

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

In Great Britain as Tourists,
thereafter in Benelux & France as NaTourists



Chapter 24

March 2013 - October 2013

Great Britain: a varied country with a varied culture

March 1st 2013, we boarded [Brittany Ferries'](#) large vessel Armorique bound for the [U.K.](#) Though the car ferry is operated by a French company, already the booking process was very British. Titles like Mme and Mr. are really only good enough for commoners and therefore, the internet-tool proposed also more honourable titles like Lord, Lady, Sir or Reverend. As we couldn't choose "naked King and Queen", we opted to those titles German speaking natives are meant to bear. Ironically, we discovered that only the English website proposes titles of nobility or honorific forms of address, whereas the German version offers just simple Herr+Frau (Mr.+Mrs.).

Around sunset, our ferry docked in **Plymouth**. Cautiously, we cautiously adapted to driving on the wrong side of the road – for us the first time we did so with a vehicle that is designed to drive on the right side of the road. We also had to get used to convert the indicated distances and speed limits from miles to the metric system.

For the night we had booked a B&B room in the seaside resort of [Looe](#) which we reached within an hour. The village is glued to the slopes on both sides of an inlet that is used as a harbour. In summer, it must be quite touristy but right now it was just perfect; not too busy but with a good choice of restaurants. We opted to eat Chinese and had another good look around the village before we started our tour around the United Kingdom on the next morning.

Cornwall: driving between hedges to astonishing coastal views

After a few miles, we reached [Polperro](#). Here we were greeted with the first of a million "pay and display" signs. To us, the four pounds parking fee were quite a shocker for such a small village. In the coming weeks we got used to it (reluctantly) and weren't even surprised if it cost more than that, be it in cities or out on remote view points... we just grinned and paid it. Coin management got a big matter as you always have to pay the exact amount. If one hour costs 4 pound and 3 hours six pound, you still get only one hour if you pay £ 5.95! Just a pity if you don't have the extra 5p coin. At least we must accredit that parking lots are clearly signposted and often provide clean toilets for free.

Polperro itself was a nice little harbour village, though probably a bit overrated. Even beginning of March, tourists seemed to outnumber locals. As [Cornwall](#) is reputed for its mild climate, it attracts visitors year round. The roads are mostly narrow and it can be a major challenge, passing other cars or equestrians on horseback. Thanks to the Brits courteous gentlemen like drive code, venturing on those small roads is still quite bearable.

The peninsula of Corn-wall must pies and its walled roads. Yes, road-stretches are walled with so-matter whether the width of the most of the roads are flanked by metres tall, right on the edge of the without leaves and newly trimmed, narrower during summer. The hidden behind such walls and after local resident entering the main road Cornish hedges. Well, once you've your parking fee and displayed the will be rewarded with awesome



have lent its name from Cornish hereabout not towns, but entire called Cornish hedges! It doesn't carriageway is two metres or six, walls of hedges that can be up to six road. Mind you: we have seen them which means the roads become still region's beauty is to big parts every bend you have to expect a through a tiny hole in the wall of managed to reach the seashore, paid ticket behind the windscreen, you views all along the coast.

In the evening we found a nice B&B in [Penzance](#), from where we stayed two nights and explored the surroundings. One excursion brought us to the nearby village called [Mousehole](#). It's nicely situated around a harbour but driving through strained our nerves. Here too, the roads are very narrow and because residents don't have off street parking but park on the road, passing is only possible if your fellow drivers are in their British gentlemen mood and let you pass. Squeezing through is a matter of "give and take" possibilities and felt rather like sneaking through a key-hole – in fact, Mousehole is just one of countless "keyhole-, respectively mousehole villages" in the country.

Once we finally managed to get to the edge of the nearby cliffs, we were stunned by dramatic seascapes. The view points at [Lizard Point](#) and a little west of it: **Kynance Cove**, were just amazing. Both had craggy cliffs with crumbling rocks forming sea stacks and other astonishing shapes. Though the wind blew strong and cold, we were glad it remained dry. We wrapped warmly and hiked a bit in every direction on every view point.

Land's End, Britain's westernmost point, was equally pretty with several rock arches. Unfortunately, a huge tourist complex is trying to divert the masses of tourists from the natural beauty. If people flock in just because it's the westernmost point, it's too easy to separate fools and money, so why shouldn't they do it? Only the parking fee is imposed, otherwise you choose freely, whether to go directly to the coast or straight into the tourist traps. The highly praised resort town of [St. Ives](#) was, in our opinion, again overrated. The fact that it's extremely touristy does not add any beauty to it. Penzance, where we stayed, charmed us much more.

Cornwall's north coast: at its best in sunshine

As we headed on and continued our tour of Cornwall, we were finally accompanied by plain sunshine. Therefore we stopped quite often. First, in the village of [Hayle](#), where we admired a beautiful inlet with many water birds. Only a few miles eastwards, we found beautiful dunes and billabongs in the nature reserve **St. Gothian Sands**. Not smooth, but rather dramatic, were the cliffs at "hell's mouth" near Camborne.

Soon thereafter, we marvelled at the high fragile looking rock arches at the beach off **Perranporth**. The higher the track led us above the beach, the more impressive arches came into sight. It was low tide and this made the vast golden sand beach very wide. By the time we were hungry, we reached the stone village of **Tintagel**. It's a bit touristy but it has some unique grey stone buildings that give the place a special character. As always, apart from natural sights, we are also interested in discovering local specialities. Here we indulged again in Cream Tea, a delightful creation Cornwall "exported" to the whole Kingdom – including Down Under. Freshly baked scones are split in half and generously topped with clotted cream and jam. Traditionally it's accompanied by tea but nowadays, coffee got also popular. Another local invention are Cornish Pasties; meat and/or vegetable, embedded in a shortcrust pastry. We were also impressed about the array of tasty local cheeses the U.K. has on offer, it's not all just about Cheddar!

Well fed, we continued our trip eastward and stopped again at **Crackington Haven**. It has a fascinating tidal seascape that can be walked at low tide. It consists of black visibly folded sedimentary rock formations of grey shales and Carboniferous sandstones. Partly it looks like cooled lava and in other sections it appears like a 10m tall black dough that had first stood upright but melted sideways upon heating. Many rock pools had formed between the layers, teeming with sea grass, live mussels and sea snails.



Overnight we found a B&B that was more like a Backpacker's Hostel on a "lifestyle-farm". It was situated near [Bude](#), Cornwall's border town to the neighbouring province Devon. Following the recommendation of our Landlord, we took the risk and ventured to a pub for dinner. We didn't regret it, as it was more like a "gastro pub" than a noisy, sports TV polluted watering hole. Surely, it had all

the deep fried pub grub on offer, but there were also healthy and well prepared alternatives on offer. On other evenings, we often took advantage of the fact that you find in most U.K. villages, even small ones, at least one Asian restaurant. The most common are Indian, but also Chinese and Thai are easy to find and sometimes a Japanese, Malay or whatever, will also offer good and healthy food.

Exploring coastal Devon and Somerset: steep hills and touristy railways

Our first stop on the next day, meanwhile our fifth in this country, was in [Ilfracombe](#). This is a large seaside town in Devon. The town's theatre, named Landmark Theatre, is with its two tall and one small cone, really a landmark. Locally it's nicknamed "Madonna's bra", but you have to be very prudish, if this concrete structure inspires your fantasy that much...

The town is naturally grown and has many neat large houses, sloping up the hillside above Ilfracombe's picturesque natural harbour. A big hill that falls down to the sea as a steep cliff, protects the harbour and part of the town from the ocean's moods.

