years, quite a few self-ironic Dutchmen gave us an insight how their calculation works out: “What you don't consider: as real Dutch, we fill at least half of our caravan with cheap tin-food from home, therefore we barely need to shop groceries in any country that is more expensive than ours!”.

Surely, for those who prefer flexibility and simple living in a small tent, camping can be a really good experience indeed. This way, they can be moving about without reservation. On the other hand, with the sophisticated equipment most people “camp” and stay for two to three weeks at the same site, camping seems to us nothing more than “saving, no matter the cost”.



## Excursions around Creuse Nature

When walking around the campground, we missed the “bonjour”; everybody was greeting in Dutch with “Goedemiddag!”. As 90% of the other holidayers originated from the Netherlands, even some arriving in German or French matriculated cars, it's not surprising that they thought, everybody else must be Dutch. We love the Netherlands but as we were in France, we preferred to feel that! So, once a while we left the Dutch colony and ventured out to France, be it for a meal or some sightseeing.

The Creuse district is sparsely populated, never the less, it offers a few worthwhile sights. Only three kilometres out of Creuse Nature lies **Boussac**, a nice village that is also convenient for shopping. A few kilometres on, you find the balancing rocks “**Pierres Jaumâtres**“. They are an impressive sight and can be reached with a pleasant hike through a mossy forest. Most of the boulders were exposed and could be up to ten metres in height. Those rocks are situated on municipal territory belonging to **Toulx-Sainte-Croix**, a village that is famous for its viewing tower.

For city-sightseeing, we headed to medieval [Montluçon](#), some 40km east. This town of 40'000 offers an abundance of good restaurants but unfortunately, we had to learn the hard way that the best ones are all booked out on weekends. After six unsuccessful phone calls on Saturday morning, we finally had to give in and opted for a nice Vietnamese- instead of a fine French restaurant. But the town is really lovely, especially its historic centre!

During our last two weeks at Creuse Nature, the weather was still anything but perfect, but at least a bit warmer and sunnier, allowing us to roam around in the raw for a few hours most days. Some holidayers left early in search of better weather conditions, but this didn't help either, as all of Europe was exceptionally cold this summer. On the morning we were packing, it rained again in sheets and bad weather escorted us almost all the way north to Paris. The only ones more than happy with those adverse conditions, were the many mushroom pickers we saw along our way.

## Héliomonde; perfect for a long holiday

On Aug 6, 2011 we arrived at [Héliomonde](#), a large naturist ground at the doorstep to Paris. This is probably the “most French” member of “[France4naturisme](#)”, a successful association of about a dozen naturist resorts that joined in an effort for mutual marketing.



Surely, at the reception they speak English, but we preferred to exercise our French with the humorous staff. We had discovered Héliomonde two years ago and came now back to stay for three weeks. Again, we had reserved a small chalet which was much more spacious than the caravan we had rented at the last place and it was even slightly cheaper. Rentals for those staying more than a few days, are very competitive in order to motivate holidayers to stay longer.

Considering the beauty of the place and the excellent facilities, it's a shame, most tourists use it as stop-over, or base to visit Paris, only. The recreational value qualifies Héliomonde easily to spend an entire holiday. Parisians are fond of it for a long time and flock here to spend relaxing weekends. About 350 families own bungalows and come whenever possible.

Despite its proximity to Paris, Héliomonde is situated on a forested 47 ha plot, surrounded by pastoral countryside. There are many excellent paths through the woods, some of which are three metres wide, others just narrow trails. As cars are only allowed on the site for arrival and departure, all paths are ideal for nude hikes. A two- and a three-kilometre round loop are marked, though there are many more tracks to be discovered. We don't know how many kilometres we walked but the soles of our shoes almost got holey there.

Surprisingly, the two roe deer we once spotted were not in the undergrowth but between cottages. Caravans and mobile-homes are only a few, as most permanents own a wooden chalet, of which so many are dotted around the forest. Their shapes and decorations are very individual and we got the impression that the character of many changes annually, as most owners are do-it-yourself enthusiasts.

## Getting even better

The virus of constantly improving the facilities has infected not only the owners of the chalets, but also the owners of Héliomonde. Since our last visit, a gym hut, packed with modern torture equipments and mirrors, had been added. This provides an athletic alternative for those who prefer to vainly admire their muscle gain in mirrors, instead of simply running around the woods. The many play- and sports-fields provide also a good option for exercises in fresh air.

On the other hand, movement is not required anymore, to catch the Wi-Fi-signal, as it now spreads to most of the campsites and rental possibilities by itself. It was very comfortable, to have internet access in our chalet, instead of sitting in a too bright open-air Wi-Fi zone, as often elsewhere.

Thanks to some additional chalets, new rental tents with wooden floors, plus a groundbreaking tree-hut, the total number of rental units was brought up to about 20.

The previous restaurant had been completely replaced by a new one. Though it's up and running, we realized after a while that it's not entirely completed yet. Work is under way to add a huge rooftop terrace. The restaurant focuses on simple but good and modestly priced dishes, including Pizza. Freshly baked bread is sold at the restaurant between 8 AM and 10 PM, though there is no shop on site. To us it was heavenly, to be able to get fresh bread all day long, leaving us spontaneity.

Next to the swimming pool, there is a building that houses a large sauna and a hamam steam room, complete with showers and chill-out room. The sauna is heated daily during the summer months and as Héliomonde is open throughout the year, the sauna is also running every winter-weekend from Friday to Monday. It's a very sociable and popular affair.

