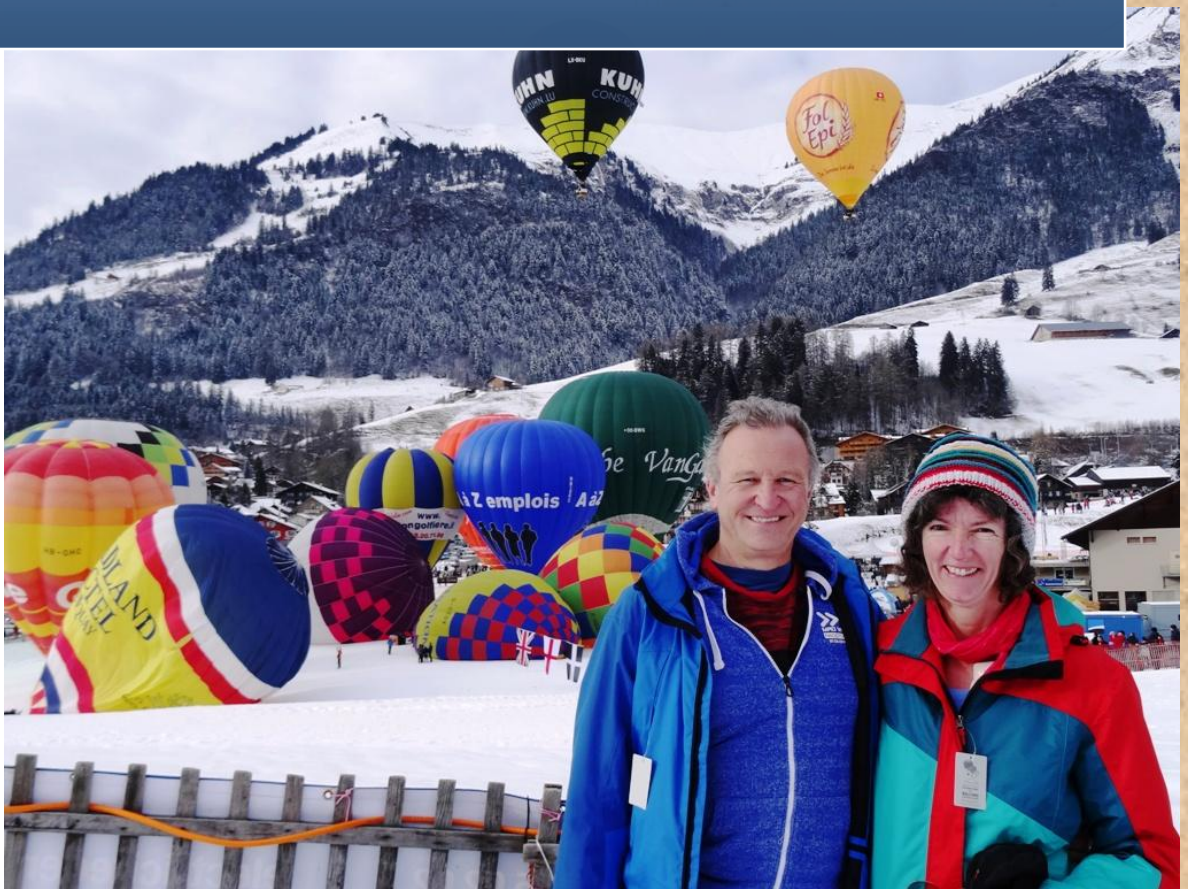


Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Warmly dressed in the mountains -
undressed on the sea



Chapter 25

October 2013 - January 2015

Warmly dressed in the mountains - undressed on the sea

Again and again, we're curious to explore regions not well known to us in-depth. The coming year however, we were just looking for nice places to stay and to enjoy ourselves. During the cold time of the year, we wrapped warmly and rented some nice holiday flats in the Swiss mountains. During the warm summer months, by contrast, we were going to bare it all, mostly on the French and Spanish Mediterranean- and Atlantic coasts.



Switzerland: re-visiting our native country

Two years ago, during winter 2011/12, we've spent once more some time in our native country. Then, it was the first time after 12 years that we've visited Switzerland as tourists, and not just as visitors of our friends and relatives. By chance, we had then chosen two holiday-flats in the country's sunniest valleys. Then, we liked our stage so much, that we decided to spend another winter in [Switzerland](#). As we wanted to devote the chunk of the following months for brainstorming about our future, our homeland provided a logical choice, as it shouldn't distract us with too many unfamiliarities ...

How time flies! Even to us, it's mind-boggling that we enjoy already the 16th uninterrupted year of travelling slowly and joyfully to our favourite destinations around the globe. It was at the end of the last millennium, when we chucked our jobs and exchanged the security of a regular life, against a life in unlimited freedom. Then we thought, our savings would last for about 12 years, maybe 14, if we're lucky, or perhaps only 7, if things go wrong. We didn't worry, as we knew, whatever we get, it will be plenty.

We were quite shocked, when we learned that some couples in Switzerland and Germany pay every year for their health insurance alone, as much as we spend for 12 months of travelling in comfort. Instead of having spent all money for exaggerated security, we just enjoyed life and it still feels brilliant to have the benefit of our freedom, devil may care. As we live out every day to the fullest, we don't miss out on anything we'd need to catch up on tomorrow. Thereby, it gets irrelevant whether there will be still another tomorrow!

Until last year, it didn't look as if our funds would last for only 7, 12 or 14 years, but even for 16 years, more than we had ever hoped for. Maybe it's law of nature: if you don't worry, destiny rewards you with a particularly great deal and it got even better! About a resources would have could, totally inherit. That way, our accumulated again up size as it was, when in 1999.

Bingo, but now we to make the best of years with unlimited as an unexpected gift "would like to do, to see-list", we had dropped out, is above years as roving have the privilege to like to do, to see-list", to make the second part of our Therefore, we year mainly to places we know little destructions and impressions, we should have enough time to think, what suits us two connoisseurs of the art of living best.



year before all our been used up, we unlooked for, nest egg to about the same we dropped out

have to worry: how the many additional freedom, we just got of the deities? The experience and to compiled when we fulfilled after 15 spirits. So now, we write a new "would experience and to very best of the globetrotter lives. decided to stick this regions and naturist- rather well. With only few new

Sedrun: six weeks in the Grisons' Surselva Valley

After visiting some friends and relatives, we headed for our first retreat in the mountains. Travelling over Oberalppass, we arrived in [Sedrun](#) on Oct. 26, 2013. Here we shall stay for six weeks in a holiday-flat we had arranged a few months ago. It was actually a nice 55m² granny flat with two rooms in the basement of the owner's house. Here we found a perfect quiet location, all amenities we like and nice young Landlords in our age! Though the house was barely 30 years old, it was built in the traditional architecture of the [Surselva](#) Valley; a chalet style made of wood and plastered brick walls.

End of October, nature's colourful autumn display was at its best and the pass-roads allured us for drives to the surrounding valleys. Thanks to Sedrun's good location and the splendidly constructed mountain roads, we reached the Valley of Uri, the Bernese Oberland, the Valais and the Ticino (Tessin), all within one day. Thereby, we passed Oberalp-, Susten- Grimsel-, Nufenen and Gotthardpass. Knowing that they were all going to close with the next major lot of snow, it was amazing, on how many spots workers were still busy upgrading roads with heavy machinery. Most of the day, we had splendid weather. Near Meiringen, the temperature was even up to an unreal 25°C degrees, due to the influence of foehn wind. In the Valais' Obergoms Valley, we still had tea in an al fresco restaurant. However, as we approached the Canton of Ticino, it suddenly got rather cold and so foggy, we could hardly see the road before us. On the summit of Gotthard pass (altitude 2106m) we could not even see the lake we knew we were driving along. Soon thereafter, we were back in plain sunshine again and had the best view down to Andermatt.



There, an Egyptian investor is currently building a new top class resort that's being advertised as [Andermatt-Swiss Alps](#). Altogether, about € 1.5 billion are being invested to build six 4-5-star hotels, twenty-five mansions that go for modest tens of millions, several hundred luxury-holiday apartments, a golf course, indoor pools, spas and other sports facilities. The [Chedi](#), a five-star superior hotel had already been opened, other apartment- and hotel-complexes are under construction.

As part of the new resort, also the existing ski areas get a multi-million upgrade and become the so-called "Ski-Arena Andermatt-Sedrun". Sedrun is much more laid back than Andermatt, but obviously hopes for a boost in business as well, once ski lifts and cable ways are connecting the slopes on both sides of the mountains. The two villages are located 20km apart on either side of Oberalp pass-road which is open during summer only. A railway service commutes all year round and adds a few wagons to load cars, once the road closes.

Sedrun and the Grisons

From Sedrun, we also discovered many worthwhile destinations in the Grisons. Among them Disentis, with its bold

monastery, then pretty Vals, famous for mineral water and its legendary rocks. Another time we cruised up to the noble winter resort of Arosa. We also marvelled at the Gorge of the River Rhine (Rheinschlucht) with its eroded rocks on the river banks.

For pleasant hiking, on the other hand, it wasn't necessary at all to drive out, as Sedrun has plenty of great hiking tracks in cardinal directions. Some are flat, some are steep and we took advantage of the different possibilities daily. When meeting other hikers, many greeted in the local language Rhaeto-Romanic or Romansh. Unlike in the Engadin Valley, here almost everybody spoke Romansh. In remote mountain valleys like the Surselva, local languages and traditions are more likely to survive.



Modern city people come here for peace and quiet, but if it comes to shopping, they find possibilities are limited. Luckily, there are two small supermarkets selling all necessities. As they change their selection every few weeks, there is no risk dying of one-sided nutrition. However, for everything out of the ordinary, you need to drive to Ilanz or Chur, which is 40km or 70km respectively, on a rather windy road or with an ultra-low-speed train. Just a pity, if you have to bring your newly bought camera back because of malfunction.

During our stage, Sedrun felt neither dead nor lively. Its 1'500 permanent residents include all ages. On the other hand, holiday apartments are abound and now in late autumn most were empty... Actually, our Landlords were rock-solidly convinced, we are the only (...), renting a holiday apartment at this time of the year. So it's no surprise that hotels and restaurants closed one after the other, and sure enough, the best chefs could afford to go walkabout for two months.

Lucky us, we still didn't have to be without gourmet-meals. As we went very well along with our Landlords Ursulina and Pius, they invited us twice for a nice dinner. Ursulina would easily qualify as chef in an awarded restaurant. So once, they spoiled us with a delicious meal made of local deer and another time with something fishy, which we liked equally. In return, we invited them for dinner into their granny flat. We had lots of fun together and though their lives are quite different from ours, it was very interesting exchanging stories. Thereby, we learned that our rental-request for 6 weeks puzzled them at first, as normally nobody would rent at this time of the year and certainly not for so long. However, after seeing our homepage, they overcame their mistrust and got rather curious about us.



Unusual sauna habits

As holidayers in our home country, we had to re-adapt to Swiss customs and nuisances. In the community's own wonderfully designed wellness bath, we fell into a first sand-trap. We were pleased that sauna habits in (the German part of) Switzerland are much more natural than in Victorian influenced countries. However, we forgot about the Swiss keenness to reach consensus. To please both, Italian speakers from Ticino and Italy who make up for 50% of guests, and who are used to sweat in bathers, as well as German speaking Europeans, Sedrun's Sauna managers invented a unique system. Bathers are strictly banned all over the sauna area. Though, inhibited guests are allowed to wrap in a towel during sessions in the sauna and the Roman-Irish bath. In the attached chill-out room, everybody is obliged to wrap in a towel. Indicating signs with Sedrun's handbook of wellness-manners were banned, as they would be an eyesore to the exclusive ambience, the municipal administration had decided!

Well, we were behaving "correctly" visiting the saunas and hammams in the buff, only the Italian Lady in a bikini was being reproved. But while we cooled down on a sun-bed in the chill-out room however, still naked, using the towel only as padding, three other guests complained about us at the reception. Furthermore, we had the colossal cheek to speak, instead of saying nothing to each other. Now we were friendly told to wrap the towels around us and shut up whilst cooling - whether this makes sense or not. The nice manageress said, she only enforces the rules set by the municipality. Casually, she mentioned too that there had never been more than four guests at once, in the generous wellness section (3 saunas, 2 hammams, warm water pool, ...), since she took the job last June. This day, the last before their seasonal closing, was by far her busiest with 15 guests.

Well, Sedrun's sauna habits are strange. With the current regulation, apparently half of the Italian speakers back off, after they are told they shouldn't wear bathers. Ironically, when the wellness centre tried with textile days, almost all of the Italians and Ticinese backed off. Probably they wanted to come here to see, but not to be seen...

After 12 days in Sedrun, we got snow. It wasn't much, just enough for the roads to get slippery and for us to get some exercise with the shovel. After a few days, the landscape was green again and this "game" repeated again and again. The opening date of the ski season was set, but Mother Nature seemed to have invested her stocks elsewhere, but the local ski



resorts. Afraid this could happen, the Ski-Arena Andermatt Sedrun invested in an arsenal of snow canons, better than any fully comprehensive insurance were already working out in the ski resort was due to open. random, especially not if it's at the beginning, you couldn't see artificial snow piled up so high, wide sealed mountain road to Alp Milez. The road climbs to 500 metres above Sedrun.



against a lack of snow. Those canons green fields about a month before the Nowadays, mankind leaves nothing at efficient money-making-machine! On much of a result but after a few weeks, we couldn't even find our three metres anymore, on which we loved to hike up an altitude of 1900 metres, which is

In contrast to our visit to firstly stayed incognito, we had time. Therefore, a few came to Brigitte's parents were first, arriving for an afternoon, whereas Heinz' sister and brother in law Edith & Karl, as well as Moni & Bruno, each spent a winter-weekend with us.

Switzerland two years ago, when we informed friends and family ahead this visit, giving us plenty of social activity.