Continuing east, we could admire plenty more striking cliff and rock formations all the way to Combe Martin. From there road A39 led up and down steep grassy hills until we met the coast again at [Lynton](#). After parking there, we took the foot path down



to the tiny settlement of **Lynmouth** some 210m (or 700feet) below. Down there, tourist businesses outnumber locals, not to mention the number of visitors. So we did what tourists are meant to do and took the funicular cliff railway back up, to avoid getting too hot on this sunny day with about 4°C.

We passed through parts of Exmoor-Nationalpark on our way to Porlock Hill. A steep road with a gradient of up to 25% leads from 400m (1,300ft) down to the village on sea level. Those with heavy vehicles or campervans have to take a toll road that leads smoother down to Porlock. As our cheap brand Dacia, at 100'000km still has its original brake shoes, we took the steep road. Gradients of 25% or even more are not uncommon all over the U.K. and normally they can't be bypassed.

Never the less, it didn't take long until we reached the village parking lot in **Porlock** that greeted us with an abundance of "pay+display" signs. Just feeding the parking metre is not enough. You have to be submissive to a number of rules, as listed on the "menu of fines". Most car parks list around 15 price tagged offences, like e.g. parking beyond bay markings, parking when the car park is closed, repairing or cleaning your car, cooking on the parking lot, parking in an area not designated for your class of vehicle, or parking in a parking place for a purpose other than the designated purpose of the parking place!!! Sure enough, you could also be fined for making excess noise, as this would disturb those who risk getting fined for sleeping on the parking lot!

It's also clearly indicated how much discount you gain in case you pay your fine within a few days.

After studying the menu and making sure, everything is to the best of our knowledge and belief in order, we wandered around the neat village of Porlock with its many houses, covered with thatched roofs.

Overnight, we stopped at **Dunster**, some 8 miles down the road. Here, we found only a room in a pub, and it was not as nice as the B&B's we've stayed beforehand. However, the food we got in one of the local hotels, was out of the ordinary. When asking the waitress whether the chef comes from the region, she answered "no, he's French!" Dunster village was somehow unassuming but pretty. There was an unusual covered market, a round dove tower, some thatched roof buildings and a large castle.

After a few days of uninterrupted sunshine, rain and fog were back but it didn't matter so much, as we were now heading for the city. Along the way to Wales, we strolled around

Bridgwater in Somerset, an appealing lively place.



Cardiff: the pretty capital of Wales

It was March 6th 2013 when we reached **Cardiff**, the imposing capital of **Wales**. We found the perfect place to stay; a backpacker's hostel next to the city centre with free off street parking. We loved to explore everything on foot, from the stately buildings in the old town, to the modern structures down

in Cardiff Bay, about a mile to the south. The centre was very lively and packed with nice coffee houses. Proper coffee is much more readily available here in Cardiff than in the rest of Britain and we really liked it.

Most roads in the centre belong to the huge pedestrian area and are flanked with nice stately buildings of different epochs. We took our time and spent three days in this beautiful city which has a surprising number of Shopping Centres; some modern malls and some old fashioned arcades where the small alleyways between the shops have elaborate glass roofs. Sure enough, one was named "Queens Arcade" and another one "Castle Arcade" and there was also a "Duke-" and a "High Street" of course. Cardiff has an old fashioned market hall with small stalls where people still know each other, even though it's a city of 350'000. It was in the Central Market, where we picked up a good and typical example of truly sarcastic British humour. Two elderly ladies, both past their eighties and walking with canes, were laughingly greeted by a stall-keeper: "oh my God, you're still alive, the pair of you?"

In general, we experienced the very model of an Englishman (or woman) as good humoured, considerate and helpful. Friday evening, however, seems to change them for the weekend when many get unpredictable. Boozing and pub crawling seems to be a national obsession, especially but not only among the young. To prevent those folks from harming themselves too much, entire city centres are sealed off for traffic and police presence is highly increased. Surveillance cameras are omnipresent, even in small villages. To us, changing the society's attitude towards drunkenness would be more successful in eliminating alcohol related problems than constant surveillance. To fuddle shouldn't be something one wants to brag with, but something to be ashamed of.

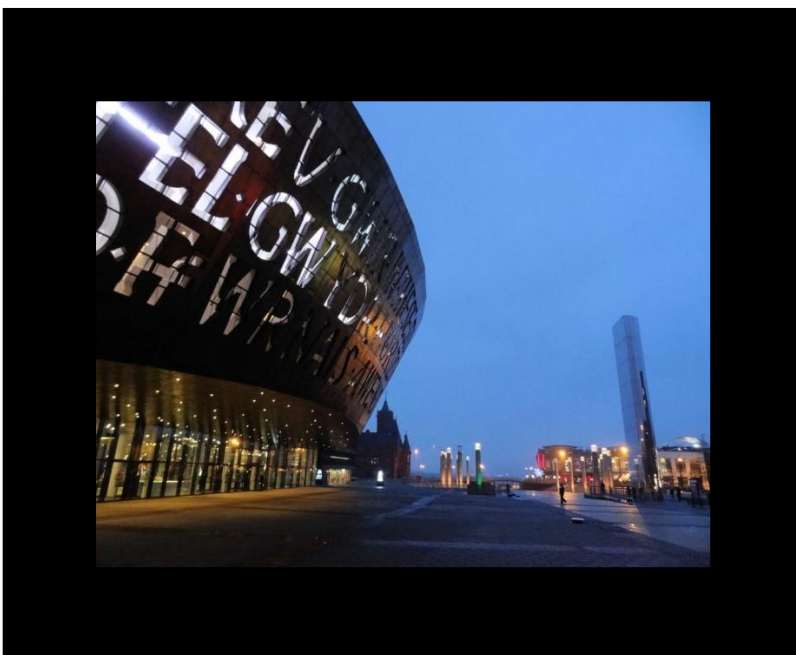
As we walked the streets after dinner on a chilly 2°C Friday night, we found ourselves wondering, just as other tourists, how lightly the ladettes had dressed. Those dolly birds looked almost like tarts to us. Sexy hunting gear seems to be a direct consequence of prudish societies. The lack of proper sex education, together with an excess of alcohol, result in more than 30% of British teeny girls getting pregnant. It's not too bad if you compare this figure with the much more

conservative USA, where 52% of under 19 year olds get pregnant. However, countries like Sweden, the Netherlands or Switzerland look much better with around 6% and even hot blooded Italians and Spaniards have less than 8% teenage mothers! Young people of all nations like to go out and party, so where's the cause for the problem?

Cardiff Bay: refreshingly modern

Brits love to live in row houses and also Cardiff has large quarters packed with such houses on both sides of the street. They all look very similar and most are very pretty with their little gardens. While walking down to Cardiff Bay, we passed many roads lined with such row houses. Nearby was a large Moslem quarter, where a totally different atmosphere prevailed. It was Friday and men in traditional dress were just returning from prayer in the mosque. The shops in this quarter were mainly serving the needs of the Muslim community like butchers or kebab stalls offering halal meat or barbers for men.

Not much further, we stepped into another world again: [Cardiff Bay](#), the former docks. Starting after 1830, coal had been loaded here in big quantities, but the trade ceased during WWI. Thereafter, we read, the docks became no more than tidal swampland and very smelly with sewage. The neighbourhood had quite a bad reputation as red-light district and multi-



ethnic meltpot. After lengthy planning and building phases, by 1999, the area was finally redeveloped. Now there is a tidal barrage that retains the water of two rivers in a huge freshwater lake. In the following, the reclaimed land along the new shore became an architect's playground who have sofar designed and realized about a dozen ultra-modern buildings. One of them is the new Assembly Hall of the Welsh parliament that was constructed after Wales got some limited self-ruling from the U.K. However, the Welsh don't seem to be too serious about independence, otherwise their modern new parliament building wouldn't have been designed by an English Lord and officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II.

Other remarkable buildings in Cardiff Bay are the [Millenium Centre](#) with its theatres that only got completed in 2009.