Héliomonde's size and setting in the woods, together with its excellent facilities, make it to us at least as attractive, as any more popular ground. However, many tourists don't even take time to find out. Some arrive late, fiddle for three hours with their sophisticated tenting equipment, rush to the restaurant just before the kitchen closes at 10 PM, and by early next morning they're either on their way again, or maybe on a sight-seeing marathon around Paris. Wouldn't such harried people have a more relaxing evening, if they'd spent it in a (budget) hotel?

We can't understand, why so many naturists come to this paradise but flee it, in search of what they hope are sunnier regions, before they actually had seen it. During the week, the majority of those camping were foreigners, but on sunny weekends, the campsites were being invaded by French. They have a totally different attitude towards camping than other French are not armed with sophisticated camping small simple tents. They quickly set them up and have restaurant. Those who prefer more creatures comfort, opt

Despite the many short-time campers, the bungalow-who stay longer quickly, and it was easy to get in contact. of campers reduced dramatically every morning, we were our chalet ahead. All rental units were taken most of the charged the same price for 4 days, as for a week, some opportunity and stayed longer.

The atmosphere here was very French, but at the same cosmopolitan. We got the impression that France's many better integrated than elsewhere, at least when it comes to various continents and colours enthusiastically joined in and went nude. Of culturally mixed couples, sometimes it was the foreign part who was the driving force bringing them here.



We observed that they nationals. Usually, the equipment but rather with their meals at the for rental accommodation.

owners notice tourists Even though the number glad that we had reserved time and as Heliomonde holidayers took the

time also very immigrants are much naturism. People of

## Annual "congé", or an entire nation on holiday

The village of **St. Chéron** can be reached from Heliomonde either with a three kilometre's drive, or alternatively with a twenty-minute's hike along a forest-track. The place is ideal for shopping and there are also a few restaurants. An Asian we visited two years ago, was top on our list to be re-visited.

If we stayed in France during August, we have up to now always been in places where many Frenchmen holiday as well. Therefore, all shops and restaurants were bustling and it never crossed our mind, that all those French holidayers leave a gap in companies all over the country. On all these businesses, a sign is put up "congé annuel" (annual holiday), whether it's at the baker, butcher, pharmacist, electrician or restaurant! Most do point out when they're going to be back, but people know anyway that it's unlikely to be before September. Here we were, suddenly seeing all these signs staring at us and the streets were empty. Only our favourite Asian Restaurant had a different sign; it read "closed for renovations". What should we say, as "congé permanentes" (permanent vacationers) ???

Therefore, we looked for salvation in our yellow Gault-Millau Guide. There were a few options nearby, but it seems French chefs not only know how to cook, they also know how to holiday. Whichever gourmet temple we checked by internet, there was an appealing menu plus, as if it was the speciality of the month; a "congé" message popping up. Soon we realized that entire villages have to be without baker, butcher or whatever, for the entire month of August. Somehow it's understandable; for whom shall they be open, if all their customers are grilling themselves on the beach. Luckily, supermarkets, department stores, a few takeaways and public transport are serving the few ones left out, as they either have to work or lack the money to go on holiday. Hence, we could only be glad we had cooking-facilities in our bungalow, indulge in reminiscences about the gourmet-meals we enjoyed during the past months and hunger for those awaiting us next month... Meanwhile, French families with children raid the gastronomic restaurants along the coast and any other touristy area. That's also part of the French way of life; children are welcome and catered for in every restaurant, be it a simple Pizzeria or a top notch place.

## Paris; lifeless but bustling at the same time

Surely, we wanted to visit the French capital once more and were curious, how empty it would be, after seeing the deserted villages. We bought a day pass at St. Chéron station, only a stone's throw away from Heliomonde, and boarded one of the trains that run every half hour. During the one hour ride to the heart of [Paris](#), we passed near-empty P+R parking lots at almost every station. Our sightseeing started at the national library François Mitterrand,



where we didn't see many other people. The nearby quay along the Seine was lined with moored boat-restaurants and they were all closed for summer holiday. The same applied to the endless hawker stalls along the river. Only a few hawkers from the Far East were still waiting for customers. As they were fasting and observing Ramadan, it was not sensible to go on holiday. They could just as well wait and see if there was some money to be made with the odd by passer who would buy some of their sex videos.



Apropos Sex; there was also a beach! To make the city more appealing to those who are not on holiday, sun beds, sunshades, pools and sand had been brought to the shores of the Seine. Those beach sections are set up annually for a month and marketed as "Paris plage". This proved quite popular and families were either sunbathing or just strolling along, admiring the huge sandcastles that had been sculptured.

Away from the Seine boulevards, the city was again very quiet and most shops and restaurants were closed. But as soon as we approached the famous sights, the picture changed dramatically and the streets were suddenly bustling with photo hunting tourists from all over the world. Here, all businesses were in full swing. To be precise: all souvenir shops and those restaurants we would consider tourist-traps.

Sure enough, we got hungry as well. So we hunted for a restaurant that neither observed the annual August congé, nor tries to milk tourists. Luckily, even those Japanese living in France get a bad conscience, if they don't work for more than a few days. Paris has hundreds of Japanese restaurants and because of their sheer number, some specialised just like in Japan. So we found eateries offering nothing but Ramen-, Udon-, Tonkatsu-, Tempura-, or the famous Sushi dishes.

