

# Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

As Tourists and Naturists through Europe Part 2



## Chapter 23

October 2011 - February 2013

# As Tourists and Naturists through Europe (Part 2)

## Switzerland: sunny, remote mountain valleys



Many of our relatives and friends probably think, we must be weird, as we stopped working 1999, to become permanent globetrotters, at a rather “tender age” (i.e. 37/40). However, what we intended to do now is on one hand rather normal, but might on the other hand bear the risk of offending some. Just like many expats we know, who also had been living for more than 10 years abroad, we once wanted to holiday in our home country, rather than solely visiting friends and relatives. Therefore, we secretly arranged a couple of nice holiday apartments in some remote valleys, high up in the mountains. To us it will be an interesting experience to spend a winter this way.

Coming from Chamonix in France, we arrived in [Switzerland](#) on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2011, so it was anyway best that nobody knew, as it would be a bad omen for those who are superstitious! Because the first of our chosen hideaways was far away from any big shopping centres, we spent the first Swiss bucks soon after crossing the border, in the densely populated area between Sion and Visp. In this country, home electronics are in general a fair bit cheaper than in the EU, so we got ourselves a new digital

camera and some memory extension for our notebook.

Further up the [Valais Valley](#), civilisation is limited to a few lonely villages. We made an overnight stop at one of them: Obergesteln. For only CHF 60 we got a private room, which was actually in an apartment. It was situated in one of those black wooden houses, typical for this valley. They often have some pretty storage sheds standing next to them.

We were quite lucky that the snow from last weekend melted quickly away and most pass-roads opened again. Next morning, we opted for a side trip over the Grimsel Pass to Meiringen in the Bernese Oberland. As Sustenpass was closed due to a mudslide, we backtracked to the Valais, from where we first conquered the Furka Pass and later Oberalp Pass to reach the canton of Grison. Brigitte hoped we’d find another private room around Flims/Laax but soon we discovered, it is so touristy, there are only hotels and bold holiday apartment blocks. We asked around for quite a while and finally had to take something rather expensive and not that outstanding, but at least it included a superb breakfast.

## Zernez: a perfect holiday flat embedded in a perfect landscape

On the next morning we continued to Davos, from where we ascended to beautiful Flüela Pass. On the summit, there was more snow than on any of the other passes we had crossed during the last week, though the road brought us up to 2’383 metres above sea level. Less than an hour later, we reached [Zernez](#).

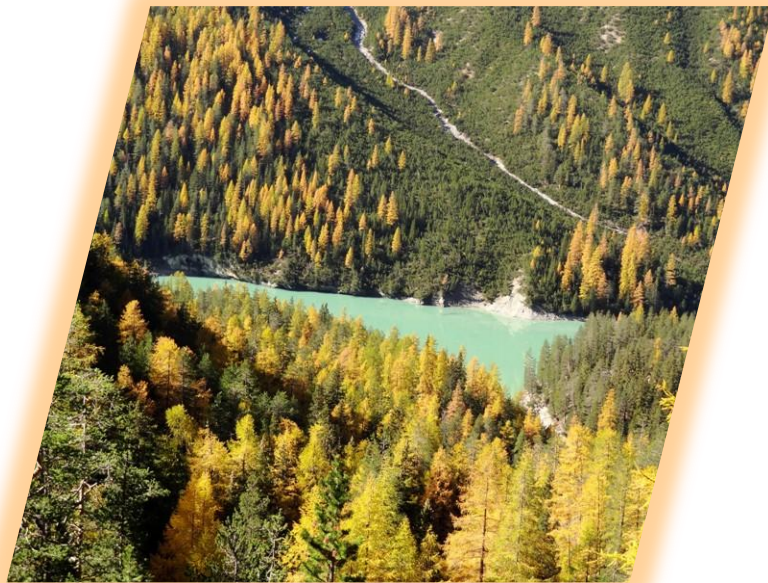
It was now October 15, 2011 and we moved into our first refuge, which we had reserved for almost ten weeks. It was a very new 80 square metres flat, situated on the first floor of the owner’s house. Everything was of generous size and we also had a south facing balcony.

As much we were smitten by this apartment, we were also smitten by Zernez, located on 1474 m above sea level. It’s nestled in the high altitude valley of Engadin, one of the most beautiful and least densely populated areas of Switzerland.

Flanked by impressive mountain peaks, we're now situated at the country's eastern edge, right at the doorstep to its only national park.

Despite being Switzerland's third largest village in area, (Zernez is as big as the canton of Zug) it has barely more than 1'000 inhabitants. It's touristy but on a rather low scale, just big enough to provide all infrastructure necessary for a nice holiday. Within walking distance, we had two bakeries and two supermarkets: one Denner Satellit and a medium-sized Coop. For such a small village, Coop had a superb choice in prime meat and fish. During off-season, they obviously couldn't sell it all before expiry and therefore, we could often get the best pieces discounted to 50% for quick sale. If you're in the right place at the right time, even Switzerland can be economical.

But surely, sometimes we couldn't avoid paying high prices. Tourist tax can be that high, even Bill Gates would think twice whether he can afford them. Surely, they are meant to rip-off foreigners, but as we have the law of equal right, even we have to bear and pay it. We had also to get used to Switzerland's sophisticated waste-management system again. Everything you can recycle, can be given away for free, but everything you can't, is billed either by the bag or by the kilo. Some families with small children spend a fortune disposing of their nappies. Couples and singles however, can easily get by with just a few Swiss Francs a month. It's just tricky to manage that the rubbish doesn't stink to high heavens, before the taxed bag is full to the rim. Well, just too bad if you have seafood shells, fish- or meat bones left over already on the first day of your holiday, as we had... but the sea bass was delicious and really cheap...



## Golden autumn in the Engadin Valley

Zernez is situated in the Engadin Valley and it was a real pull of luck to choose this region as our first hideaway. According to a smooth talking tourist office, the Engadin is pleased with at least as many sunny days as Andalusia, however, they are smart enough not to mention any temperatures. Yet, it's a fact that this is a very sunny region and thanks to the high altitude of the valley floor (~ 1'500 to 1'800 m above sea level), fog is a real exception, in sharp contrast to Switzerland's lowlands.

Throughout autumn 2011, the weather was certainly up to satisfaction. It was exceptionally warm and calm, as in the rest of the continent. We arrived just at the right time, when the trees started to develop their colourful autumn foliage. Up here, there are not that many leaf trees but mainly larches that lose their needles, which are therefore, botanically considered as leaves.

During our first three weeks, we witnessed the splendid cycle of these trees getting yellow, then orange and finally dropping their needles. Those stood in nice contrast to evergreen conifer. The sun was with us every day and let temperatures rise to approx. 15°C, but at night they dropped considerably below freezing. We were astonished how long the many petunia and geraniums that decorated the window sills survived. Only after the thermometer fell to -10°C, they all died.



Snow could presently only be seen up on the mountain peaks but twice already, the entire region had gotten a thick layer of snow. The first time had been very early: mid September. Then, Zernez had to cope with half a metre of snow. It melted within days, but the same happened again on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, damaging lots of plants and trees and forcing all the pass roads to get temporarily closed.

Now roads had opened again and we were keen to discover this mountainous area before winter closure will be imposed, which could theoretically be after the next abundant snowfall.

Not a day we stayed in. We just had to find the right balance between driving over the partly snow-covered passes and hiking between the autumn trees in the valleys.



As Switzerland is a small country, and our base was located on its eastern extremity, our tours often involved also Italy and/or Austria. Somehow it was impressive, to see that another language is spoken in almost every valley. Already the local language, Rhaeto-Romance or Romansh, consists of five so distinctively different dialects, standardisation was necessary. Therefore “Rumantsch Grischun” was introduced. All those Romansh languages are spoken by no more than 100’000 people in Switzerland, of which 35’000 consider one of them as their mother tongue. Lucky us, they all speak Swiss German as well. Those Rhaeto-Romanic languages had been introduced during the middle ages by the Roman Empire. Therefore, many more dialects are being spoken in other Alpine countries, from northern Italy to the Dolomites of today’s Slovenia. To make things less boring, several distinctly different

Italian and German dialects are being spoken in the surrounding valleys on all sides of the Swiss border. It’s not exaggerated to say, that more than 10 languages are spoken in a 60 kilometres radius around Zernez. On top of it, we still had the chance to polish our Spanish a bit, as one of the sales attendants in the local supermarket comes from Ecuador!

Back to our sight-seeing. Our discovery tours included the following fascinating mountain passes, all mentioned with their altitude in metres above sea level: Ofen 2149, Maloja 1815, Julier 2284, Splügen 2113, Lukmanier 1914, Reschenpass 1507 in Austria... stop, stop, stop – this is getting too much. Maybe we just mention the tallest ones: Flüela 2383, Albula 2312, Bernina 2328, Umbrail 2501 and Stilfser Joch 2760 in Italy. All passroads included fascinating drives through breathtaking scenery and uncountable hairpin bends. On many of the summits, there was a bit of snow along the roadside and sometimes a slightly frozen lake.

As much as we enjoyed the drives to the thin air and the astonishing rock formations, and as much as we enjoyed our hikes between the colourful trees, as much we loved visiting the traditional Engadin villages. The most characteristic about them, are the houses with extremely thick walls. Furthermore, the openings for the windows are typically all slanted. The usually big buildings that at least in the olden times, included stables and hayricks, are often showing extensive mural decorations. Either they are painted or applied in a technique called sgraffito.

## Perfectionism and marketing

The stage in our home country, made us again aware of the Swiss tendency to perfectionism. An illustrative example were the kitchen appliances of our holiday flat. Surely, they were all expensive Swiss makes. Whereas in most parts of Europe, dishwashers for example, are available for approx. 200 to 400 Euros. Swiss however, choose assembly appliances with cladding sheet matching the rest of the kitchen furniture. Those sell at a whopping € 2’000 to 4’000. The manufacturer promises a particularly long life expectancy of their products – provided the devices are being serviced annually. To make this as reasonable as possible, they offer a service-package that costs only Euro 100 per year, but is limited to 12 years. Even during that time, not all spare-parts and not all labour hours are included.

During our time in the Engadin Valley, we regularly sighted wild chamois, grazing like sheep or cows. They seemed to overcome their inhibitions, in order to batten before winter arrives. Probably they knew that the hunting season was over. Their less fortunate mates had been served on plates in the surrounding gastronomic restaurants. To our surprise, there was a fair share of top class restaurants in the area. In some, the price was as extraordinary as the quality of their food. Luckily, we also found a few newcomers that served extraordinary dishes at ordinary prices. Somehow it’s a shame that some of St. Moritz’ jet setters visit the better known of these gourmet temples mainly to be seen, rather than for their delicacies, as an Italian waiter complained about his rich and famous countrymen. Despite the financial crisis and the strong Swiss Franc, the Engadin Valley is still a favoured holiday destination for many northern Italians. Some villages like Celerina, are dubbed by locals as “little Italy”.

Many come here to take advantage of the extraordinarily sunny climate. What is the tourist’s joy is the farmers sorrow. The abundance of irrigation systems are proof how dry the entire valley is. This year was not only extraordinarily sunny, but also extraordinarily warm. Consequently, it didn’t snow. Despite the lack of natural snow, St. Moritz opened its ski

season as planned on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Artificial snow solved all the problems. Some of it had been brought to downtown, for the “city race” that is traditionally being organized in the town’s pedestrian area.

All that many skiers could not be attracted as yet. On the second December weekend this changed suddenly. It seemed as if all of Poland and the Czech Republic were on the main road that connects Austria with Zermatt. From there, most Polish continued towards Ofenpass, whereas some of the Czech headed direction St. Moritz. Later, we learned that the nearby Italian resort-town of Livigno is marketing itself with sweet off-season deals; obviously successfully. A few years ago, they attracted half of Denmark, but as Eastern Europe has a bigger army of willing bargain hunters, they now targeted Poland and the Czech Republic. A few kilometres outside Zermatt, the single line tunnel connecting Livigno with Switzerland used to create more than ten kilometres of traffic jam every winter week-end. A better traffic management, allowing at first only outward traffic for several hours, and then only inward traffic, seemed to alleviate the problem.

Rivers and lakes started freezing in November but the only other signs of winter were the cross-country ski tracks that were being set up on the meanwhile brown meadows. Bridges, snow canons and lamp poles, as well as pay booths were put in place. It seemed that Santa Clause had an affair with Mother Hulda, as the Engadin Valley finally got covered with a snow blanket on December 6<sup>th</sup> 2011. We appreciated it very much that we now could enjoy our chosen hide-away with a completely new face; the one of winter wonderland.

Now many mountain passes were being closed but to make sure the Engadin stays connected, a fair share of mountain roads are being kept open year around. A few others, like Flüela Pass, have prolonged winter openings thanks to private interest groups that arrange snow removal. Some of the money comes from sponsors, but the bulk is still paid by the government.

Only two weeks after the snow arrived, our time in Zermatt was already over and we were a bit sad to leave. Ironically, despite all those sunny days experienced, we had heavy snowfall on the day of our departure. Though Flüela Pass was still open, we felt it was safer to use the [Vereina rail loading](#) underneath the mountain.



## Unexpected inconveniences

Well, the time we chose to hide away included also the X-Mas/New Year period. As we wanted to duck out on paying high season prices, we had to leave ski resorts. Instead, we decided to venture abroad, to the German shore of [Lake Constance](#). On the internet, we found many appealing apartments and thought we wouldn’t need to hurry with a reservation, as nobody would go there, at this time of the year. Well, our last-minute attempt to make a reservation was quite a tricky affair. Most prospective Landlords found an excuse, why they can’t rent their holiday dwelling for this time of the year. The place that finally accepted us, only did so, because we arrived already four days before Christmas and stayed for more than a week. Their other apartments were not being let. It soon got obvious; Southern Germans are far more traditional than the two of us.

Our journey there was as tricky, as our booking. We did have snow all the way, even the motorway was white. Shortly before reaching our destination, the road got more and more slippery. As it ascended a fair bit, we started to worry, whether we were still on the right track. More and more it felt like driving on soft soap. Therefore, we stopped halfway up the hill to mount our snow chains and ask for directions. After seeing that even proud owners of 4WD-vehicles with brand new winter tyres got stuck, and after getting confirmed that we were on the right track, we felt much better. For almost an hour we fiddled with our brand new chains in the dark and drove on, only to realise after a few kilometres that this road led to Immenstadt, instead of Immenstaad. Right; turn back and down those curves again! As soon as we had left the Allgäuer High plateau and got on the right track, the road was black (for the first time today). Here WE became a traffic obstacle until we had found a place to dismount our snow chains!

At Immenstaad, we finally spent a quiet week in a nice apartment overlooking Lake Constance. We made a few excursions to the nearby villages and towns like Lindau, Friedrichshafen and Radolfzell.

## With a stroke of Luck to the Valais Valley

Good Fortune was on our side when we returned to Switzerland. The weather prediction was again for heavy snow and therefore we decided spontaneously, to leave two days early to the Valais. We attempted to book a B&B for two days in Obergesteln. Had we been able to get in there, we would have ended up being cut-off in that village for almost a week. Instead, we were among the last ones to use the [Furka rail loading](#) before it had to get closed for risk of avalanches. We passed through Obergesteln just a few hours before the road down to the valley had to get closed as well. We regretted that we could only stop briefly in the many wintry snowy hamlets of the upper Valais along our way. However, after hearing on the radio that the road closed almost behind us, it was a relief that we now had a booking much further down the valley. Whilst we were staying comfortably in a very nice B&B in Niedergampel, a lot of snow was coming down.

Lucky us; our landlady provided outstanding service: she even dug our car out before we departed.



It was a Saturday, and on top New Year's Eve, which meant that it was one of the main weekends for people commuting in or out of holiday apartments. Fortunately, we had now less than 50 km to our destination. With all the snow on the road, we were glad that most of the traffic moved in the opposite direction. In fact, those on their way home were not really moving; they were stuck due to bad road conditions and heavy traffic. Most had to stop on the roadside to mount snow chains, before joining the 10km queue up to the Lötschberg rail loading. It didn't help them out of the soup – it rather brought them further in. The road ahead of them,

as several dozen others, had to get closed the same morning due to heavy snow and fear of avalanches. And again; we were not affected, as our chosen location was once more in a dry and sunny valley.

## Saas Grund: plenty of sun and snow

On a road with relatively little snow, we reached our holiday apartment in [Saas Grund](#). Though our new Landlord was busy cleaning the car park with a big snow blower (his new toy), there weren't very big snow masses around here. Despite the altitude of 1'560 metres above sea level, there was only about half a metre and we learned, snow didn't arrive before December 17<sup>th</sup>. Strong winds, as common around here, had meanwhile blown most snow away. Only thanks to Mother Hulda's equity, this popular skiing area got a bit of a white blanket again last night.

Our basement-flat was in a holiday chalet that consisted of two apartments only. It is situated in a small hamlet, from which we could reach the village centre of Saas Grund in a pleasant twenty minutes stroll, along a winter hiking path. Though that village only has 1'000 inhabitants, there are three supermarkets, of which at least one was open on Sundays as well. According to law, supermarkets in Switzerland are closed on Sundays, which apparently doesn't apply to touristy areas like the Valais.