Furthermore, there is the Mermaid Quay, a

waterfront complex with restaurants and shops. Not many old buildings survived the re-development but two were lovingly restored: a wooden Norwegian church and the "Pierhead Building", which had been the lavish company headquarter during coal shipping times.

British food habits: rather fast than healthy

It was a rainy day when we left Cardiff for North-western Wales. Inland, we drove through pastoral landscape, dominated by steep green hills. As soon as we hit the coast, it was sunny. The coastal inlet and the sand dunes near Tywyn looked very beautiful in glittering sunlight.

In the evening, we reached our holiday cottage in **Y Felinheli**. From there we enjoyed great views over Menai Strait. The former farm building had been converted and renovated to a bright modern holiday flat with big windows. On two storeys, it offered great vistas and all the luxuries we like.



When we arrived, it was shortly before 7 P.M. on Saturday night. So we quickly unloaded our gear and then rushed to the supermarket in Caernarfon to buy some groceries. When we asked at what time the shop closes, Heinz heard something

like 12 but asked again, since he didn't believe what he'd heard. The saleswoman almost apologized and explained: "sorry, this is a small village and therefore we close at midnight. However, bigger towns like Bangor (13'000 inhabitants), six miles from here, have supermarkets open 24 hours. Only on Sundays, they close for a few hours".

When browsing around the hypermarket, we soon discovered that pre-cooked meals work out cheaper hereabout than cooking something fresh. The range of microwavable food is just unbelievable and the price too: the cheapest "meals" go for as little as one Pound Sterling! For those who like something lazy but prefer the illusion of having a proper meal, there are restaurant-style "menu-deals for two" available in abundance. For £10 the lazy would-like-to-be chef can assemble a "gourmet meal" out of pre-cooked dishes. They only have to choose from several starters, main courses and desserts, put them in the microwave and while it's reheating, start sipping the wine that is part of the meal-deal. How long will it take until people forget altogether how to cook, because of laziness, lack of time or funds to buy fresh products? Instead of spending money for a raw, untreated and unseasoned piece of fish, meat or vegetable, they will spend much bigger amounts on miracle slimming cures or at the doctors to get rid of the consequences of all that fast-food.

It would be easy to find healthy alternatives in the U.K., also when eating out. The problem is just that the culture and low prices let too many people stick to junk-food. Six to eight pounds for TWO pub-meals are a common asking price. Fish & chips and hamburger stalls have become so much of an integrated part of British cuisine that ordering chips as side dish is common place even in ethnic restaurants. Chinese and Indian food is hereabout often munched down with chips instead of rice. We noted with surprise, how guests in an Italian Restaurant commonly ordered chips with their pizza and pasta – have they ever heard about how much carbohydrate we need? It didn't stop there! Even Michelin-starred restaurants put, needless to their well-balanced meals that usually include a wide variety of healthy side-dishes, chips as additional side order on the menu. Why should restaurateurs be health conscious, if it's so easy to earn some additional bucks with simple potatoes?

North-Wales: a week amidst of stunning nature

Sure enough, we did not only spy out British life to point out the cultural differences, we had mainly come to explore the great countryside and our holiday cottage in Y Felinheli was a good base to do so. We didn't need to go far to visit the famous ranges of [Snowdonia National Park](#). Though Snowdon, the highest peak, is only 3,560 ft/1'085 m tall, the landscape looks truly alpine. As much as its name suggests a snowy mountain, most years it presents itself only as a barren brown peak. Just like on continental Europe, this winter lasted longer and brought colder temperatures than usually. Therefore, several of Snowdonia's peaks were covered with a touch of snow. In Snowdonia there are 93 summits higher than 2,000 feet of which 15 are over 3,000 - or in metric words: 5 peaks reach more than 1'000m and 88 higher than 600m above sea level.

As nights got freezing cold, salt was generously scattered on the roads every evening. That way, British die hard outdoor enthusiasts could safely reach the frozen plots of grass on the mountains, where they pitched their tents. We didn't expect the locals to be so eager to hike and less so to camp whatever the temperatures.

The [Island of Anglesey](#) could also easily be reached from our holiday cottage, as it was just over the bridge on the other shore of the narrow Menai Strait. With more distance from the mountains, the panorama over Snowdonia's peaks could

best be admired from over there.

Anglesey offered a variety of very interesting sights as well. Also the weather was anything but boring, somehow it was "April in March". When we arrived at Black Point, our first sight seeing stop, it was glooming in golden sunlight and surrounded by mystical dark clouds. Only minutes later, we fled back to the car, as a heavy snow flurry hit the coast.

Luckily, the white stuff settled for a few minutes only and half an hour later we explored the ruins of Beaumaris castle in sunshine again.

On another day, we visited Anglesey Island's northwest, near Holyhead, where the ferries to Ireland leave. We, for our part, drove out to **South Stack**, an area of fascinating coast line and a bird sanctuary. Large colonies of Guillemots were already populating the sea cliffs. Again, it was mainly sunny, but we had to brave a stiff cold wind and occasional short showers.



Welsh language: a real tongue twister

For us, who speak reasonably well English, it was just great that we could communicate with everybody during our five weeks in the UK. However, Wales has its own language which we most often heard here in the north west, where Welsh is the mother tongue of about 20% of the population. It is of Celtic origin and related to Breton and Cornish. Hereabout, traffic signs are bilingual and for tourists on the move difficult to read quickly, especially as every local council decides, which language to put first. In the south, despite the capital Cardiff being there, we recognized the Welsh language only on government information boards and traffic signs, but never heard it spoken.

Cultural differences may exist, but in general, Wales appeared to us as British as the rest of the U.K. All over the Kingdom, the “dos and don’ts” are clearly and politely marked on large boards: please pay... please mind the step... no noise please... We had to smile, when we saw a sign in front of a freeway tunnel, kindly asking not to pass the tunnel with a horse drawn carriage or by walking. When we had to pay an entrance fee, one staff even said “sorry, I have to charge £ 5. The Brits are a truly polite bunch.



On the coast, we visited [Llandudno](#) a Victorian seaside resort that was developed already 1850. Most of the noble town houses and mansions along the parade date from those times.

Only a few kilometres to the west, we admired the walled old town of [Conwy](#) and the still impressive ruins of the former castle. After dawn it is illuminated and reflects majestically in the water of the natural harbour at its feet, presuming it isn’t low tide.

Even nearer our holiday cottage was [Caernarfon](#), another walled town with ruins of a bold castle, though of different architecture. The curtain walls, as well as all the round and polygonal towers are still intact and the castle is nowadays listed as world heritage site. Inside, it’s obviously just a ruin but the old town it guards, is very pretty and lively. The castle was strategically placed on the confluence of the Seiont River and the Menai Strait and constructed between 1283 and 1330.

England: discovering the sparsely populated western region

After 11 days in Wales, we continued to discover the western part of [England](#) on March 16th 2013. We devoted a good part of the afternoon to the extraordinarily pretty old town of [Chester](#). We admired the many half timbered houses and other stately buildings of mediaeval and Victorian times. The beams of the half timbered houses were not all straight but often rounded and had ornamental carvings. Many of the windows had crown glass and there was an unbelievable variety of elaborate bay windows, bow fronts, balconies, as well as turrets and dormers. On that Saturday afternoon, Chester was extremely lively with shoppers and tourists and we loved to soak in the atmosphere.



Next on our agenda, was [Shrewsbury](#), in the West Midlands. With some Good Luck we managed to drive straight into the suburb that supposedly has many B&B’s. However, while checking how close the city centre is, we got lost in the maze of one-way roads and so it took us a solid hour and 40 kilometres until we knocked somewhere on the door.

Also Shrewsbury has a nice city centre and by the time we could explore it, big snowflakes fell down from the sky. So we quickly sought shelter in a Thai restaurant where we celebrated Brigitte’s birthday.