## Paris without Eiffel-Tower

Saturated, we continued the tourist trail, as any dutiful Japanese would do. At first, we mainly concentrated on sights we hadn't seen two years ago and therefore didn't visit Eiffel-tower and company. Paris' top attractions are so many and multifaceted, you can easily spend a week without seeing it all. Even away from major sights, there are uncountable appealing spots to be discovered.

The area around Villette Park with its "Cité des sciences et de l'industrie" was such a site. Knowing that star-architect [Jean Nouvel](#) was commissioned to design the new Philharmonic, we hoped to see some futuristic buildings. Though, the science-centre buildings did contain some modern elements, the new concert hall of the philharmonic was no more than a yawning chasm, with a few cranes and a small construction crew. Due to financial straits, the completion of the project has been delayed and all we could see were models and floor plans.

So, we headed on by metro to the touristy Montmartre Arrondissement. We got the impression, our fellow passengers were only tourists and immigrants, as the French were on holiday somewhere else. Foreigners however, were abound around the famous Sacré Coeur basilica, the charming alleys around it and near every extraordinary building, be it the Opera, Louvre, Notre Dame or the modern centre Pompidou.

The town hall is among these impressive buildings. On the square in front of it, sand was brought in and a row of beach-volleyball fields were set up for the summer. In the old days, sand was already common here. The square is called "Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville" since 1803, but was renamed "place de grève" before, with the initial French meaning "Square of the Strand". Because of the many assemblies and revolts on this once sandy square, "faire (la) grève" commonly got the meaning "to strike" on that square. That's how it developed that the French word "grève" is nowadays used for "strike".

We're not sure whether this nation is proud on its many strikes or not, but they definitely have lots of national pride. Therefore, it was easy to associate names to the numerous pictures we took; if we added something like "de France, du Président de France or nationale française..." at least half of the names were already guessed right!

A modern fashion that got hold in Paris, just as in any other big city, is graffiti. We saw such "artworks" almost everywhere, not only on walls, but also on trains and parked cars. Shortly after midnight, we took the last train back to St. Chéron.

## Change of scene

The fourth August week, which was our last at Heliomonde, started with a very warm weekend. Many Parisians wanted to take advantage and at the same time, the end of the school holidays in the Netherlands brought also many (stopover) Dutch. Therefore, every time we looked up from our terrace, there were some more French pitching up their small tents or additional Dutch Families, positioning their caravans or setting their tent-castles up. By Monday, most French weekenders had disappeared but many more of the permanent's bungalows in the woods were now occupied. It seems that many local families spent their last holiday week here, in their beloved summer cottage.

Those tourists, who came in now, didn't bring children along anymore, as they were considerably older. Those grey nomads seemed to have a bit more time, as most of them stayed for a few days. Where only a week ago, children's bicycles had been plonked about, you could now see tripods with satellite dishes everywhere.

Of those elderly people, we didn't meet many on the walking tracks around the woods, as on the weekend before, when it was packed with Parisians. In this warm weather, it was joyful to find shade between the trees. Even during our last week, we still discovered new trails. A French Family, who owns a wooden cottage for six years now, told us, that this still happens to them!

Weather-wise, we were now spoilt in comparison to this year's cold July. It wasn't brilliant, but warm enough to go nude most days. If the wind blew too strong in front of our cottage, we found shelter down in the "valley of Incas", the lower part of Heliomonde. If it was a bit overcast, it usually felt still warm around the pool, as it is also sheltered and doesn't have trees around. During our last few days there, we rather sought shade, as temperatures rose close to 30°C again.

Our three weeks vanished quickly and we had to pack up again. On a sunny day, we moved about 300km southwards along small, pleasantly empty country roads. First, we stopped in the charming village "Chaumont sur Tharonne" where we had lunch. A little later, we admired the impressive castle "Chateau de Valençay". It was just getting closed because of a wedding, but we wouldn't have wanted to pay the entrance fee anyway, as we are usually happy to look at castles from the outside.

## La Petite Brenne; a place with a special identity

A little later on this August 27, 2011, we arrived at "[La Petite Brenne](#)", a large naturist-ground in the Indre district. We moved in a small mobile-home we had reserved in advance. It was brand new and not that narrow, consisting of two small bedrooms, bathroom, separate toilet and a small living area with kitchen that was by itself still larger than many caravans.

Of the ten rental possibilities, all were taken, but of the 150 campsites, only about a quarter were occupied. The number of campers and caravaners declined quickly during our stay. In the first week, there were still families with children but thereafter, the average age of guests rose and the popularity of the sports and playfields decreased dramatically. Soon it looked very empty here but on the other hand, due to its 42 ha in size, "La Petite Brenne" won't look cramped even if it's full to the rim. The majority of campsites are dotted around large open meadows but there are also some in the woods and some with view to the little lake that is also part of the ground.



Before the Dutch owners bought these premises 15 years ago, lots of horses had been running around here. Meanwhile, the large farm buildings have been properly renovated and many facilities have been added. There are still a few 4-legged animals here but nowadays it's a real paradise for bipeds who also like to roam around in the buff, as normal as animals can. However, visitors are not allowed to bring their dogs along, so you only have to fend off the four dogs in residence. Therefore, "La Petite Brenne" is the only naturist place we know, where guests won't encounter much dog droppings and hear much barking.