Our six weeks in Sedrun, where we enjoyed the transition from autumn to winter, were a perfect start to our stage in Switzerland. Thanks to our joyful hosts who provided us a nice apartment, we were given the feel good factor right from the beginning. We loved the many walking opportunities and the village, where most people know each other. There is still enough trust that the local baker sells his bread, sweets and other goodies, during off-season in a self-service store with honesty box. What a wonderful world - and how good that we could share it. What we experienced in the Surselva Valley has become an interesting part of our life story and we fondly remember our good times spent in Sedrun!

Brione: superb vistas from a holiday flat right above Lago Maggiore

On December 7th, 2013 we travelled over Lukmanierpass from the Grisons to the [Ticino](#), Switzerland's Italian part. It was rather freezing when we'd left Sedrun but as soon as we descended from the top of the pass, we came into much milder climate and the remaining snow and ice on our car melted quickly. A good two hours after departure, we reached the **Lago Maggiore** (literally Lake of Maggia). After a few kilometres along the lake, we ascended to the village of **Brione**, high above **Locarno**.

As our new Landlady led us into the holiday flat we had arranged a few months ago, we were instantly smitten by the bright living room with large windows offering unhindered views. We couldn't hide our excitement, in whatever direction we looked. Almost the entire south- and west-facing walls were glazed from floor to ceiling. We didn't need to go out to the balcony to enjoy the vast view that stretched from the Magadino Plain over Lago Maggiore, and over the towns of Locarno and Ascona to the mountains. At dawn, the picture changed but remained equally fascinating with a sea of lights that became ever more intense. Obviously, this is a "million-dollar-view". This flat, situated in a small apartment building with four holiday flats, was pure luxury to us. However, it was modest compared to most others in the neighbourhood. Many of the surrounding villas are indeed owned by lucky people, able to pay for a multi-million-Swiss Franc property with their pocket money.



Lago Maggiore's northern lakesides are so steep, there is no way to construct anything cheaply. On the other hand, those who have the cash to spare, don't mind the premium, as unhindered views are almost warranted due to the steep siting. As the hillside here consists of mainly rugged rocks honeycombed with seep water, building sites have literally to be blasted into the rock. Therefore, all houses get very solid foundations, though they need to be well sealed against humidity. One way to do so, is to leave space between the rock-face and the building; quite a challenge with such steep landscapes.

The entrance to our edifice was next to the garages and after climbing the stairs one floor up, we left again through a backdoor. From there, another stair led up to a three metres wide patio which was the backyard of our flat. Though, here

we were already five metres above road level, the backyard was framed by a nine metres high concrete wall to the hillside. This was nothing more than the foundation of a large 6-storey apartment building behind, resp. above it.

We were quite lucky, as our apartment had direct access from the village road and there was even a bus stop just in front of our door. However, many, if not most of our neighbours had small private “mountain railways” built, to carry themselves and their gear from the parking up or down the hill to their dwellings. The locals who have to commute, prefer the easy accessible housing options down in the towns. Uptown, on the sunny hillside, Brione, Orselina and the like, are dominated by second homes owned by German speaking Swiss, Germans and Italians.

The same bread is not the same everywhere

During our stage in Ticino, we were surprised about how often we were surrounded by German and Swiss German speakers. In the supermarkets however, the selection was clearly different from other parts of Switzerland. Specialities like Vitello Tonnato, a cold veal roast with tuna sauce, or chestnut products were abundant. Less delightful however, we found the bread. Most loafs were twice as big but only half as massy than the namesakes in Switzerland’s German part, including the “Tessinerbrot” (bread of Ticino), popular all over the country.



We don’t want to complain, as the lack of what we consider good bread was clearly improving Heinz’ fitness and health. The bread at Brione’s convenience store, located only 200m from our dwelling, was delivered from an award winning bakery. Well, we would award this convenience store’s meat counter but for bread, Heinz preferred to walk to the store in Orselina, which was a bit more than a kilometre away. That way, he killed two birds with one stone; we gained better bread and he better fitness.

Fitness was essential to take advantage of the many walking opportunities around our holiday apartment. Many appealing destinations could be reached on foot. Locarno for instance, was less than an hour and 286m in altitude away. A surprising number of narrow tracks and stairs was laid between the houses. Often, they led into wild wooded areas, intercepted with scenic rivulets and waterfalls. Alternately, we came through mansion districts with lush gardens full of palm trees, Kaki Persimmon trees and camellia, some of which even bloom in January. These plants can grow because the Ticino’s winters are rather mild.

Most of the time, it was sunny and some 8-15°C warm, better than in average winters, according to our Landlady. So it was very pleasant to hike these steep hillsides up and down but we think it must be hell in the summer heat. During our five weeks in Brione, we walked almost daily, be it to the lakeshores in Locarno, **Ascona**, **Minusio** or **Tenero**, be it to the pilgrims church **Madonna del Sasso**, the picturesque mountain valley **Valle Resa**, to the impressive **Verzasca dam** or just around the woods above the settlements. Most of those walks offered vast views, but those we enjoyed straight from our apartment were almost unrivalled.



Mogno: a chapel attracting different pilgrims

Having those great vistas and such extraordinary walking opportunities just at our door step, we sometimes had to motivate ourselves to jump into the car and go further afield.

One of those excursions brought us to that end of the **Verzasca Valley** we couldn’t reach on foot. In stark contrast to most of the Ticino district, it’s very sparsely populated. Only a handful of small settlements with traditional stone buildings are situated along the clear green river. The rough beauty is certainly the Verzasca Valleys drawing card and a nice change from the hustle and bustle of Ticino’s urbanised areas with their abundance of supermarkets, shopping centres, do-it-yourself and speciality markets.

Another excursion led us up through rather urbanized **Maggia Valley** to **Val Lavizzara**. In the almost abandoned hamlet of **Mogno**, we visited the small chapel. Nobody would talk about it, if it hadn't been destroyed by an avalanche and re-designed by a famous architect who turned this place of worship into a tourist magnet. Not even the narrow and



adventurous road hinders masses of “pilgrims” to get to see that little chapel, drafted by one of Ticinos famous sons: **Mario Botta**. Every commoner knows that even a tiny chapel costs lots of money, if designed by a star-architect. Therefore, the parish deposited a bundle of payment slips next to the offering box, facilitating hoped-for generous donations.

Talking about the architecture: we had read quite a bit of negative criticism about the colouring of the chapel and that it didn't fit into this alpine hamlet. Curious how we would like it, we were first and foremost surprised about how small it is. The chapel

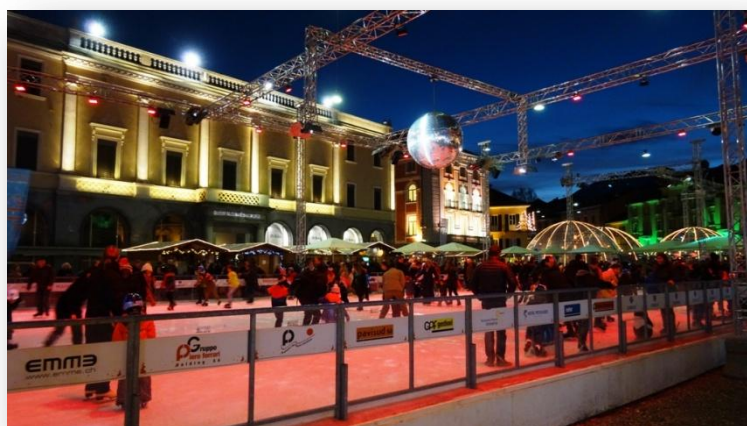
is entirely round, sort of an edged cylinder. Though the walls don't have windows, it's very bright inside, as the edged roof is entirely made of glass. The building features a colour mix created by alternating white marble and grey granite. The description of someone who said it remained him of Cordoba's Moorish design would suit it, we found. In many sections there are dark and bright stripes laid in different directions. Behind the altar, as well as at the entrance, the grey and white cubed wall is tapered off to a point, giving the illusion of a much larger room though it only seats 15 people. All in all, the little chapel is an impressive sight which has delighted us with its modern architecture.

Brontallo and other Excursions around the Maggia Valley

Back in the Maggia Valley proper, we visited the snug village of **Brontallo**. In this old stone village, the authorities must have taken care of the traditional appearance for a long time. Nowadays, most buildings are renovated and though many stables are converted into holiday houses, all retain the old outside appearance. This means, modern double- and triple glazed windows are hidden behind massive wood bars. Therefore, holiday house owners have modern but rather darkish cottages, whereas photographers are delighted about the picture perfect appearance of the village.



Thereafter, we paid a visit to the side-valley **Valle Bavona**. Now, during the shortest days of the year, the sun never reaches the mountain valley's floor, leaving the ground frozen. What a contrast to our sunny and warm place above Lago Maggiore. Here, in Valle Bavona, less than 40km away, everything was frost-covered and therefore, the meadows, stones and houses appeared in eerie pale colours.



On another day, we came back to the Maggia Valley and this time we ventured around the gorge of the green river near **Ponte Brolla**. Though the rock faces are not very high, they form a very narrow and impressive canyon. The stones have wonderful shapes carved and polished by water of the Maggia River.

Two weeks before Christmas, we felt like walking down to **Locarno**, having a good look around the small town, maybe checking-out some restaurants and steaming back uphill after a decent meal. We were a bit surprised, how lively

it was; almost too lively to stroll and look around. Soon we discovered the reasons for the crowds. An ice-rink, surrounded by stalls selling souvenirs, snacks and drinks, had been set up on the main square for a few weeks. Furthermore, a huge Christmas market was held in the charming old-town and it prove immensely popular. The different flavours, the nightly stalls and the Christmas lightings were magic. We found also several decent restaurants awarded by gourmet guides. There was just one problem; how to find back to the one we finally chose? The crowd was moving hardly more than a metre per minute and our internal GPS had problems coping with the many distractions. At least we were very hungry by the time we sat down in our chosen restaurant. We were lucky, the food was excellent and the walk uphill back to Brione helped digesting it.

Excursion to Italy

Beginning of January 2014, we made an excursion to **Morcote**, a bit south of **Lugano**. We know, during summer, this little lakeside village is very popular but right now, it was so dead, you could almost smell it rotting... Never the less, to us the tour was absolutely worthwhile, as Switzerland's only service point for our beloved Espresso Machine was on this route. Luckily, they had the desired spare-parts, - even a fair bit cheaper than expected.

Next, we continued to the nearby **Italian** market town of **Luino**. Well, during winter there are no tourists - and therefore no market. The only appeal we found in the whole place, was an overheated Italian ice cream parlour; irresistible and excellent. Some 20km further southwards along Lago Maggiore, we took the car-ferry from the pretty village **Laveno** across the lake to the town of **Verbania**. Now, we drove on to **Cannero Riviera** which turned out to be the Italian counterpart of Morcote: pretty, but pretty dead. Now we felt pity that we had neither stopped at Laveno, nor Verbania, which both had looked quite bustling and would have offered us a more authentic experience of Italian life.



Snow everywhere

The Ticino is famous for sun, but neither for rain nor snow. During most of our stage, we had sunny, and for the time of year, warm weather indeed. However, exactly when Brigitte dutifully wanted to visit her parents for Christmas, the area received more precipitation than ever in recording history. In the valleys, roads had to be closed because of flooding, and in the mountains, because of snow and damage caused by strong winds.

Luckily, we had seen the weather warning and postponed the 4 hour trip for a few days. As we wanted to bring a speciality from the Ticino, we bought a Panettone cake from a bakery. Well, what we got was certainly no advertisement for this priced speciality. Every Panettone we had ever gotten before from super discounters or supermarkets had tasted much better. By chance, we were invited to precisely such a cake upon our return. Our landlords Marlies and René didn't need to put in that much effort to do better than the baker, it was impossible to fail. However, another time they invited us for a delicious dinner and then René prove that he's a really good chef.



Around our holiday flat in Brione, it only snowed twice but soon the white powder melted away. Nevertheless, through our large panoramic windows we cosily watched the other shore of the lake, where snow was omnipresent during our stage. The poor guys over there live so close beneath the mountains, they never got a ray of sun during the shortest days of the year. We were ever so glad having ended up above the sunny northern lakeshore.

Mild climate can be very enjoyable, but it's also very pleasant to have a winter wonderland within reach. **Bosco Gurin** is a real fairytale village, only about 40 windy kilometres away from Brione. More than two metres of snow piled along the

road and almost as much on the roofs. Some small walking tracks were carved so deep into the snow, only a giraffe would have seen the beautiful landscape and the charming village around it. We hardly could get enough of the picturesque scenery and the lovely wooden houses. Bosco Gurin is a German speaking island within the Italian speaking part of

Switzerland. The folks who settled here in 1244 had come from Walser Valley in the Grisons, on the other side of the mountains. Therefore, the houses don't resemble the typical stone buildings of the surrounding valleys, but rather the wooden structures seen in the Walser Valley.



Bosco Gurin is situated in a shady spot on 1500 m above sea level and can therefore rely on snow, making it an attractive skiing destination, though quite low key. It's probably more the charm of the village that draws the crowd.

We felt our five weeks were over too soon. Despite having picked the Ticino's wettest winter in recording history, we were lucky enough that the weather at our place was exceptionally good during most of our stage. Somehow, most of the downpours, be it rain or snow, miraculously spared our paradise with the excellent view.

Six weeks in the Bernese Oberland

We left the Ticino on January 11, 2014 and proceeded quickly through the Gotthard- and many other highway tunnels to the [Bernese Oberland](#). Reaching the village of **Faulensee**, next to **Spiez**, we moved into a nice holiday flat right above Lake Thun (pronounced Doon). Again, we were spoiled with superb vistas, though the windows here, were a fair bit smaller than on our last place. On the other hand, with 94m², this was the largest flat we had been renting this winter. It had a very generously sized kitchen, as well as large living- and bathrooms, on top of two ordinary sized bedrooms.

Faulensee has a small Volg grocery store that stocks fresh bread. Furthermore, we could also reach larger supermarkets in Spiez, in less than half an hour's walk. The surroundings of our holiday flat offered ample opportunities for walking or hiking, with many starting directly from our house. Wonderful views of the lake and mountains could be taken for granted on all walking paths.