To nearby Saas Fee, it was only a bit more than an hour's walk. Together with [Zermatt](#) they are this region's most famous alpine resort-towns. As any famous places, they could easily be recognized by the fact that less than 5'000 inhabitants have more than 10 pharmacies at hand. All advertise in, around here, often heard dialects like English or Chinese.

Such holiday places are keen to retain their good image. Being car-free is one way to do so. What sounds like a great idea in theory, means in practise, you don't need to worry about getting hit by a car in these places. You only should be wary of the silently approaching electrically powered vehicles that are speeding around in big numbers! Not only businesses,

also all local families have at least one of them and no way seems too short to use them. But there are certainly no cars indeed, they are all parked in huge (expensive) multi-storey car parks outside the village.

Comparing to Saas Fee and Zermatt, Saas Grund felt like a touristy, though ordinary village, despite the many holiday apartments and hotels.

During our first week, tourist accommodations were full to the rim but after the first week of January, it was a bit like in Southern Spain; most places were empty - only those with competitive pricing filled up, mainly with Germans, Dutch and English. Furthermore, many Italian and French spent their ski holidays around here. Despite all the talking about the strong Swiss Franc and the weak Euro, many foreigners still chose Switzerland for a vacation. As long as the quality is all right, many don't mind to pay a bit more, they only start moaning when they have to pay extra to dispose of their garbage.

## Cut off!

Soon, more snow was coming and for a few days, our village was cut off from the rest of the world, due to a risk of avalanches. Didn't we want to be far away from it all? That's exactly what we got now! Seriously, there was not that much snow falling on Saas Grund. However, on the radio we heard with how much more snow the valleys around us had to fight. Therefore, we were just cut off because of the access roads. Again, dozens had to be closed; some for a couple of days, others for a week.

From our landlady we heard that the Saasertal (Valley of Saas), as well as other southern valleys, enjoy a sunny and dry micro climate. In fact, we had observed that meadows are equipped with irrigation systems also around here. We learned that several weeks without downpour are no exception, but if snow arrives, it stays the entire winter due to the cold. That's exactly what attracts sun-seeking winter tourists. Meanwhile, it developed to an important industry the locals depend on: a huge money making machine that pays for the many snow making machines which in turn make sure, the dough keeps snowing in.



Although, until the end of January this winter was warmer than average, it was also one that blessed the mountainous areas with more snow than usually. As our valley always seems to receive the sun, some others always seem to receive the bulk of the snow. In stark contrast to the Saas Valley, which got only about 50 cm of snow, the [Lötschental](#) and [Obergoms](#) valleys both got more than five metres of it. Both were regularly cut off this winter; Obergoms already seven times until mid of February. Nowadays, avalanches are set-off artificially but with such snow masses, it wasn't possible to cope as quickly as everybody liked.



However, after a few days, the situation improved, and one road after another could be opened again. With typical Swiss perfectionism, the roads were not only cleared to be drivable, they were almost polished till they shone – even on altitudes above 2'000m. Now, it was easy to reach the villages that had received most of the snow. Unfortunately, we didn't have unlimited views along the way, as the snow walls lining the roads were often higher than our car. It looked truly fairy-tale like; not only the landscape, also the villages. The typical black wooden Valais houses stood in the midst of snow that piled up higher than their doors. The roofs had to bear up to two metres of the white stuff.

We don't know how welcome those snow masses were to the locals, but photo obsessed tourists couldn't get enough of it. With a blue sky, it looked really fantastic. Sometimes it was just challenging to bring the camera in a position higher than the snow walls. Except along winter hiking paths or cross-country ski slopes, you had sunk immediately deep into the fluffy blanket as soon as you left the car. According to locals, most mountainous villages in the area hadn't received that much snow in decades. Anyhow, the snow masses we had seen on about 1'600m during January, were an impressive sight indeed, BUT: they piled still less than half as high of what we had seen in Norway on 800m above sea level in May 2010; all things are relative!

We regularly enjoyed walks on the many well prepared winter walking tracks. However, we realized how old fashioned our winter-walking must be, as our sole equipments were comfy warm clothing and hiking boots. To go with modern times, many winter-wanderers invest heavily and don't mind to struggle with additional equipment, like snow-shoes or sticks. Up to now, we were forfeited to the delusion that snow shoes are designed to be used in deep powder snow and Nordic-walking sticks not only to be carried or dragged along ...

## Final thoughts about our stay in Switzerland

Our first three and a half months in Switzerland blessed us with much more sunshine than we'd expected. During February, we reserved two weeks to visit relatives and friends and for that purpose we stayed with Heinz' sister Edith and her hubby Karl, down in the lowlands. There, the weather was more like we had known Swiss winters from the time when we were still "ordinary citizens" and not globetrotters. That means: it was often wet and foggy, feeling colder than in the mountains.

Well, our decision to spend a winter in Switzerland, but far away from relatives and friends, might have been egoistic, but somehow it was also just what we needed. When we booked our two holiday flats, we weren't even aware that they are located in valleys that receive still more sun than Andalusia. Sunshine and dry air make cold temperatures easily bearable. Mountain air is reputed to make you hungry, so we ate lots of typical Swiss food, like Fondue or Raclette and we took advantage of the irresistible choice of yoghurts. Surely, what we experienced was Switzerland's chocolate side, and it was even sweeter than we'd expected. Away from the country's industrialized regions, we found two perfect small villages, far away from it all, but still close enough to civilisation.

## France: passing the Loire Valley

Meanwhile it was mid February 2012. Next on our itinerary was Brittany and on the way, we intended to visit some of the sights along the Loire River. Expecting that this time of year wouldn't pose any problem getting some good holiday flats on short notice, we were kind of surprised that the first three places we contacted, were fully booked already. Surely, the first one would have been quite special: a converted mill spanning a rivulet. But the other two ones were located in Brittany, which is not really a prime winter-holiday destination. However, after showing some flexibility and a bit of re-scheduling, we found something that suited our taste and our pocket.

Just as we were leaving Switzerland, another blizzard was starting. We were glad to get out of it and as we reached the Jura Region, we even saw the sun again. For the next 600km till we reached the [Loire Valley](#), many small water bodies were frozen because of the exceptional cold spell that hit the continent this month.

Our first overnight stay was in the pretty town of Beaune, and then we based ourselves for two days in Blois, to have a look at some of the castles nearby. Because of school holidays, the car parks at the most popular ones were quite packed. One of them was Château Chambord, nick named the "super jumbo" of castles, due to its sheer size and elaborate appearance.

We also liked the impressive Château Chenonceau that is built across the river Cher. As we didn't feel like visiting it from the inside, we found the € 25 entrance fee (for 2) just to see it from the outside, a bit steep. Never mind; every river has two shores, and luckily we found a lovely forest track that led us just to the opposite side of the castle...

Also several of the area's towns still boast symbols of former royal power. Many are fortified towns and have bold castles above rows of charming houses, like e.g. in Blois, Amboise and Saumur.



## Brittany: sunshine, crêpes and stunning seascapes

On the motorway, we headed further west. After passing Nantes, traffic got quite dense which we didn't expect. We thought, [Brittany](#) is a lonely place. On the other hand, it didn't surprise us that it got foggy; that's what we expected from Brittany. Therefore, we waved our intended stop on the coast and visited the town of Vannes instead. It has a quaint old town with many half-timbered houses. As we wandered the old streets, we couldn't believe how many eateries were specializing in crêpes: all of Brittany is obsessed with these pancakes. We joined in, and sampled the first crêpes of many more we imbibed during the coming 5 weeks. Hereabout it's not just a small snack. Crêpes are often served in a succession of three courses, making it a full meal consisting of a starter-crêpe, a main-dish crêpe and a sweet one for



pudding. The savoury version is called “Galette” and made of buckwheat (dark flour). The filling can be anything you can imagine and pay for.

## Summery Morbihan Coast

On February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, we reached our first holiday dwelling, or “Gîte”, as French call it. The flat was located only 300 metres from the sea. It belonged to the village of Erdeven in the [Morbihan](#) Department, Brittany’s south eastern district. A former farm building and its horse stables had cleverly been converted into seven nice holiday flats. To our big surprise, the other apartments were occupied as well; all with French families holidaying. So, we were not the only weirdoes, coming here in February.

After our five-day trip along the Loire, we would have earned a days’ rest, but Brittany’s good weather loomed us out every day. Often it was foggy in the morning, clearing up during the afternoon. Most of the time we hadn’t any wind at all and temperatures rose daily. From initial 8°C, the thermometer soon showed 12°, and then 16°, not stopping there. One display on a pharmacy even indicated 33°C – but we assume that was when it had about 22°C really – end of February. Anyway; it did feel like summer and the locals call this area “Côte d’Azur of Brittany”.

As we drove to the southern tip of [Quiberon](#) Peninsula, popular for its sandy beaches, as well as for its cliffs, we were puzzled about the amount of traffic. All view points were quite popular and some car parks were full to the rim. People went surfing, sunbathing and some diehards even swimming. On the coastal path, it looked as if a column of ants was moving along; young and old people in masses. At lunch time, al fresco dining proved very popular. First we thought it’s only like that on a weekend, but it didn’t get any different mid-week. Though it looked like in summer, it was really only February. Seeing this, and the many tourist accommodations that were not yet open for the season, we can easily imagine that “hell” could already start at Easter time. No wonder that our travel guidebook warns, not even to think about driving down to Quiberon during summer.

## Megaliths and old customs

Brittany is not only popular with beach-bums, but also with people interested in age-old cultures, due to its abundance of [megaliths](#). The best known and biggest of these prehistoric sites are situated around Carnac and Erdeven, literally just a stone’s throw from our holiday flat. It’s all about stone boulders in different sizes and shapes, up to several tons heavy and carried from far away. Though such megaliths can be found from Spain to the very north of Europe, Brittany has an extraordinary number. They were placed by ancient cultures between 4’500 and 2’500 BC. Some form kilometre long lines, others form chambers with huge lid-rocks, again others are grouped in circles or as megalithic stone ships. The megaliths are being distinguished as Dolmen, Menhirs, Cairns or Cromlechs, which indicates the way they are standing in or their arrangement with others. Scientists couldn’t agree on their role. They established wildly different theories; from fertility- to burial- or sacrificial sites, but also calendars or landing spots for extraterrestrials are considered.



The region also has a lot to offer to history buffs that don’t want to go back so many thousands of years. Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, Celtic immigrants from Wales in Great Britain arrived in today’s Brittany and that’s how it got its name. Though at times, its culture was heavily suppressed by French Patriarchs, the Breton customs and language survived to this day. Meanwhile the language is again spoken by 5% of Brittany’s population and all place names are labelled bilingual.

Many excursions led us along the coast and also to pretty harbours. Not only those for fishing boats, also those with leisure boats were bustling. Because of the Atlantic’s huge tidal amplitude, proud captains and fishermen alike, cannot leave and return after their moods, but have to stick to the tidal-charts. Small and large ships are “grounded” at low-tide. This might be annoying for seamen, but landlubbers admire the change of scenery and take it as good opportunity to

picture the colourful boats that are grounded for a while. Due to small fjords, which hereabout are called “ria” or “aber”, and also due to rivers affected by the tide, many inland villages can claim to be on the seaside.

For a long time, the sea nourishes the population in many ways, not only with the catch of fish and crustacean. Various types of mussels are being cultivated, and also seaweed and salt are harvested. “World famous in France” is the pricey “fleur de sel”, hand collected in huge saltpans near Guérande.

## Through South-Finistère to Crozon Peninsula

After a wonderful week at Erdeven Plage, we left to Brittany’s westernmost province [Finistère](#). Along the way, we stopped at the pretty village of Pont-Aven. Apart from its tidal harbour and the picturesque river, the place mainly got famous because Gauguin once painted its landscape. In 1886, he started giving painting lessons there, as he probably needed some money. This was the founding of the now famous painting school Pont-Aven that attracted many that got, or would-be famous painters. Many of them developed impressionism further. Nowadays, the village is literally polluted with art galleries, aiming at tourist cash.

Next on our trip, was Concarneau’s fortified old town that sits like a moated castle in the bay. Already the many fishing boats anchored around it, or grounded respectively, were very charming. Again, the streets in the historic old town, and especially the street cafés were teeming with other tourists – not really what we’d expected at the beginning of March. After a crêpe, we made a detour to Pont l’Abbé, and later spent the night in a budget hotel in Quimper. Though it is a rather big town, its old quarters with many half timbered houses are incredibly picturesque. Wandering the streets took some time and so it got 9 o’clock; unfortunately too late for dinner at the gourmet temple we had in mind. As we already mentioned: Brittany is crazy for crêpes and many Crêperies are even listed in different bibles we believe in, like Gault-Millau, Bottin Gourmand or Guide Michelin. So we indulged in a delicious crêpe dinner and were happily sitting in a venue still bustling with people. When we left at 11 PM, we noticed with surprise that one open-air café was also still full to the rim.

On the next morning, we continued to the village of Locronan. Its old houses are uniformly built in dark granite, and the village of 800 appears pretty unchanged since mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Thereafter, we headed for Crozon Peninsula. As soon as we reached the cliffs of the western tip, fog started to come in from the sea. What a pity; we could only see as much, to realize how nice it would be, if it would be fine. After more than a week of summery

Brittany’s weather gods real face. Luckily, we found ourselves a hotel raining heavily during the down. So, we were blue sky next morning. headed for the fishing that was now glooming we had discovered a before. Invigorated, we worthwhile viewpoints Dinan and also some over rocky coastline, formations, including was just stunning; backdrop.



weather during winter, attempted to show us their still had time and so we room and a good feed. It was night, but this washed the fog delighted to wake up to the We took the chance, and village of Camaret-sur-Plage in the morning sun. There, delicious bakery the day trudged around the most again: Pointe Penhir, Pointe additional ones. The views with many freestanding rock quite a number of big arches, especially with a blue sea as

Around here, we found also many remnants and memorials, reminding the second World War. However, it seems more people were interested in the fascinating land- and seascape, rather than the displays about the war. At least one car park had a big sign indicating that only those are allowed to use it, who actually visit the war museum!

## Finistère's northern coast and interior

Now it was only 1 ½ hour’s drive until we reached our second apartment in Brittany, on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012. This time, it was a 100m<sup>2</sup> holiday house, situated in the hamlet Moguéric, west of Roscoff. Though we were impressed how elegant the renovated house had been decorated, we laughed most about the modern trash bin. It opened its “mouth” automatically

when you approached it and then you could throw in anything you manage – within the 4 seconds before it shuts its mouth again.

Lucky us; we were not only spoiled with high-tech, our Landlady brought us also regularly fresh vegetables from her farm. We learned from her that vegetable farming got an important part of the local economy, thanks to the mild climate. She told us, it never gets very hot here, though seldom very cold and in winter, it hardly ever freezes. It's a micro climate that affects about a 15km wide belt along the coast, where you see vast fields of broccoli, cauliflower, artichoke and shallot.

During our stay, the weather was still quite friendly, but the sky was often covered by low stratus. Then we made ourselves comfortable in the cosy upstairs lounge, read, wrote and organised our entire summer, by booking naturist places throughout France, using our computer with the provided internet access and telephone.

Therefore, we were not sad, if the sun didn't shine, but if it did, we were quickly out exploring the amazing coastline. It had rocky sections interspersed with golden sandy beaches. We visited many coastal stretches twice, as we wanted to see them in the contrast of the tides. Sometimes it was very calm and the sea was almost reflecting, but sometimes the Atlantic Ocean demonstrated its power with huge waves. They were clashing on the rocks that were situated in front of the beach, appearing like shifted onto each other. French call such an assembly of boulders very aptly: a chaos. At high tide, they looked like small islets, but at low tide, they could be scrambled upon.



The nearby port town of Roscoff is very charming. It has various ferry connections to the U.K. and near the docking, shops and hotels obviously aim at English. It seems they hope all those tourists who flock in, prefer to order booze and fast-food in their mother tongue, instead of making an effort with French for fine local food.

Only a few days prior to our departure, we ventured out to discover “[Finistère](#)’s” interior. The town of Morlaix, nestled at the steep end of a tidal fjord, impresses with its many high stone, or timber framed houses, and its railway viaduct that spans right across the town and is already for 150 years in service. Further inland, the landscape is dominated by green hills. We looked around the picturesque town Huelgoat with its historic mill. Here, we learned that it's been sunny for weeks; only the coast had been affected by foggy skies. There we sat, at 20°C degrees by the lakeside, enjoyed the sun and had another crêpe.

On the way back, we passed several hamlets that have remarkable stone churches with parish enclosures, typical for this region. Brittany has about 70 such “ecclesiastical closes” (in French: enclos parossial) dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> century. They all feature fancy stonemasonry on different buildings, like a triumphal entrance, a chapel for storing bones, a central chapel and most typical: a calvary, a sophisticated portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion. Parish enclosures are still bold witnesses of former church power.

A much simpler chapel can be seen on Montagne St. Michel, which is not even a distant relative of the famous Mont-Saint Michel. This chapel stands lonely on a bold hill of the “Monts d'Arrée” mountain ranges. Up there, the views are vast, and even in March, we were by far not the only tourists to conquer the 380m hill.

The day before we left the comfortable house in Mogueérec, we celebrated Brigitte's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Heinz set off to get her a birthday cake, and later cooked a delicious French dinner.