On the next morning, the sun was with us again and we went on to visit some small villages. First on the map was [Much Wenlock](#)

where we saw some half timbered houses and the ruins of an old priory (from the outside only, as we didn't pay the £4 entry fee). From there, we drove along snow capped hill ridges to [Ludlow](#). Contrary to the previous village, Ludlow was quite touristy, maybe because it's bigger and boasts many souvenir shops and eateries. The town itself is pretty indeed, not only because of the many half timbered houses and the castle ruin, but also because of its market.

The Cotswolds: varied and charming countryside villages

The same evening we arrived in [Stow-on-the-Wold](#), a small village in the touristy [Cotswolds](#) region. As we intended to stay for a few days, we took our time and patiently searched for the right room. Just a pity that the Landlady of the B&B we finally chose, went walkabout by the time we stood at her doorstep again. As it got quite late until we gave up trying to contact her on different means, we had to take a hotel room for the first night. At least she gave us a giant room the next day when we changed to her place.

Staying in Bed & Breakfast accommodations is a valuable experience of travelling through Britain, as you get in touch with locals and get an impression of how they live. Breakfast is in general huge but for us Swiss, who are used to hearty crusty bread and jam, instead of cooked morning meals, it involved some compromising. Bacon, eggs and mushrooms can be quite nice for a change but to get fond of English sausages, baked beans and Marmite, you probably have to be brought up with to like it.

What we missed most, was heavy crusty brown bread. Once Brigitte got so desperate for it, she went to a nearby Tesco supermarket who stocks some continental style bread.

On the other hand, we were surprised about the excellent quality of British dairy products. We spoilt ourselves with rich creamy yoghurt, cheese and of course our new discovery: (Cornish) clotted cream – all fattening but great in taste!

Clotted Cream is produced by indirectly heating cream, either with steam or in a water bath, until it condenses to a fat content of about 60%. It is easy to get in Stow-on-the-Wold. At least 20 coffee houses and tea rooms serve clotted cream together with delicious scones in their “cream tea” or “afternoon tea”-deals. Furthermore, the village of 2'500 inhabitants also has some 20 souvenir shops and at least as many restaurants. Sure enough, some might cook simpler than others, but in this village it is certainly easier to find a high quality upmarket eatery than cheap pub grub.

Now in off season, Stow-on-the-Wold prove a perfect base for exploring the surroundings. After getting some input from tourist brochures and our guide book, we ventured out to the Cotswolds villages and discovered that we liked some of the “not so famous” best. It seems strange: the more souvenir shops could be found, the more tourists were abound. Some villages were already raided by the specie “homo sapiens touristicus” mid March and we wouldn't want to come back here in summer.

Presently, visitors consisted almost exclusively of Brits and we got the impression that they, by culture, are much more fond of little knick-knacks as found in souvenir shops than our society. On internet portals, like TripAdvisor, it was striking how most Brits liked over-commercialised sights with countless souvenir shops, even in the middle of nowhere, whereas German speaking nationals found this rather annoying. Other countries, other manners.

We found it striking how different the Cotswolds villages were in appearance and construction.

[Broadway](#) is unique for its uniform golden yellow sandstone buildings. [Chipping Campden](#) pleased us with its many thatched roofs. [Bourton-on-the-Water](#) has countless bridges, [Moreton-in-Marsh](#) has a wide boulevard but too much traffic. Then we loved little [Painswick](#), that has a unique church yard with 100 funnily trimmed trees. Much bigger was [Cirencester](#), a town with two distinctive churches and several old limestone buildings, next to newer pastel coloured ones.



Outside the Cotswolds: vibrant historic towns

We also drove out to visit some attractive towns outside the Cotswolds. [Stratford-upon-Avon](#) is a charming town on the Avon river. The town still makes a big fuss about its famous son William Shakespeare. Sights are plentiful and include inclined half timbered houses, a modern theatre on the then overflowed river shore, a pretty clock tower and several old churches.

Also very appealing was [Oxford](#), the famous university city. The town is packed with pretty historic buildings and we wandered for hours along those stately colleges with their churches. Loads of cheap restaurants were aiming at the student crowd, whereas the main pedestrian area was bustling with overpriced eateries aiming at tourists. The very city centre is only open to public transport, which means predominantly red double decker buses and old fashioned black, or sometimes coloured [\(London\) taxis](#). During summer there are many punt boats on Oxford's water bodies, but presently they moored by the dozens on the two rivers; the Thames and the Cherwell.

And we visited also [Cheltenham](#), a former spa town, with lots of buildings typical for such a resort.

After five days in Stow-on-the-Wold, we continued our tour and drove again to Wales. While cruising around the U.K., we observed that towns, cities and parks along our way were often named after places we know from overseas, like Marlborough, Perth, Newcastle, York, Picton, Stratford, Blenheim... If there would be less traffic and carcasses of kangaroos on the roadside, we would feel like being in Australia. Here however, there is lots of traffic even in rural areas and we mostly saw pheasants that were hit by cars. The colourful and curious male birds can be seen often - dead or alive.

Back in Wales: a week in a modern cottage with typical British equipment



In the evening of March 22nd 2013 we arrived at our next holiday cottage. It was situated in **Penally**, near Tenby on [Wales'](#) south-western Pembrokeshire coast. Our cottage offered all the luxuries, like dishwasher, washing machine with dryer and baking oven. But as often in the U.K., some little things that go without saying in big parts of the world, were missing: a sizeable dining table and mixer taps.

While looking for holiday cottages around the U.K., we had soon realized that it's easier to find one with several TV's, rather than with a proper dining table. It seems common practice that the English munch their (microwaved junk?) food down while watching junk on the box. We ignored our two tellies and attempted to perform the miracle of placing all our breakfast jams on the bonsai table.

This was usually after the screams from the bathroom had faded because we didn't manage to handle the silly gas appliances without a mixer tap. In the shower, the two old fashioned taps were at least connected to one hose, though this one regularly got hooked in the six-armed wheels of the bib valves, thus tearing the patiently adjusted temperature into another extreme, be it hot or cold. Even less advanced was the sink where the hot and cold water came out of two taps miles apart though only a fingerbreadth from the basins rim. The last time we had seen such antique fittings regularly, was Down Under...

Splendid Pembrokeshire Coast: managed by a charity

The [Pembrokeshire Coast National Park](#) was the reason for our coming here and it was right at our doorstep. Its vast coastline can get discovered on 186miles (300km) of coastal path. The scenic rugged cliffs are and full of fissures, coves and arches and uncountable rock stacks poke out of the sea. Geologically interesting are the rock layers that vary quite a bit in colour and fold shapes. Everywhere we went, be it on a remote headland or in front of one of the many fishing- or tourist resort villages, the scenery along the coast was just amazing. Our favourite sites of those we visited, were **St. Nons Bay** below **St. Davids**, then the outcrop **Wooltack Point** near **Marloes**, **St. Annes Head** and the giant rock arch called **Green Bridge** at **Stack Rocks Point**. To get access to this so called green bridge, we had to wait until the military cleared the way through its territory for tourists.



We often came across military territory in the UK. To us, it seems that a lot of the funds that go to the army, are lacking in maintenance of civil infrastructure. Roads with potholes, rusty bridge pillars or collapsed retaining walls and stairs are common sight. If it gets too dangerous, the common cheap solution is just to fence it off and close those sections to the public.

Many duties and services, which in other countries, belong to the responsibilities of the government, are in the hands of charities all over the U.K.. There are countless national monuments like castles, national parks and nature reserves managed by a charity called "National Trust". To raise enough money to be self supporting, they rely on donations, membership fees, legacies, entrance fees and an army of 61'000 volunteers. Along the Pembrokeshire coast, the National Trust managed big sections of the national park and had parking lots with kiosks, where a volunteer provided information, brochures and sure enough: collected parking fees. If the hut was unattended, there was always a box where visitors were invited to leave a "recommended donation" of a specified amount.