The tourist magnet of **Interlaken**, situated between Lake Thun and Lake Brienz, is only 15km away from our place. Interlaken is an excellent example how the tourist trade can change the appearance of a town. Twenty years ago, there were a number of sushi restaurants, because Interlaken was bustling with Japanese tourists en route to the famous mountain **Jungfrau** (meaning virgin - elevation 4158 m or 13,642 ft).

Meanwhile, the big business is made with tourists from China. Sushi restaurants have disappeared, but modestly priced simple Asian restaurants of any colour have popped up everywhere. To us, this is only one of many positive aspects of foreign influence in Switzerland.

Now there are even more watch- and jewellery shops in Interlaken than before. Chinese staff give their clients the chance to buy Swiss quality in their mother tongue, in case the price tag doesn't render them speechless... Until late at night, jewellery shops are bustling with Chinese clients. Not only members of tour groups, but young individuals are generously spending their tourist bucks for expensive souvenirs. Every shop in town is keen to get a slice of the pie, from the candy store to the pharmacy or the hawker stall with hot chestnuts: all advertise in Chinese. It's gone so far that some shops mark that their staff also speaks German, the local language around here.

The world changes quickly. Twenty years ago, Chinese couldn't even leave their town of residence without a permit. In 2013, from no other country in the world, as many tourists were travelling abroad, as from China. For the far right wing parties, Asians probably represent the ideal of foreigners: they arrive to spend huge amounts of money, and leave within a few days. However, who wants to take advantage of foreigners must be willing to live with the disadvantages as well, but such would be serious politics and not simple populist arguing.

Hot air balloon festival in Château-d'Oex

Most of our excursions led us to the surrounding mountains, hills and valleys but for one special event, we went a bit further afield to the French part of Switzerland: after 15 years, we visited once more the [hot air balloon festival](#) in snow covered **Château d'Oex**.

It is a spectacular view when dozens of colourful balloons are being filled with hot air and raise from a snowy white field. Despite the good weather, the balloons entered a lull and therefore hung around the village and nearby mountains for quite a while.

Altogether, about 100 balloons from 15 different nations start annually during the 8 days festival. The weekend-programme is dominated by two mass starts daily, one for "ordinary", and one for "special shape's" balloons. Already the "ordinary" hot air balloons excited us with their many colours and sizes emerging and ascending almost at once from the snowy starting field.

Sure enough, the sponsors want to have their name perpetuated on the balloons, though this is naturally less interesting for spectators than the often funny and peculiar special shape balloons, of which only one had a recognizable sponsor. We've never seen such balloons elsewhere and they included a huge flying pig, chicken, duck, lion, even a lighthouse, a huge head of a cartoon figure, a sunflower and many witty more. It must be very demanding to sew such balloons that are so different from the usual drop-form and much more challenging to manoeuvre in the wind.



Culinary encounters

Another excursion away from the Bernese Oberland led us to the [Emmental](#), where the namesake cheese originates. For cheese lovers, it might be good to hear that "the original" is much more intense in taste than its copies manufactured around the globe.



Emmentaler Meringues are another speciality from that valley but they are probably only "world famous in Switzerland". [Kambly biscuits](#), in contrast, are exported far afield. The factory shop in Trubschachen draws the crowds. It serves the much loved purpose of a free "sampling station" and offers a well made multi-lingual multimedia show. About 100 different biscuits, savoury and sweet, can be

tasted or tested respectively. It's just a pity that most of them are so irresistible, you might be tempted to buy more of the handy 500 gram packets than you can carry! The choice is just incredible and there were many biscuits we had never seen on sale anywhere we had been.

We almost forgot to mention the reason why we visited the Emmental: because of its distinctive old farmhouses with their very big roofs. Farms, full of character are dotted around steep hills, now partly snow covered. Beautiful to look at!





Appealing Bernese Oberland

Our main reason for choosing Faulensee as a base was to visit the surrounding villages, valleys and lakes. Apart from touristy Interlaken, we also visited the charming town of **Thun** several times. Other excursions led us to **Frutigen**, where the new 35km long **Lötschberg** railway base tunnel ends. From there, we continued to beautiful **Blausee**, a tiny clear lake that can be admired for free during winter. The road ends in **Kandersteg**, from where car shuttle trains lead through the 15km long Lötschberg tunnel to the Valais. **Kandersteg** is nowadays a quiet but appealing ski resort which was currently covered in fresh snow.

Probably more famous, are the winter resorts of **Adelboden** and **Grindelwald**, of which we liked the latter much better. Low key and very pleasant was the village of **Lenk**, where we witnessed the descent of an avalanche. From a safe distance it looked like a white dusting waterfall thundering over a bare rock face before taking the snow field below with it. Luckily, no one was hurt but avalanches are a serious risk all over the Alps.

With more distance to the mountains, you often see more of them and this is certainly true for the hills called **Guggisberg** and **Gurnigel** (1600m above sea level). They both offered vast views over different lakes and mountain peaks, most prominently the famous trio **Eiger, Mönch** and **Jungfrau**.

Very pretty was also the valley of **Diemtigtal**. After driving up the lovely valley, we were rewarded with the view of bizarrely shaped mountains.



Winter didn't last long - it was one of the warmest north of the Alps. Already in February, spring flowers popped up everywhere and temperatures rose to reasonable 10-12°C. So it tempted us to drive around the lakes Thunersee and Brienersee. Especially the northern shores, with their small roads and lovely villages, like **Sigriswil** and **Brienz**, were charming. The southern shores, on the other hand, consisted of not much more than highway tunnelled rock faces.

To discover the beautiful landscape around Faulensee, we often went for long walks right from our holiday dwelling. On foot power, we went not only to Spiez, but also to Aeschi, Aeschried and Krattigen. Sometimes, we were accompanied by visitors, as Edith & Karl, Annemarie & Beat and also Petra & Otti spent weekends with us. It was great to have friends coming and sharing more than just a few hours.

Bern: the historic capital

During our last week in the Bernese Oberland, we spent a day in Switzerland's capital **Bern**. We parked our car at the modern **Paul Klee Museum**, where we had a look at the fascinating architecture. From the outside, the metal construction looks like three wave shaped buildings merged by glassed corridors. To the back, the three buildings appear to disappear in a field that covers the large rear section of the art gallery, making one big complex out of the three halls.



From the Museum Paul Klee, it was only 20 minutes' walk to one of Bern's landmarks: the so-called "Bärengraben" (bear's ditch), which has recently been converted into a more species-appropriate bear park, along Aare River. As the bears were hibernating, we soon proceeded over the bridge to the old town. It is surrounded by a sharp river bend that encompasses a hill with rows of charming townhouses of similar architecture. Most of the buildings, dating from the 15th and 16th century, have arcades on street level.



Smack in the middle of the cake is Switzerland's parliament, which is called Federal Palace, or Bundeshaus respectively, in German. All over Bern, embassies and vehicles of diplomats can be seen.



Right now, shortly after the Swiss voted in favour of immigration quotas, as proposed by the populist right wing party SVP, diplomatic activity around the Swiss capital was certainly on peak level, as such quotas violate the Bilateral Agreements with the EU. We don't really know, whether we shall be ashamed or feel pity for our compatriots, who fell into the trappings of populist advertisement! With populist arguing, the SVP made Swiss commoners believe, "mass immigration", especially from Germany and Italy, is to blame for high unemployment, low salaries, high rents, traffic-jams, overcrowded public transport and so on.

Well, high unemployment in Switzerland means 3.5%, which is presently among the lowest in the world! In 2013, unemployment in the EU countries ranged between 4.9% and 27.8%, or an average 12 % in the Euro-Zone.

Low salaries means: Swiss receive among the [highest salaries in the world](#) and during the last 10 years, Swiss salaries rose "only" twice as much as in the European Union! Less than 10 % of Swiss cross-salaries are below SFr 4'000 (€ 3'290) a month! In fact, Switzerland enjoyed astonishing economic growth since the Bilateral Agreements that include free trade and free movement of people, with the EU, were introduced.

Many international companies went to Switzerland, as they could now find enough qualified personnel and still take advantage of a secure environment, low taxes and almost no risk of strikes.

While the rest of Europe was enduring recession and financial crisis, Switzerland's GDP was growing and growing! It's true, the country's roads are jammed. However, would Swiss resort to their bicycles, foreigners could drive on near empty roads that wouldn't exist without the many foreigners who did the hard and dirty work, almost no Swiss would do! It's also true, public transport, though Switzerland's network is among the world's most efficient and most dense, is packed during peak-hour. However, without the many foreign employees like bus-drivers, public transport would come to a standstill. Further, most Swiss hospitals and care-homes wouldn't have the capacity to do much more than bare emergency treatments! Admittedly, a few foreigners (as well as some genuine Swiss) misuse the social security system, but in general, immigrants pay more into the system than they ever take out!



Well, we understand, everybody who has to deal with an unpleasant situation, be it unemployment, jammed roads or trains, or whatever, gladly takes an "offered" culprit. It's much easier than putting the thinking caps on and start evaluating "what can I do to change my unsatisfying situation".

The populist advertising machinery did a good job in spreading angst and fears. Mainly the regions with few foreigners voted in favour of immigration quotas. But those regions that have already a fair share of immigrants, refused the proposal of the populist right wing party SVP, as they obviously realized, foreigners are also a big benefit for the society! Democracy is actually a great invention, but it has also its limitations, as many electors are over-challenged by it. Italians regularly vote for Berlusconi, Dutch for Wilders, Turks for Erdogan, Egyptians for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Swiss decided, by popular vote, to bite the hand that feeds them! Free movement of people is just one paragraph of the Bilateral Agreements between Switzerland and the EU, and those are now at risk!

Democracy can only work properly with mature voters, and those are few and far between, even in countries with long democratic traditions. That's why the West shouldn't assume, democracy is the best system for all, and has therefore to be exported everywhere. Sensible dictators can be a better bet for a country than unreasonable, manipulated voters!

Hopefully, Switzerland's vote on "mass immigration" was a wake-up call for the rest of Europe, to stand together and make sure, populist arguments don't ever win again. Remember: even Hitler got to power by a popular vote!

Germany: an early spring month on Lake Constance

After six weeks on Lake Thun, we changed lakeshores and left Faulensee on February 23rd 2014 to Lake Constance. We had chosen the [German](#) shore and moved into a nice holiday flat in [Immenstaad](#), halfway between the popular tourist destinations **Friedrichshafen** and **Meersburg**. We stayed at Apfelhof, one of the regions many farms that cultivate apples. There, we got a modern, well appointed top floor apartment in the owner's house that offered us astonishing views over the lake to the Swiss Alps.

Our dwelling was perfectly located, with a bakery and the apple orchards right behind the building and the appealing village of Immenstaad to the front. A pleasant 5 minutes' walk led to the village centre and a further 5 minutes to the shores of Lake Constance.

In theory, it was still winter though, it felt rather like spring, with lots of sunshine and temperatures rising often to around 15°C. Snowbells had already faded but daffodils and even tulips were sprouting in many gardens.



We know, Germans are fond of Italian ice cream and some ice cream parlours stay open all year round. With such an early spring, many more popped up already now. As we expected some ice-cream crazy friends to visit us here, we had good reason to find the best "Gelateria" in the area. So the ice cream parlours we visited could be as good as they were - we still couldn't stop ourselves checking out whether we wouldn't find an even better one...



Heinz was very delighted to find that a so-called "normal portion" consists of 5 scoops, in what soon turned into our favourite parlour in Immenstaad. First came Beat (the craziest...for ice cream) with Annemarie and Echo (another crazy ice cream lover) to spend a weekend with us. All three really appreciated our hard work of sampling Italian ice creams, whereas we totally failed in the eyes of Andrea & Peter who visited next. They were much more fond of cakes and we couldn't recommend any tea room to go - only ice cream parlours that half-heartedly were selling some baked items too. As Andrea & Peter spent four days with us, we found ample time to rave of each other's globetrotter experiences.

Meersburg: picturesque village with a superb thermal bath

Not only for puddings, we went to **Meersburg** with all our friends, but because Meersburg is a treat in itself. The neat harbour village nestles to the hillside and has a picturesque old town with many half-timbered houses. Several stately buildings, like the new and the old Meersburg Castle, are overlooking the village and the lake. Currently, the alleys were decorated for carnival with colourful stripes of cloth or ties hanging between townhouses.

We regretted that we didn't try [Meersburg's thermal bath](#) earlier, as we had waited for the advertised fortnightly naturist-evening. On these evenings, the huge thermal baths can be used in the buff as well, whereas on all other days, only the sauna section is to be used naked. Seeing how big, varied and sophisticated this sauna section is, you could easily spend five hours there alone. Luckily, there is a small restaurant for a feed. If you want to use the big thermal bath or the big restaurant, you need to wear bathers unless you visit on a naturist evening. But the sauna section has various smaller pools too and on top of it, you can access Lake Constance for nude swimming or a dip after the sauna.



Most of the seven saunas and steam baths are not only big, but huge, sitting up to 60 people keenly sweating. Apart from the indoor sweating cabins, more sauna-huts can be found outside, resembling a pile dwelling village right on the lake shore. The regularly scheduled "pouring water over the hot rocks"-ceremonies proved very popular. At Meersburg

Therme, they do no ordinary ceremonies at all, but have a wide array of special ones, listed on the door to each cabin. We experienced an “ice-, salt-“, and a “sound-pouring water onto hot coals ceremony”. As we liked the ambiance of the place so much, we returned after a few days.

Ravensburg and other worthwhile sights

Another pretty town we visited more than once, was **Ravensburg**, some 40km from our holiday dwelling in Immenstaad. The place appeals with more than a dozen city gates and towers and a large pedestrian area. The bustling old town boasts quite a few attractive historic buildings and of course many shops and restaurants. Parts of the old city wall with its city gates are still intact and there is a castle hill to be climbed for great views.