## **Côtes d'Armor: yet another highlight**

On March 17<sup>th</sup> we moved less than 100km to our next temporary home. It was situated 10km inland, next to the village of Camlez near Lannion. What we rented as renovated apartment in an old farm building actually was a newly built corner house which retained only the old curtain masonry walls. Our Landlord was busy completing an additional holiday apartment. Everything was very modern and top notch. Never the less, he invested lots of work and money to integrate some old elements into the new structure. The old fragile and crooked ceiling beams were restored and placed below the new concrete ceiling, just for decoration. As the vast kitchen was situated in a former bakery, the woodstove opening and

chimney were perfectly integrated into the very modern kitchen furnishings. The wood fire oven is now gone, but the opening where in former times the bread had been put into the oven, now has a window behind the stove, and the cooker hood ventilator is well hidden into the old chimney.

From the outside, the building looks like a traditional Breton “long house” (longère) with thick stonewalls. The stones had been sandblasted and looked really good. Walls are even thicker now, as insulation, as well as brick walls have been placed inside the external walls. In modern fashion, the (new) house is equipped with heat recovery ventilation and solar panels; the first for comfort, the latter for government subsidies.

The area offered again many nice sights, be it historic villages or seascapes. We were now in the “Département [Côte d’Armor](#)”. The most evident difference to the region around our last “home from home” was that the stone boulders on the beaches around here were of red granite. No wonder that this part of the coastline is named “Côte de granit rose”. The rocks still had similarly bizarre shapes to those we had seen before. They often lay in stacks that look like arranged. Some have strange forms and we wonder how the uncountable balancing rocks withstand the crushing waves. We were most smitten by the coastal sections around Plougrescant, Port Blanc and Île Renote. Very picturesque is a holiday house in the coastal area known as Le Gouffre. It sits majestically between two rock boulders, which are higher than the cottage itself. The area boasts also many historic towns, of which we found Tréguier, Pontriex and Paimpol the most stunning. Also the ruins of the Abbey of Beauport, another bold symbol of former church power, is worth visiting.



Though, winter school holiday was now over, French tourists were still abound at any nice spot we visited in Brittany. Beginning of spring, March 21<sup>st</sup> was obviously the signal for most woman to bring out their shorts, though it was a fair bit colder than at the end of February.

Despite the fact that the area boasts many gourmet temples with star rated chefs, such tables must be scarce as dust of gold during peak season, according to our Lonely Planet guidebook. With a cast of fortune, we managed to get a table in a Michelin three star rated establishment without reservation, although it was almost full to the rim, midweek in March.

## Farewell from Brittany

On March 31<sup>st</sup> we left our holiday home in Camlez and continued northwards. It was a sulky day, but along our way, we visited the appealing villages of Moncontour and Jugon-les-Lacs. As overnight stop, we choose the charming fortified town of [Dinan](#), with its many half timbered houses. The next morning was sunny again and our visit of Dol-de-Bretagne, another village with many half timbered houses, was a picture perfect farewell from Brittany.

Retrospectively, it was the right decision to visit France’s westernmost region during February and March. It was much warmer, sunnier and much more frequented by other tourists than we ever expected during this time of the year. We had the privilege to travel among the French, as there were no other foreigners around now.

We got to know an area with a fascinating and very varied coastline, intense green landscapes, proper and neat towns and villages. A prosperous region with warm-hearted people. We experienced it as distinctively different from the rest of France, but its cuisine is at least as excellent. Now we understand why people get so easily addicted to Brittany’s charm.

## Northwards through Normandy

Though, we were already surprised how many people visited Brittany in off season, we couldn’t help but wonder about the masses of people visiting Honfleur on Sunday afternoon, April first. Most were probably Parisians and they definitely

outnumbered the locals. Car parks were charged for, the houses along the harbour were charming, the boulevard had a flea market, tourist shops were plentiful, money was rolling in, ice-cream and street side cafes were in high demand, the alleys were narrow, businesses had a good turnover and it was so bustling, you couldn't tumble over! In short: it was just awfully touristy.

We escaped to the much prettier town of [Rouen](#), situated on the shores of the Seine River. As we arrived in the centre around sunset, we made a few nice twilight pictures, but then it was soon time for dinner, so we postponed serious exploration for the next day. Soon we stood in front of the restaurant that was recommended by our hotels receptionist. However, checking the menu and seeing how empty it was, we felt her reason recommending it, was probably another one than the quality of the food. We then sat down in a restaurant two houses on, with a menu that sounded more appealing to us, and we totally agree: the different "guides gastronomiques" had good reasons to award it.

Rouen's extensive historic old town has many half timbered houses, of which the timber frames were often painted in nice colours. There were also many neat large town houses and we found the "Quartier des Antiquaires" to be especially charming. After two nights in Rouen, we left France and continued to Belgium.

## Bruges; a Belgian jewel

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> we arrived in [Bruges](#), one of Belgium's most beautiful towns. We stayed at the new Etap Hotel, situated right at the station. From there, it was only a puddle jump to the city centre where we mingled with tourists from all over the world. At such exceptional places, you can certainly not expect to be the sole visitor. The new Concert Hall is about the only modern building in the centre, but everything else still retains the charm of old times. Brick buildings are predominant; some are plastered and colourfully decorated, others are left as mainly red face brick. Street facing gables are often elegantly curved or staircase-shaped, and adorned with some kind of decoration. Bold churches, huge squares and charming channels can be found all over the town.



## The Netherlands in spring: flowers everywhere

From small Belgium, it was only a short drive to the almost as small [Netherlands](#). We arrived at the Zeeland Province on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2012 and started our discovery by visiting the villages Veere and Domburg. The latter was almost occupied by German tourists, but as evening approached, we too, looked for a room to stay. We had dinner at an excellent Chinese Restaurant and gave the staff the chance to practise their English, instead of German, which they probably speak more often than Dutch.

The next morning, we continued over the Eastern Scheldt storm surge barrier, or Oosterscheldekering, how it's locally known. It is part of the huge Delta Project that protects the region against the mood of the sea and also reclaims additional land. We bypassed the big cities mainly on small country roads that often look rather like bicycle paths, where cars are tolerated as well. Somehow, whenever we took a freeway it was jammed, despite the sometimes more than 10 (ten) lanes, so we decided that mingling with slow traffic in this bicycle-obsessed country, is more relaxing. This led us through many neat villages like Strijnen and famous but ordinary Maasdam.

While driving through villages, we sometimes lost the through fare, as the entire centres often are paved with red cobble stone and roads are partly narrowed as traffic calming measures. In the vicinity of Gouda, we found a maze of small roads that were lined with small canals on both sides. Most houses could only be accessed over a bridge that led onto their yards with pretty gardens. Sure enough, we also passed the first windmills.



For the night, we headed for the west coast, to the area most famous for its flower fields due to its large tourist magnet [Keukenhof](#). If we had worried about arriving too late for the tulips, when it was unseasonably hot during the last few weeks, it was for nothing. Upon arriving in Lisse, we spotted endless carpets of colourful fields in the sunset, before finding a B&B. The next morning, we saw thousands of cars parked at “Keukenhof’s” entrance and endless coaches, stopping in front of a few roadside stalls that sold flower bulbs. This didn’t seem too inviting for us. We contended with big, authentic flower fields of farmers who make a living, cultivating flowers be it for the cut flowers or for their bulbs.

Currently, fields of daffodils and hyacinths in full bloom could be seen everywhere. For tulips it was still rather early, but wherever they were out, hordes of tourists swarmed around. Dense traffic didn’t hinder them to park their cars on the roadside and run into the fields, desperately looking for the prettiest flower to be pictured. Photo obsessed tourists from western countries, of which quite a number were Americans, were trampling into the patches for close-shots, they could just as well do at home, with the flower in a vase. Asians on the other hand, “had to be” in the picture themselves of course, so they really had to be in the middle of the flowerbed. To us, the main attractions were the different colours and the vast sizes of the fields. ... and we were lucky enough to have three more weeks to admire this aspect of spring in the Netherlands.



## Flevo Natuur: naturism below sea level

Just at the time we thought the warmth of spring was definitely taking over, winter temperatures were back. Exactly now, we had this year’s first reservation in a naturist ground. It was April 6<sup>th</sup> 2012, when we arrived at [Flevo Natuur](#), a naturist ground 50km east of Amsterdam. It had frozen during the night and it was still a chilly 5°C when we stood at the reception. Never the less, it was Easter weekend and the ground was packed with naturists who had probably buried their faint hope to peel off.

Though the Netherlands are not famed for Mediterranean climate, Flevo Natuur is open year round. Consequently, they have to offer facilities, which make it attractive to visit, if the weather bears the risk of freezing, rather than tempting to sunbathe. The amenities include a large, beautifully decorated indoor swimming pool that somehow resembles a tropical adventure pool. Furthermore, there are three large saunas, of which at least one is heated all day long. Not only the swimming-pool, also the saunas proofed very popular with families with children. Some visitors probably appreciate it that one sauna is declared “silent zone”.

Surely, Flevo Natuur has also amenities that serve in the first place the needs of little visitors. Apart from playgrounds, there is even a petting-zoo with deer, pigs, sheep, goats, geese, hens, and so on.

The naturist holiday park is located on Flevoland that is an interior island of 1’419km<sup>2</sup>, reclaimed from the Zuiderzee. After the 32 km long Enclosure Dam (Afsluitdijk) was completed in 1932, the water was slowly pumped out. Ten years later, the first reclaimed area was inaugurated: “Noordoostpolder”, followed by “Eastern Flevoland” in 1957 and “Southern Flevoland” in 1968.

Naturists are not the only ones brave enough to live 4 metres below sea level. Meanwhile 400’000 residents inhabit the Netherland’s youngest province. For the time being, six municipalities have been built, of which three are rather big towns, all entirely designed on the drawing board. Nevertheless, most of the new gained land is used agriculturally. To our delight, many farmers cultivate flowers, not for the flowers themselves, but for their bulbs. As mostly tulips are planted on Flevoland, the blooming period is a bit later than where narcissi and hyacinths are farmed. Normally, the best time to see blooming tulips are the last two weeks of April and the first week of May. Though we were one week early, we found the first blooming fields already a couple of kilometres outside Flevo Natuur. As we drove on minor roads up to Noordoostpolder, we saw many fields that were just about to bloom.

We visited the charming village of Urk, which is an oddity in itself, as it used to be a fishing village on an island. Today, it still lies on the sea, but at the coast of the new polder, how artificially dried land is called. There were more tulips to be seen around Noordoostpolder as well. Several “tulip routes”, up to 80km long, were marked and invited to discover a true mosaic of colourful tulip fields.

Back to Flevo Natuur: it belongs to the municipality of Zeewolde, which ironically had been founded 10 years later than the naturist ground, which can celebrate its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary 2013. With 35 ha in size and at least 1'000 bungalows and camp sites, it's set up like a little Dutch village, with plenty of water canals, including a swimming pond, supplementing the indoor & outdoor pools. There are 250 to 300 permanent residents that enjoy the service of a shop and a restaurant, which remain open year around. We really appreciated the big selection of breads and the generous opening hours.

We rented a mobile home that was rather like a small house. On 45m<sup>2</sup> there was a generous lounge with upholstery, a big kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom. The well appointed house was very cosy and we were glad it had central heating. Due to the persisting cold spell, with temperatures between 0°C and 9°C, we only sat out in the sun for some 15 minutes. However, the saunas, the indoor pool and its location among tulip fields, made our stay at Flevo Natuur very rewarding, despite the Arctic April weather.

## In Noordholland's sea of flowers

Against all reservations, we moved to a new area on Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup> 2012. Driving from eastern Flevoland over the impressive 30km dam "Markerwaarddijk" we reached the province of North Holland. This dam separates the Markermeer from the IJsselmeer two giant shallow lakes. Together, they formed the "Zuiderzee", before the enclosure dam (Afsluitdijk) between Northern Holland and Friesland cut the sea off, subsequently turning the locked water to a huge freshwater lake that was divided by "Markerwaarddijk" in 1975.

Late afternoon, we moved into our next holiday house. It was situated near [Schoorl](#), a few kilometres north of Alkmaar. It was well equipped and though it had two storeys, its surface was smaller than the "mobile home" we occupied before. There was a bakery nearby and the centre of Schoorl offered anything, tourists seek for, including many restaurants and shops that are open 7 days a week.

The weather was still freezing cold and we couldn't give the nearby naturist beach a thought. We didn't rent bicycles either but went sight-seeing by car or foot. But more and more tulip fields came now in bloom, of which also Northern Holland has plenty. As they don't solely grow tulips in this region, but also other flowers that bloom earlier, we were able to admire impressive flower mosaics all the time, and they got more plentiful the longer the more. Whereas cut flowers are being grown in hot houses, the flowers in the fields are cultivated for their bulbs only, as mentioned before. Because the farmers are keen to direct the plant's energy into the bulb, rather than into the flower, the fields are being mown the way that most flowers will be "beheaded" just when they look best in tourists' eyes. With so many huge fields abound, flowers pop out quicker than farmers can cut, so flower spotters still have ample opportunities to walk, cycle or drive among a sea of flowers in a firework of different colours.



During our excursions, we discovered that the Dutch have developed a culture of little cheap snacks. Sometimes it's fast food type, but more often something quite sophisticated. Many cosy Café's are open all day for a quick feed and though they usually don't cost an arm and a leg, portions are normally generous. Especially fish- and shrimp sandwiches, apple tarts and Belgian wafers became our favourites. We also enjoyed Indonesian eateries, a good legacy of the Netherland's colonial past.

Flowers, Canals, Cheese and old windmills are not the only assets interesting to tourists in this country; even traffic can be attention grabbing. On small roads, as well as on highways, traffic regularly comes to a standstill, as bridges open to let boats pass. To commuters, this is certainly annoying but tourists usually follow the procedure with interest – and camera. Less often, boats can be seen passing above the road, as a waterway crosses the road in an aqueduct.

The Netherlands has no shortage of pretty historic villages and towns. The many canals and harbours are only adding to their charm. One area that is still very characteristic of the beginning of reclaiming land is the Schermer-Region, where each field is still separated by a canal. In times past, farmers were tending their fields by boat and floating markets were held. The 126 km long "Westfriese Omringdijk" (Westfriesian Ring dam) was already built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, enclosing big parts of the district North Holland. In some parts, a narrow road is laid on the vermiculated dam, offering better views of the flat countryside and its tulip fields.

Many traditional houses have beautiful big roofs, often ornamented in a mix of tiled and thatched sections. Also most of the old windmills have thatched roofs. We hadn't seen one that was not nicely renovated. Nowadays, many of these former corn or pump-mills are privately owned, and converted into lodgings. As winds never seem to cease, huge modern wind generators are being set up all over the Netherlands, producing electricity and filling the air with their humming.

We have visited the Netherlands before, but always during the warm summer months. The extreme cold spell during April 2012 didn't spoil our stay in this appealing country at all. We got to see and smell vast fields of blooming flowers and experienced "Flevo Natuur", a naturist centre that is very attractive, even if the weather doesn't cooperate.

Again, we got to know friendly people, beautiful landscapes and well maintained historic towns in a clean and orderly country. Now, we would say that the Netherlands are at their best, when the uncountable flower orchards are in full bloom.

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, our 3 ½ weeks were already over, and so we mingled with the dense traffic on the country's freeways, as we were looking forward to meet our friends Moni & Bruno only a couple of days later in Southern France.

## France: Naturist tour through 8 resorts

End of April 2012 we arrived in France, where we once more intended to spend the summer, wearing most of the time no more than our birthday suits. Well, as naturists, naturally we do not see any other reasons to wear clothing than to protect ourselves against the elements or the risk of injuries. Nude welding for instance, is not as much fun, as it would appear in a Mr. Beam sketch!

Knowing that nobody could look us something off, we would naturally feel most comfortable to be naked wherever and whenever the weather Gods moods and our current activity would permit to do so. Unfortunately, most societies are conditioned the way that plain natural nudity seems offensive to many. Erotic appearance on the other hand, is strangely not only better accepted but often even paid for!

As good Swiss, we're anyway programmed to compromise until everybody is equally blessed with sorrows and joy. Our solution is to enjoy the bulk of sight-seeing activities during the colder winter months, when it's just natural to wear clothing. During the warmer summer months, when it's naturally more comfy to be naked, we simply seek shelter in naturist- resorts and clubs. Being surrounded by likeminded people who are most comfortable to be naked and accept each other the way they are created, is very relaxing and lets us forget being in a ghetto. It's just a shame that most of the millions of Europeans who enjoy nude recreation regularly, don't share with their friends outside the naturist ground, how natural it is to them, and how much they enjoy it. If all naturists would share their passion, probably

it could only be a matter of time until naturist-ghettos become unnecessary and everybody could strip off everywhere and every time the weather would allow. If nobody would be disturbed, or attracted by the sight of a naked person, the world would certainly be a more natural one, and many of the problems related to sexual harassment would thereby evaporate as well.

Instead of moaning until this dream (illusion?) becomes reality, we better enjoy the diverse naturist-grounds around the globe. France, with more than one million naturist-holidayers annually, is probably Europe's prime destination for nude recreation. Despite having visited many French resorts, there is still a fair share waiting to be discovered. Though we intend to revisit some favourites, our nude summer will again focus on places we hadn't visited before.