One of the two former farm buildings now hosts a restaurant with fire-place, a mini shop with bread service, as well as a library and a lot of communal space. These include lounges with Wi-Fi access and play rooms with games and music instruments for everybody's enjoyment.

There are several things that give “La Petite Brenne” a profoundly different character to other naturist places. There is an “outdoor gym” with a number of funny and colourful gym machines. Children might find it hard that those modern toys are only meant for adults, whereas grown-ups have to contend with admiring the others’ growth in muscles, as there are no mirrors out here – only a fresh breeze!

Then there’s also a sophisticated maze, created of wire netting, many arches with lockable doors and even an overpass. Despite some of the creeping plants that are meant to cover the fence, having died, it’s still tricky to find the way through, especially as it’s altered regularly by opening and locking different gates. Those children (or adults) who secretly exercise might find themselves trapped, if they attempt to impress their mates, without realizing that the owners have altered the path through the maze!

## Mosaic Frenzy

The most striking feature of “La Petite Brenne” and what everybody, who has ever been here will remember, are the countless mosaics, made of colourful ceramic tiles. You find them literally everywhere! They beautify not only the floors inside and outside of the main building, but also many walls and rooms. There are modelled animals like the stretched horse that greets at the entrance. Some of the most impressive mosaic art-work, can be found around the two pools. Next to the indoor pool, there is a row of fanciful mythical creatures presiding above an anatomically shaped, 10 metre wide mosaic sun bed.

Much more space still, is provided by the snake-shaped bench that sneaks along the entire length of the outdoor pool. This giant snake-mosaic is some 45 meters long, more than twice the length of the pool. The snake’s entire “body” (it means the bench) is decorated with countless individual subjects.

Entire ceramic murals adorn the sauna, ablution blocks and whatever needs to be protected by tiles or invites to look at.

Whoever would like to take some of those beautiful and imaginative artwork away, can participate in the mosaic-frenzy, as courses in crafting of ceramic mosaics are offered.

Cottages and some other buildings with walls made of wood billets and cement, instead of bricks, is another unique feature we hadn’t seen elsewhere. Also this looks very special and the visible round or cut wood between the cement, is quite decorating – almost like a mosaic made from wood.



## Parc naturel de la Brenne

“La Petite Brenne” is situated within the boundaries of the [Brenne regional nature park](#). It was created as a 183’000 ha big nature reserve, around its approx. 2’500 “étangs”, how these small artificial lakes are called. Though these ponds and little lakes are manmade and used for fish farming, they provide meanwhile an important ecological contribution to flora and fauna, including a variety of natural habitats for birds.

The park was not only created to protect these lakes, but also to render some of them accessible to the public, as most are privately owned. One of them is “our” lake on the naturist camping, which is used for swimming and fishing. Once, when we asked a lucky “hobby fisher”, whether he intends to eat his catch, or whether he will give it back to the pond, he replied drily: “Neither, nor; I just dump it, it’s not eatable and there are too many of it around!”

The fish caught in most of the Brenne lakes however, give their lives for a more sensible reason; they will be eaten as local delicacy. Most of the farmed fish around here is Carp, considered by many us uneatable. But the folks of the Brenne region found out, how to treat it that every gourmand likes it.

The 2’500 “étangs” around here, are not deep and built with the aid of surrounding dams. Most are rather small, however, the biggest one covers an impressive 160 ha. We don’t know why, but it’s called “mer rouge” (red sea). Each of the lakes is being emptied completely about every fourth year. Then the fish is being sorted by size, roughly into those who have to ensure the future of their specie, and into those who have to help feeding the specie of homo sapiens.

Nice walking tracks and bird observatories are provided along those lakes that are made accessible to the public. Two visitor's centres offer interesting displays, multi-media shows and guided tours. This uninhabited area attracts a variety of migrating birds, and they in turn, attract ornithologists from far afield. The "parc naturel régional de la Brenne" is also home to Europe's largest population of pond tortoise. About 100'000 of this small freshwater turtle can be found around here.

## Surprises on and below trees

For hikes, it was not really necessary to leave the boundaries of the naturist ground "La Petite Brenne". Even here, an extensive network of paths leads through varied landscapes and best of all; they can all be walked in the buff. Three loops, measuring between two and three kilometres each, are well signposted, but there are countless other possibilities. They sometimes lead through shady forest, but sometimes also across flowery meadows, mostly far away from the campsites.

There was a tree, bearing fruit we have never seen, and on the same day, there was an animal in the small rivulet that flows through "La Petite Brenne" – again; one we have never seen before. Later we found out, this animal that looked almost like a giant Guinea Pig, might have been a nutria, a "Myocastor coypus" respectively.



Just a few days later, Heinz discovered a beautiful red and white mushroom that almost had the form of a starfish. This one turned out to be a cuttlefish-mushroom. After showing pictures of it around, we had to guide fellow naturists with their cameras to the site, where these mushrooms grew. They and many other mushrooms have appeared, thanks to the many brief showers interrupting the hot weather. To see them was very lucky, as these cuttlefish-mushrooms were like fallen off the face of the earth only two days later.

Blackberries however, could be found in big numbers, though the shrubs tried to fend pickers off, with their nasty thorns. However, our will was stronger; we bore the pain and had afterwards a few wonderful berry smoothies.

Our daily nude tours through the large property brought us also along the meadows, where horses and donkeys grazed. Sometimes they came to meet us at the fence and were even available for a photo shooting. They were well used to people, as horse- and donkey rides were offered daily.