Another excursion led us to Lake Constance’s hinterland to the hills around **Salem** and the appealing town of **Saulgau** with its half-timbered houses.

More attractive half-timbered houses could be seen around Allgau, where we visited the picturesque towns of **Wangen**, **Kempen** and **Immenstadt**, which is almost a namesake of Immenstaad, where we stayed.



Most days however, we didn’t move our car, but went for walks between the fruit orchards in our absolute surroundings, along the lake or past the nearby hamlet of Kippenhausen with its red hill-top tower overlooking a grape-yard.

On March 19, 2014 it was already time to sack and pack again and so we returned to Switzerland where we could stay with Heinz’ sister and brother in law Edith & Karl. From there, we took the chance to visit some more friends and relatives and organized a few things, before we got ready for our further travelling.

Final thoughts about our stay in Switzerland and Germany

One more time, we’ve spent winter in an area not famous at all for mild climate and one more time, the weather gods gave us the best one could expect. Again, we experienced a Swiss winter with lots of sunshine and mild temperatures, even though we didn’t resort to the country’s sunniest corners. To get to the snow, we needed mostly to drive or hike to higher altitudes. With the Surselva Valley in the Grisons, the Ticino, the Bernese Oberland and finally, the German shore of Lake Constance, we experienced again four attractive regions we hadn’t known so well before.

We had chosen those areas also to have some think tank and have a few thoughts about our future. But as all those regions proofed to be so overwhelming, we couldn’t help but go out and see more of it, whenever the sun shone, and it shone a lot!

Again, we indulged in Swiss specialities like cheese, sausages, chocolate and yoghurt - among many other delicious things we hadn’t had for a long time...

Of course, we are very fortunate that we realized how far our savings go, if we do without the so-called security. With so much time, we regularly see and experience things that those running the rat-race don’t recognize.

On one hand, it got very easy to us to see the best of any place we go, including our home country. On the other hand, the privilege of having plenty of time allows us to see behind the smiley faces and the picture perfect “showcase piece of the cake” the tourist industry wants us to make believe. That way, we realize lots of things that remain hidden to stressed city folks on a two-weeks holiday.

We’re very glad that we have some more years ahead of us to experience the world with “more time than money”. This privilege allows us to grasp and see things others don’t - be they positive or negative - it’s all a further bonus to our wealth of experiences.

France: no clothes, no worries

On April 4th 2014, we left Switzerland again and ventured towards [France](#). As our winter in Switzerland and Germany had rewarded us with lots of sunshine and experiences, we still needed some time to indulge in serious thoughts about our future travel plans. After living the privilege of being travellers, instead of workers or salaried employee, meanwhile for already 15 years, totally unexpected, it looks as if the party could go on for as long as we wanted. Initially, we thought we would run out of money after about 12 years.

Obviously, we get rewarded for shedding off our security thinking and so we could travel to all the places we wanted to go. Now we have the privilege to (re-)define what we shall do during the second half of our globetrotter life with unlimited freedom.

Being naked and feeling the sun and a breeze, is always a good base to reveal our wishes, think and talk about them and come to a conclusion. That's why we've decided to spend another summer on French naturist resorts, and why we chose mainly places we know quite well.



From Beaune to the Cévennes: spring in full swing

Passing the Jura Ranges on both sides of the border, we travelled in bright sunshine from Switzerland to **Beaune**, our first destination in France. Brigitte was delighted by all the spring flowers along our way and furthermore, because we dined again at Restaurant Fleury, one of her absolute favourites.



The next day, April 5th, we followed a small road along the picturesque Canal du Centre southwards. After a lunch-stop in **Charolles**, we bypassed Roanne before following road D8. In **Montbrison**, we found ourselves a hotel room. This town was surprisingly pleasant and spoiled us not only with a good hotel, but also with a great dining place.

The route on day three led us first through pastoral green landscapes and then over pass roads, leading up to 1200metres above sea level. Up there, a cold breeze was dominant, contrasting the otherwise very mild spring temperatures

and there were no leaves in the trees as yet. The air was extremely clear and offered vast views from every summit. Around lunchtime, we reached the pleasant pilgrims town of **Le-Puy-en-Velay**. On the edge of town, there are three rocky spines, each occupied by a bold religious symbol. We just arrived before a procession of chanting pilgrims marching through the oldtown up to a church.

Continuing southwards, rewarded us with spectacular hilly landscapes in which the picturesque artificial lake **Lac de Villefort** is embedded. Not much further, we stopped at a belvédère that opened breathtaking views into the deep **Gorge de Chassezac**.

Now it was only a short drive to **Les Vans** on the eastern rim of the Cévenne hills. Overnighing here, we drove for dinner to St.-Paul-le-Jeune where we let ourselves spoil once more at the "Auberge des Enclos".



Domaine de la Sablière: a warm start of the season



Despite being only April 7th, 2014, temperatures around this part of France reached already astonishing 25°C. So it was staring in the face to visit [Domaine de la Sablière](#) once more. As they were open only about 10 days, big sections of the large naturist resort were not yet ready for guests. So, for an exception, we were given a mobile-home in the upper part of the camping and not near the river and supermarket, as we had hoped for. Never mind, we like to walk and our shoes are used to carry us for several dozen kilometres weekly anyway.

The resort is very well equipped and embedded in the Cèze Valley. Surrounded by steep forested hills, the shores have unique rock outcrops along the river. Lots of sunny and lots of shady pitches can be found and due to the steep landscape, which Sablière tries to keep as natural as possible, footpaths can be a bit rustic in some areas. However, this year, the naturist village celebrates its 40th anniversary and therefore lots of improvements are under way. One of the swimming pools got a brand new and bigger roof, many roads and foot paths were re-done and broadened. Hundreds of deck-chairs were replaced around the pools and also around the almost 200 rentals. Chalets, mobile-homes and pre-erected tents are available in many different standards. More and more are added all the time and the existing ones are regularly upgraded and get new mattresses.

Weather-wise, we had a perfect summer week already early April indeed. However, outside Sablière, the tourist-season had not yet started, meaning many restaurants and businesses remained closed at least until Easter. Luckily, the supermarket on the naturist ground was already well stocked with groceries, including fresh fish, meats, fruits, vegetable and breads. The very friendly shop keeper, who came back from La Grande Cosse, does certainly a good job. Also Sablière's restaurant had already a good selection and proved popular, as everything was carefully prepared to perfection à la Française, providing excellent quality for a good price.

We had a very relaxing week here, certainly a perfect start into our naturist summer and we were able to get a good base of a tan, during our strolls around Sablière's extensive woods and down to the river.

Gorge de Tarn: driving along spectacular rock faces

We left Sablière on April 14th 2014 with destination La Grande Cosse on the Mediterranean, which would theoretically, be an easy three hours drive. As true "roving spirits", we checked the map carefully and found many tempting detours with famous tourist sights. Therefore, we decided to stretch our route to the coast over three days. First, we headed back to the Cevennes and then west towards the Tarn Gorge, taking roads yet unknown to us. Surprisingly, our detour brought us very close to the source of the Tarn River near **Le Pont de Montvert**. It was another day with clear blue skies, making our drive alongside the Tarn River already very pleasant before we reached the most spectacular sections between St. Enimie and Le Rozier.



We had been driving through the Tarn Gorge already twice in autumn but to see it now in spring, in picture perfect weather with the first leaves, was even more breathtaking. For many kilometres, you drive between sheer rock faces that often have pillar like outcrops. Once a while, there are little hamlets of old stone houses snuggled along the river shores. Some could only be reached with small private cable cars, or by boat of course. During peak summer, canoeing is the thing to do and there are probably so many, you could do canoe-hopping from one shore to the other.



We stopped almost after every bend and were so glad to have plenty of time. We reached **Le Rozier** still in the best of light and as the landscape started to flatten out, we decided this village was just perfect for an overnight stop. Looking around, we climbed up to pretty Peyreleau, enthroning Le Rozier. There, we enjoyed spectacular views of the area and noticed another beautiful gorge conglomerating here. Luckily, the chosen accommodation, Hotel Doussière, boasted also the best eatery in town. Restaurant Alicanta was the perfect place to finish this wonderful day off.

From deep gorges to tall mountains: highlights all over

As we weren't gorged-out yet, we decided to drive through **Gorge de la Jonté** the next day. It was almost as spectacular as the Tarn gorge, but never as touristy. After passing Meyrueis, we came over two small mountain passes and spontaneously decided to head to the weather observatory on **Mont Aigoual**, on 1600m above sea level. Still with clear weather, we enjoyed a phenomenal 360° view, reaching from the snowy alpine peaks down to the Mediterranean Sea.

There were still more highlights ahead of us. South of Le Vigan, we soon stood at the **Cirque de Navacelles**, the canyon rim above the northern end of Gorge de la Vis. The vistas from the view points over the deep carved gorge with its many river bends, were just breathtaking. The same applies to the drive over numerous hairpins down to the river, and up the other side of the canyonlike gorge. We don't know for how long the stream is as tame as we saw it, on this warm spring day. However, some brave people have built the hamlet of Navacelles almost at the bottom of the valley. We refrained from staying there but continued to **Villeneuveville**, where we had reserved a room at Hotel La Source. We had discovered the attached gourmet restaurant two years ago, while staying for nude hiking at nearby Domaine Lambeyran, which was still closed until May.



For the remainder of our way to La Grande Cosse, we did as other people would: we took the motorway and reached the Mediterranean within an hour.

La Grande Cosse: a true nature- and naturist reserve

Approaching [La Grande Cosse](#), we felt again as if driving through an African national park, only the animals were missing, though the naturist reserve is situated within a nature reserve indeed. You could never guess its proximity to the big cities of Béziers and Narbonne.

We had decided that arriving on April 16th, 2014, is early enough in season not to make a booking and this was certainly no disadvantage. Though many mobile-homes were not yet ready to be hired, we asked shyly and without serious expectations for one in the front-row. To our delight, we got just that, so we could enjoy unhindered views to the nature reserve that separates La Grande Cosse from the beach.

The mobile-home we got was very well appointed, much better than in many other naturist grounds - only the mattress was a little pain in the back.

As we had seen on our first stage at La Grande Cosse, some two years ago, the employees were taking great care in tending the gardens and many flowerbeds bloomed already all over the large resort. It consists of about 150 rental mobile-homes, some pre-erected tents, around 250 pitches and some 100 sites for permanent, most of them occupied by French.

Upon our arrival mid April, La Grande Cosse had not felt as lively as Sablière and we were rather surprised that the camp ground, as well as the mobile-homes filled up only after, and not before Easter. First arrivals were mainly retirees but with the start of the Dutch spring holiday, in honour of their royals, suddenly families with children flocked in.



Birds of passage

During our stage, free WiFi-access was only available around the bar but a pay-and-surf network, covering the entire campground was (once more) under construction. However, as we spent a few months in France, it was worthwhile finding an independent solution and investing in a 3G mobile-internet device. That way, we were more flexible if the provided access was achingly slow or only available at the reception, during limited hours or somewhere outdoors. To us, who are constantly on the road, the 3G connection with Orange proved very reliable and satisfactory.



The internet connects people and though we're not collecting "virtual internet-friends" at all, our footprint on the web sometimes leads to acquaintanceships with real people. Out of the sudden, a couple emerged on our terrace at La Grande Cosse. We hadn't met before though of what they told us, it seemed as if they knew us quite well. After our stage in Australia they must have "followed our footsteps". They had found our webpage and after reading through it, they visited some places we had mentioned in our travelogue, including Sunseekers, a naturist club near Perth. Quickly, a sense of community developed with Gudrun & Uly and we talked for hours. It's rare to meet other globetrotting naturists, most are either naturists OR globetrotters. So we chatted a few nights away, talking about all the world and his wife.

Only two days after they had left, we got a surprise visit again. This time by Sonia & Toni, a French couple we had previously met at Sablière. There was lots to talk about again since we hadn't seen them for two years and they had also been travelling a lot. The quiet family in the mobile home next door probably wondered, where the hell we knew all those people from, with whom we talked whole nights away.

Being here so early in season, has its pros and cons. On one hand, the constant wind felt often a bit chilly, despite the mild spring temperatures. Therefore, we often resorted to wind sheltered places for sunbathing, be it around our mobile-home, around the pool or on the beach. On the other hand, the olive trees started blooming and flamingos were still around in the nearby saltwater ponds. We only needed to get dressed and walk for a few hundred metres until we could point the zoom-lens to these elegant birds. Sometimes, a small group of them could be seen sleeping with their long necks bent to hide the head under a wing. Amazing how flamingos withstood the sometimes very strong wind, considering they often stand on one of their thin legs only. At other times, a dozen or two could be seen wading through the water in search of food. If we were lucky, some would even fly over us. Probably it's the abundance of birdlife that motivates La Grande Cosse to consider naturists just as another specie of birds in the observatory. Why else would they dare to ring all their holiday-makers with a non removable strap? - unless you resort to scissors!



A great beach and other worthwhile sights

Among the other highlights of our stage at La Grande Cosse, was always our walk down to the beach. Luckily, that part of the nature reserve [Parc naturel Narbonnaise](#) we had to cross for some 500m, is naturist friendly territory. It's truly unspoilt marshland that changes appearance with the seasons. Though spring was extremely dry, the ponds and inlets had quite a lot of water. A small footpath passes several ponds and crosses two water-bodies on bridges. It's all extremely picturesque, not only along the biggest pond; "étang de pissevaches". You might guess what its name means, though we can assure you, it doesn't smell bad.

Also the beach that opens after crossing a small overgrown sand dune, is just pure nature. It's only dotted with some driftwood and sun-seekers "au naturel", again just pure nature. Officially, the naturist beach stretches for some two kilometres but at least during off-season, almost the entire 6km between the bustling summer resort villages of Cabanes de Fleury and St. Pierre-la-mer are dominated by naturists.

As we felt being like in the midst of a wonderful oasis, we didn't go out often. Only for shopping, as the supermarket at La Grande Cosse didn't offer many fresh products in pre-season and tinned food is not to our taste.