## Domaine de la Sablière: meeting friends on the Cèze River



It was April 29<sup>th</sup> 2012, when we arrived at [Domaine de la Sablière](#). It's a big, well managed naturist ground near the Ardèche-Valley, where we had reserved a small mobile home. The ground is situated in an impressive valley, just 7 km outside Barjac. It's nestled along and above the left shore of the small Cèze River. We stayed in the shady area near the bottom of the valley, during spring however, most visitors prefer the warmer sections uphill.

Sablière is a vast ground and we enjoyed the many possibilities for walking "au naturel" every day afresh. At night, it's not unlikely to hear, or maybe see some wild boars. Proof of their activities can be seen everywhere. The entrance with the reception is situated on the rim, above the valley. From there it's one kilometre down to the pool area, and another kilometre to the shop and restaurant. Another few hundred meters more and you're down by the river Cèze. The two distinctive rock outcroppings guarding the river opposite the main beach are certainly one of Sablière's biggest assets. A large natural pool invites for bathing. Children and adults alike, swim to the opposite shore, sunbathe near the small natural cave or jump down the rocks. Those who like it a bit quieter, find many lonely sunbathing spots further upstream. It's very picturesque all along the shore. Many naturists come down here to enjoy the rough beauty of the landscape, watch the flow of the river, and while the time away.

However, not only relaxing was on our agenda, as we met up with our friends Moni & Bruno, who like Sablière even more than we do. No wonder, it was right here, where they had fallen in love during May 1995, when the 4 of us stayed here for the first time. Meanwhile, we had all grown from "over aged juveniles" to mature young adults, who just passed their fifties! Moni, as well as Brigitte had had their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries just during the last two months, so we had more than enough reasons to invest in two birthday-cakes and a couple of (additional) gourmet meals.

### All for the guests comfort

The weather was not that warm during our first week, but luckily, "La Sablière" has also something to offer if the sun indulges in one of the French's favourite pastime and goes on strike. The large sauna, for instance, proofed very popular. Even during off season, it was heated for ten hours daily. The upper pool has a removable lightweight construction that converts it to an indoor bath. The second pool and the children's basin, however, were not yet opened for the season. Due to the sometimes chilly weather, a dip in the well heated indoor pool was anyway more tempting. Thanks to the big glass roof, the sun managed to heat the pool up to a tropical 32°C, far better than the 25°C promised in the brochure.

The swimming pools and the sauna are ideally located in the heart of the Sablière. Wireless internet access however, is only available in a tent next to the reception. As it is a more than two kilometres uphill away from the furthest campsites and rentals, many visitors understandably drive up there, instead of doing a healthy hike. A Wi-Fi Zone near the pool area could be much more convenient, as almost everybody could be expected to walk there. To us, unnecessary car drives are a real nuisance at the Domaine, and we know people who go elsewhere on that reason. To those naturists who like to walk, it makes a big difference, whether they smell the crisp air, or the exhaust fumes caused by those who like to go back to nature, but certainly not by foot.

During peak summer, a shuttle bus is on service around the large grounds. Abolishing the unnecessary car-parks near the pools would furthermore motivate visitors to make use of the grounds topography to improve their own fitness, instead of moving around by horsepower. Are the passionate drivers the first ones who might use the new fitness centre?

Sablière is one of the naturist centres which offers meanwhile almost as many rental possibilities as campsites. The almost 200 accommodations include: furnished tents, modern bright and spacious mobile homes, cosy chalets and luxury cottages. The newest additions are 32 m<sup>2</sup> big, furnished luxury tents with tiled floors, proper beds and a kitchen cabinet that incorporates even a stand-up bar! It probably aims at those parents who like to holiday in style, but have to compromise with a touch of camping, to keep their children happy.

Especially the French realize that if everything is taken into account, renting buys often more comfort for less money than camping. Campsites only fill a few weeks annually, however rental accommodations are occupied for a few months, and naturally that's all reflected in the pricing. Sablière attracts many holidayers; French and foreigners. Thanks to the more than 100 permanent sites that are predominantly rented to local families, and thanks to the many possibilities to rent a places to stay, many more French visit now, compared to 10 - 15 years ago. Surely, the reception is truly multi-lingual and multi-national, but those foreigners, who make the effort to speak French, are self-evidently rewarded with a French reply, rather than forced to speak their mother-tongue or English, as it's too often happening elsewhere. To us, it's very important to feel that we're in France, and this is certainly the case here.

Sablières competitively priced “épicerie” (small supermarket) is also very French, but still serves the need of its clients from all over Europe. Even though it was still very quiet in spring, the shop stocked not only a good choice of breads, souvenirs and tins, but had also a comprehensive selection of fresh meats, vegetables, fruits and milk products. It’s easy to assemble fresh healthy meals just from this well stocked store. An excellent selection of magazines, journals and quality papers from all over the continent is also readily available, even the New York Times’ international edition: the Herald Tribune can be found. Nice to have such a shop on site, and not just a symbolic store, as some other places have even during peak season.

For those who are neither in the mood to cook, nor to test the region’s gastronomic highlights, there is also a restaurant at Sablière. During our visit, the new hosts seemed still trying out different concepts. What we got served on our plates could be everything: very good and cheap, rather simple, or even a real gastronomic highlight!

## Cascades de Sautadet and other Excursions

The region has also an abundance of sights to delight keen tourists. As the two of us, as well as Moni & Bruno had meanwhile been at the Sablière for more than ten times, we rather enjoyed the naturist life, than to venture out, as we thought we had seen it all! Therefore, we didn’t disturb peace and quietness neither at Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, the Ardèche George and the famous caves at Orgnac nor at Nîmes, Avignon and the Pont du Gard.

However, last year, Moni convinced her aunt and uncle to join her and Bruno at “the Sablière”. Surely enough, their visitors were keen to experience more than just naturist life and studied the brochures with touristy highlights.

That way, they found the Cascades de Sautadet at La Roque-sur-Cèze. Moni & Bruno were so excited about them; they showed us this spot as well. It’s not the waterfall itself that is attractive in the first place; it’s rather the rocks the water is

tumbling over. Therefore, there is almost more to see if the Cèze is low. The ground perforated limestone formations that can easily be climbed for a few hundred metres, are like little artworks of Mother Nature. Sometimes, you see terraced pillars in the water, sometimes stone mills arranged in patterns. The layered white stone directs the gurgling wet in many detours through a mini-canyon, where it runs like a true play of water. Further down it re-unites in a tame course of the river and flows on calmly and almost reflecting. It’s worthwhile exploring both shores indeed. A narrow but strong bridge spans the river midway between the falls and the village La Roque-sur-Cèze, which is worthwhile discovering as well.



After two weeks, we had to wave good-bye to Moni & Bruno but spent another week. It didn’t got lonely, as the long weekend around Assumption Day approached. Especially the rental units at Sablière filled now quickly. We made friends with a French couple. We also met a couple from Switzerland again, we hadn’t seen for nine years.

We really enjoyed the very natural setting and atmosphere at the Sablière. Some things are top notch, others a bit rustic. Overall, it’s a good compromise between retaining the ground’s unspoilt character, but making it accessible and providing good facilities. To us, “La Domaine de la Sablière” is a very suitable place to introduce newcomers to naturism, as undressing just comes naturally in this stunning valley along the Cèze River. Sablière is perfect for those who like large naturist grounds and are keen to discover them by foot.

## La Grande Cosse: washed ashore the right beach

On Sunday, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2012 we left Sablière just in time before a sudden thunderstorm set in. It didn’t help; we soon had to fight through sheets of rain on our journey towards the Mediterranean Sea. We sighted the first “étangs” (inlets) already from the freeway, and upon leaving it behind Béziers, the landscape changed from rolling hills with grape yards to flat marshland that lost itself into the sea. Some 20km before we reached our next naturist place, “[La Grande Cosse](#)”, the area got lonely and somehow eerie – it reminded us of Africa. Brigitte was almost expecting to see an elephant or giraffe crossing the road ahead of us. Surprisingly, it didn’t take long until we really sighted some. It was after we had checked-in at La Grande Cosse. The alleys within the 25ha big naturist resort are marked with characters A-Z and usually named

after an animal for easier identification. Neat signs show a sketch of the respective specie and its name, e.g. E-elephant, J-jaguar, F-flamingo, or Z-Zebra. Ironically, our mobile home was situated in alley S, which stood for “sanglier”, which means wild bore... To get a picture of the kiwi-sign was almost as tricky, as getting a shot of a real bird in New Zealand. A TV-addicted camper had placed his satellite dish just in front of that sign. As he constantly guarded it, we didn't dare to move it quickly away.

We were given a very good and exceptionally well equipped 5-person mobile home that included mosquito nets, an extra large bed, as well as a generous fridge with separate freezer and a big terrace. Most of the almost 150 mobile homes for rent, are of this type, but there are also smaller and larger models available. Furthermore, there are about 300 pitches, of which some are taken by permanents.

La Grande Cosse is a well designed and maintained ground with nice flowers everywhere. Barbecue corners are abound and sanitary facilities are of high standard. Even if strong winds are not such a big problem as elsewhere on the Mediterranean, it might at times be appreciated that the two swimming pools are well wind protected with decorative walls, though for our taste, they closed a bit early. Furthermore, there is a bar and restaurant with almost daily animations. Best of all: a real supermarket with a wide choice and opening hours as in villages. Shops in the small touristy villages nearby, were neither better, nor cheaper. By the end of May, the selection in our “épicerie” was further extended, and we could find even more greenstuff, as well as fresh fish, additionally to a variety of meats.

Despite all this praise and the four star rating of Grande Cosse, we missed a sauna and we agree with a French couple that is really fond of this place as well, but asked “how did they get a fourth star, if they neither have a sauna nor a hamam?” Well, star-ratings are invented by the textile world and many star keen naturist resorts comply with criteria, whether it makes sense to naturists or not. Therefore, they installed not only shower cubicles, but also washbasin stalls, instead of keeping spacious shower- and washbasin rooms, with lots of elbowroom. We're not sure, whether they also got stars for their dog shower, but we'd rather give stars if they'd provide leads to those dog owners that can't afford one. At least they provide “loo bags” for those who walk their dogs.

Despite La Grande Cosse being a rather large centre, staff at reception works in the uniform of nudity if weather permits. This certainly adds to the natural atmosphere that prevails among guests as well.

## A unique beach

A pleasant ten minutes stroll through the nature reserve, leads from La Grande Cosse down to the beach. Everybody walks or cycles there in the buff. The path leads along knee high bushes, over two little bridges and an overgrown dune. Now there was water in the canals and also in the “étang de pissevaches” (lagoon of pissing cows). The appearance of the water surface was changing constantly, as algae was growing and shifting with the raising heat. We heard, by end of summer, the étang often dries out. Who climbs the abandoned bunker along the way, gets rewarded with spectacular views over the bushy marshland and the various water bodies. Inland you see the craggy rock layers of the stunning mountain range “La Clape”. All this area is protected under the large ["Parc Régional naturel de la Narbonnaise"](#).

After this rewarding leisurely walk, we stood atop the dune and looked down to the nicest naturist beach we had seen so far on the western shores of the Mediterranean. The pale golden sand was strewn with driftwood. Some of the trunks had been quite big trees. Where bathers were abound, the beach had been cleaned of wood, elsewhere only of rubbish. A stroll along the beach was always like visiting an exhibition of wooden sculptures and artwork, created by Mother Nature. Officially, the naturist beach stretched for 2 km only but nude bathers were the norm along 3-4 kilometres, depending on the day. The beach is framed by the rather ugly holiday village of “St-Pierre-sur-Mer” on one side, and “Les-Cabanes-de-Fleury” on the other. In between, there is nothing else than untouched nature, just water, sand, wood and humans, who enjoy their being nude in this pretty nature reserve.



There would be many sight-seeing possibilities but we left them to another time, as we loved it here so much and had such terrific weather.

We appreciated that almost nobody took the car to move around La Grande Cosse. Walking was the common thing to do and we too, often strolled around the camp. To our surprise, we thereby met a few known faces, like the French couple we had had as neighbours on the last ground. There was also an elderly German couple who recognized us, though at first, we didn't remember them. It showed once again that some older people have better brains than we, who still feel young at fifty. It's frustrating to realize that your head is only good for the hairdresser. Anyway, we got together quite a few times, be it for a healthy fruit smoothie or a meal.

To us, La Grande Cosse is a great discovery, a natural place, embedded in an untouched landscape right on the beach.

## Domaine de L'Origan: among stunning mountains

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, we left the Mediterranean and undertook the long drive eastward to the Provence, Alps Maritime Region. After leaving the rat race on the freeway, we got into increasingly beautiful scenery, as we approached the mountains. Late afternoon, we arrived at our next destination, [Domaine de l'Origan](#). It is situated 600m above sea level and surrounded by forest-covered mountains. This naturist ground sits above the Var Valley, a couple of kilometres from the village of Puget-Thénières.

The 35 ha big holiday resort is laid out on a quite steep estate. The campsites and rentals are distributed over different sections, some on the terraced hillside, others on top of a flattened hill. Altogether, there are about 200 sites, evenly divided into pitches, sites for permanents and rental accommodations, which include chalets, various mobile-homes and furnished tents.

Our reserved chalet was well situated and offered, likewise to Origan's mobile-homes, some rather unusual luxury, like reverse-mode air-conditioning and TV with international channels, and an inevitable microwave oven. Instead of the latter two, we'd have preferred to get four, instead of only two gas-rinks and beds that wouldn't have been surrounded by walls on three sides. On the other hand, we really appreciated the electric boiler; to us much better than the gas appliances that are common in accommodations on most campgrounds.

Upon inspecting our chalet a bit closer, we noticed to our surprise, that it wasn't all that clean and shiny. It was only things we would tolerate on other places, if we were not given a letter to sign that we have to leave the accommodation "meticulously clean", once we move out – and that was before we even had gotten the keys. Well, under these circumstances, you go back to reception to complain. Unfortunately, nothing happened, even after our second reminder. The management probably assumes that the five-percent voucher for reserving next year's stay, which guests receive upon check-in, is more motivating to come back, than good service.

Soon, we realized how must have been. All 70 and that half of the pitches that rim too. There was an obvious installing about 10 additional other work that was in progress June, work was still in progress finished. No wonder, it always found the time to fix minor showers, the slow heating sauna connection, free to guests, after suppose, once they catch up extensions, everything else will could see that if they do properly.

In general, Origan is quite well equipped. Apart from a sauna and pool, there is also a large hot tub and (in peak season) a toboggan, how a cork-screw waterslide for children is called in France. The sanitary blocks offers a bit more comfort than many, on other campgrounds; here you'll find hairdryers and toilets with paper in each cubicle, plus comfy toilet seats.



overloaded some of the staff accommodations were taken was accessible, was full to the delay in creating terraces and mobile homes, apart from to upgrade the ground. Mid everywhere, nothing was took ages, until somebody things like plugged or cold or the unreliable internet-it finally worked. We with their improvements and be in good state again. We something, they do it

Origan's Restaurant is well decorated and very cosy, plus there is a big new covered terrace, where dinner-dances are held regularly. Though the choice of dishes is not that big, they cook excellent and serve generous portions. In the basement,

there is a wellness-centre and next door, a small souvenir shop that opened during our stay. For food, you find all the basics and more in the small “épicerie”. The limited selection of fruit and vegetable still includes some exotics like Mango or Topinanboure (Jerusalem Artichoke), a delicious vegetable, even we, had never eaten before. The couple who runs the shop is very friendly and organize fresh trout, or communal BBQ evenings at regular basis. As other staff members, they can often be seen lingering at the pool, when off duty.

## Sight-seeing from Origan: clad and unclad

Though the sea is 60 kilometres away, nude cruises are arranged every now and then. They start from the glizzy Côte d’Azur, with its famous cities Nice and Cannes.

Inland, it’s certainly the gorges and mountains that offer scenic highlights. Origan arranges almost daily nude hikes, incorporating touristy highlights in the area. We know, they’re quite popular, but as they always left rather early in the morning, it was not really our time! The region offers countless pretty valleys, villages, gorges and mountain passes. It’s a sparsely populated district where the selection of shops and restaurants is very limited. On the other hand, everybody who comes here, gets rewarded with stunning nature, whether you intend to enjoy it with activities like canoeing, wild water rafting, climbing, bungee jumping or just quietly admire it from a view point or on a hike.

We, for our part, took drives through the purple-red gorges of Daluis and Cians, stopping and swarming out numerous times along the way. Further north, we passed the ski resort Valberg and in another outing, La Foux d’Allos. That trip led us to the neat little town of Barcelonnette, which is said to have some Mexican flair. On the way, we passed the stunning mountain passes Col de la Cayolle (2376m) and Col d’Allos (2247m). On the first of them, we saw the last patches of snow, but at the same time, smelled the spicy odour of a plentiful alpine flora, with more gentian than in the Swiss Alps.