## Residential area

Even if the campground got quite empty in September, we didn't feel it that much, as our mobile-home was situated in the middle of the "residential area". About ten mobile-homes had been sold to naturists who spend the bulk of the summer here, making the ground livelier during off-season. Most of them come from the Netherlands and Belgium, but there are also a few odd exceptions. Their dwellings are all lovingly decorated and extended by terraces and garden sheds.

As observed elsewhere; most owners seemed to concentrate on working, rather than relaxing. There is just one big problem: their mobile-homes are all brand new and there is so little to improve or repair...

Never the less; the desperate found something to do. The fact that their terraces consists of long lasting wood, which theoretically could bear wind and weather for decades, didn't hinder some do-it-yourselfers, to paint and sand off and re-paint, not only the reeling but the entire terrace. This probably nullifies fading due to months of sunshine and keeps them busy for a few weeks, until the impact of winter puts a few fresh ideas into their mind.

Most resident women gather daily 2 ½ h for some ceramic-mosaic work, allowing their dutiful partners barely enough time to mow their 50 m<sup>2</sup> estates properly!

## Towns and valleys along the Creuse River

Only 12km east of “La Petite Brenne”, you’ll find the pretty town [Argenton-sur-Creuse](#). It has a neat little centre and many shops, but most of all, we loved the picturesque houses nestled along the Creuse River. In a way, many looked a bit ramshackle and oblique - somehow just the way a bloke like Dalí would paint them on canvas.

Then we followed the road through the twisted river valley. It brought us sometimes through forests and sometimes through agricultural land, offering views of the river all along our way. Every now and then, there was a little hamlet, one of which was Gargillesse. It figures on the list of the prettiest villages “un des plus beaux villages de France” and there was a nice view of it, from one side at least. By all means nicer, than of the nearby village St. Benoit-du-Sault. It appears on this same list as well, but that’s probably for its historic significance, as we didn’t find much other beauty there.



## Food for life

Not to see a pretty town, but to eat well, we drove to Le Blanc about 30km west of “La Petite Brenne”. As this region is slightly touristy, the gourmet temples here kept open all summer long. To our surprise, we realized that they rather close in September – which was NOW! Never mind, we still found one that spoiled our palates. As the Brenne region is very sparsely populated and doesn’t offer many opportunities to earn money, it’s just logical that restaurants rely on the few tourists who come here in peak season. Therefore, local chefs holiday in off-season.

Gourmandising got such an integrated part of the French society that pets are being treated the same way. With a bright grin we noticed that cats and dogs in this country don’t simply get tins, containing “Bowwow” or “Miaow” with chicken, fish, or pork. French supermarkets shelve a big selection of sophisticated pet-food, like “mousse”, “terrines” or “émincé au sauce” for the budget conscious customer.

Real pet-lover will however, not worry about the costs and spoil his furry friend with something from the pet-gourmet-section. There, he’ll have to choose between “cassolette gourmande” (gourmand pannikin), “les mousselines avec des légumes” (fine vegetable mousse) enriched with either lamb, duck or trout. Then, before we end, we must also mention the double-delight dishes, like rabbit with liver or fish caught in the ocean now swimming in a lovely spinach sauce. Even if all these delicacies are meant exclusively for four-legged friends, the pictures on the packages present it just the way they would be served in the pet-owners favourite gourmet-restaurant.

After seeing all this, we know now why “sweetbread” and calf’s head got local specialities for bipeds: it’s just too simple for pet-food. Unknowingly, we embarrassed a waitress by asking what the term “ris de veau” means. As she was not as straight forward as Heinz, she came with a dictionary that translated “ris” into “sweetbread”. Our English is not all that imaginative and so we still didn’t have a clue.

We only got a meaning, when an English naturalist told us the next day: “that’s the balls, mate!” Well, it’s not quite that easy, though a common confusion. While searching for the right words to put this story into German, we discovered that “sweetbread” or French “ris” respectively, are culinary names for the thymus (throat, gullet, or neck sweetbread) or the pancreas (heart, stomach, or belly sweetbread). Especially those of the calf (ris de veau) and lamb (ris d’agneau) are considered culinary specialities! Wow, as puzzling as it is, this sounds definitely much more out of the ordinary, than just eating some animals’ testicles!

## Good weather and good food at “La Petite Brenne”

We spent three pretty warm and mainly sunny weeks at “La Petite Brenne”, considering we now got into September. We could go for our nude walks almost daily, resulting again in severe damage to our shoes.

We suspect the owners maintain such a large network of walking-tracks mainly for their visitors to get hungry and then come to their restaurant. Surely, we had to compensate for our loss of calories as well. Though the owners are Dutch, their menus are truly French. In fact, they run a French restaurant in the Netherlands, before emigrating here. Their typical French set-menu changes daily, offering several starters, four main dishes, including a vegetarian option, and several desserts. What comes out of the kitchen is quite sophisticated and those who prefer something simple, can opt for pizza

and take-away from a separate counter. Once or twice weekly, the chef spoils his guest with dishes from other countries. We joined in for the Indonesian Rijstafel, where we got a wide choice of delicious dishes, all matching the original, though not as spicy.

As every evening, dinner was served on a communal table. This night, it was accompanied by live-music, performed by a talented couple, who spends the entire summer at “La Petite Brenne”. As always, the meal was excellent and it was also very socialising, if you had the chance to be on a “multilingual” table, since most guests are Dutch. However, most do quite well in mastering foreign languages like English or German, they’re just a bit reluctant with French! We would have joined communal dinners more often, if it wasn’t served already at 7 PM, but also at 8 PM, as it is during high season.