Because it is common courtesy to do something for charities, Brits have an extensive variety of them. First of all, church related charities cup the most hands. Next in the list are animal rescue, health, human rights etc.- go through it yourself, if you've got the time - there are 160'000 registered charities... "charitychoice.co.uk/charities".

Knowing that people in the U.K. are rather prudish, it's quite amazing how it became fashioned to pose near-nude for charity calendars.



On our last day in Penally, we walked to the small town of [Tenby](#), well worth a visit. It sits on a big rocky outcrop, high above a natural harbour on one side and a vast sandy beach on the other. Tenby is guarded by the ruin of a once large castle that adds some more character to the place. It was Good Friday when we visited and therefore bustling with people, despite chilly temperatures. However, the sun was enjoyed by everybody, whether they strolled about the high town-houses painted in pastel colours or down below, on the sandy beach that became very wide at low tide. As the difference between high- and low water is very big, the building of the sea rescue RSLI is placed on high stilts and has a steep ramp down to the water. This "pile dwelling" houses the vessel of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, a charity that saves lives at sea. Actually, there were two such buildings; the former station was sold and converted to a luxury residence.

Across England: impressive villages and national parks

On March 30th 2013, we definitely left Wales by traversing it through [Brecon Beacons National Park](#). Due to unseasonable snow falls last week, all of the higher hills were now white. We had passed here three weeks ago, and then everything had been green.

Not far after the "border" to [England](#), we came into Herefordshire, famed for its "black and white villages" with old half timbered houses in said colours. We strolled around the very pretty houses in [Weobley](#), small [Dilwyn](#) and picturesque [Pembridge](#), where we found a coffee house. The well travelled lady here made everything fresh and we have been lucky to find such places once a while.

Bypassing Ludlow, we landed in [Bridgnorth](#) for the night. This was an unexpectedly pretty little town, again with many elaborate half timbered houses and a covered market in the middle of the cake. We got a room in one of those leaning character houses where furniture has to be placed on wedges to stand even.

It was weekend and therefore many of the otherwise very polite and sensible English got drunk - not only the young. Somebody moaned that due to the financial crisis, many pubs had to close, as many "would like to get drunks" now fill up at home or buy booze at the supermarket and hang around the square. In our opinion, there were still more than enough of those places Brits fondly nickname "watering holes".



Didn't we just see an alarming sign at the fire brigade stating: "75% of all house fire fatalities are alcohol related" ? Maybe a Scandinavian-style tax on alcohol would smoothen the alcohol related problems and also provide money to the Queen's treasurer, helping him to fight the financial crisis!

Well, while in other nations, people drink regularly alcohol to savour, it seems that Brits want to get drunk. Therefore, they tend to drink the whole weekly statistic at once during the weekend! We just can't understand, why it's illegal to deal and consume drugs like hash or dope, but legal to consume and deal with drugs like alcohol and tobacco.

We had breakfast at the branch of "Costa Café" and thereafter, another good look around Bridgnorth, before leaving. Thereby, we saw the [Cliff Railway](#), which looked like an old bus mounted on a steep funicular. For us, the 100m down (thereof 34m in altitude) to the shore of the Severn River seemed like a good exercise before sitting in the car. However, the railway's 64% gradient might be an experience too.

Englands Midlands: snow and ice in all its variations

As we proceeded north east, we crossed the glittering **Blithfield Reservoir** on a dam. It was freezing cold and some snow laid on the roadside, but this didn't hinder Mr. Whippy's Ice Cream van to try for some business on the lakeshore. This being the last day of March, Heinz thought it was about time. Unfortunately he had to queue quite a while in the cold, as the van proved unexpectedly popular. Meanwhile, Brigitte was impatiently waiting in hat and gloves in the distance, not wanting to know this guy...

North from Cornwall and Devon, the roads were still lined with hedges once a while, but at least they kept now a certain distance from the road, making them a bit more bearable. However, with the snow flurries and the strong wind of last week, the road between those hedges got completely clogged with all the white stuff blown in. Despite it had snowed only a few centimetres, snow ploughs had to work day and night. Driving through this landscape now, was somehow bizarre; the fields were green again, but the road was lined with sometimes more than two metre high snow walls pressed to the hedges though immediately behind them, it was green.

Following a recommendation of the Tourist office in [Ashbourne](#), we detoured to **Dovedale**, dubbed as Switzerland of the U.K.. To get there was rather challenging, as the track was now lined with snow walls. No passing bays had been cleared and the road was barely wide enough for one car. Just a pity that the tourist office had sent other people there too and they all seemed to come from the opposite direction... By the way: the houses were really pretty, though they look nothing like Swiss chalets.



The next stop on our way, was at the spa town [Buxton](#). It is an airy place with lots of space and lots of stately hotel- and spa complexes. The opera building houses an indoor tropical garden, called Orangery, where an indoor flea market was held.

Leaving this place, we were already in the [Peak District National Park](#). Contrary to what this name might suggest, there are no high peaks in this park, only ~600 m high hills. But it was here, where they had the first and only avalanche in England last week. Even though it almost had melted away, we still could see, from which hill the avalanche had come down. It was not much more than a snow slab, though it had managed to push a car from the road.

We started looking for accommodation in [Castleton](#), a touristy village in the midst of the park. Well, on Easter Sunday, it was not the best of ideas to arrive without reservation. We still got by and found a room in an Inn. It was their last one and with good Luck we got it at a reduced last-minute price, even if that wasn't cheap. In the morning, we opted for continental breakfast and got really delicious croissants, mind we were in this remote "mountain village".

Well fed, we looped through Peak District National Park to Glossop, which brought us over a snow covered high plateau reminding of Norway's Hardanger Vidda. We got rewarded with great vistas all the way, and we believe we probably saw Manchester in the distance. Unfortunately, the road was narrow but fast, with no option to stop. Turning another 20 miles east, the road led us down to flat land and into urbanised territory. There was quite dense traffic but thanks to Easter Holidays, we easily made our way towards York.

By now, we had gotten used to British invented traffic solutions, coping with lots of traffic, limited funds and space. An often seen, cheap way of mastering busy intersections, are double-roundabouts. It only takes a few new signs, a bit of white paint to mark two dots in the middle of an intersection - and off we go. On the beginning, we were quite a bit afraid,

driving through these twin-mini roundabouts, but as we avoided the most densely populated areas, it was ok. On the road signage, it was unusual for us that the posted destinations were usually quite nearby. However, road numbering was consequently marked – much better than elsewhere, and thanks to this, it was easy to navigate.

York: snug lanes and old fashioned junk shops

On April 1st 2013 we arrived at [York](#)'s Ibis hotel, where we spent two days. With some Good Luck, we even snatched a space in their parking lot. In this Ibis, apart from traditional English items, the breakfast includes croissants and baguettes. The price for the room cost, at £ 57 about the same as a B&B in the countryside. In towns they charge often £ 80 or more. During our stage in the U.K., we mostly got by with £ 50 for our accommodation, and we never needed to pay more than £ 75, thanks to our travelling in off-season. Some luxury B&B's will easily charge £ 150 and more ...

The Ibis Hotel was close enough to walk to the city centre. Before we even got there, we passed Micklegate Bar, one of 6 remaining entrance gates in the largely intact city wall. York has been fortified by the Romans back in 71AD. The wall can be walked on 4,4km length and offers vast views, depending on where you are. The charming old town has many half timbered houses, some lining large boulevards, others narrow alleys. Somehow, York seems like the quintessence of England with such an abundance of old fashioned junk- and curiosity shops, they become trendy again. We observed that English households are decorated with lots of knick-knacks, creating a homey if not very modern atmosphere.