As it got sticky hot in St-Martin-Vésubie, with its through the beautiful gorge rather narrow, but lorries, so we had to stop other vehicles. On the way Roubion that is, like many rock face, high above the



Discovery can also be had doesn’t require clothing. For hour’s nude hike. It starts rewards with spectacular you feel like going down to

From Origan, a stony path brings you in 15 minutes to the shores of the Var River. It’s of a grey-blue colour, typical for mountain rivers. During summer, there is not that much water flowing down, but judging from the width of the riverbed, with its large gravel islands and the huge boulders, the stream must be quite powerful at certain times. It’s nice to wander over rough and smooth, and then refresh under the nearby waterfall, or in the cool manmade swimming hole, situated in a quiet branch of the river. The naturist area on the water is quite large. It’s more suitable for a foot massage than to comfortably sunbathe on a towel, since there’s almost no sand; only stones and boulders. Some naturists might find it a bit disturbing that the river is visible from the railway line and from the main road. However, it’s too far away to recognize anybody through the trees and drivers will anyway not have time taking their eyes off the road.

Origan, we ventured out to cool mountain air. The road of the Vesubie River, was surprisingly packed with every now and then to pass back, we visited the village others in this area, glued to a valley.

within Origan, and surely, it the energetic, there is a two with a step ascent, and views over the Var Valley. If the river, this is possible too.

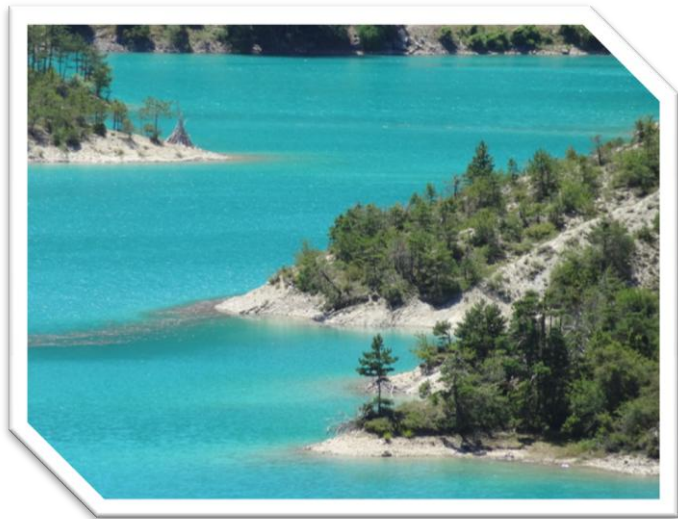
Three donkeys reside at Origan too, and as they often get spoiled by holidayers, they might come begging onto your terrace or into your tent. At times, they manage to escape and then an employee will tie them to a car or electric vehicle upon finding them, and thus tow them back to the camp.

Due to Origans compact heart, it’s easy to get in contact with other guests, who come not only from all over Europe, East and West, but also from as far away as Russia, the Ukraine, Indonesia and even China. The atmosphere is very natural indeed, but on weekends, Origan cannot deny its proximity to Nice. We don’t think, the rich and famous come here, and if so, we wouldn’t recognise them anyway. Nevertheless, many Niçois arrived in convertibles. Around the pool, you couldn’t tell them apart from other naturists, except for those who had beautified their bodies with silicon. Nevertheless, as soon as they walk away from the pool area, it’s another matter. Most Niçois, men and women, have developed a special skill, how to tie a sarong or a flimsy accessory artfully around the hip, in a fashion that it covers, and displays their private parts at the same time. And that way, they all move about....

It’s all relative: If you talk to people from Nice, they’re very friendly and all accentuate that they, above all, come to Origan, because they find the atmosphere here so much more natural than on any naturist beach along the Côte d’Azur!

## Castillon de Provence: between temples and a stunning green lake

As we were keen to discover naturist grounds, yet unknown to us, we stayed in the area. So, on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, we didn't even drive an hour, before we reached our next holiday camping: [Castillon de Provence](#). It's situated near Castellane, embedded in a stunning mountainous landscape. Though we were now on 1'000 metres above sea level, the surrounding peaks were not as high, as near the last place. We sighted Castillon de Provence's biggest asset, Lake Castillon, already on the way. It's a big artificial lake, with incredibly turquoise water. We stopped to picture it, as soon as we caught sight of it, and were looking forward to bathe in it. While crossing the dam, we were closer than a kilometre to the naturist beach, while we still had about 10km to loge, before we got to the entrance of our chosen destination. Castillon de Provence is accessed on a good, but narrow and steep road. With a car, there is no restriction to drive there any time, but those who tow a caravan or trailer, have to descend before 1 P.M., or to ascend after 2 P.M., to avoid getting jammed.



It was mid afternoon, when we moved into our wooden cabin at Castillon de Provence. It didn't have a bathroom, but was otherwise very well equipped. The modern kitchen had four gas rinks, and a boiler for hot water. The 15m<sup>2</sup> cabin had a smart layout, with a sofa and plenty of cupboards, partitioning off the double bed. As from most rentals and pitches, we were overlooking a large meadow, and had vast views to the mountains. Most sites are rather sunny, but have some shady trees nearby.

The 47ha camp ground, with bushland and meadows gay with flowers and butterflies, is landscaped in a way that it offers ample space for the ~100 pitches and the 30 rental possibilities, ranging from well equipped furnished tents, to a variety of mobile homes and chalets.

The spotless amenities include a small swimming pool, a sauna, two cottages; one for children and another for youths. The biggest playground is illuminated at night, and smartly situated next to the restaurant, so parents can supervise their gang, while sipping coffee. There is also an outdoor fitness centre, and several modern and squeaky clean ablution blocks. It's a pity, you have to bring your own toilet paper (and plush seat). On the other hand, there is no need to bring a table, as every single pitch is equipped with a large wooden table with benches.

Castillon de Provence is owned by a Dutch naturist family with two children, and they run the place together with the help of many working-holidayers. The owners know how, to run the place, and implemented some innovative ideas. The restaurant for instance, delights its guests every evening with a different concept. On some evenings, there is theme night, focussing on some foreign countries specialities or traditional French fare, on others, announced as "à la carte", they please mainly those who like French gourmet cuisine. Though, those who choose French fries as side-dish, get only a touch of haute cuisine. Real fine food is only served, if you choose vegetables as side dish. The "little" difference between the side-dishes is hereabout much bigger than it sounds!

As a counterbalance, something quick and simple is available once a week, or twice, if a sports event is screened, pleasing some guests, but disturbing others. The owners realize that fine food and football don't go together, as it attracts different people. Eating at the restaurant is always very sociable, as meals are served on communal tables, even if it's "à la carte" and diners arrive at the time of their liking, but you have to book it ahead. Everything is orderly organized at Castillon de Provence, and almost everything else must also be booked ahead, it doesn't matter whether it's for free or for a fee.

The small convenience store has limited opening hours and choice, however, it's big enough that it gives you several possibilities to assemble meals, including frozen fish and fresh greens.

Wireless internet connection is offered, but due to the place's remote location, it's at a very slow pace only.

## Disputed and undisputed sights on, and around the ground

Castillon de Provence is situated in a mountainous area, favoured by tourists for their many beautiful sights. One of the star attractions; Lake Castillon, can be reached with a pleasant 30 minutes nude hike. A wide, but stony pathway leads directly from the camp ground, situated on 1'000 metres above sea level, down to the naturist beach, on 880 m. The path is fine for walking with proper shoes, yet rough enough, to discourage the not so sporty from driving. Along the way, you get rewarded with stunning views of the turquoise water, and the surrounding mountain ranges; you will be smitten.

It was the end of June, and we were delighted to find out that the water temperature was already very pleasant to swim; warm, though still refreshing. Every now and then, the colour of the water surface changed, depending on wind and weather. It's wonderful to while the time away, and wearing anything else than your birthday suit would almost be like disturbing the peace of nature.



Walking back up, you'll see an assembly of temples and golden statues on a hillside. They belong to the Aumists "holy city of Mandarom", literally guarding with AUM (OM) just above the naturist colony. Aumism is a sect that incorporates symbols and temples of all big faiths, notably Buddhism. We learned a bit about it on a conducted tour, but the sober truth can better be gained from [Wikipedia](#) or other [sources](#). Aumists believe, the sect's founder will resurrect, and exactly of this, Castellane's local authorities seem to be afraid – why else would they have placed a concrete sarcophagus on his grave?

Totally undisputed and adored by everyone, is the Gorge du Verdon. This major tourist magnet can be found just a few kilometres from Castillon de Provence. With 25 km in length, and up to 700 metres depth, it's Europe's biggest canyon. It stretches from Castellane westwards to Lake St. Croix. Winding roads lead along both sides of the gorge, with countless breathtaking lookouts. The views along steep limestone cliffs, down to the green river, are just stunning. Now the Verdon River didn't have very much water, but seeing the massive canyon it carved out, it must be very powerful at times. We drove along this beautiful gorge more than once, as we incorporated it also on our way to some other, worthwhile sights.

One was the pretty village of Moustiers-Ste-Marie, just behind Lake Sainte Croix, which boasts the same turquoise colour as "our" lake.

Another time, we headed for Provence's famous lavender fields. We're neither delighted by Lavender soap, nor by its smell, but the sight of those vast fields, surely delight everyone. Lavender is grown in many areas, and we opted to visit the "Plateau de Valensole". As soon as the long rows of purple lavender came into sight, hordes of tourists stopped along the road to admire it, creating dangerous situations with the fast traffic. Luckily we found a minor road, where stopping was easier and tourists outnumbered locals. The lavender flowers had just opened and the humming sound of busy bees was omnipresent.

There would be much more to see around Castillon de Provence. Due to the exceptional warm weather, we were pleased we had visited other major attractions, like the purple red Daluis Gorge or the fascinating high mountain passes further inland, already from where we stayed before.



## Peak season arrives suddenly

We got the proof that the Provence really is an exceptionally sunny region. Also Castillon de Provence attracts a few people from Nice on weekends and they told us, how glad they were, to escape the hot pot along the coast. Thanks to the altitude of 1'000 metres above sea level, days and especially nights, are here substantially cooler. However, temperatures still rose above 30°C regularly, and being nude in Paradise was certainly the best thing to do.

We appreciated that it was a little cooler down on the lake. To enjoy it, we didn't mind the, at such temperatures, rather strenuous walk, which we did sometimes twice a day. Upon arrival, it was always refreshing to jump into the water and the fact that we indulged into an illegal activity, just added to the thrill. According to a local law, it's forbidden to swim in a natural water body, if no life-guard is present. As it's also forbidden to take photographs of nudists without their consent, the infraction of the law is hard to proof and keen swimmers are predominant on this beautiful nudist beach.

Apart from swimming, also canoeing, or shall we say “canuding?” were popular activities. A few canoes and surfboards lay on the beach. They could be booked and borrowed for free, but the paddles had to be carried up and down from the reception.

During our first week at Castillon de Provence, accommodations were almost fully booked, but only about half of the pitches were taken. The owner told us, this was more than habitually at this time of year. As the Provence was the only place in Southern France, where it didn’t rain, many campers spontaneously decided to come here. Most of the visitors were elderly quiet couples. On June 30<sup>th</sup> this changed suddenly. The occupancy remained about the same, but the retirees got replaced by young families with children. With a big bang, the place got much livelier and probably a bit too noisy for some of the remaining pensioners. Playgrounds were popular until late at night, and up to a dozen excited kids were jumping on the large trampoline. Not even their parents could build up understanding that, according to insurance regulations; only one child should use the trampoline at once.

As many naturist grounds that offer an abundance of activities during summer, also Castillon de Provence relies on a bunch of working-holidayers, combining the naturist lifestyle with a bit of a job. As well as the owners and most of the guests, also the “summer-workers” all come from the Netherlands and speak various languages. This gives somehow a challenge to French speaking clients of the little supermarket or the restaurant. There, they have to choose whether they prefer to speak English, German, Dutch, or maybe some Spanish or even Indonesian - just French is not on offer. The sign “on parle français” is almost ironic.

We think it’s not enough, if only the owners speak French, and if only the majority of announcements are translated into the national language. Guests might go to reception two or three times during their stay, but they might buy bread or something in the supermarket or restaurant daily. Also if certain activities, like nude hikes, are advertised in no other language but Dutch, not only French guests will feel left out, making them think, they’re in little Holland, instead of France.

Dutch owned holiday enterprises in France are in general proper and neat. Most owners would be keen to get an international mix of holidayers, which would considerably prolong their season. But most seem, unconsciously, to make the same little mistakes and remain so Dutch that even some of their countrymen don’t come back.

Castillon de Provence is by far not the “worst” example of Dutch naturist embassies in France; upon request we could give you the address of a place, where also non-Dutch guests get regularly updated with Newsletters in the universal language of the former colonial power, the Netherlands...

Well, we liked Castillon de Provence a lot; the high standard and the spectacular scenery are so convincing, if this place would have been in the Netherlands, we wouldn’t even have found one thing to moan about...

## **Source St. Pierre: only the chirping of Cicadas**

On July 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, we swiftly changed on the freeway to the region north of Montpellier. For the next week, we stayed at [Source St. Pierre](#), a small naturist ground along the Hérault River. Though it is situated midway between the villages of Gignac and Aniane, it is hidden in a forest. The 70 shady pitches and 8 mobile homes for rent, attract many regulars. The French owner- family consists of three generations who run the place with heart, very personal but without many formalities. The grandmother takes joy hosting guests and doesn’t bring out a bill, each time you ask for something.

Most visitors chose Source St. Pierre to relax, as it is a pretty quiet place. The holidayers were quite international, mainly couples in their thirties, or above, but very few children. This might change, as the swimming pool, of which construction was on hold until the end of season, should be ready by 2013.

Swimming in the river is only safe for good swimmers. Though the green water of the Hérault is very tranquil, it is very deep and there is no beach to get in slowly. The shore is lined by trees and there is only a small ladder to enter the water. Many choose to float on an airbed, to soak in the atmosphere of the jungle-like shores a bit longer. Enjoying the idyllic setting and relaxing under the shady trees, is the main asset of this





place. Because with only 3 ha, possibilities for exercising are very limited and you have seen the entire camping in just five minutes. On the other hand, the fee based, very fast internet access is available on every pitch.

Even though there is not really a shop, guests can order bread from a very good selection and it is of extraordinary quality. In the morning, the bread can be picked up in the de-facto shop that means in the restaurant, which functions as ice cream parlour at the same time.

The covered outdoor sitting area is furnished quite stylish, with colourful chairs. It's popular for lunch and dinner and in the evening, it reminded us of restaurants on Thai holiday islands; the food is very good and very cheap, but guests get constantly bothered with the noise from the oversized TV in the background.

## Bustling outside, calm inside

After having spent five weeks in lonely areas of the Provence, we were quite delighted that Source St. Pierre is situated in a more inhabited area, even though it was still quite sparse. The next supermarket is only two kilometres away, and we could again find nice restaurants easily. There is still no lack of worthwhile natural sites to be visited, though we didn't return to "gorge de la vis" and Lake Salagou, where we had been less than a year ago. Instead, our sightseeing excursions led us through the gorge of the Hérault, and through various pretty valleys, stopping at St-Martin-de-Londres, St-Jean-de-Buèges and St-Guilhem-le-Désert. Especially the latter is a historic village; very picturesque and very touristy. The same can be said of the three bridges, including one more "devils bridge", a little south of St-Guilhem. People were stopping their cars everywhere, canoeing the Hérault gorge, bathing and jumping from the rocks. Watching the crowd and the seething river-beach, we were ever so glad to return to our peaceful naturist ground afterwards.



At Source St. Pierre, the only noise was the chirping of cicadas that filled the air all day long; in fact, quite loud! As it got very hot, we enjoyed our neatly tailed patio having also a sunshade, despite the many trees around it. Though our mobile home was neither big nor new, it was well equipped and well maintained. At sunset, we loved to sit at its back and sip a fruit shake as aperitif. Through the trees we could also see the flow of the river some ten metres below.

At night, the mystical ambience continued, as the toilet- and shower-building is illuminated with atmospheric LED lamps; each compartment in a different colour. Nice that even the bare necessities of life were enriched with a special touch. Why not? Who hasn't had good ideas on the loo?

To us, Source St. Pierre was smaller than what we prefer, but as it was such a tranquil place and managed so personally, we found it to be perfect to re-charge batteries.

## Domaine Lambeyran: a Guinness Book of Records listed naturist ground

Well, after one week in a very small ground, we continued 45 minutes up the road to Lodève. Here we got compensated with the other extreme: [Domaine Lambeyran](#), Guinness book listed, as the world's largest naturist resort by size. Despite the estate's 348 ha, there are only about 150 camp sites and 10 rentals, ranging from caravans to simple chalets and mobile homes. The website is not very detailed about what you get, when renting accommodation. The number of rooms and whether you get en-suite facilities or not, has to be guessed. Therefore, we phoned and mailed a couple of times, before making our reservation. We couldn't make up our mind, whether to book a small mobile home or a big caravan. In the end, the owner talked us into taking the caravan, which we hoped would be like an Australian wheel estate, according to his description.

However, upon arrival at Lambeyran on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012 the owner explained with discomfort that the reserved caravan had somehow suffered severe damage during winter. Therefore, he generously upgraded us to a mobile home, which he now said, was much better... Well then; surely we didn't mind.

So, we moved into our mobile home "Bambi" where we had two small bedrooms adjoined to a kitchen-living room. We liked the generous 10 m<sup>2</sup> covered terrace, and the shady site. As it didn't have a bathroom, we used the nearby sanitary block. All of them are clean, neatly tailed and equipped with toilet seats but loo paper was a BYO affair.