Wherever the owners of a holiday resort are from a foreign country, there is a risk that the place gets “ghettoized” by their countrymen. Serving French meals and listing the daily changing menu first in French, and then in other languages, is one way, how “La Petite Brenne” makes sure, everybody feels he’s in France. Despite most guests being from the Netherlands, the blackboard listed all animations in French first, and then only in Dutch and English.

The ground’s different areas are consequently named in French only, marked on neat little signs dotted all around. To us, this is much more charming than what we had seen in other places, where the owners seemed to forget, that the national language in this country is French.

## Neither rich, nor famous

Not in French, but in English, we were being addressed by a couple from the U.K.. They were the very first readers of a naturist magazine who approached us, because they had seen some of our stories. We were quite amazed and talked for a long time to Margaret and John, who run their own naturist retreat: Pevors Farm cottages, 50 miles from London. When we started to contribute parts of our long travel stories to “Naturist Life” in 2003, and later to other magazines, we worried a bit that we would be recognized all the time, when venturing around naturist grounds. The prospect of being recognized as naturists by average citizens didn’t bother us, we can easily handle that, but we didn’t want to get “too famous” within the naturist world either. As it took eight years until somebody approached us, there was no need for concern. This should motivate every naturist to let others partake of their interesting stories and pictures. If naturism is somebody’s honest lifestyle, why should he not share it with others?

Our three weeks evaded quickly, as we regularly socialized with people we met on the communal meals and with our neighbours. Sometimes we invited somebody for a shake, or got invited for a drink. The sauna however, was rather relaxing than socialising. For a modest Euro 1.50 you got access to the huge wood fired sauna. Sure enough, the entire wet area was decorated with fanciful ceramic mosaics. Furthermore, it also had fanciful showers with overhead bucket, huge rainforest showerheads and the like.

Mid-September, “La Petite Brenne” had another ten days before closing the season. The rental possibilities were still all taken, the campsites however, only about 10%. Never the less, most services were kept up and alive, including the still very popular restaurant. Therefore, we joined in for another French-dinner on our last evening.

Thanks to very warm temperatures that still persisted on our departure day, we were in no hurry to leave after packing. As we had decided to split the 700km drive on motorways to our next destination, into two days, we only said farewell to “La Petite Brenne” around 3 PM.

After only 2 ½ hour’s drive, we left the freeway and made a small detour to La Roque Gageac, one of our favourite places along the Dordogne. We ended up in the same B&B as in July, and indulged once more in a great meal at a nearby gourmet temple. Meanwhile, the atmosphere had changed. Most tourists had left and most campgrounds were already closed. The sunflower fields that were in full bloom during July, had now been harvested, leaving no hint of the radiant colours of those seas of flowers behind. On the other hand, the first trees along the Dordogne River started to display their colourful autumn foliage.

On the next day, we hit the road again. As there was not that much traffic, we were the more so surprised, how busy the road houses and pick nick areas south of Toulouse were at lunch-time. Now it was less than two hours down to the Mediterranean Sea near Perpignan.

## The naturist villages in Port Leucate

When we arrived at Port Leucate, it was September 17<sup>th</sup> 2011. The friendly receptionist of [Agence Oasis](#) handed us the keys to a well appointed terrace house, which we had arranged a few months ago.

The municipality of Leucate is divided and spread over four distinctly different village-areas, each of which resembles a township by itself. The only village grown naturally, is Leucate Village in the north, a couple of kilometres away from the sea. The other three are purposely built holiday villages along the beach, named Leucate Plage to the north, Port Leucate to the south and in between: an entire village just for naturists. Situated between the strand and an inlet, it consists of several holiday villages with apartment complexes and terrace houses.

Altogether, “**Le Village naturiste de Port Leucate**” consists of about 1500 privately owned dwellings. A fair share of them can be rented through different agencies, like Oasis. Some are also being rented out directly by owners, though the asking price is often higher than what you’d pay through the agencies, even more so during off-season. As the agencies are keen to do business all season long, the pricing is naturally very competitive and on top of it, they are on the spot for help and advice.

Development in the naturist area started in 1974 and new holiday villages have been and are still being added since. **Aphrodite** and **Oasis** are the biggest developments. Aphrodite is very French, but still has a fair share of foreign owners and holidayers. It consists mainly of one and two storey buildings and many of the apartments have been altered or extended by their owners. Many of those apartments along the inlet overlook the small boat harbour, which belongs to the naturist resort as well. The centre of Aphrodite consists of several small shops and restaurants grouped around a square. They include butchery and a superb bakery, which we visited daily. We enjoyed it, to have those shops nearby, but as we stayed in a neighbouring urbanisation, we opted to pay an administration fee to obtain a key, sparing us a detour to get there, as every holiday complex is fenced off, except along the beach.



The apartments at Oasis are predominantly owned by German and Swiss nationals, just as its sole restaurant, though we could have easily endured more French character and life around us.

The holiday village is nicely landscaped and the apartments, mainly in three- and four storey buildings, are rather large and modern. At Oasis, the gardener is not the murderer, but the one who sells Wi-Fi codes for internet access.