Though there are ample opportunities for sightseeing, we only made one serious outing. Heading west, we stopped at the new tourist developments and harbour outside **Gruissan**. It was the long weekend of Labour day, meaning no labourer worked! They rather frequented the street cafés, ice-cream parlours and souvenir shops, whilst their bosses sailed out with their big yachts.



Just besides this hustle and bustle, was the almost unnoticed peaceful historic town of Gruissan, enthroned by the ruin of a castle. Just a bit further, we reached the colourful salt pans of "**île St. Martin**". Over a small bridge that was actually just a plank, we went for a walk and admired the different pinks and whites of the partitioned fields. Another couple followed us and was delighted too. After a while, we approached what looked like a processing plant, with other tourists strolling around. A friendly lady approached us, just to inform us that we were on forbidden ground.

Visitors are only meant to see the museum with the souvenir shop and the restaurant of the salt works. But in areas where you cannot buy anything, you're not welcome, even if a plank leads you there...

Back at La Grande Cosse, we realized that the wind here mysteriously blows a fair bit weaker than just twenty kilometres north or south. Obviously, we had found one of the better places on the Mediterranean for beach-life. We liked the natural atmosphere very much and the unseasonably warm spring further enhanced our stay. Apart from a rainy few days around Easter, we had lots of good weather. We had enjoyed our four weeks in the sun, going for some lengthy walks along the beach, around the extensive campsite, or in its surrounding. We truly appreciated the comfort offered by La Grande Cosse but even more its location embedded into pure nature, just a perfect environment for naturism.

From coast to coast: the journey is the destination



On May 12th 2014, we left the Mediterranean and ventured slowly but surely towards the Atlantic. After passing through the pretty fortified town of **Carcassonne**, we stopped at the villages **Revel** and **Gaillac** which both are scenic too. Each of them has an impressive main square with a covered market. The houses around the squares have large arcades held by massive beams. In Revel, the timber is painted in a different colour in front of every shop.

The scenery was dominated by pastoral landscapes and hills and after passing through **Cordes-sur-ciel**, we headed to **Villefranche-de-Rouergue**. After finding a hotel, we explored the historic old town with its narrow alleys. Even the main square was narrow, or maybe it only appeared like that because of the bold church.

The next day was full of highlights. First we drove along the River Lot and visited **Calvignac**, picturesquely nestled above it. A bit further, we took the turnoff to **St. Cirq-Lapopie** glued to a cliff. Despite the lonely small road to get here, we saw ourselves suddenly surrounded by other tourists, some even arrived by tour-buses. For once, we had to pay for parking, which is quite an exception outside French cities. We had arrived on a major attraction "un des very plus beaux villages de France". After a good look around, we continued to nearby **Cahors**. The fortified old town had some extremely narrow alleys. Many of the medieval houses are in need of more than only a renovation with a paint brush. Luckily, the bridge on the other side of town has already gotten a renovation. Pont Valentré that spans the River Lot, was part of the former city wall and has therefore three distinctive watch towers. Pretty as they were to look at, they were hard to get on one picture.

Now we had to make up our mind of where to spend the evening. Heinz' idea won and so we ended up in **La Roque Gageac** which we know quite well. The enlarging and beautifying of its main road was almost completed. We took the new footpath from our hotel to a nearby restaurant, where we knew, we would not be disappointed.

The next day was even fuller of highlights! Whilst driving west over the rolling hills of the Dordogne district, we took advantage of having plenty of time and visited many of the picturesque villages along our way, bypassing those we know well, but stopping in some villages we hardly knew. So we visited **Cadouin**, where a (tourist-) market was held and **Beaumont-du-Perigord** with an exhibition of giant manmade donkeys, the emblem of the Catalan. Then we came through **Issigeac**, where we enjoyed a (Breton) Crêpe and finally through **Eymet**. Here, we were again delighted by its market square and also by the old castle.

Dune de Pilat: picturesque all over

Now we bypassed Bordeaux on some minor but still fast roads and reached **Arcachon** on the Atlantic coast around 6pm. After quickly checking-in to the modern "B&B hotel", we ventured out again to see the famous **sand dune of Pilat** before sunset. Well, even today, on an ordinary working day outside school holiday, we were by far not the only ones.

After passing an alleyway with food- and souvenir-stalls, we took the polyester-stairs giving easy access to the top of the presently ~110m high shifting dune.

The wind blew hard but nevertheless, the golden sand was pleasantly warm. The views up there are just marvellous! The setting sun cast long shadows on the undulate dune shaped by wind. To the west, we looked down to the beach and the shallow water with the sand islet Banc d'Arguin. To the north we overlooked the Arcachon Bassin and to the east a vast pine forest that is here gradually taken over by the dune. It was so wonderful, a Chinese couple had chosen the Pilat dune as background for their wedding pictures and we chose to come back the next morning.





With the sun high above, the shapes of the dune didn't have much contrast now. The sea, on the other hand, was bright blue. Thanks to the tide now being low, you didn't only see one, but a dozen of sandbars, visible in, and some only through, the shallow water. The colours were simply "incroyable, mais vrai!!!"

We spent the afternoon looking around Arcachon town and the settlements and touristy developments along Arcachon Bassin. This big inlet is almost encircled by land. The outer tip of Cap Ferret is just about 2,5 kilometres away from Arcachon.

La Jenny: naturism and golf between gaily coloured cottages

Late afternoon of May 15th 2014, we arrived at [La Jenny](#). This attractive naturist village is situated between Ares and Le Porge right on the Atlantic coast. At La Jenny, some 750 chalets are dotted around 127 ha of hilly pine forest. Despite all cottages having en-suite facilities, there are dozens of small sanitary buildings. However, camping is a definite no-no at La Jenny - even children's tents in the backyard are undesired. We remember some 10 years ago, arriving with a wet tent from the previous night. We just wanted to dry it next to our cottage but it didn't take five minutes until somebody informed us that tents are against the house rules.

So here, you see nothing but cottages and that's La Jenny's peculiar charm. All are detached houses and most contain one dwelling only. However, of the smaller apartments, sometimes two or three, are housed under one roof. The wooden chalets are painted in various colours, real gaudy. Because of the sandy ground, the cottages are put up on concrete platforms on stilts, some quite high. Many of La Jenny's charming houses look, together with their sometimes incredibly large terraces, very stately. Nevertheless, even the largest ones offer no more than 60m² of living space.



If a cottage is extended, it always retains the original style of the building. Though there are about 13 different types, their style is usually very similar within the same quarter. All chalets are so well integrated into the pine forest, the properties' borders can only be guessed. There is ample space between the large cottages but less between the small ones.

Most of La Jenny's colourful bungalows are privately owned and some 450 of them can be rented through reception. About a dozen different types sized between 11 m² and 60 m², are on offer. Obviously, standard and equipment varies according to owners' tastes and needs. Our cottage was superbly equipped and so generously furnished, we had to fill the second bedroom up to the ceiling with spare chairs, upholstery and knick-knacks, until we were able to navigate through the living room without toppling over anything.

We took full advantage of the large kitchen, equipped with baking oven and dish washer. As almost all cottages, also ours had an additional shower on the terrace, which we really appreciated on hot days.



Our pretty green and white painted house had two big terraces, altogether 65m², which was almost twice the size of the apartment itself. As our patios were partly covered and facing to the south, to the east and the north, we could always find sun, shade and wind shelter. We had ample opportunity to watch the proud owners of the neighbouring cottages doing their self-imposed chores, like washing down the façade, cleaning the roof, painting, trimming bushes, or whatever...

A few times, we had the opportunity to watch wildlife. More

than once, roe deer were grazing just next to our cottage. Other tourists spotted a fox and heard wild boars. Squirrels on the other hand, were quite reliable to be seen every day. It amazed us, how these little fellas raced effortlessly from one tree top to the next when chasing each other.

Playing golf requires less clothes than walking to the beach

On its impressive estate of 2500m length and 500m width, La Jenny offers not only plenty of lodgings but also many sports- and play grounds, among them more than 10 tennis courts. The most striking feature is certainly the 9ha golf course with 6 real holes and a driving range. Depending whether you check La Jenny's German or English website, it is the only naturist golf course in Europe or even in the world. Like most golf courses, also La Jenny's golf club has a strict dress code: you must play naked!

Not only the golf course but all of La Jenny is nicely landscaped. Cycling- and walking-enthusiasts can even find some separate cycle- and footpaths. By providing very limited parking space, the use of cars within the holiday village is successfully discouraged - naturism as it should be. Near the beach access for instance, there is no parking, except two spaces for handicapped, a fair and perfect solution.

To reach the naturist beach some 850m away, you have to pass the woodland outside the resort and cross a public cycling path. Therefore, you shouldn't walk nude but "wear a minimum", as a board at La Jenny's exit explains in various languages. We got the impression that "a minimum" is interpreted in lots of different ways. We hadn't seen anybody fully naked indeed but especially many of La Jenny's permanent residents wore no more than footwear or a necklace! Others chose elegant city wear but most holiday-makers opted for what passersby expect to see on any textile beach: a sexy next-to-nothing, leaving lots of room for imagination. That's along the way. However, in the section where the public path comes closest to the naturist village, no imagination is required at all. Exactly in this sector of La Jenny's outside border there is no visual cover at all, only a wire netting fence offering unhindered views to the many nudes on the popular "Boulodrome" and other sports fields just behind the fence!



Everybody stripped off anyway, once down on the beach. It proved quite popular already in May and June, long before the MNS (life guards or "Maître-nageur sauveteur" resp.) went on duty. There is fine golden sand and we're still impressed how much the width of the beach varies, according to tides. Here it was between 30 and 300metres. We loved walking on the vast beach which didn't limit us in either direction. To the north, there is another public naturist beach and to the south, as far as we went, there is just sand, not even old bunkers from world war II.

As everywhere on the Atlantic ocean, most of the time there were crushing waves, perfect to surf, play and watch. For safe swimming, we headed for the big pools. With their water surface of 1,000m², the group of 4 pools at the centre of La Jenny is quite impressive. The water park with its pools, some square, some rounded, include a generously sized paddling pool, a small pool and two large basins, of which one is well heated. Everything is overlooked from amphitheatre-like terraces that invite for sunbathing on the colourful comfy chairs.

Next to the water complex, there is a small spa, beauty- and fitness centre with sauna, plus a large restaurant, an oyster bar and a few shops. The biggest of them is the "épicerie" the supermarket which is pretty well stocked and very much in demand. The nice couple who run it, are true naturists and if weather permits, they work in the buff. Together with the nude animators, they help that people want to set off to La Jenny to take off their clothes.

This holiday village is the perfect place for all naturists who not only seek a natural atmosphere, but also love to stay in a small summer house surrounded by nature, rather than being on a parcelled campground or in a concrete holiday urbanisation.

At La Jenny, you will find well appointed, high quality holiday cottages naturally nestled in a pine forest, excellent sports- and leisure amenities, as well as a great naturist beach on the Atlantic ocean.



CHM Montalivet: the founding spirit of naturism transformed into modern times

On June 10, 2014 we moved from the Arcachon Basin less than 100km north to Montalivet. This is probably the only small village having two giant naturist resorts within a radius of 5km, each hosting some 15'000 holiday-makers during peak summer: Euronat to the north and [CHM Monta](#) (Centre Héliomarin Montalivet) to the south.

Last year, we've been to Euronat but this year we opted for CHM Monta(livet), to check whether the great atmosphere we remember from previous visits, still prevails and to spy out the differences to Euronat. At least at the reception there were none. Both centres proceed check-in super efficiently for those arriving with a reservation, but take ages, if you arrive without.

As the International Naturist Federation (INF) was founded here in 1950, CHM Monta is considered the cradle of naturism. Christiane Lecocq, who founded CHM together with her husband Albert, lives still here - she is meanwhile over 100 years old. For a long time, CHM Monta was the firm favourite of an alternative circle of people, seeking simple nude living rather than modern amenities. Meanwhile, many things have changed here. Nowadays, Socnat, CHM's parent company, is owned and professionally managed by Village-Centre, a subsidiary of a large stock-market listed investment company.

The spirit of naturism is still very much up and alive here though meanwhile, CHM Monta has been transformed into a modern naturist resort with contemporary lodgings, powered pitches and top notch facilities. This attracts many young families, securing the future of naturist ideals, but in line with present days. The veterans on the other side, are still keen to hold on to the old times neither with electricity nor hot water heaters and en-suite facilities. We heard about vandalism on Wi-Fi antennas and naked road blockades on the main road, whereby the old guard protested against enlarging the wireless network over the entire holiday village.

We always thought, old age brings wisdom but it seems those venerable guys forgot something: if the naturist movement wants to survive (them), it needs to adapt to modern times, otherwise it might extinct - just like any other non-adapting ideal.

Lodgings of unbelievable standards

We had booked a mobile-home for six weeks and for such a long time, it was just perfect that we didn't choose the smallest one. We got a bright, new and modern model, just the way we like it. It had two bedrooms, an open plan living room with kitchen, en-suite facilities and a wooden terrace with benches and a table.

From the newly installed pay-TV system we profited differently than CHM Monta had intended. They had to build us a new parking space, after our car got bogged in the drench for the antennae cable, which had only been filled with sand. For our taste, the mobile-homes stood quite close to the neighbouring ones, though that way we easily got in contact with the nice people staying around us.

Nowadays, all of CHM Monta's rental accommodations are modern and inviting. The last of the basic cottages are all privately owned but even of those, many have been improved to present day standards. Over the past years, hundreds of



new ready to live in tents, mobile-homes and chalets have been set up. In the area with cottages, you get a real village feel, as there is always plenty of space in between them. Most of CHM's campsites and pitches are very well integrated into the hilly landscape of the dune. As a result, they have charming, though not entirely even sites. Ablution blocks are clean and abound, some showers are indoors and heated during cold times, others have roofed, outdoor showers, evenly spread between east-, south- and west-facing ones. So holidayers can choose whether they prefer to have their bath in a communal shower room, or whether they prefer to get clean in morning- or evening sun.