Though Domaine Lambeyran is huge, its campsites are assembled over three main areas. Those are connected with good roads. The former farm meadows were flattened out, to provide everybody with an even grassy pitch. The many old trees were supplemented with tall poplars, to divide sites. Those who sleep in a tent, might appreciate that there is no street

illumination. Also noise isn't a problem, as there is plenty of space for everybody and Lambeyran attracts in general a rather quiet clientele. Even during peak season, the place is not crowded and animations are held once a week only. Surely, during high season there were also families with children, but by far not as many, as on other naturist sites. Is it because of this that the well maintained paddling pool wasn't filled before July 21<sup>st</sup>? However, there is an unusually large swimming pool where you can have refreshing dips, as well as vast views over Lodève and the surrounding ranges.

Even though the camp ground is well signposted from town, it lacks clear indication about it being a naturist ground. Obviously, non-naturists rarely know the mentioned abbreviation "FFN" (which stands for "Fédération France Naturisme") but the symbol for camp ground. Therefore, non-naturists turn up quite regularly, after taking the 4km long access road. The owner and his staff have addresses of textile camps ready and make sure, only naturists get in here. However, even during the hottest time, cloths never melted off the owner, nor his receptionist..

## Unusual fast- and fine food

The restaurant of Lambeyran is rather a "snack bar", offering simple fare at very competitive prices. If you don't mind to order 24h in advance, you may get something more sophisticated. The weekly and economically priced communal meals, are in general a BBQ and French fries affair. However, they're sometimes advertised in a way, that you get curious. We translated the following menu for you. Think about:

- **chenilles et sauterelles grillés de Madagascar**  
(grilled caterpillars and grasshoppers from Madagascar)
- **oreilles de crocodiles en friture (à volonté)**  
(deep fried crocodile ears (all you can eat))
- **encore cuisse de poulet grillée et frites**  
(otherwise just grilled chicken legs and French fries)

that would have been the choice of starters and here come the main courses:

- **pieu de mammouth farci de Borneo**  
(stuffed mammoth feet from Borneo)
- **ragout de tête de singes d'Alaska (selon arrivage)**  
(ragout made of Alaskan swans heads (if they arrive))
- **encore des merguez et saucisses grillées et frites**  
(otherwise just grilled sausages and French fries)

and the pudding sounds equally mouth-watering:

- **œufs de têtards en gelée et coulis de framboise**  
(jellied tadpole eggs in raspberry sauce)
- **encore boule de glace en choix et petits biscuits**  
(or then just a scoop of ice cream of your choice and a cookie)

Lambeyran's chef knows the pictorial language of Michelin-star rated restaurants and those, who are serious about gourmandizing, can find several good options within a 30km radius. Unfortunately, the nearest of those gourmet temples is so well reputed, it can charge € 80 for a meal. Therefore, we had to drive a bit further, but got by for half the price - and also that was most delicious!



To get fresh bread in the morning, we wouldn't have needed to go far at all, as a baker comes in with his van to Lambeyran's reception. Just his time-table didn't match our inner clock, as he popped in between 8:45 and 9:15 A.M. Heinz woke up far too early, probably afraid he would miss the baker, but then fell asleep again until 10:00h. Next day was Brigitte's turn, and though waking up in time, she only found empty baskets and ended up with a simple baguette. We decided: there must be another solution for us! There was a bread-list in Lambeyran's tiny supermarket but it wasn't our salvation: during peak season, they leave the business to the baker and during off-season, the bread can only be picked up at 11:00 A.M. Our answer was, to invest € 35 in a little baking oven, buy lots of different pre-baked breads, make the baker redundant and leave Lambeyran with an inflated power bill.

That way, we found out, why French are so fond of Brioche. We had bought such butter-enriched types of bread before, but always found them to be too plain, considering their reputation and price. Now we know: you have to bake them again, or toast them. Warm, right out of the oven, they taste super delicious; almost like a cake. Due to the Brioche's high

content of butter, the bread only gets the right texture when it's reheated. Its Breton counterpart, called "gâche", is even more mouth-watering. It contains some 15% pure butter, on top of it 5% "crème fraîche" and also a few eggs.

## Hiking-boots is all you need

The centre of Lambeyran is situated in a horse shoe shaped valley. The forested hills surrounding the camp ground, all belong to the large domaine and offer vast possibilities for nude hiking. Different, more or less well marked round loops, within the boundaries of Lambeyran's estate, amount to an impressive 30 kilometres of hiking possibilities. For hunters and gatherers, we would recommend the countless narrow and partly steep paths through the woods, where collecting scratches is almost certain. For the less adventurous, there is a tractor trail, we dubbed hiking-autobahn that leads very smoothly upwards for about 8km. Part of the pleasure of nude hiking here, is also that you don't have to carry anything along. After 6km the tractor trail comes close to a road for a short distance. Here, Lambeyran recommends wearing "a slip". Well, we're not sure whether approaching car drivers wonder more about nude hikers, or possibly even more about women walking by in briefs only.

When we got close to the road for the first time, we didn't have any cover up with us. Realizing that we really get into plain view of the street, we hid near the bushes until we couldn't hear any car, and then run as fast as we could. After 60 metres, there were again bushes to hide, and we happily continued our nude hike in comfort. Apart from other naturists, we often met the owner's twelve horses or passed a group of cairns on our tours of the ground. There are also donkeys, sheep and wild boar roaming around, but they always hid on the estates inaccessible parts. Hiding, were usually also roe deer, and little snakes and lizards, however, a few times we caught a glimpse of one. Butterflies on the other hand, were abundant, especially where it bloomed, be it on the side of the track, or on the meadows, gay with flowers. Furthermore, the chirping sound of uncountable cicadas was filling the air almost all day long.



Most walking paths offer vast views and even after marching for 5km you see down to the campground often, and think, you're only just above it. If you reach the hill crests, you're actually on 750 metres above sea level, meaning 300 metres above Lambeyran's main building. Up there, you get rewarded with great vistas, from the western hiking routes, all the way to Lake Salagou and on clear days even to the sea, some 50km away.

On most days of our stay, temperatures rose to about 25°C and when they rose higher, we postponed our walk until late afternoon. However, nude hiking is in any case most comfortable, because the cooling effect of sweating only works properly, if the breeze reaches your body, instead of wet sticking cloths.

Those who are still energetic after hiking around Lambeyran, and don't mind to put some clothes on, will find an abundance of major sights in the proximity. They include the impressive ["Viaduc de Millau"](#), the stunning ["Gorge du Tarn"](#), picture perfect Lake Salagou and the rock formations at the "Cirque de Mourèze". Lucky us had seen all of those attractions during some quiet and cool October days last year.



As we didn't venture out from Lambeyran very often, we remained nude most of the time. Though, we still needed washing to be done, if it was only for our smelly hiking socks. Due to the extensive grounds, it took almost a hike to reach the washing machines. However, very modern quality front loaders were provided, which took 1-2 hours for a wash and this for half the price than what other camp grounds charge for their 20 minutes stirring in a top loader. Even if the use of the washing machine had to be

booked ahead, we never had to wait, as Lambeyran's occupancy was rather low, considering it was the end of July. Most holidayers were from the Netherlands, some from France, but guests from other countries like Germany or Switzerland, were real oddities.

In front of the reception, internet access was provided by an Orange WiFi hotspot. It's free for Orange clients, but others could buy hours via credit card.

To us, Domaine Lambeyran is a wonderful place to get away from it all during peak season, just right for nude hiking, though sometimes a bit hot. The owner is extremely keen to keep the camp quiet and asks everybody to avoid excess noise. In off-season, it might be very lonely, though, probably an even more perfect retreat for absolute peace and quiet.

## Lous Suais: like Scandinavia and the Netherlands erred to France

On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2012, we left Lodève northwards, and soon the motorway got quite steep and led us onto a high plateau. The further up we came, the more the landscape reminded us of Scandinavia. Late afternoon, we arrived at [Lous Suais](#), a naturist camping in Cheissoux, some 30km east of Limoges. With 65 sites it's a rather smallish, yet, very personal place.

The only rentals were four small caravans and two tents. From the two options, we realized that the rental tents offered substantially more space, so we had reserved one of them. We had electricity, but there was no proper lamp provided; only a very weak solar device. So we were once more glad, we had brought along our own lighting. With three burners, suitable for small pots only, the campers kitchen was rather well equipped. Never the less, even cooking spaghetti gets complicated when you're not used to work with such small space, without tap water and sink. So it came in handy that Heinz had miraculously managed to stuff the baking oven, we had bought recently, into our well packed up trunk as well.

Normally, we don't like „convenience food“ at all, but here, we had to compromise a bit, in order to simplify cooking. That way, we discovered that French supermarkets offer a big choice on surprisingly good ready-to-eat meals or frozen items that only need to be baked up. The country's high standard of cuisine influences even the supermarket shelves.

Our tent was equipped with very comfortable, legless beds where we slept very well, except on the first few nights, when it got pretty chilly. If we stay in a tent for once again, sure enough, we get the only cold nights during the entire summer! The tent was a Dutch type made of thick cloth. It might look nicer than the furnished plastic tents, commonly rented in France, but in humid weather, the fabric gets mouldy quickly.

Though Lous Suais is a small place, it takes some ten minutes from the lake shore to the upper part of the camp ground; either on a steep stair or over a good gravel path. The ground is very nicely terraced and most sites have a good mix between shade and sun. Because of the big trees, you see the lake only from very few campsites.

## Lake views

It rained a bit during our first two days, but then the sun came out again, and we fully enjoyed Lous Suais nice setting on a forested hillside on the river Maulde. Nowadays, the river has a succession of dam walls and one of them forms a small lake, right below the camp ground. This lake is the main attraction of Lous Suais. Children and adults alike, were splashing and swimming in the warm water, or sunbathing on one of three rafts that are anchored near the shore. To everyone's delight, canoes, pedal boats and surfboards could be borrowed for a very modest fee. We loved to sail out on one of the two pedal boats, but were surprised how much strength it needed to power them. We often pedalled the lake's entire navigable length, including the two side arms, of which one led to a road bridge. The landscape here too, reminded us of Scandinavia. The copper coloured water just emphasized this impression. The only things that were clearly “not Nordic”, were the French climate, and the Dutch atmosphere that prevailed around us.

You will get the best views of the lake already while



checking in at Lous Suais, as the chalet with the reception overlooks the lake. For a warm welcome, arriving guests with reservation find their name on a black board. They are offered a welcome drink of their choice. As another present, every “family” gets a solar powered light. We found this very innovative; much better than the boring bottle of wine, distributed on many other vacation centres, ignoring teetotalers and unnecessarily tempting cured addicts.

About 95% of holidayers, often families with children, came either from the Netherlands or from Belgium’s Flemish districts. The owners of Lous Suais, have started up this naturist camping some 23 years ago. At that time, they were still teachers in the Netherlands, but meanwhile they have retired and live here most of the time. They, and all of their staff, are true naturists and run the place very personally. For many guests they created a sought after destination and “desired/ sought after” is exactly the meaning of the name “Lous Suais” in an old French language.

If it comes to languages, the owners and staff don’t need their skills so often, which doesn’t mean they wouldn’t master others than Dutch, including French. Though, from the communications on note boards, quite a few activities were announced in Dutch only, not even in French.

Next to the reception, guests can access internet or bore themselves with Dutch TV. The same building houses a small snack bar that serves simple dishes (very) early in the evening, on a large terrace overlooking the lake. Communal meals are organized regularly and you may ask the owners for tips on restaurants. There is no shop at Lous Suais but a baker pops in every morning and sells an extraordinarily good selection of “pain et viennoiserie”. She finished serving the queue by about 09:30h A.M., but we still managed to miss her twice.

Children will find various play- or sports grounds to entertain themselves, after they got wrinkly from splashing in the lake. The clean sanitary buildings have large shower rooms, which is certainly much more appreciated by naturists than the small cubicles often found elsewhere. The two ablution blocks are bright, inviting, well equipped and decorated with love. For example, there are posies between the wash basins, giving a special note. Toilet seats and paper, as well as cleaning liquids add to the comfort.

Surely, the picturesque lake on Maulde River is the major draw card of Lous Suais, but the sympathetic owners and the well appointed grounds are other good reasons, why many people are looking forward to returning.

## **Domaine de la Gagère: pretty and pretty Dutch**

Meanwhile, we had visited all naturist grounds we had pre-booked for this summer. Actually, now we intended to go to some of the large holiday centres along the Atlantic coast. In the meantime it was August 11<sup>th</sup> 2012, and finding suitable accommodation on short notice was pretty hard, as French and German vacationers had reserved their holiday dwellings well ahead. Even the largest naturist centres were fully booked.

Almost as soon as we had found a suitable shelter on the Atlantic, we got news that our car was called for a technical inspection to Switzerland. Well, that meant we had to alter plans. In that case, we rather chose an alternative, somewhere halfway between Limoges and Switzerland. Consulting the map of F.F.N. (Fédération France Naturisme) and checking on the internet, we found vacancies at [Domaine de la Gagère](#), situated in Luzy, 30km west of Autun. This is yet another Dutch owned naturist ground in France. As most of their guests come from the Netherlands, the season here is much shorter than in cosmopolitan holiday centres, e.g. those marketed by “France 4 naturism”.



Surely, also La Gagère’s owners would love to see a more multinational clientele, but it’s a number of little details that keeps them Dutch. They underestimate the effect which too much “Dutchness” has on other European nationals. Even many of their countrymen prefer holiday centres, where they feel being in France. Dutchness starts already with their website. Though multilingual and offering extensions like “.com”, it gets re-directed to “[la-gagere.nl](#)”. The welcome by the owners and their personnel is very friendly. They are working in the “uniform” and are able to speak several languages. However, unless you are French, they try to avoid using the national language by all means and for the shop keeper, French is just a foreign word. Many announcements are posted in Dutch only and a

conducted tour means here: only about 10% of the lengthy explanations in Dutch, are being translated into other languages.

Guests relying on the staff speaking their mother tongue, might hardly notice some of those things, but to French speakers it makes a big difference. Learning that the owners live here for 20 years, it's all the more surprising that they still try avoiding to speak French. Anyway; with the 15<sup>th</sup> of August being a public holiday in France, quite a lot of locals came to La Gagère to spend the long weekend, and then there was no way around speaking French.

## Stylish and well equipped

The 5 ha family orientated camp ground is situated high on a hill, surrounded by forest on three sides. It offers 120 sites, plus 20 rentals, ranging from furnished tents to chalets and mobile-homes. As most Dutch owned places, we must praise that also La Gagère is extremely tidy and neat. The ground is nicely landscaped with even pitches and good pathways in-between. From many locations you have fantastic views over the surrounding pastoral landscape. The very clean ablution blocks have large communal showers. There are two pools, of which the smaller one is heated to 27°C. Lots of communal space, lawns and sports fields invite for activities, including beach volleyball. Also the largest of the many play grounds, is filled with golden sand.



For those willing to spend additional bucks, there is a massage parlour and a sauna. Further, there's a restaurant, offering daily three-course menus. Communal meals, focusing on foreign cuisines were organized regularly. We joined the Greek night and were impressed with the quality of the dishes served, even more so, taking in consideration they had 65 diners.

Furthermore, La Gagère has a small shop that sometimes offers real bargains, especially if it comes to non-food. Bread could be ordered from a varied list, and we were pleased to be able to pick it up at the reception, if we missed the shop's 10 o'clock closing hour.

More than other places, La Gagère is decorated with love. Pretty flower beds and pots, as well as adorning objects, are dotted everywhere. Painters find ample opportunities for still life, including a well, old farm tools and vehicles, flower arches or decorated window sills.

We stayed in a pretty new mobile home with a semi-covered terrace, two bedrooms and own amenities. It was very modern and exceptionally well appointed. After our week in the rental-tent we enjoyed it all the more.

Possibilities for nude hiking were a bit more restricted than we liked, but those willing to put on clothes, find a hiking path that leads all the way to Santiago de Compostella, right from the doorstep of La Gagère. This section of the famous Pilgrims Way of St. James does certainly tempt believers to become sinners, as it's just too easy to peep over the fence!

The little town of Luzy is 7 km away. It offers good opportunities for shopping, invites for a stroll or a truly French gastronomic meal in one of the many restaurants. We give you here our personal tip: [Hotel du Morvan](#). The building itself wouldn't raise too high expectations, but what they serve is outstanding even by French standards. If you want to burn your calories afterwards, nearby "[parc naturel régional du morvan](#)" offers ample opportunities.

In our opinion, La Gagère is perfect for everybody who likes personal naturist grounds that are small but not too lonely, at least during season. It's just big enough that they can run a shop and restaurant, as well as some animations, but small enough to get in contact with other guests.

## Unplanned visit to Switzerland

On August 19<sup>th</sup> 2012, we returned to Switzerland; this time mainly to fulfil some duties. We were glad that we could again stay with Annemarie & Beat, as well as with Edith & Karl. Our first week was very efficient. We managed to bring our car through the technical inspection without calling in to a workshop. Furthermore, we visited some friends and family we couldn't see in February. During the second week, we helped Heinz' sister Edith to vacate the apartment of the mother.

Already on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, we continued our journey. However, at first without leaving the Swiss borders. We spent three pleasant days with our friends Andrea & Peter, who can be described as addicted globetrotters as well. To us it is always particularly joyful to exchange travel tales, giving us the feeling that we are not that much out of the ordinary, after all.