## Hot autumn days on the beach



As our Swiss friends Annemarie & Beat joined us for two weeks, we had opted for a terrace house along the inlet. They arrived already on our second day by train, and we brought them straight away to our favourite restaurant, to give them a good first impression of French gourmet delights. While we had given them various options about where they could meet us, we had warned them, that Port Leucate is not only a paradise for beach-bums, but also for windsurfers who come for the strong wind that often blows here. It is called Tramontane and frequently develops in the Pyrenees. During spring, this wind chills bathers sometimes even on warm days and forces them into wind-sheltered spots, during summer it's often a blessing and during autumn the Tramontane behaves like a true Frenchman; meaning it's often on strike...

Our first day was a bit overcast with some gusts, yet still 23°C warm. Therefore, Annemarie & Beat feared already the worst and worried, whether they would be able to enjoy the beach at all. However, this day was just a short interruption in an otherwise unbelievably calm and warm period, all along the Mediterranean. The locals said, it hadn't been as good for such a long time during the last 20 years. For the two of us, who now arrived from the interior of the country, where we had seen the resorts getting empty, it was amazing to see the big crowds that were still drawn to the beach. Also the holiday apartments of the naturist villages were still very well occupied. Moreover, the sea was still pleasantly warm (some 23°-25°C), so even Annemarie brought herself to go swimming. Beat on the other hand, as real water lover, stayed regularly in the water until he got wrinkly skin. He knows how to float on the surface for the longest time, as if he would rest on an airbed. This way, his tan got darker quickly, just as ours. However, after he, as occasional naturist, decided not to wear sunscreen anymore, he started to develop a bright red bum.

We enjoyed regular walks along the 1.5 km long beach, during which we sometimes took a dip to cool down. Another means of cooling down was provided by our shaker. As it was almost too good to leave the beach, Heinz sometimes volunteered to lift his bum and spoiled the rest of the gang with a freshly prepared fruit smoothie that he carried in a cold box the ~150 metres from our house down to the beach. The many jealous eyes focusing in our direction, made us enjoy the healthy drinks even more.

With this superb weather, our friends were highly pleased and absolutely content. The many excursions we proposed, didn't tempt them more than further lazing on the beach. Except for a short visit of [Perpignan](#), we hadn't seen anything else than meat and fish: either grilling or swimming on the beach, or nicely arranged and cooked in a restaurant.

Annemarie & Beat did certainly not regret to join us a second time for a naturist holiday. However, we were somehow surprised about their conclusion that mainly "old people" seemed to practise naturism. After reasoning why, we figured that the lack of young people and kids was most probably because no country had school holiday in the second half of September. If they had stayed one week more, our friends would have seen a sharp decline in "oldies" and a sharp rise in families with children and teenagers, as well as young couples. For us, there was just one problem; many spoke Swiss-German, so we had to control our tongue!

We had only one more week at the house in Port Leucate, after Annemarie & Beat left. It brought us some windy days, though they were quite bearable, with temperatures around 30°C. Now we took our chance to visit the oyster farms with their many sampling stalls, situated next to the naturist villages.

To us, Port Leucate was a perfect finish of our tour around several French naturist resorts. We enjoyed it very much, that Oasis and Aphrodite were anything else than dead, even in October.

We left on October 8<sup>th</sup>, just a day before the bakery was due to close, but the small Casino grocery store remained still open for another two weeks. Surely, its offerings got gradually reduced. It's all relative; it still sold several times more items than any of the stores in the resorts we had stayed during peak summer!

## Final thoughts about our summer "naturally"

This year's exceptionally hot spring, late-summer and autumn, did more than compensate for the unexpected cold midsummer weeks, and certainly proofed all those wrong, who believe, sunbathing and swimming is restricted to a few midsummer weeks only.

Spending an entire summer in French naturist resorts once more, was not only a very good experience, it made us also realise how short the tourist-season is. Even though naturist grounds can in general attract guests for quite a few more weeks than traditional (textile) resorts, their business opportunities are still very limited. Only the few ones that do not solely concentrate on camping, but also offer accommodation, can fill up reasonably well, for more than the few summer weeks, but only, if they offer competitive pricing!

For most owners of naturist grounds, it remains their lifestyle-business, rather than a money-making machine. But they get rewarded with guests that behave much different, and not only more natural, to those you see in ordinary textile resorts. Quite a few times we observed, how five-times less people on a conventional campground, easily cause ten-times more noise than those, who opted to stay on naturist grounds. We certainly don't regret that we dumped our bathers and spend lots of time "au naturel"...



## Journey through the Massif Central

Leaving Port Leucate on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2011, we started northwards attempting to cross the French mountain ranges. Having studied some tourist brochures beforehand, the artificial **Lake Salagou** caught our eyes and now we noticed how close we would pass it. Spontaneously, we left the motorway to make a little detour to see it. On our regional map, Brigitte discovered a minor road, and soon we were “jammed” in the very first village. As we attempted to turn around, a very friendly man approached us. He shook hands right away, introduced not only himself, but also the major highlights of the area. Then he advised us not to worry about the car but to leave it where it is. He now wanted to show us, what he was convinced, we were looking for. Slowly, it dawned on us that we were not who he thought. It turned out that he was a real-estate dealer who had an appointment with some prospective clients from abroad – and here WE came, not with a Rolls-Royce but with a Dacia...

Never mind, we followed his valuable tourist advise and drove on a narrow gravel track along Lake Salagou. It was incredibly scenic, with green water, framed by unusual red mountains. This rough road was much more rewarding than the drive back along the main road on the other shore.