Though there is already a very large community of permanents owning tents, caravans, mobile-homes or cottages, CHM is encouraging holidayers to become owners as well. In many rentals, a displayed leaflet informs that the rented accommodation is for sale.

CHM Monta is aware that a few visitors would like to buy a proper accommodation, but feel they do their children a favour, if staying in a tent. No worries, the sales office has it all and some models can be viewed in a small exhibition. With disbelief, we had not only seen large plastic tents with double glazed windows and doors, all equipped with nice wooden furniture. Furthermore, there were tents with en-suite facilities and proper fitted kitchen, including cooker hood ventilator, full-size baking oven and dishwasher. To compensate the thin plastic sheet walls of those tents, electric heaters were installed. At least that way, the power plant can make up for some of the money they loose with modern energy saving houses.



Shops and recreation-facilities: something for everyone

Altogether, CHM Monta covers an area of 200ha. As in any other village with up to 18'000 inhabitants (if only during high season), you find many shops and restaurants. Grouped around the main square, there are some 15 shops and 5 restaurants and a few more can be found near the beach access. They're all very popular, the selection is so diverse and the quality so high, there is no need to drive out. Supermarkets, bakers, bio groceries, fish monger, butcher, a large French style deli take-away, hairdresser, hardware store, florist and of course a newsagent with book store. The list is not even complete, just name it and you'll get it and for those who run out of cash, there is an ATM handy. Shopping and dining at CHM Monta is usually done in the nude. In some restaurants, like the Crêperie, the waitresses and the chefs worked topless.



Who likes to browse through a touristy market can head to Montalivet, where a very touristy market is held daily in season, tiny before Bastille day but huge from then till the end of August, almost like a fair.

Back at CHM Monta, there are occasional flea-markets and even a merry-go-around situated on the main square.



Countless animations and many recreation amenities are offered for every taste and every age.

At CHM Monta, it's self understood that animators work in the buff. The reception issues a handy booklet listing all activities, time-tables, opening hours, plus sightseeing possibilities. Buildings in which workshops are held, or the stately town library, are modern and supplemented by several large sports- and play grounds, including two large artificial lawn soccer fields. Children will certainly be delighted that CHM Monta has not only ordinary swings and slides, but also an impressive tall ship for climbing and a few large bouncing castles. In peak season, there is a large open air cinema and in a hall they screen more films even during off season.

Wellness enthusiasts who don't mind to spend some pocket money, will be pleased by CHM Monta's thermal bath that offers sauna, spa, hamam and beauty treatments.

For free, are two very inviting pools. The original pool complex has recently been redone and extended. Some lanes are reserved for keen swimmers counting their rounds. Beside it, there is a large paddling pool, as well as a jacuzzi and inviting deck chairs.

Near the beach access, some 500 metres away, there is also a new aqua centre and that proved to be a real crowd drawer. It's much bigger than the other pool, beautifully landscaped, all palmfringed with little waterfalls, grottoes, islets and a bridge. Whilst adults enjoy the massage jets, they can observe the kids riding the five large waterslides, of which one is like a cork screw.

As appropriate for a leading naturist resort, the pools, as well as the beach are supervised by nude lifeguards MNS (maître nageuse sauveteuse), adding to the very natural atmosphere.

Plage 100% naturiste

As you enter CHM Monta, everybody passes two large boards reading “centre exclusivement naturiste” and we believe this is understood in every language. Otherwise the illustrations throughout the ground may put you on the right way, as you find various funny cartoons meant to motivate guests to go nude all the time. Before crossing the dune on the way to the beach, you pass a big illustrated sign indicating unambiguously that the beach (too) is 100% naturist. Surely, this sign provokes to look around, whether nudity is observed by everybody, as there is always the odd one who believes this applies only to others. During our first four weeks, we didn't spot any bathing suit, indeed. However, with the start of the season, there was once a while a teenage girl wearing a bathing slip. They were such exceptions that they probably felt uncomfortable after a while and stripped off too. Being surrounded by nude peers naturally creates peer pressure to go naked as well.



How does CHM Monta manage that everybody strips off at the beach? The exemplary function of its fully nude live savers certainly helps and also the beach access controllers work “au naturel”. Furthermore, the majority of guests are French and we observed that their kids grow up with less restrictions and controls than other nationals and therefore they probably don't feel the need to revolt against the older generation by wearing bathers on a nudist beach. On top, many young families belong to CHM Monta's permanent community. As their children grow up all naturally with naturism, they probably still have never holidayed on a textile beach by the time they become teenagers. It is striking, how many groups of youth and young adults populate the nudist beach here, obviously feeling on top of the world while being stark naked in each other's company. For these young people the “ethnic guards” wouldn't be necessary but maybe they impress others. Very rarely, they have to remind somebody of the naturist ethic. If a friendly reminder doesn't help, it could even happen that the undiscerning's whole party or family gets expelled.

As Village-Centre, the owner of CHM Monta, also operates many textile holiday centres, including a campground just next to CHM Monta, they give their guests the choice to either go naked or textile, but once it's decided, they expect the entire party to stick to the family pow-wow's (pa-/matriarch?) decision. By adding naturist resorts as a second mainstay, Village-Centre got the opportunity to even take money out of the pocket of a nude man!

Sure enough, CHM Monta attracts not only French, but also holiday makers arriving from anywhere between Spain and Eastern Europe. In addition, the sheer size and capacity of the naturist resort makes overseas visitors curious, be they from the Americas, Down Under or Asia. Most foreign holiday-makers however, arrive from Germany and the Netherlands. Sure enough, the staff at CHM Monta is multilingual, but there is no additional, compatriot-staffed office of a foreign travel agency, as in a few other large naturist places. In our opinion, this draws a totally different clientele. CHM Monta attracts predominantly full hearted content naturists who try to speak at least a few words of French and love to feel they are in France. They have little in common with the ever nagging, tarted up package holiday-makers who might enjoy nude bathing, but nude living or shopping? Yuck - so filthy!

Endless stretch of sand

Back to CHM Monta's beach: it has the same fine golden sand you find along big parts of the Atlantic coast. The beach is guarded by a sand dune for which efforts are undertaken to keep it overgrown. On the seaside, seep water is trickling from underneath the dune, carrying minerals and maybe also manmade pollution along. In some parts of the beach, it creates colourful, almost artistic appearing pictures in the sand; great to look at but not so inviting so sunbathe on. Around CHM's north and south beaches, dry sand has been heaped up to provide enough space for the sun seekers. At high tide, it still gets a bit cosy with thousands of people, but at low tide, there is ample space for everybody. It's always great fun to watch the tide rise and to observe grilling dozers startling up and fleeing an approaching wave. The beach's width shrinks and grows up to 500 metres, depending on the tide.



Just in time before the life savers assumed their duty mid June, the water got pleasantly warm. Until 7 PM, dogs are banned on and between the two supervised beaches. A dog free beach is heavenly for everybody who feels bothered by dogs respectively by their reckless owners who neither see a need for a lead, nor for collecting their four-legged friend's droppings.

At the beginning of July, couples got gradually replaced by families. Now, two students were selling ice-cream whilst getting an all-over suntan. Otherwise, there were no vendors on the beach. The only other business, was a juice-bar, a great idea and much healthier than a booze-bar! Healthy were also the walks along the beach. Southwards, you can walk fully naked for three to four kilometres and then you should cover up a bit for a short while. To the north, nude walking is possible for almost two kilometres before you reach the tourist settlement of Montalivet.

Now it's up to you, whether you whip some clothes on and throw yourself at the bustle of the tourist traps. If you prefer to keep on walking along the beach, a pareo is all you need to go further. After some 500 metres, you can strip off again and carry on to the naturist resort of Euronat another 5km north and even much further, if your legs still carry you on.

Once you've had enough of beach life and go back to CHM Monta, you will be welcomed by a comic billboard reading: "you are at Centre Héliomarin, there's no reason to get dressed". The many witty cartoon-signs are part of the excellent signposting all over the large holiday village. Finding the way to your pitch, lodging or holiday activity is mere child's play.

Sights around Montalivet

Excursions? Well, the one we never miss when in this region, is dining "chez Gilles & Marika", an excellent restaurant at Hotel de France in Vendays. Sometimes there are also things, you don't need to drive out for, because they come here. Among them is the annual Harley Davidson gathering, bringing some 10'000 - 20'000 motorbikes to Montalivet at the last weekend in June. At least 100 bikers with their machines polished to a mirror, stayed at CHM Monta. Touristy Montalivet however, was literally occupied by thousands of Harley Davidsons, totally changing the appearance of the place. Now, charm was added around the tourist traps. Less charming, however, it was away from the hustle and bustle, where guys sprinkled the gardens with their willies.



Many people drive out to the surrounding vineyards but as teetotallers, we're not interested in the devil's workshops of the so-called Chateau's. Instead, we found two appealing sites we hadn't seen before.



Top, was certainly the scenery around the lighthouse **Phare de Richard** near St. Vivien. It sits on the Gironde Estuary with views to the other shore. Especially north of the lighthouse, there are dozens of pretty “carrelets”, small fishing huts on stilts. Along a footpath, you can see many different types and colours. All “carrelets” have a traditional square net to catch the desired delicacy fresh from the estuary.

Another outing brought us to **Hourtin Port**, south of Montalivet. Though the village of Hourtin also has a beach on the Atlantic Ocean, the port is actually on a freshwater lake a bit inland. There is a tourist resort offering activities like water skiing on a lift installed over the lake. In places, Lac Hourtin looked almost Scandinavian to us. The shore was dominated by pine forest and patches of beautiful water lilies in pink and white.

Sometimes, there were also some “must-do” excursions. This summer, both of us needed to see a dentist and we were lucky, as this is always a straightforward and cheap affair in France. In comparison to our family dentist home in Switzerland, we saved in France always plenty of time and even more money.

It wasn't a disadvantage to admit to be naturists at the doctors, as both acknowledged to go to naturist places too, as a waitress in a Sushi Restaurant did as well.

Farewell from CHM Monta

Staying at CHM Monta from June 10th till July 20th, made us aware, how short the season is. Because of the many residents it's actually never really lonely and the shops are always well stocked.

Seeing that dozens of additional rental tents were being put up on the beginning of July, visualises in what a short time money has to be earned. The late set-up wasn't a delay, the brochure clearly stated these tents to be available only after July 10th. Ten days later, almost all were occupied and some more were efficiently erected in another corner of the campground.

We don't regret our decision to come to CHM Monta once more. The great atmosphere and ideals you might hope to find at the cradle of naturism still exists, even if CHM Monta meanwhile became a very modern, efficiently run and well appointed holiday centre. It's a perfect place for those who like large grounds, where everyone in the family can choose whether he likes just to relax or to join in with the countless activities and entertainment possibilities.

It's a place where also your car can have a real holiday, as you don't need to drive out for shopping and dining, if you don't want to - everything is available at CHM Monta and also the quality is more than all right. We loved the very inviting aqua-park and fabulous beach, all perfect for true naturists.

CHM Monta is a place that truly wants to abide naturist and nips the first lines of becoming just cloth optional in the bud. We felt, being tough with the few ones who think naturism is a great thing, as long as only the others strip off, attracts certainly more people to CHM-Monta, than it puts off. This approach attracts predominantly true naturists who come here to live nude, not just to sunbathe in the buff. Together with nude life-savers, animators and other nude personnel, they add to the very natural alternative atmosphere at CHM Monta and take a role model function to newcomers. Here, they can't help doing anything else but join the naturist-lifestyle. It's obvious, if a teenager is surrounded by dozens of peers sunbathing “au naturel”, it's much more convincing to do likewise than if he has to obey the parents word of command.

We hope, CHM Monta remains the way it is: a true naturist resort, where French and foreigners alike, are made very welcome. We will certainly come back, it's just the way we like it...

ARNA: very natural, very happening and very quiet at the same time

On July 20th 2014, we continued to [Arnaoutchot](#), in short ARNA. Also this is a very attractive naturist resort in a pine forest right on the French Atlantic Coast. It's located near St. Girons, roughly halfway between Biarritz and Mimizan. We had stayed here last year and liked its unique atmosphere so much that we wanted to come back. As in most places, high season prices are also here really above our globetrotters-budget. But with a cast of fortune, we got a discount thanks to an IT failure in their internet-booking tool. So we were now looking forward to spending six weeks in a small, but very well appointed mobile-home.



What makes Arna so special? With its capacity of 4.000 holiday makers, it's big though not anonymous at all. The predominantly alternative and ecologically thinking crowd of guests create here, just as at CHM Monta, a very natural atmosphere, meaning: designer-ware, high heels and city behaviour (if existing) are purposely left at home and one is pleased to be able to spend the vacation fully naked. Here, nudity is the most natural thing in the whole wide world and if it should get cold for once, people just cover up with something warm.

Upon arrival at Arna, we were heartily greeted by many faces we knew from last year. You easily get to know not only your neighbours but also people you meet during various activities, on the beach, around the pool or in the restaurants. Children and adults alike, can have a quiet time if they want to but there are countless animations, sports, excursions and performances to participate or simply to look on.



We value the vast naturist beach on the Atlantic coast as Arna's top attraction, together with the very inviting group of indoor- and outdoor-pools, the well stocked grocery shop, the mobile fish monger and the weekly performances on the open air stage. Others might give more importance to the sports- and playgrounds, the surf school, the large market that is held weekly, the wellness & beauty centre, the disco or the reasonably priced restaurants.

Arna's facilities are plenty and everything is top notch, as the new and very modern ablution block or the "rubbish and recycling centre" that opened in 2014. Many villages don't have such a sophisticated and tidy recycling station. Arna has moved its waste-collection points to a central waste management facility at the entrance, as guests have complained about noise and malodour from the many garbage collection points formerly dotted around the campground. Well, those thoughtless "naturists" who now regularly hop into their cars just to dispose of their rubbish, create unnecessary noise and tainted air too! To us, the walk to the bins was just a perfect postprandial stroll.