York's streets were bustling with locals and tourists alike, and this not only on the week-end. It's a very attractive city indeed. The two towers of the [Minster](#) dominate the skyline though parts of the immense gothic cathedral were currently under renovation. An impressive sight is the round Clifford Tower that stands as last remains of the castle on a small socket-hill. We also loved the waterfront along Ouse River where red-and-white sight-seeing boats cruised.



Museums are plentiful and in the pretty Yorkshire Museums garden crocuses were out already. We visited the highly interesting [railway museum](#); they say, it's the largest in the world. Sure enough, it's not government funded, but run by a charity. Housed in the old York Station hall plus an extra exhibition hall, old locomotives and rail carriages stand shiny renovated next to each other. To make technology accessible to lay people, some engines were neatly cut open. The exhibit included various foreign exhibits of more recent locomotives, like a Japanese bullet train, the Shinkansen. Sure enough, some lavish carriages that once transported Kings and Queens had to be exhibited as well.

York-Hull: leaving the Kingdom

Already it was April 3rd 2013, our last day in the U.K.. We were booked on a car-ferry from Hull but since it only left in the evening, we had an entire day of sight-seeing ahead. Driving across pastoral hills towards the east coast, we reached **Bridlington**. It didn't hold us for long so we continued to **Hornsea**, a seaside resort with many holiday parks packed with mobile-homes. It seems every Brit would like to own such a mini-estate, as we had seen such holiday parks all over the country. The beach at Hornsea was not very inviting, firstly because there was still an icy wind and secondly, because the water was totally murky.

In a nearby Tesco supermarket, we took our last chance to buy some fattening souvenirs, like Cornish clotted cream, cookies and chocolate. As always, they had some "multi buy offers" (get 3 for the price of 2), so we got out of the shop with more sweeties than intended.

Our last sight-seeing stop was in [Beverley](#), an enchanting town just a few miles north of Hull. We loved this place with its tidy pedestrian area, a minster and another bold church. Enjoying French patisserie in a bakery was our last act, though we had initially searched for either Yorkshire pudding or a last cream tea, before boarding the ferry to the continent.

Final thought about our stay in the UK

During our five weeks in the UK, we experienced a very diverse country with astonishing land- and seascapes. Away from England's densely populated areas, we experienced Great Britain at its best. We didn't expect to find such a great variety of landscapes; from surprisingly steep hills to brown marshlands, sheer cliffs, seemingly alpine mountains and even arctic scenery similar to some of Scandinavia. As well very appealing to us, was the rich cultural heritage, the variety of historic towns and villages with mostly well restored hearts in totally different architectures.

We had been warned about endless traffic jams but as we stuck to Cornwall, Wales and the Midlands, avoided the densely populated areas and travelled during off-season, we had been lucky to bypass all the crowded roads.

Apart from the unseasonal cold, it was rather an advantage to travel in March. Touristy places were busy but not crowded, as locals know, it can also be beautiful in winter. It was far from being packed like in peak-season and therefore rather easy to spontaneously find a room for the night. Landlords, sales assistants and waiters always had time for a chat. We truly enjoyed to be able to communicate with everybody, as they all seemed to understand our English with Swiss-German accent.

We liked the unbelievably relaxed and humorous people. It's still true: most Brits behave like proper Gentlemen or Ladies respectively; they are very considerate and very helpful. But it's also true that getting drunk seems socially accepted, some things are crumbling and the country is polluted with sports TV and fast food joints.

On the other hand, high class cuisine can often be found too, and foreign immigrants from all over the world, but foremost Asians - from India to Japan, brought a wide array of healthy dishes to the island. All in all, our trip to the U.K. was much more rewarding than we had hoped for and we can very well imagine to come back.

The Netherlands: revisiting a beautiful spot

A big car ferry: [P&O's](#) "Pride of Hull", brought us to the [Netherlands](#) in style. As it was an overnight crossing, we opted for a two-bed cabin, which was quite luxurious, thanks to its own bathroom and porthole. Our cabin was situated on the 8th floor of the luxury liner that is owned by a Dubai based company. There were two restaurants, several bars, a cinema and gambling hall, as well as the compulsory duty free shop on board. Most people raided the buffet restaurant before the boat disembarked around sunset, but we felt more at ease in the civilized à la carte restaurant.

Early morning of April 4th 2013, we alighted in **Rotterdam** and shuddered as we saw snowflakes dancing. If we had hoped it would be warmer on the continent, it was just wishful thinking.

Dutch people told us (in English) that winter had been extremely cold and extremely dry and therefore, lighting BBQ's was currently forbidden for fear of forest fires. As we drove around, we saw that the landscape was totally different from the begin of April last year. Then, the flowers were already out after a much warmer winter whereas now, nature was still hibernating. We chose again small roads that led us first to [Kinderdijks](#) many beautiful old wind mills. Later we came to **Otterlo**, where we found ourselves a B&B for the night.

On the next day, we finally managed to find some tropical temperatures – if only in the saunas and indoor pool at [Flevo Natuur](#). We discovered this nice naturist village last year and had booked the same mobile-home again. Of course we would have appreciated it more if it would have been warm and sunny, but after 3 months of intense travelling through Brittany and the U.K. we needed a rest anyway. Thanks to Flevo Natuur's good facilities and our comfortable mobile-home with central heating, we enjoyed our stay again very much, even though it was rather cold most of the time. We only made some short excursions this time, whereby we discovered the modern city of **Almere**, which was built from the drawing board after the polder of Flevoland (reclaimed land) had been inaugurated. During the 45 years that passed since then, some 200'000 people settled there. On the "old land", we visited the appealing villages of **Putten** and **Nijkerk**.

Towards the end of our two weeks at Flevo Natuur, our friends Gisela & Klaus visited us for two days. We had a great time together, talking, walking and having a sauna bath. As special welcome, we served our successful version of homemade scones, accompanied by clotted cream we had brought along from the U.K..



Four days, four countries

On April 19th we set off again and started towards the French Atlantic coast, where we were due to arrive in 9 days time. It's about 1'000 km and many people would consider it an easy 10 hours' drive. However, there is lots to see in between, and as we travel under the motto "the journey is its own reward", we had a hard time figuring out which route to take. In the end it just happened that we visited four countries in our first four days, though we made it barely 400 km away from Flevo Natuur. On our first day, we concentrated on the Netherlands, south-eastern part, crossing [Veluwe National Park](#), where we admired mossy forests, heathlands and inland sand dunes. For the evening, we stopped at town of **Deurne**, the pretty and totally non-touristic asset. They are not only the best Dutch clearways, but often lead to small country roads are a big way to bypass the heavy traffic on through pretty landscapes worth to be admired, and it's easy to do only bicycles everywhere.



On the next morning we hoped for similar small roads in **Belgium**. However, over there it was different. Lots of nervous drivers, many potholes, narrow roads and speed limits that suit maniacs. Never the less, we stopped at a few nice little towns like **Peer**, **Visé** and the pilgrims abbey **Banneux**. For the night, we landed in the Ardennes mountain range, at **Coo**, a very touristic place with lots of adventure activities for people of all walks of life and age.

Luxembourg: a small beauty with a striking appeal

Next day: two new countries at once. Well, for two days we zigzagged through [Luxembourg](#), which was a big surprise to us. With 2'586 km² it's much bigger and more rural than we expected. Apart from Luxembourg City, where 20% of the inhabitants live, there are many more sizeable towns and villages. To us, they appeared all much more well-kept and more colourful than those in nearby Belgium. On our first day, we explored the border region with Germany along the river Sûre, stopping at **Vianden** along our way. For the evening, we found a hotel in the pretty and also pretty touristy town of [Echternach](#). As roadwork obstructed road access to town, we initially crossed a footbridge to **German territory** to see, if we could get a room over there. Certainly, it is not only a cliché that Luxembourg is a wealthy country and therefore we didn't find anybody trying to make some additional money by renting out a few rooms in their private home. Instead, four- and five star accommodation is much more established than anything in the budget range.