## Swiss highlights: zigzagging through the mountains

Once we left our friends in Switzerland's north eastern district of St. Gallen, we could have been back to France within two hours. On the other hand: why should we not take advantage of being here and enjoy the country's great scenery? So we stretched our departing trip to three days. We invested our travel bucks into the gastronomy, private rooms or economic hotels. We briefly passed through the Engadin and Valais valleys, where we had spent part of last winter. Now we could also cross some of the mountain passes that had been closed for winter back then, like San Bernardino and Nufenen. That way, we came to beautiful Bernese Oberland, where we enjoyed the scenery of its majestic ice covered mountains, reflecting in the green lakes. Continuing from Brienz westwards, we had a look around the touristy ski resorts of Grindelwald and later Les Diablerets, before we reached Lake Geneva in the evening.



## Back in France: two weeks on the way to Spain

On September 8<sup>th</sup> 2012, we passed the border to France and found a place to stay in [Evian](#), at the southern shore of Lake Geneva, just as the sunset coloured everything pastel. Though, or maybe because the thermal resort town was still packed with tourists, it was not that easy to find a decent place to eat. Too many eateries seemed to focus on cheap and cheap food, as the Euro rolls in any way. However, we were lucky to finally find a restaurant that delivered good quality and for that we didn't mind to pay a bit more.

The next morning, we continued westward on minor roads. Arriving at Les Vans in the evening, we thought we'd find lodging, as we had stayed overnight here before. Nevertheless, all hotels seemed to be either closed or full. So we continued for a few kilometres and with a stroke of luck, we found a beautifully decorated B&B with large rooms. It was even within walking distance to one of the gourmet temples we sometimes visited when staying at La Sablière. We were delighted – but only until we realised that said restaurant didn't open again in the evening. Probably they didn't have any reservations and we hadn't made one either... So that night it was us, having pizza.

As we had internet access, we just wanted to quickly check which type of accommodation were available at “La Grande Cosse”, the place where we intended to arrive within the next two days. With disbelief, we realized that there were none for the next three days. Not only here, but also in other popular naturist centres. We hoped it might be a technical error – mind; it was mid September by now and La Grande Cosse has some 150 mobile homes for rent. So we gave them a call, only to learn that there was a technical error indeed. The system should have shown “no vacancies” for five, not only for three days! Better we knew it now than arriving unaware at the reception.



## Unexpectedly to Domaine Lambeyran

As we were going to drive through the impressive “Gorge du Tarn” once more, we remembered [Domaine Lambeyran](#), situated in Lodève, only 60km south of the gorge’s western end. Despite them having only very few accommodations, we managed to get the same mobile home again, we had stayed in during peak summer. In that period, it had been a bargain, but meanwhile, on September 10<sup>th</sup>, you could get better value for less money elsewhere – at least if you had reserved ahead.

So we ended up spending four days at Domaine Lambeyran, hiking contentedly again on its vast network of nude hiking paths. It was still almost as warm as in summer, though the camping was now almost deserted. Although there were now only about ten parties occupying the huge ground, the owner was still keen to keep it quiet, and asked us to park outside, if we’d arrive after 10 o’clock at night.

Lambeyran’s restaurant and shop must have been stalled quite a while ago, as the wrapped furniture had already put on some dust. However, we could still order bread, and also our favourite restaurants in the vicinity, were still open. So we enjoyed once an excellent and cheap Vietnamese meal in Lodève and celebrated Heinz’ 53<sup>th</sup> birthday at a superb restaurant in Villeneuve.

Though the world’s largest naturist ground by size, was very lonely this time, our stay at Domaine Lambeyran was again very enjoyable.

## Revisiting La Grande Cosse on the Mediterranean

On September 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, we changed to [La Grande Cosse](#), our new favourite on the Mediterranean Sea. What a contrast! Here, it was bustling and full to the rim. Not only the ~150 mobile homes, but also all of the 350 campsites were taken. It’s quite striking, what international marketing and competitive pricing can do. The membership with „France 4 naturism“ seems to work out very well; for La Grande Cosse, as well as for its clients.



Now in autumn, the shop was stocked even better than end of May, and you often had to queue. Additional to the restaurant on the ground itself, also the beach restaurant was (still) open. La Grande Cosse still organized daily animations and entertainment evenings, enjoyed by its guests from all different nations.

Grey Nomads were now dominating the beach, which had still plenty of space for everyone, as it is very wide and long. We enjoyed that we could walk in the buff for about 2km in either direction. The beach was still very clean and part of the driftwood had been cleared. Sure, this gave more space for bathers, but on the other hand, we thought it was also quite charming with a superabundance of logs laying

around during spring. At that time, the adjoining “étang de pissevaches” had had more water. Meanwhile it was all but dry, and there was only some water left in the channels. Luckily, the dry inlet meant less mosquitoes. We heard they had been fought with an airplane only a few weeks ago.

The character of the nature reserve, which has to be crossed on the way to the beach, has changed too with the season, making La Grande Cosse a place worth visiting at different times of the year. We certainly enjoyed our second visit to this popular and very natural place again to the full.



## Episodes to laugh and reflect



It doesn't matter whether you spend a long, or a short time on naturist grounds, encounters with fellow naturists are part of the experience. Every age and every stratum is represented; simple campers with a tent, caravan-owners spoiled with luxury, as well as those staying in rented accommodations. Though we shouldn't judge others in general, it's sometimes just interesting to observe what people do differently.

- Once on a long weekend, a couple moved into the mobile home next to ours, towing a small trailer behind their cabriolet. It contained everything they deemed necessary for a comfortable three-days-stay, including a home trainer, on which they pedalled for 5-10 minutes daily. However, their fitness was not very solid as yet, because whenever they went somewhere more than 20 metres away, they hopped into the car...
- A German couple told us, how jealous they are that we stay in a quiet two person apartment, where we only had other couples as neighbours. To celebrate their golden wedding anniversary in style, they wanted to spoil themselves with a luxury holiday apartment. This joyful couple finally booked themselves into the most expensive accommodation, they could find in their favourite naturist resort! What they got, was a luxury four bedroom terrace house with all the trimmings. They were delighted – but only until they realised an abundance of noise around them. Not surprisingly, the surrounding terrace houses were all occupied by families with lots of children...
- At one of the places where we stayed for three weeks, our neighbours changed often. All were so quiet and reserved, to us it seemed that we bothered them already, by saying “Hello” in the morning! Only on our last day, a very nice and sociable couple installed themselves on the pitch next to our mobile-home. Sure enough they invited us for a drink, just when we actually should rather have been packing...
- At one of the naturist-resorts we stayed a few years back, the bar was usually a very lonely affair during the day. Holidayers just went in there to grab a drink or ice-cream, and consumed it usually outside on the sunny terrace. However, this changed suddenly. When Heinz went in to buy ice cream, he almost fell in comma, due to the smell of excessive drinking and smoking. The Bar was packed with noisy men, all staring at the large TV screen showing a major soccer event. The atmosphere outside on the patio was much more pleasant: some 50 naked bored woman of any age were having an ice cream or sipping a drink. Any man more interested in ladies than in sports seemed to have ample opportunities ...
- A local couple installed themselves in the mobile-home next door. As it was quite warm during the day, naturally, everybody was roaming around naked. Only our neighbours' remained fully clad, as they hosted some textile friends daily. However, after sunset, it got quite chilly and everybody wore some clothing by then. Only our neighbours stripped now off and practised naturism, as their friends had left only then...
- While sunbathing on a cloth-optional beach, we observed a family arriving next to us in conflict, whether they shall install themselves here, or on the nearby textile beach. However, the head of the family decided: “we stay here”; and soon all were sunbathing in their swimming gear.

Nevertheless, after a while, one of the children was questioning: “why are we the only ones wearing bathers?”

The father answered: “I don't have a problem with nudes, indeed. I just think it's not what our family should do!”

“But if everybody else is naked, I want to be naked too” the daughter argued and started to put her panties down.

“You must support me” the father then said to his wife “our children are going to strip off!”

“Well”, the mother answered, “if you can decide it's appropriate for our family to sunbathe on the nudist beach, we can also decide it's appropriate to strip off” and before he even had a chance to reply something, her bikini was already gone....

- What a physically handicapped can do and what not, is often a matter of attitude. Once, we had a neighbour with a recreational vehicle, who didn't obviously look disabled and we could see him walking several times. However, whenever he moved more than 10 meters, he used a special electric tricycle, designed for disabled people. Still on the same naturist-ground, we met a woman who was the absolute contrary of him. Despite being bound to a wheelchair, she still camped in a tent, excitingly participated not only in activities like dancing, but also motorcycling with a trike. She also managed to parachute, kite-surf and many other crazy activities more...
- Once, while doing the dishes, we talked to a Frenchman about our stay in Croatia. With our limited French, we meant to understand that he doesn't like it there, because there are only "allemands et autres chiens" (Germans and other dogs). We were a bit puzzled and told him, that there are many of those mentioned around us. He just replied that he doesn't think they understand him, as they don't speak French, and if they would, this wouldn't be a problem anyway...

Only a few weeks later, we meant again to hear, that some French talked about "allemands et autres chiens". We thought this must be bad language among French commoners... until their conversation continued about Vienna, Salzburg, the Danube and so on. Only now we realized, that the polite French must have talked about "allemands et **autrichiens**" (Germans and Austrians) ...

- Two large English Families with altogether a dozen children between 8 and 18 years old, were settling in a bay at our lake in Switzerland, certainly not aware that they had chosen the local nudist beach for their picnic lunch. As the day went on, more and more bathers arrived and naturally: all stripped off. Now the English children started giggling and talking about going naked as well...

"It's up to you" one of their mothers said, "but if you strip off, make sure, you do it properly, I won't accept anything half-hearted!"

The children just continued giggling and swam out to a sandbar in shallow water, about 70 meters from the shore. Out there, they now stripped off, shouted and swung their bathers. One of the fathers paddled to them with a canoe and collected all their bathing costumes. Swimming back, all of them were begging to get their swimsuits back, so they could leave the water. The mother (wearing a bather) just smiled and said friendly, but determined: "I told you already; if you strip off, you have to do it properly. There is no way around it! All of you: don't make a fuss, just leave the water naked!" Surely, everybody's eyes were focussed just on those children who screamed as if they would be grilled on a spit, while leaving the water inhibited. At least they have just learned a lesson.

- Once we had rather astonishing French neighbours. They managed to sleep in until 10 o'clock almost daily, even though they had a 3 years old girl and a baby. In general, French parents seemed to deal with their kids in a more pleasant tone than we are used to hear from German speaking fellows. Could it be, that their mentality is more relaxed and permits the children to collect their experiences by themselves, rather than bewaring them of everything bad by continuous controls and directions ?
- There were skilled tent-constructors, able to build a very smart rain roof with the simplest material. Another one extended his already cleverly built camping kitchen with the help of the drilling machine - all at hand ! Just next to him, an awkward tent-engineer, who tried to adjust some pegs daily, even though he'd put up his new tent with the help of the instruction-leaflet, as well as 3 expert neighbours.
- Some naturists brought only small and simple tents and were able to put it up or down in just 1 hour. For most others, however, the process of erecting and disassembling cost them one and a half days each, on the beginning and at the end of their holidays, regardless of whether they had a family-tent, a caravan or folding trailer.
- Single men are not always welcome on naturist grounds. However, most we met, were very friendly and didn't behave any different from others. Once we met a single man and first-time naturist who had such a pleasant personality, he got along exceptionally well with everybody; guests and staff alike. Therefore, a BBQ-evening was organized with 20 people attending, just to give him a decent farewell!
- Very amazing was also the old man, who asked us, whilst he was shaving, how old we'd guess he is. Well, we thought around 80. This prove wrong, as he proudly told us, in 4 years time he shall turn 100.

# Why a world of naturists would be a better world



Again, we had the privilege to spend 8 months on naturist-grounds, wearing nothing more than our birthday-suits for most of the time, as it was sunny and warm wherever we went. All resorts we stayed at have naturally some pros and cons, but most important: the atmosphere and environment are very natural in all of them. When talking to newcomers of naturism, it's always striking to them how much more natural they experience the atmosphere in naturist resorts, than in the textile resorts they had been holidaying before.

As we can practice naturism regularly, some of the benefits of it got so self-understood to us, we sometimes forget to fully appreciate them. At other times, we must remind ourselves that nudity is not as natural to everybody, as it is to us. Of course, it would be best, if nudity would become an integrated and accepted part of our society's values. Unfortunately, there's still a long way to go.

Many people think just the sight of a naked person would sexually arouse them. In reality, it's rather the contrary. Excitement is created by what you think you might see; if that little sexy shaped piece of textile would be gone... However, if you see it all, there is no room for imagination! The so-called perfect bodies are unmasked as pure illusion, created by advertisements! You just see the bare (plain) human being. As nothing is hidden outside, naturally, your interest is diverted to the person's inside. As you neither need to waste energy in worrying about your own beauty, nor in imagining how beautiful others might be, you retain the power to open your inner self. To us, this is one of the main benefits of naturism: nudity becomes so natural that a human being's bare body gets totally irrelevant; it's just the inside that gets all the attention...

Sure enough, there is a process of getting there. The sight of nude people might be more extraordinary to newcomers at first, if it's only because of seeing something that was taboo before. However, most don't get as overwhelmed, as Teresa, a former, then 35 years old, Caribbean flatmate of ours. After joining us for the first time to a nudist-beach, she spontaneously exclaimed: "Now I've seen everything, now I can die..."



## Onward to Spain: three days through the interior

We pursued our trip and continued to Spain on September 21<sup>st</sup> 2012. From the motorway, we could hardly see the Pyrenees, as they were wrapped in dark clouds. At first, we were a bit disappointed, as we had intended to cross this mountain range. The closer we got, the more it looked as if there would be a small “blue hole” southwest of Perpignan and so we decided to take the risk. We got rewarded, as we soon drove in plain sunshine through the “Vallée de Tech” and over the Ares Pass. We were ever so lucky, as the good weather persisted only just around us, a perfect welcome to Spain, where the sun shines every day (according to tourist offices).

We stopped for lunch at Camprodon, but had trouble finding something quick. The French influence reaches the cooking pots also on the Spanish side of the Catalan region. Restaurant menus were just the way we like them for dinner, but a sumptuous five-course meal would certainly have required more time than we were willing to invest for a pit stop. As often in Spain, the main square “plaza mayor” offered shady trees and was lined with many little cafés and restaurants, and there, we found something really good.

Soon we reached a brand new motorway on which we continued to “Lleida/Lérida”. After we found that the hotel we had stayed before, was now out of business, we started asking around. Spain doesn’t have many hotels on outskirts of its cities; usually all concentrate on the centres. But finding a place in the narrow chaos of an unfamiliar town centre is not really pleasant, if you’re travelling by car.



Spain has many lonely areas with almost no houses, as civilisation prefers to concentrate to one, densely populated point. So you’re often driving through lonely areas, until you see the sign with the place name, and just behind that sign dense rows of apartment- and business complexes are abound. Therefore, we decided to continue through the villages along our way, while looking for accommodation at the same time, though it got really late by the time we found a small hotel. Touristy Mequinenza offered us all the pro’s and con’s of Spanish life. Eating out at 11 P.M. wasn’t a problem at all and it wasn’t expensive either, though typically Spanish, which means: good, but rather simple fare.

The next morning, we left the pretty village along its artificial lake that was formed by retaining Rio Ebro with a dam. As always, our drive through inland Spain was very varied and immensely rewarding. Around Teruel, we loved the rock’s colours and formations that were carved by the Turia River. The soil along our way, had the same variety of colours that ranged from red to white, brown and ochre. Apart from forested hills, the landscape looked mainly dry and arid, though that was probably because the fields had already been harvested and irrigation had stopped.

In the evening, we arrived at pretty Alcalá del Júcar, a picture perfect village glued to the walls of a gorge. It’s a touristy place, popular with locals, and Saturday night was certainly not the best night to look for accommodation. Despite the many hotels and “hostales”, it took a while, until we found a place to stay.

Now, we could join the crowd sprawling through the street near the river, where everybody goes to see and to be seen. Down there, it was a fair bit cooler – or shall we say: less hot? - than up in the narrow alleys of the steep village. Neither the steep and narrow lanes between houses, nor the stairs could hinder locals to drive around with their jeeps, quad- and motor bikes.

Our last day on the road was as fascinating, as the other two. However, it led through a vast area affected by bush fires. The sight of black dead trees on chalk white hills was quite moving. Luckily, the first signs of new green emerging from the ashes were already visible.

## Revisiting Natsun in Vera Playa

It was September 23<sup>rd</sup>, when we reached Vera Playa again. We had come here to spend the rest of the year at [Natsun](#), the naturist resort right on the sea where we had spent some time before. The Dutch owners Hedi and Jan gave us a warm welcome and moving into the same apartment we had rented before, we instantly felt at home. During the next few days we met many of the people we know from our previous stages and it was nice seeing them again.