Home-made and professional shows on ARNA's stage

Animations and performances are also made up to perfection. With an open air stage equipped like a city theatre even the open podium is choreographed to excel, including a wide array of costumes. Better still are only the dance- and show groups contracted every Wednesday night to please Arna's crowd. Those professional artists are sometimes from a neighbouring country, but mostly from France. However, France is not that small. This year's cultural highlight was certainly the performance by a dance group from French Polynesia. The men and women of "Haiva i Tahiti" were all Pacific Islanders, tattooed and most with long black hair. Their Haka Dances, which terminated with making big eyes and sticking out the tongue, were the real thing indeed, just as we had experienced in the Pacific!

Considering the many holiday makers and the many things happening at Arna during high season, the peace and quiet around our mobile-home was amazing. Sometimes we felt, we were the noisiest, as we often chatted with acquaintances. Already before we had arrived, a Swiss couple we had met two years ago in Burgundy, had installed their caravan in a pitch nearby. Later, towards the end of our stage at Arna, Gudrun and Uly, the globetrotting naturists we had met this spring, arrived in their motor home. They spent a week here and so we talked again about all the world and his wife, as well as all our past and future travels.



It was a perfect choice to spend the peak season at Arna. We loved our daily extensive walks along the vast naturist beach. Moreover, we enjoyed the relatively mild and dry weather, considering the rather wet and chilly conditions the rest of Europe had to endure this summer. With its pleasant natural “all over atmosphere”, Arna outshines many naturist resorts we know and it has certainly moved up to the top of our list of favourites. If you want to read more about this very natural place, you might find our comprehensive account from our last year’s stage at Arna interesting.

Booking or not: both can lead to troubles

If you plan your holidays, there is always the question whether it’s sensible to make a reservation or not. As roving spirits, we like our freedom and detest any form of commitment. However, experience taught us to overcome our dislike, and so now we always book ahead for peak season. We have also learned, where we’re likely to be shifted around different accommodations, if we arrive without reservation, even in off-season. This being said, you’re never sure of surprises. Every naturist resort we’ve stayed at this summer, bore one! Just one after the other.

Without a reservation, we asked at the first place, for a mobile-home in a certain area, just to learn that it wasn’t ready to be rented yet. So we had to contend with what turned out to be a much sunnier location but a long (healthier) walk away from the shop.

On the next place, still without reservation, it was similar; what we asked for was not ready yet, so we asked for an even better location, though we thought it would certainly be booked out. It was indeed, yet the receptionist didn’t realize and so we got it. In the process of the weeks we got to know the couple who had reserved and pre-paid precisely the mobile-home we were given. They told us, they had to fight quite hard to get at least a similarly good location after reception realized their mistake.

Before moving again, we called ahead, to find out at what time the reception at our next place closes. Thereby we learned that we need to make a booking, even if the place is near empty. We agreed, they would deposit a key for the desired cottage. We found the key and the cottage, but it was much smaller than the one we had chosen, so we had to sort it out the next morning.

Meanwhile, holiday season arrived, for which we had made bookings months ahead. We got the key to a nice cottage, though again, it wasn’t the type we had reserved, and it stood on a tiny plot. After complaining, it turned out that our chosen mobile-home needed urgent repair. In the end, we were given several other options to choose from.

On the next place, we wanted to book a three weeks stage. After seeing that the internet booking-tool deducted a huge discount, even during peak season, we spontaneously tried for six weeks. After some arguing with the misfortunate management, which wasn’t very happy about such generous discounts, we agreed on a compromise.

So, when summer ended, we felt liberated to pop up without reservations again. Now we had chosen a naturist resort, which had just introduced competitive off-season pricing, and sure enough, we were not the only ones to know. Oh dear; of all the many rentals, there was only a tent left. As this didn’t tempt us, we backed off. Whilst spending a night in a hotel, our computer smelled out a 30% last-minute offer for another place nearby. Coincidentally, it was the one that has given us a € 80 gift-voucher last year, and we even carried it along. Could we do better than humbly accept such an offer?

The list is not yet finished, but every single naturist resort we stayed at this year, contributed with a little anecdote upon booking or arrival!

Domaine Laborde: between summer-heat and table cloth

On September 1st 2014, we checked-in at [Domaine Laborde](#), an appealing Dutch owned naturist ground that attracts guests of many different countries. It derives its name from the border location between the districts of Dordogne and Lot-et-Garonne. A tiny rivulet marks Laborde's estate border, as well as the districts. The ground is nicely landscaped, and many of the buildings dotted around the 25 hectare estate, incorporate a pigeon tower. We had chosen to stay in a mobile-home which stood on a sunny hillside. It was well appointed and varied a little bit from the models we had rented on other campgrounds, as Laborde had opted for a different make.

From the friendly French bloke at the reception, we learned that this summer has been unusually wet and rather cold. However, now in September, we enjoyed temperatures around 30°C for almost the whole month. It could get cold at night, but during the day, we lingered in the shade of trees, either by the two picturesque ponds or around the pool.

If we were going out, be it for sight-seeing or for dining in the evening, we always stuffed our clothes into a bag and walked naked up to Laborde's big parking lot. Only there, we would get dressed - just seconds before our car's air conditioner got the challenging task to compensate for the warmth of the clothing.

After staying all summer long at the over-touristy Atlantic coast, with its many tourist traps, we selected the Dordogne and Lot-et-Garonne area, because of their historic pretty towns and villages and the reputed eateries. Now we needed to feel and enjoy a bit of culture! This region is heavenly for foodies and we discovered even more gastronomic restaurants than we knew from previous visits.



In the beginning of September, Laborde was still quite busy with guests of different ages and nations; there were many French and English, apart from the "usual" Dutch (can't argue with that). As school holidays ended, more and more pensioners and young childless couples came in. The new playground got lonelier daily and the Toboggan was only open on demand. Not many dared to ask for it, but if somebody did, quite a few hilarious adults enjoyed it as well. Thanks to the exceptionally warm weather, the demand for the well heated indoor pool was not overwhelming. Never the less, sauna and steam bath, were heated three times a week.

As Laborde closed at the end of September, the campground started to get quiet mid month. Even so, most services were still kept up and alive. The restaurant was not open every day anymore, but if it was, it prove popular until it closed end of the 3rd September week. During the last week of the season, only about 25 people remained, but if we were too lazy to go shopping, we could still stock up at the little in-house-supermarket. Though the shop is very small, it turned out to be much better than visible, as many delicacies were hidden in a cold storage-room. Frozen fish and meats of good quality could be bought by the piece at reasonable prices.

However, no meat was sold from the rutting deer entertaining the holiday makers nightly with their roaring.

Even though we know the region quite well, and Laborde is very tempting just to linger in the sun, we were not too lazy to go for some sight-seeing. We enjoyed the rolling hills and the many picturesque towns and villages like **Monflanquin**, **Villereal**, **Monpazier**, **Castillonès** and **Lauzun**. Twice we went further, once to pretty **La Roque Gageac**, nestled along the Dordogne and once, a full day to **Agen**. Often, we complemented excursions with a gastronomic evening meal. Lucky, our favourite restaurant: "La Table du Moulin", was the closest. Unfortunately, "Ferme Auberge des Selles", opened at this time of year only for lunch. It serves an interesting fusion between farmers kitchen and gastronomic specialities.



It was our third time at Laborde and initially, we intended to stay for only about 10 days. As the weather and the atmosphere suited us perfectly, we ended up staying almost all of September. We only vacated our comfortable mobile-home a couple of days before they would have kicked us out anyway...

Domaine Le Couderc: a very personal run naturist-ground

We initially planned to move on to Spain on the end of September but somehow felt tempted to spend some more time in the **Dordogne Region**. After Heinz' sister and brother-in-law Edith & Karl spontaneously decided to join us for some "vivre nu et manger bien", we had the perfect excuse to do so, as this region is just perfect for the gourmandising-part.

During October, it's not easy to still find an open naturist place in the French interior, except you find [Le Couderc](#). It's situated in the heart of the Dordogne, some 20km south of Bergerac and surrounded by first class restaurants! We have visited this place some 14 years ago, and it left a lasting memory, due to its unique atmosphere. Then, we were still young(er) and had the illusion that camping in a simple tent would save lots of money, and so we endured it for 4 peak-season weeks.

Le Couderc's special atmosphere is described by some as "heaven for children, but hell for adults". We would rather say: it's a very lively and very family oriented naturist ground with uncountable activities and animations. For the "ghosts night", they don't hesitate to regulate traffic on the surrounding roads. Thanks to its "army" of young, enthusiastic working holiday-makers and animators, Le Couderc felt somehow like a fountain of youth. The guests were mainly Dutch families with children of any age. They enjoyed their freedom and loved to gather in gangs. That's why those youngsters always wanted to come back to Le Couderc.

We got the impression, half of the guests were professional artists from the Netherlands. There was almost a stampede for the weekly "open podium" and most of the performances were top-class, what you'd expect in a concert hall rather than on a campground. Despite performances being limited to seven minutes, the shows still lasted from 9 PM to 2 AM.

Even though we liked Le Couderc very much, so far we never came back. This was probably because, there, we felt to be in the Netherlands, rather than in France. Retrospectively, we never returned to a place where we had (only) camped and later we started to prefer bigger places with lots of space to roam around.



Now we found, Le Couderc has many nice chalets for rent and the ground has been extended. When we arrived on September 27th 2014, we got a warm welcome by the Dutch owners Marieke, Nico and Olivier who are the heart and the soul of the place. Upon arrival, guests are offered a welcome drink whilst one of the owners, who are all true naturists, takes time to explain everything about the camping.

We had chosen one of their new chalets with extra insulation. This was an advantage as the nights got already quite chilly, though day-temperatures remained high: between 25°- 30°C. What an October - as it were summer in autumn - just perfect for naturism. The 33ha ground offers ample space for everybody, as it has only 22 chalets, 6 rental tents and 160 pitches. The estate consists of flat meadows flanked by forests and fields.

There are no fences at all. The neighbouring farmers seem to have grown used to the sight of nude people and naturists know, when to wrap. However, Le Couderc offers ample opportunities for walking in the woods and along the fields, where no clothing is required at all.

Summer heat: when a pond turns into a mud pool

Very picturesque are also the two ponds that invite for swimming and fishing. The long lasting summer was certainly enjoyed by all holiday makers. Unfortunately, it had a negative impact on the water-bodies, encouraging too much growth of algae and the ground turned muddy.

In one of the ponds, it became that much of a problem, it had to be pumped- and dug out. One morning, we woke up to big noise of heavy machinery and were



astonished about the huge dump trucks we saw, passing back and forth. Those monsters were almost taller than the restaurant. Last time, we had seen such giant trucks, was in Australia while visiting an open-cut mine. Down by the pond, we witnessed an impressive spectacle. A heavy caterpillar and also one of the heavy trucks, were almost bogged down in the mud. As it got too dangerous, "the show" had to stop, to be continued after a few days with even heavier machinery. A bigger caterpillar, with an impressive 18m arm, took the job on from the secure shore. In total, 1500 m³ of sludge and mud were removed from the dirty hole. Later, some sand was brought in to create a nice beach. Only a few days later, the now substantially bigger pond was refilled by diverting a nearby creek. By the time the next summer holiday crowd arrives, the shore will again be overgrown and the billabong ready to please children and adults alike.



For the time being, we were very happy with the large, heated swimming pool which was still 24°C warm upon our arrival. If more warmth was required, we could sit into the spa pool, or the sauna. Everything was heated daily, even in October.

When we arrived, it was surprisingly bustling around the pool. To blend some French into the otherwise Dutch dominated naturist ground, the owners successfully attract local naturists by offering season tickets. With this fantastic weather, quite a few people from the surroundings came in regularly, to take advantage of Le Couderc's excellent facilities.

Very popular were also the good and reasonably prized restaurant, the snack- and pizza-corner, a bar, as well as the small, well stocked grocery store. Despite the dwindling number of guests, everything was kept open daily almost to the very end of the season, or even longer

respectively. Sure enough, there wasn't somebody waiting behind every counter. You just needed to clang a bell and somebody popped up. At happy hour, it was the other way round. As soon as the bell was sounded, the bargain hunters knew, it was time to go for it. Even by the time the campground seemed already near empty, we were surprised how many people showed up there.

Open podium: hugely popular in summer, less in autumn

Also very popular, is Le Couderc's open podium, where guests are invited to perform something on stage. Proudly, Olivier communicated in several languages that we had the privilege to experience the first open podium they held in October.

We remember very well, how during our previous stage in high season, almost more of their guests wanted to perform something on stage rather than just watching others. Now in autumn, it was obviously different. Spectators were view and artists even fewer. The professional performers were back in the Netherlands, earning bucks with their commitments, instead of pleasing fellow naturists with free shows during their holiday at Le Couderc. Luckily, there was still a very talented French working holidayer who returned to stage, again and again, between two short stunts of guests.



During our first week, we got friendly with the Dutch couple who stayed in the bungalow next to ours. They were very different from the stereotype of Dutch tourists to France. Whereas most are happy to communicate in any language but French, be it English, German, or even Indonesian. Our neighbours wanted to talk French to us, in order to improve their language skills, what we really enjoyed. All four of us just smiled, when one of the owners came to our table, and explicitly said: "Brigitte & Heinz can speak English as well, so you don't have to torture yourself with French"...

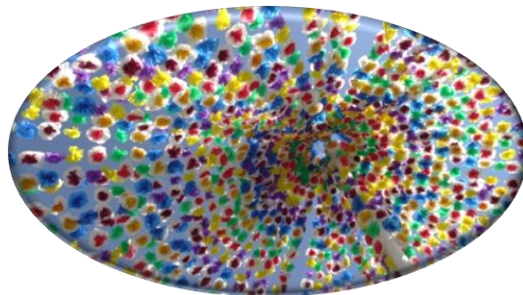
The Dordogne: introducing our visitors to the beauty of this region

During our second week, Edith & Karl moved into the cottage besides ours. They were delighted too, about the very well appointed chalet with its spacious living-kitchen area that had a large modern kitchen. It offered also a covered terrace, a generous bedroom and a modern bathroom with controlled ventilation.