Continuing northwards, we later saw the striking [viaduct above Millau](#), which had been inaugurated in December 2004. We were quite pleased that the visitor's centre that could be visited for free was open until 7 P.M. even on a Saturday. The movie about the construction of the 2.4km long bridge, with its 7 concrete pylons, was very enlightening. The bridge spans an impressive 270 metres above the valley and its tallest pillar is an astonishing 343 metres high. Though it is a really beautiful bridge, we opted for a bed in a hotel but it was not even situated underneath the “Viaduc de Millau”.

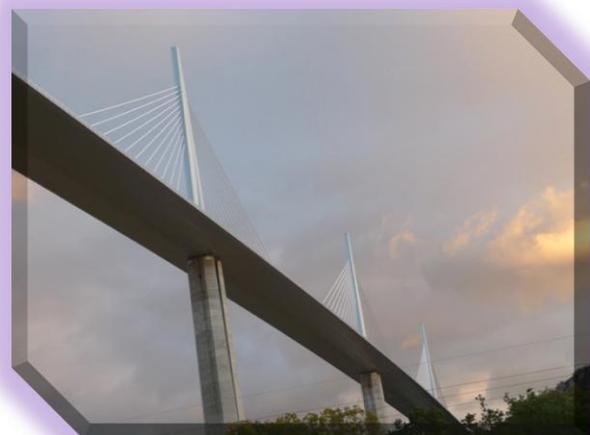
On the next morning, we continued through the truly astonishing “[Gorge de Tarn](#)”. Despite the weather not being perfect, we stopped countless times to drink in the scenery. The narrow road often led through small tunnels, cut into the bare rock. Many small hamlets could only be reached by simple cable cars spanning the gorge, unless you wanted to swim. The age-old rocks bore, in many areas, witnesses of glaciers in form of cirques or rock pillars. Much older than the tiny hamlets with their houses built entirely of stones (not only walls but also roofs), are the reminders of the troglodyte cave dwellings, high above the river.

In the evening, we ended in the village “Les Vans”, which was by coincidence very near “St. Paul le Jeune”, where we know a gourmet-temple to which we couldn't resist.

## Pass-ing the French Alps

On the next morning, we soon passed the thermal spa town of Vals and continued through an autumn coloured landscape. After inspecting volcanic rocks below pretty “[Antraigues sur Volane](#)”, we drove on lonely mountain roads, further through the Massif Central to the Rhone Valley. On the other side, we climbed up to the mountain ranges again, which awarded us with vast views over the [Vercors Mountains](#). After the first summit, we unfortunately came through very dense fog for some 20 kilometres.

For our next overnight stay, we descended to “[La Chapelle en Vercors](#)”, where we found a nice rustic hotel. Strangely, it was packed with other Swiss Tourists. It seems that the French don't holiday in autumn and already on the way, we had noticed that many hotels in resort towns were closed. Despite its good occupancy, also “our” hotel went into hibernation the very next day. Luckily, they were still heating well, because outside, the temperature had dropped to about 7°C. No wonder; we were now almost on 1000 metres altitude and surrounded by high mountain peaks.



Driving out of lifting fog in the morning, we soon traversed a small tunnel. On its exit, we were greeted by incredible panoramic views. This was the summit of “[Col de Rousset](#)”. After passing through “Die”, we traversed the very narrow and rocky “[Gorge de Gats](#)”, before coming out to a vast plain with beautiful views to the surrounding mountains near Mens. Overnight, we stayed in the quiet ski resort town “[Le Bourg d'Oisans](#)”. Though we arrived early, we polished doorbells for ages, until we finally found a place to stay, as the whole town seemed to hibernate (until winter). At least we were lucky and got a newly furnished studio, as the only guests of a huge youth hostel.

After the waitress at the tea room where we had breakfast, motivated us to ascend to the ski resort “[Alpe d'Huez](#)” that perched high above the valley, we decided to do so. As fascinating as the drive along the 21 hairpin bends was, as dead was the ski resort itself. Hard to imagine how it will look like, when this ghost town is teeming with 36'000 winter-holidayers.



After descending, we later passed the picture perfect artificial lake “**Grand Maison**” with its incredible turquoise colour that contrasted the golden-orange autumn foliage of its surrounding trees. Not much further, we reached the summit of “**Col Glandon**”. First we were really excited about the superb vistas, all the way till majestic Mont Blanc, but then a little disappointed to see the sign that read: road closed for construction. At least it was only a few hundred metres back to the road which led to the summit of “**Col de la Croix de Fer**”. We had conquered it already 8 months ago, when coming the other way. Nevertheless, it offered an equivalently wonderful panorama in this direction. From an altitude of 2067 metres we drove down to **Arvan Valley**, and up again, towards “**Col de la Madeleine**”. All the way, we passed impressive slate mountains.

It was rather late, when we reached [Chamonix](#), our last destination in France. Due to foreign tourists and its permanent population, this town was not nearly as quiet as the other ski resorts we had passed during the last days. That night, we did just as we did on our last night in

Spain, which happened also to be a ski resort town: we spoiled ourselves with Sushi in a Japanese Restaurant.

On the next morning, we continued to Switzerland, where we had arranged some holiday apartments high up in the mountains – far away from family and friends. We will tell you more about that in our next story.

Brigitte & Heinz



more pictures on our Homepage