After staying at so many Dutch owned naturist places in France, we are even more impressed, how successful Natsun is operated by Hedi and Jan. Unlike most of their countrymen, they manage to have high occupancy rates that stretch well beyond the peak of the season. Natsun's clients come from all over Europe, except for peak season, when almost all guests are Spanish. This is in striking contrast to most Dutch owned holiday resorts we had been visiting in France, where you mostly get the feeling to be in a colony of the Netherlands.

Once more, we enjoyed the vast views we had from our large terrace and the naturist beach in front of it. To us who don't have a permanent home, it was just nice to live once again in a larger dwelling, which we could make a bit of our own. As we already know the surrounding well, we now just wanted to lay back, have a break of travelling and enjoy once more, being "resting rovers".

## Joy and sorrow are not far apart

We truly enjoyed our third stage in a top-floor apartment at [Natsun](#) in [Spain's](#) beach resort Vera Playa. When we arrived on Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, it was sunny and warm and it stayed like that for quite a while. During our four months stage, we enjoyed up to seven continuous weeks without a drop of rain. However, when it rained the heavens unloaded the entire statistic at once. After the soil had become dry as a bone during the summer heat, it couldn't absorb the masses of water that poured down after torrential rains inland [Andalusia](#) and Murcia, on Sept. 28, 2012. Many areas along the coast

between Valencia and Malaga got flooded within minutes. We were very lucky, as Vera Playa's naturist urbanisations had been spared. Only one kilometre away, disaster struck causing fatalities and much material damage. Bridges, cars and small buildings were swept away like toys. Cellars, underground car parks and thousands of apartments were being flooded up to the ceiling. In Vera alone, several lives, some 4000 apartments and 900 cars were lost. For the next few weeks it was quite messy, though the authorities cleaned and reconstructed roads and bridges in lightening speed. Only three weeks later, the 40km detour to reach the neighbouring village Garrucha, was not necessary anymore. If the same disaster would have happened in Switzerland, the authorities would only have set up temporary solutions, buying time to argue about how to properly fix things – and this would take years if not decades!



All of October was again very sunny and warm but most of November was the opposite. This suited Edith & Karl who visited us for two weeks as of October 15<sup>th</sup>. It was their second visit to Natsun and again, they truly enjoyed the beach. We also showed them some of the area's touristy delights like Lubrin and the Tabernas "desert", or the coastal areas around the towns of Mojacar, Agua Amarga and Puerto de Mazarron.



Once our visitors had left, more and more of the regular winter-escapees from northern Europe arrived at Vera Playa. Quite often we met up with long-known friends, exchanged news over coffee, or over a meal, be it at home in our holiday flats or in a restaurant. Many took advantage of Heinz knowledge in solving small computer problems though they were less happy when he only could solve it, but not explain what he did....

During December and January, it was again very sunny and quite warm for the time of year. So we were often frolicking in the buff outside when we actually should have worked on the planning of our coming travels.

## Spain: four days across the country

On January 25<sup>th</sup> 2013, everything was fixed for this year's itinerary and we left our paradise in the sun. On the freeway, we made our way to Huerca-Overa, where we took the mainroad to Albox. The more we came inland, the more the weather turned grey and even foggy. It confirmed our Lonely Planet travel-guide's remark: "the sunny and dry winter climate only applies to a small coastal stretch of southern [Spain](#), but the interior gets a lot of rain, unless it turns into snow". Knowing that big parts of the interior are on rather high altitudes (about 800 – 1500 metres above sea level) we were a bit concerned about getting stuck in snow.

At first it was still sunny, but soon we came into mist, creating a spectacular natural phenomenon we had never seen before; not a rainbow but a fog bow spanned the artificial lake Embalse de Negratin. It looked very mystical. Along minor road A-315 we passed endless olive-plantations and later some fascinating rock formations near Pozo Alcón. For the night we headed to the historic town of **Úbeda**. As many times before in Spain, we got almost jammed with our car in one of the countless narrow lanes while looking for a hotel. Stressed out, we asked at the only hotel we found: a posh four-star palace. Luckily it was booked out due to a congress and they could direct us to a cheaper place. To our delight that €50 room was very posh and large too. As the weather was not that motivating, we only trudged around the major sights though Úbeda would deserve more time.

On the next morning, we continued along road A-301 and after passing a tunnel, we had left the fog behind and alighted in the sun. Though vegetation was currently having its winter break, the array of the vast fields and acres with soil in different colours, was still an impressive sight. As always, we mostly chose minor roads but progressed still swiftly, as they are usually quite lonely and in very good state.



Approaching **Alcázar de San Juan**, more and more old windmills came into sight. We visited the San Antonio windmills, a group of four on a hill just next to the town. Those mills were nicely restored and made accessible for tourists. The site offered also vast views of the surroundings which we enjoyed at 20°C and in the best of light.

Night fell when we approached the village of Huete, and that's where we stayed overnight, relieved to find a hotel on the outskirts. Later, when we strolled through the village, we discovered it has quite a number of restaurants and nice buildings. On the next morning, we left in fog again. That's why we did unfortunately not see the full beauty of the lake dotted landscape with its colourful rock layers.

By lunchtime we visited the historic town of **Sigüenza**, a real tourist delight. A market was held and we strolled through the narrow alleys to the castle that enthrones the old town. After warming up whilst having a hearty meal in one of those typically Spanish "comedores" (dining rooms) hidden behind a noisy bar, we continued north.

## Mountains & Snow: unexpected Spain

Before reaching Soria, the road led higher than 1000 metres above sea level and patches of snow still testified last week's cold spell. The two metres tall snow poles lining the road augured ill how much more could come. At 3°C we were spared with snow for today, though, we got more than enough rain.

As it got dark at 6 P.M. already, we turned off Route N-111 and drove up to the village of **Viguera**, situated above the Iregua Valley. Even though the place was tiny, the village roads gave us again this key-hole feeling. Worried that our car jams between the houses, we turned back and parked outside. However, after asking in the only open pub for a room, it was a piece of cake. The Señora behind the counter brought us to a nearby house. Then she phoned around ordering some locals to move their cars out of the narrow maze. Then she helped us to park on a patch of road in front of somebody's door. Now WE were blocking traffic in the narrow alley! Needless to say, there was no other place to eat than the lady's pub. Unfortunately, the dining room was already booked by the women of Viguera, so we were left with some Tapas in the bar, together with their soccer obsessed husbands. Altogether, a very authentic Spanish experience.

On the next morning, the sun was out and we could admire the surrounding rock formations that frame the Iregua Valley. The red rocks have astonishing round shapes and guard the valley for a few kilometres, after they form a veritable entry gate by two very steep cliff faces.

While continuing on NA-120 west of Pamplona, the road climbed again to over 1000 metres above sea level and there was enough snow to allow parents to sled with their children.

A diversion led to the village of **Saldia**. To our big surprise, the houses up on that hill reminded us very much to those of Switzerland's Engadin Valley. Shortly before reaching the French border near the Pyrenees village of Ainhoa, we could admire vast views down to the Atlantic Ocean. Once more we experienced Spain as a country that is extremely diverse and peaceful, at least away from the coastal highways. We felt again very rewarded, taking time instead of just racing by on the motorway, and we can recommend everyone to do likewise.



## France: visiting a well known acquaintance

On January 28<sup>th</sup> 2013, we arrived in [France](#). This time, we were going to spend a month with “La Grande Nation” on our way to the UK.

Our first stop was at the pretty village of Sarre, just after crossing the border from Spain. For the night we headed to [St. Jean-de-Luz](#), where we had reserved a hotel right by the city centre. Surely, our hopes were high to indulge into French cuisine, though we forgot that the French Basque country shares its culture with Spain. So we ended up with some Spanish style food surrounded by Spaniards and other tourists. On such a touristy place, the number of restaurants is overwhelming, but on a Monday night in January you have to take what you get. Next morning we went for another stroll around this pleasant fishing port, its old alleys, the covered market and the stately mansions on the beach, of which many have wooden bridges straight out to the tall dam that seeks to keep the crushing Atlantic waves in check. Despite the chilly temperatures of around 10°C, there were plenty of surfers in the water.

Some 25km north, we also visited the pretty town of [Bayonne](#) with its many half-timbered houses in Basque architecture. Though we continued also here on minor roads, we found the landscape along our way not that spectacular anymore. We came mainly through pastoral landscape, with meadows and fields but also avenues of plane trees here and there.

Our next overnight stop was in [Agen](#), which is - in France - world famous for its plums. More remarkable to us was the delicious dinner we got served in an awarded restaurant. Once again it prove worth the effort to carry our heavy [Gault-Millau](#) gourmet guide along.

Less worthwhile was our detour on the next day to visit two villages, both awarded with the title of “[un des plus beaux villages de France](#)” (one of the prettiest villages in France). Maybe it's a matter of taste, but we liked some of the unclassified villages along our way, like e.g. Montignac, much more.

Undisputed, on the other hand, is the beauty of the Dordogne-districts capital: [Périgueux](#). That's where we spent the next two nights; barely enough time to explore all the worthwhile sights of this city, but certainly not enough to explore just a fraction of its many good restaurants.

## Loire Valley: a pretty holiday house above a powerful creek

Driving through pouring rain all day long, we reached our first holiday house (gîte) in France on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2013. It was situated in the Touraine Province and not uncommon for a former mill, [the cottage](#) sits right above a small stream. The Veude, as the creek is named, was currently quite powerful and also quite full! Caused by relentless rains, many waterways were currently overflowing and many acres were flooded.

Upon arrival, the fireplace in our holiday house was already lit. In this cosy atmosphere we were excited to watch the torrent waters flowing underneath our living room. The living-dining room has we had unhindered from sight into trees and leaves, we could watch only the stream flowing special; also the fire living- and the bedroom opened from both sides.

Our mill was situated that was founded by the city. Like the catholic walls surrounding the measuring only about 10



underneath our living room. The large windows on three sides, so views. The creek disappears as there were currently no the stream much further. Not below our cottage was very place. It was placed between the and glass-framed doors could be

near the village of [Richelieu](#) namesake Cardinal as an ideal church itself, also the estate lived, was very modest. The castle courtyard are still there, kilometres in circumference!

Another interesting experience was the market at the nearby town of Lençloître. Almost everything was on offer; from live animals to flea-market items, textiles and sophisticated food. From there, we proceeded to visit **Loudun**, a nice medieval town full of historic buildings. Of similar age were the towns of [Chinon](#) and **Loches** of which both boast a stately castle towering above their old towns.

## Rennes: Brittany's pretty capital

Our nine days in the converted mill passed quickly and our departure day, February 13<sup>th</sup>, arrived soon. It rained, when we continued to [Rennes](#) but luckily, on the next day the sun was out again and we could enjoy Brittany's student dominated capital to the full. It's an extremely clean and pretty town with very efficient public transport.

The old town of Rennes has many several century old half-timbered houses. Some of them were presently under renovation, having their fragile beams precariously exposed. Furthermore, there are some fancy new buildings like the railway station, Brittany's National Theatre and the Museum de Bretagne. The majority of the buildings however, are about three hundred years old town houses that had been built after a devastating fire in 1720. The most outstanding edifices are the town hall and the opera that face each other, plus the Parliament of Brittany just around the corner. We walked around the city for what felt like 30 kilometres, only interrupting when we got hungry. For lunch it was Crêpes of course, the Breton's national dish, but in the evening, we let ourselves spoil in a superb restaurant. Already Sunday night we had eaten quite well, though a bit more modest. It was at "the pig", Léon le cochon.

Though the city of Rennes is vast, the centre is quite compact and after our 30 km circuit, we thought we had seen it all. So we opted to leave on the third day. We chose a detour to St. Brieuc and to Lannion, which we had visited last year. It was raining again and this may be the reason why we didn't like St. Brieuc that much. Never the less, we had an excellent lunch and by the time we arrived at Pointe de Roselier, near Plérin the rain eased and we enjoyed a wonderful view to the Bay of St. Brieuc.

In the evening, we had a hard time finding a hotel room in Lannion and by the time we finally checked-in somewhere, it was almost time to leave for the restaurant, where we had reserved a table, when we passed it some two hours earlier. It was Heinz' special wish to dine again at "[La ville blanche](#)", which we had discovered last March.



## Cap Sizun: holiday house in southern Finistère

On Febr. 13<sup>th</sup> 2013 we drove from Lannion via Huelgoat to **Cap Sizun** Peninsula. Near Mahalon, we had reserved a nicely renovated two storey holiday house for a week. It was part of a converted farm and offered all the luxury the former farmers ever dreamed of. We arrived on a rainy day and the weather forecast predicted no change. However, it was sunny already on the next morning and stayed like that also for the following 10 days. Typical tourists, we couldn't stay in but had to take advantage, dashing from one sight to another. The only disappointing one, was the highly praised tip of the peninsula: "[Pointe du Raz](#)", declared as one of [France's great sites](#). Well, at least in February they didn't charge for parking and the approx. 40 tourist shops were closed. But it all hinted at how over-touristy it will be during season. Being probably Brittany's most touristy sight does not really make it more beautiful. Well to us, Cap Sizun's other view points, like nearby "**Pointe du Van**", "**- de Brézellec**" and "**- de Penharn**", impressed us much more with their scenery. Those are all on the north coast which is dominated by cliffs. But also the seascapes of Cap Sizun's southern coast that boasts rock formations, intercepted by sandy beaches, is lovely. Here, we followed the coast down to the lighthouses at "**Pointe de Penmarc'h**" and visited thereafter the town of [Quimper](#), with its many half-timbered houses. It's an incredibly charming town, but also the harbour of Audierne and the inland town of Pont Croix were very pretty destinations we explored more than once.



Another day, we headed to [Douarnenez](#) but were more impressed with the sight of the town from a distance. Nearby, we found numerous viewpoints and some of them were just breathtaking. Among them were the beach at "**le ris**" to the east of town and to the west: "**Pointe de la Jument**" and "**Pointe de Millier**".

To us, Brittany does not seem underdeveloped at all, rather the contrary. However, the "gîte" we stayed, as well as our last holiday cottage in the Loire Valley, were both co-financed by an EU-fund that supports economically backward regions. This fund seems to have lifted Brittany into the twenty-first century in lightening speed and allows Globetrotters with more time than money to spoil themselves with luxury holiday houses.

## Pays de Léon: Brittany's westernmost peninsula

When Febr. 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 arrived, we were moving house and continued in plain sunshine to northern [Finistère](#). En route, we visited the stone village of [Locronan](#) and the riverside town of [Châteaulin](#), as well as [Pleyben](#) with its old church. In the evening, we reached our next "gîte", which was situated near Plouguerneau. It was part of a little hamlet where most of the old stone buildings had been lovingly renovated and turned into holiday houses. Though we had reserved the smallest cottage, it still offered all the trimmings. It was very well insulated, though not quite as well, as our last two dwellings. If it comes to insulation and building regulations, France meanwhile seems to be even stricter than Switzerland. In newly built, or newly converted holiday houses, heat recovery ventilations are in the meantime common. Location, size, as well as number of toilets and shower cubicles are all regulated.

Also recycling has become almost an obsession in France. On many things you buy, the wrapper will tell you how many grams and percent of the packaging can be recycled and how little has to be dumped. So, if you buy something fattening, you don't need to have a bad conscious anymore: the more you eat, the more you contribute to environment friendly disposal. Now you know exactly with how many grams of recyclable aluminium and carton your biscuits have been wrapped.

Exploring the surroundings is a good way of burning your calories – provided you get out of the car. The coastline west and north of Brest is again breathtaking; mostly rugged rocks, every now and then interrupted by a white sandy beach. As the west coast is quite treacherous, there are many lighthouses helping to limit the risk to boats.

During our first days, it was sunny but cold and windy at the same time. Never the less, we put our hats and gloves on and went out to enjoy the many hiking tracks along the shoreline. We found the lighthouses and the remains of a monastery at the “**Pointe de St-Mathieu**” very impressive. The same can be said of the uniquely shaped boulders outside **Le Conquet** and **Pointe de Corsen**, mainland France’s westernmost point. Further up the coast, we admired both shores of the Ildut’s “rivermouth”. It formed a so-called ria, respectively “aber”, how it’s called in Breton. The expression ria stands for a tidal river valley, not formed by glaciers. Depending on the tide, it either looks like a giant sound or like a brown swamp. Due to the tide, even a small creek can form a huge water basin that reaches several dozens of kilometres inland.



After leaving Aber Ildut, we explored the coastline along **Porspoder** and **Portsall** that was no less delightful. Crossing over **Aber Benoît** and **Aber Wrac’h**, we returned to our holiday cottage which was itself situated near some very spectacular coastal landscapes.

After a week, we continued to the tidy port city of [Roscoff](#). Here we spent two days in a “chambre d’hôte” (B&B), before we boarded a ferry to the U.K.. Our accommodation was situated halfway between the centres of Roscoff and **Saint-Pol-de-Léon** and both could be reached by an easy two kilometres’ stroll. While visiting the latter, we admired the tidy old town and got puzzled by how many defibrillators were at free disposal; probably to prevent the village of becoming a morgue. The town map that shows the 0,8 km<sup>2</sup> heart of the 7000 inhabitant community of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, indicates no less than 9 defibrillators! To us it seems that the government is so afraid of getting blamed if one citizen dies, that it first spends millions to keep everybody alive and thereafter even more to finance their survival in a care home. Wouldn’t it be more sensible to spend extra money for improving the quality of life, rather than for prolonging longevity at any price?

Brigitte & Heinz



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