As always, when Edith & Karl visit, we had a very active time.

However, on their arrival day, we took it easy, as they had already driven a few hundred kilometres and been visiting the interesting "in-house" museum about the history of Le Couderc.

Luckily, also Edith & Karl like late breakfasts when they're on holiday but thereafter, the program has to be full of activities. After, or between long walks around the naturist ground, some sunbathing, bubbling in the jacuzzi, sweating in the sauna and cooling down in the pool, there was still ample time for excursions.



We know that the [Dordogne Region](#) offers countless destinations for sight-seeing, and we can understand that our visitors wanted to see as many as possible. Acting as guides, we proposed what we considered a good balance between small villages and little towns.

During our first outing, we led them through nearby **Beaumont**, and then to tiny **St. Avit-Sénieur**, to see its bold church and historic Benedictine abbey. From there, we continued to the pretty market towns of **Belvès** and **St. Cyprien**.

Following the Dordogne River eastwards, we soon spotted the silhouette of scenic **Beynac** with its impressive castle that stands poised above the village and the river. Sure enough, we had to pull up the steep path between old stone houses, to get a view of the valley and some of the nearby castles.

The Dordogne without gourmet-cuisine is like Paris without Eiffel Tower



For the evening, we drove to **Les Eyziez-de-Tayac**, which attracts many tourists, thanks to its impressive setting below an overhanging rock face and even more, because of its huge National Museum of Prehistory. Sure enough, so much sight-seeing got us hungry and luckily, this village boasts several award winning restaurants. The hardest thing was to choose just one. We decided for a beautiful old mill, and soon indulged in a superbly prepared and nicely presented 7-course menu. Initially, Edith was worried that seven courses could get a bit too fattening. But after she realized, how well the sizes of the portions were adapted, she trumpeted out, from now on she wouldn't contend with anything less than five-course-dinners for the rest of her holiday!



The Dordogne Region is famous for its gourmet-temples and luckily, there are also many near Le Couderc. In the pretty village of **Issigeac**, only 7km away, you find at least two gastronomic restaurants. Both were highly recommended and so we went to spy out the differences. "La Brucelière" serves creative and tasteful dishes, but unlike most other restaurants of its class, portions were not adapted to the number of courses served. Though the food was outstanding, we felt like a flock of stuffed geese when we waddled off. Nearby "Restaurant El Borini, Chez Alain", cooks equally excellent, but when you leave, you wish to eat like this every day.



For a couple of days, the otherwise excellent October weather was interrupted by a few raindrops, which we deemed ideal to visit some of the nearby towns. First, we went to



Bergerac, which is, with 27'000 inhabitants, already the Dordogne's second largest "city" and quite pretty. Even if it sees quite a number of visitors, it's easy to find several top-class eateries.

Sarlat-la-Canéda 75km east, has a very beautiful medieval old-town and much more tourists flock there. Unwittingly, they support the many tourist traps keen to separate fools and money. Here, it's much harder to find a decent restaurant. Luckily, there are plenty of picturesque villages nearby that boost a wide choice of excellent places to eat. Not only to get a feed, but to get charmed by their beauty, we headed for

Castelnaud la Capelle with its impressive hilltop

castle, then to fortified **Domme**, enthroning a hill and down again to the shore of the Dordogne. Here, we felt obliged to show Edith & Karl our top-favourite: **La Roque-Gageac**, an extremely picturesque village, nestled between a cliff face and the river. It had been a tourist favourite for decades, but visitors had to share the narrow main road with transit traffic. The new road, with generous footpaths on both sides, was just completed this year, and therefore, La Roque-Gageac became now an even more attractive bijou.

Historic Bastides and Castles

For dinner, we drove to **Monpazier**, which is a so called Bastide. This defines a medieval village where closed rows of houses form a fortification around the centre. That way, the apartments functioned as fortification and its inhabitants as cannon fodder...

Restaurant "Eléonore at Château Edward Ist", was the noble address where we finished this wonderful day off.

Now, it was time to take a day off, and so we enjoyed the perfect weather at Le Couderc, while sunbathing, strolling around and sweating in the sauna. Only in the evening we drove out, of course for gourmandizing. This time, it was to "La Gentilhommière", a B&B with its attached gastronomic Restaurant "Etincelles". When you reserve your table at this fancy place in Sainte Sabine Born, you're in for a surprise, as the chef creates a different menu daily.



Sightseeing was on the program again on the next day. The wider Dordogne Region is literally littered with castles, and

for once, we visited one properly, not just from the outside. It was the almost 1,000 years old **Château Biron**, majestically enthroning a hill. After looking into every corner of the restored buildings, we continued to pretty **Monflanquin** and then to the fortified town of **Villeneuve-sur-Lot**, which is regarded as the largest "Bastide" in Southern France. There is quite a lot to see between the Neo-Byzantine red-brick church St. Catherine, and the bridges over the River Lot.



In the evening, we celebrated Edith&Karl's 29th wedding anniversary at another stately mansion: "Château les Merles", nowadays a luxury golf-hotel with an excellent restaurant.

Is it end of season at Le Couderc or not?

Quickly, Edith&Karl's eight days were over and we waved them good bye. To keep up with the high standard of the Dordogne, we gave them an address for a stop-over hotel, we know warrants an equally excellent gourmet experience.

We had truly enjoyed their visit, but for our part, we took it a bit easier now. We were still awaiting a parcel, and as it was delayed, we had a good excuse to stay longer.



Luckily, it was no problem to prolong our stay at Le Couderc, even after the official closing date, and we were not the only ones who did so. The heated pool, the sauna and the spa were still on every day, and also fresh bread could still be ordered. Who would complain about such services?

Le Couderc is a very likeable, happening and well equipped naturist ground. The owners are fully involved and regularly mingle with the guests. Some might miss the feel of holidaying in France, as most holiday makers come from the Netherlands. However, it's easy to compensate, as the naturist campground is located within easy driving distance to countless charming villages, castles, river-valleys and other attractions of the Dordogne- as well as the Lot-et-Garonne districts. Lots of entertainment and activities can be found at Le Couderc. Their restaurant offers a wide selection of good quality dishes with a French-, as well as a Dutch touch. Those who are fond of French Haute Cuisine, will find an excellent choice of truly gastronomic gourmet-temples in the near surroundings. Just check the gourmet guides or ask at reception Marieke, Nico or Olivier, who gladly give advice.

Spain: zigzagging from France to Andalucia

We had chosen to spend the first part of winter once more in Vera Playa, and allow ourselves about 10 days to get there, as we have various worthwhile detours in mind. We don't fancy joining the one-day-marathon, along the coastal tollway to Southern Spain, just to get robbed, like too many other winter-escapees. Inland Spain is so peaceful and beautiful, and our various routes have all been highly rewarding!

We finally left the Dordogne on October 18, 2014, and got as far as **Pau**, at the foot of the French Pyrenees. There, we enjoyed the charming old-town and a last "dîner gastronomique" .

On the next day, we continued on small mountain roads to [Spain's](#) Navarra region. Our first sight seeing stop was the impressively deep gorge "**Foz de Arbayún**", which was carved out by Rio Salazar. Many vultures were turning their circles above the gorge, as they procreate due to a breeding program for different species of birds. Soon, the landscape flattened out and we felt like getting some prey for ourselves now. It was week-end and many restaurants were closed. Sunday is the day when Spaniards love to take their time and go for a posh lunch with family and friends. The best and most popular places are often a bit out of the way, so for a tourist it's Good Luck to find one.

We have now a new toy; a smart-phone. So we fiddled with it and tried to find out, whether it helps us to navigate through Spain. Bingo, thanks to internet- and sat nav-apps, we found an excellent restaurant, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Otherwise, we never ever would have dared driving onto such cart tracks that led there, but if you believe in modern technology, you just do it! Anyhow, we were delighted by the food and lively family atmosphere encountered in this place.





Well fed, we continued to the historic little village of **Ujué** that sits on top of a hill with terraced fields. Ujué is famous for its fortified church from the 12th century. The constant tourist trade led the locals to become inventive. While we strolled through the narrow alleys between the old stone houses, the sweet smell of roasting almonds was in the air and you could buy those treats around every corner.

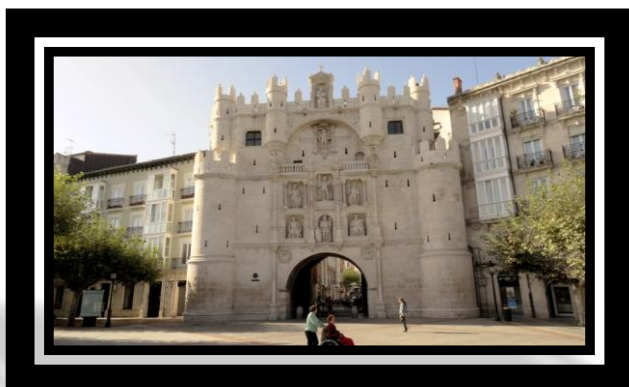
Overnight, we stayed in the picturesque fortified town of **Olite**. Though it has plenty of stately buildings full of character, the most prominent is undoubtedly the fairytale Castillo, also called Palacio Real. We were lucky to find quite a luxurious, though economic hotel at the outskirts, but within easy walking distance to the pretty town centre.

On the next day, it was a quick drive to the centre of **Burgos**, where we found a hostel with underground parking. Typical of Spanish towns, Burgos doesn't seem to have suburbs. After driving through desolate, or pastoral landscapes with no single house, you suddenly reach "a wall" of enormous multi-storey apartment blocks, and that's where the city with 180'000 inhabitants starts!

From our hotel, in the area with the modern big apartment buildings, it was an interesting stroll into the centre with the old town houses. Most have small glazed balconies. The mighty cathedral is the most outstanding building in the old town. Also very impressive, are the various ornamented city gates. A modern landmark is the complex of three interdependent buildings, housing the new congress palace and the giant museum of human evolution.

For lunch, we found a very creative Tapas Bar, with an irresistible choice of delightful treats. For dinner however, we couldn't find anything else than tourist traps. Maybe this has something to do with the fact that Burgos Cathedral is an important stop off on the famous "Camino de Santiago" the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella. After walking for hours, or even days, along busy main roads and freeways, those pilgrims are probably easy to content.

We continued the next day to the market town of Aguilar de Campo, where in fact, a market was held. After getting lost while driving near Cervera de Pisuerga (without sat nav..), we saw a Parador and spontaneously stopped for lunch. Paradores are luxury hotels in castles, monasteries and other historic buildings, owned by the Spanish Government. The income generated through tourism, helps maintaining those great buildings. There, the food was as excellent as the vista.





Picos de Europa: bizarre mountains in Northern Spain

Now we felt it was time to go out to nature, so we detoured to the **Picos de Europa** Nationalpark. Overnighting in beautiful, but touristy **Potes** and **Cangas-de-Onís**, with its old Roman bridge, we stayed altogether three days in the area. While encircling the national park and driving into three different sections, we got marvellous views of these bizarre mountains. Our drive, on a small mountain road, up to the Covadonga Lakes, was more than just spectacular! The weather was clear and mild, giving unhindered panoramic views from the mountains down to the sea. Apart from seeing the famous peaks, we came also through narrow and deep rock gorges, a real surprise to us. All over the park, autumn colours were in full display and mingling with cattle and flocks of sheep on the mountain roads, was daily business.

The small city of **Zamora** was next on our agenda. It has a fair number of buildings with historic significance, among them a lot of churches, a cathedral and a partly restored castle.

Only 70km to the south, we stopped again at **Salamanca**. This town appealed to us already some 15 years ago, and so we wanted to see it again. With its lively atmosphere in the streets and on the many squares, it's a real charmer. Already when you see its silhouette from far away, Salamanca looks very attractive. It boasts so many extraordinary buildings, we can't mention them all. The main square, "Plaza Major", is probably the largest square we have seen in Spain, though we learned that it has been much bigger, three hundred years ago. With its many beautiful churches, colleges and a big student population, we would dub Salamanca as "the Oxford of Spain".

After so much sight-seeing, we thought it would be time to move on a bit quicker, so we chose some fast roads all the way down to **Úbeda**, which we had been visiting two years ago. Then it had been foggy and wet but now the town presented itself in the best of light. We checked-in to the same hotel and after mentioning that we had stayed here before, the clerk felt obliged to give us the same extraordinary large room. This time, we had a better look around town and took many pictures that outshine those we took last year in February, which now are not much to look at.

Meanwhile, we were already in Andalusia. The landscape was even more barren, and we didn't see much else but olive orchards, and they covered entire hills. Soon, we hit the coast and were looking forward to spending a few months in the sun.



Natsun: summery well into winter

On October 26th 2014, we arrived at [Natsun](#) in Vera Playa's naturist zone. We were warmly greeted by the owners, Hedi and Jan, and given the keys to the same apartment where we had stayed before. Here, we could again enjoy the superb vistas that come with many of Natsun's holiday flats.

Upon looking around, we've noticed some improvements, implemented during the last two years. Best of all, was a comfy new mattress. Furthermore, a little door was installed at the entrance to our large terrace, so it became a bit more private. Above the entrance door to the apartment, a canopy was added and last, but not least, wireless internet-access is finally available in all apartments.

Good, almost summer-like beach weather prevailed until the beginning of December. Even thereafter, it was still possible to go quite regularly to the beach for a few hours in the naturist uniform. Even if we hope it would stay like this until we leave mid February 2015, it's unlikely. In winter, the apparent air temperature depends a lot on the wind and therefore, after New Year, only die-hards will sunbathe on the beach. Us, commoners (for this instance), will resort to a wind sheltered spot, if we find one on our terrace. Of course, this is only when the sun shines. During winter, we don't expect to see the sun every day and this shall give us time to elaborate a plan, where our itchy feet shall bring us in the future. So after mid February, you can expect to see us anywhere we hadn't been yet, or where we hadn't been for a long time; be it in Europe or overseas...

Brigitte & Heinz



more pictures on our Homepage