After a good night's sleep, we followed the Moselle southwards for a while. Then we backtracked on the German side, before entering Luxembourg again. Now we explored the country's interior, passing gorges and hills, which had every now and then a castle standing atop. Particularly impressive was the castle high above Vianden, and the ruin of **La Rochelle's** castle, but we also spent time in **Diekirch**, where we found an Italian ice cream parlour again, actually a branch of a German chain.

Along forests and glittering rivers, we moved north-west to **Wilz**, a nice village situated on several small hill tops. Ironically for us, we found parking in a new complex by the name "Kouswiss" but no hotel room. After a good look around, we continued to **Esch sur Sûre**. Though this village was much smaller, it really invited for an overnight stay, due

to its picturesque setting with a ruined castle above a knee of the river. Like the day before, room prices were rather high but at least there were several open hotels. After exploring the village, we sat down in a very good restaurant, which was surprisingly bustling for a Monday night. As almost everywhere in Luxembourg, the staff consisted mainly of foreigners and we learned that in fact, an astonishing 43% of the country's 525'000 inhabitants, are immigrants from all over the world. Foreign born residents and guest workers are predominantly from Portugal, Italy, Poland, Turkey and Arabic nations.

The languages of Luxemburg are a very interesting subject as well. French and German have been official languages for a long time. Luxemburgish, a mix between a Mosel-Frankish dialect and French, had been established as third official language only 1984, in an effort to retain the country's identity. According to new rules, immigrants have to learn all three languages. Of local residents, 77% indicate Luxembourghish their mother tongue. As it's still the case with Swiss German dialects, Luxembourghish was previously mainly a spoken language. The first book was only printed in 1829.

We have spent no more than two days in Luxembourg, but experienced a very varied and interesting country, quite different from what we'd expected. We met nice people and visited many picturesque villages and towns and marveled at the fair bit of nature in between.

France: cross-country to the Atlantic

On the next day, we left to **Belgium**, where we crossed the Haute-Sûre nature park before driving into **France**. Late afternoon, we arrived in **Nancy's** city centre at the Ibis Budget hotel, where we had reserved a room. We started touring the city's sight-seeing delights without delay, as they were waiting for us in the brightest sunlight. Most outstanding is certainly "Place Stanislas" the large city square framed by stately buildings (like city hall, opera etc.) and gilded wrought iron gates, dating from 1755.



The next morning, we continued to **Troyes**, another highlight but of totally different architecture. Again, we were lucky to find a good place to stay in the city centre. Troyes' old town impresses with its many half-timbered houses, some dating back to the 16th century. The part of town that had been destroyed during WWII, boasts now modern buildings. We enjoyed our stay at this picturesque town on the River Seine to the full.



In the afternoon of the next day, we continued through lovely pastoral landscape southwards. Finally, spring had arrived and it came with a bang; temperatures rose to well above 20°C. Spring flowers were blooming in every meadow and all trees were in blossom. Unexpectedly, we came through the historic and quite touristy village of **Vézelay**.

For a change we had decided to choose our next destinations from a culinary, rather than a touristy point of view. That's why we stopped in **Luzy**, where we had another gastronomic meal at Hotel du Morvan. We think Chef Jérôme Raymond deserves a gold medal.

Further west on our culinary journey, lies the Dordogne Valley, one of our long-time favourites. To reach it, we fought a hole day through pouring rain but we got rewarded, as we arrived at **La Roque Gageac** the same evening. Soon, we found a room in a hotel in this picturesque village on the shore of the Dordogne River. We were delighted to see that the long needed foot path between the narrow mainroad and the river is well under construction, so that traffic and pedestrians are no longer endangering each other. We stayed a second day, walking along the river, visiting some nearby villages and heading for another gourmet meal in the evening to a restaurant we know for many years.

French Atlantic: a summer in our birthday suits

On April 28th 2013, we headed via Bordeaux to the **Atlantic coast**, where we were going to spend the bulk of the summer. After more than three months of intense travelling through Spain, western France, the Benelux countries and especially through Great Britain, we definitely needed a rest now. Yes, it's true: even though we could organize our lives around travelling instead of working, we need a holiday once a while too! We opted for naturist resorts, as it's natural to us. After collecting so many new experiences, we didn't want to get too many new impressions during this summer and so we had booked only three seven- and a two-weeks stage in three large holiday villages.



Euronat; a chilly kick-off to summer

We spent most of our time at [Euronat](#) near Montalivet, where we stayed in spring and again after mid August. We had chosen this place because of its good facilities and big size. We love nude walks on the beach and on the extensive grounds. If you can go shopping on the way back, it's just perfect – provided you carry at least your wallet along. Well, during May and June 2013, the Weather Gods must have been very grumpy. Most of the time they annoyed us with wet and chilly weather, so keen naturists could be seen in polar jackets until early summer.

Luckily, we had opted not to camp but to rent a rather luxurious mobile home. So we just made the best of the chilly days, worked on our travel diary and wrapped warmly, when venturing out for walks. Despite our wrapping, we were recognized by two Dutch guys we had met in Sweden three years ago, during an unusually hot summer. Robin & Ray are campers by heart and didn't get discouraged to stay in a tent for 7 weeks. We just laughed about how many layers of clothes they peeled off, every time they visited us in our cosy and warm mobile home.

Another visitor, Amy from Swaziland* who came to stay with us for a week, was lucky with the weather, as she picked the few warm June days. Going to the beach and enjoying the sun was most important to her. She enjoyed her time here very much and left just three days before we moved to the next place.

In order to be able to describe how this naturist village feels in different seasons, we postpone a detailed account about Euronat until we have returned here in August. For now, we crossed the vast pine forests along the French Atlantic coast and moved some 300km southwards.

ARNA: a very appealing, family oriented naturist ground

It was June 16th 2013, when we checked-in at [Arnaoutchot](#) (in short Arna), an attractive naturist centre, right on the Atlantic. It's situated near Léon in the Landes district. As it was a hot day, we stripped off without delay, carried our belongings quickly into the mobile-home and went to the beach right away. It was amazingly popular with young families, mainly sun-seekers from France and Spain. We instantly fell in love with the golden sand and the atmosphere at the naturist resort; if we hadn't been naked already, Arna would have charmed our pants off immediately.



It certainly had been a good decision to book here a mobile home for 7 weeks. Though we had chosen the most economical model (up to 10 years old), it was in sound condition. Apart from a living area with kitchen, it had two small bedrooms and en-suite facilities. We were given a quiet location between (Caravan-) sites and other mobile homes. There was a large patio with wooden benches and a table, fixed directly to the forest floor. It was only a few hundred

metres to the heart of the holiday village with reception, a few shops and restaurants, as well as the swimming pools.

The “aqua park” consists of a large complex with two big outdoor pools, a paddling pool and a coldwater jacuzzi. Furthermore, there is an indoor pool, heated to a pleasant 28°C and complemented with a toboggan. Everything is nicely landscaped, wind protected and very inviting, which makes it popular to linger on the sunbeds. If it doesn't feel warm enough outdoors, there are plenty more sunbeds in a large sunroom. We were delighted about the pools staying open till 10 P.M. once a week. After closing time, overstaying bathers were friendly reminded by the staff of a private security company, contracted by Arna to patrol the grounds at night.

Treats and treatments

For those who think they are not beautiful enough, there is the possibility to enhance their appearance by investing in Arna's beauty centre, which offers also sauna, hamam and jacuzzi sessions in their attached wellness section.

Not only wellbeing, but also the guests health is looked after. During July and August, a nurse was available for some four-and-a-half hours each day and somehow we were shocked, how many people queued there. As most of them didn't appear sick at all, we wonder whether they were after a free treatment or the charms of the nurse.

However, for entertainment, there was certainly no need to visit the nurse, as Arna offers countless animations for young and old. Everything is done very professional and high class, you feel there is perfectionism behind everything they do.

One of the best examples is the “théâtre de verdure” an outdoor amphitheatre with sound- and lighting equipment, no short of what you find in towns. Sure enough, there is an indoor hall for bad weather days and we would be surprised, if this wasn't as sophisticated. Anyway, we watched a few of the shows held under the open sky.

What the contracted artists performed, was always top class, be it a big choir or a small comedy group. Even the weekly “open podium” had been choreographed to perfection. Arna does not only provide training to guests willing to participate, but also a big number of different costumes. This certainly helps to bring moody teenagers back here, if their live dance in a group of ~25 new friends was such a success.

Afterwards, they might want to meet-up in the nightly disco. As it's only open to those 18 and over, they may ask their parents (or rather strangers) to take them along...

For holidayers who prefer to do something by themselves, a fitness trail has been laid through the forest. Some might have enough exercise monitoring their children, so they will appreciate the nature trail with its many educating signs. Many of the pine trees are full of character, especially in one section. They have all sorts of shapes and bendings - as if created by artists - but it's all nature.

Most of Arna's 500 campsites are situated in Pine Forest. That's where we stayed, when we visited the first time some 14 years ago. Then, we were still under the illusion, we could save money by staying in a simple tent. Meanwhile we know: decent camping is certainly more expensive than renting a mobile home or chalet. Luckily, Arna has some 200 rental units: from family friendly, pre-erected tents to a wide range of mobile homes and chalets - some even high among the trees. Furthermore, there are probably around 200 permanent residents, mainly French and Spaniards, owning mobile homes. When we were here the first time, there were only few places to rent and somehow it was still disputed, whether a naturist campground should offer such luxuries. The Dutch guy, who stayed in the mobile home next to ours, admitted that he took part in demonstrations against the set-up of mobile-homes in Arna when he was young. Well, as you get older, views and appreciation of comfort change. Anyhow: because of his partner, he made a leap of faith and now rents precisely such a mobile home.



Miles of golden sand

From most locations and pitches, it's an easy 20 minutes stroll down to the beach. Theoretically, half of it could be covered by car but it's only handicapped, those with 7 children and lots of beach gear, or the dead lazy who drive. It's just an irony when exactly the latter tell you, they never switch their car's air-con on to save petrol, or you see them buying low-fat yoghurt in the shop, probably to compensate the calories they didn't burn.

The beach at Arna is a real dream, as the fine golden sand stretches for miles. To the south, you can only walk nude for about one kilometre and then you encounter a textile beach. However, if you walk northwards, you don't need to wear any clothes at all for at least five kilometres. Walking was indeed enjoyed by many others too, especially those without children. Most families lingered around the supervised part of the beach, where life savers are present from mid June to the end of September. Everybody goes naked, apart from the usual few recalcitrant teenagers. To make sure, they don't mushroom, a "vice squad" is present.



As we were naked, nobody ever hassled us. It's a peaceful paradise indeed! There are no beach hawkers, apart from one poor ice-cream vendor. Though, he almost melted quicker than his goods, under the heat of the sun and the weight of the box he carried.

Watching the change of the tide was fascinating. At high tide, a sandbar remained connected to the shore, like a curved peninsula along the beach, allowing the water to escape on one side only. It was challenging for children and their parents to build huge sand dams to prevent the water from entering or leaving the bay. Sure enough, the tides always won, moving even faster once the barriers collapsed to rejoicing children.

Exciting for some - boring for others

Once good weather arrived, the sea warmed quite suddenly and some regulars told us that the water is warmer here, than in the Mediterranean, thanks to the Gulf Stream. Due to the relatively high waves, it's normally not possible to swim in the Atlantic Ocean, it's only possible to play with the waves. However, there was about a week with such calm water that the life savers could raise the green flag, a real exception! Those days must have been pretty hard for surfers, though for Arna's surf school, it was probably easier to teach their pupils how to stand on the board. Also to us non-surfers, the Atlantic is fun and we find it quite a bit more interesting than the tame Mediterranean. Never the less, with its currents it bears some serious risks that even locals often underestimate. The radio broadcast far too often sad news about bathers who drowned, because they didn't respect the red flag and had thought it was more fun going into the waves away from the beach guards.

Some non-naturists might envy the life savers here, as those guys are being paid for watching nude people all summer long. We wouldn't; it's as dull as ditchwater and the job bears lots of responsibility. Sitting on a highchair, no matter how strong the wind blows, is anything else than fun. How dull it ever is, they have to be alert at all times, as they know the risks. One day, the radio connection to the rescue helicopter was down, leaving the beach guard no option but to raise the red flag and making sure nobody enters the water.

When coming back from the beach, we often used the communal showers, which was always a multi-cultural experience. German and Dutch people were usually already cleaning their dinner dishes, when the French showered after the beach to get ready for their Apéro. By the time the French washed their dishes, the Spaniards had their showers, then went for Tapas, before slowly preparing their dinners...



Other than the beach, Arna and its surroundings offer various other possibilities for activities. They are all listed in a comprehensive 40 pages colour brochure “activités et loisirs”. It bears a wealth of information about Arna itself, and even more about sight-seeing possibilities. We have never ever been handed out such a complex and well made activity-guide in any other naturist-resort! It proposes also many sights that can be reached via the extensive bicycle-path network just outside Arna. Those who don’t bring their own bicycles, can rent some from a shop near the reception.

Less impressed we were with the internet-access. The good thing was, it was available from all rental units. Due to limited capacity (probably one line for up to 3’000 keen surfers), they only sold rather expensive coupons that lasted for a maximum of five hours. That way, everybody who needed to go on-line, could do so. For most of those on a two-weeks holiday, this is probably good enough, as they have high speed access at home. Poor people like us, who are constantly roving around and had the privilege to stay here for 7 weeks, had to resort with this connection only. If you have to organize your banking, onward-travel or anything like that, it’s not such a happy solution. Sure enough, exactly here we had several urgent matters coming up, including an unexpected flight to Switzerland, after Heinz’ mother died. At 86 she was rather relieved from her afflictions of old age. Anyhow, after five days we were back at Arna and glad we had still some weeks ahead of us to digest the happenings.

Great shopping and a market among nudes



After it had been unseasonably wet and cold until the end of June 2013, the weather changed for the better on the beginning of July. Finally, wherever we went in France, it remained sunny and hot until the beginning of September. Now it was just more tempting to go to the beach than to drive out shopping. Luckily, you can buy anything you might want for a decent meal, at Arna’s “épicerie”. The little supermarket is well stocked and includes a meat- and cheese-counter. At Arna, nude shopping is the rule and enjoyed by some 90% of shoppers. We love fish and were delighted about the big market-van of a fish-monger who came in twice a week for the entire morning.

Not even those who like to visit markets, need to leave the resort. In season, every Monday afternoon, a real market is being set up and stays until 10 PM. It’s no smaller than the markets in nearby villages like Léon. We counted some 30 stalls. That’s how it goes in the countryside: first the locals moan about the nudes, but as soon as they realize, they can squeeze money out of their pockets, the naked pigs mutate to damned fine customers. As up to 3’000 holidayers inhabit Arna in peak season, there is more business potential for a market than in surrounding villages.

Also on most other days, two to five market stalls came onto the ground and stayed for a few hours, so the potential customer didn’t need to rush. Much better than the “horny” bakers visiting other resorts.

Apropos baker: one from the area has a branch at Arna and his Baguettes got awarded with a medal as “best of Landes”. It’s a well known secret that a French Baguette loses its great taste two hours after it comes out of the oven. The jury must certainly have awarded their points within this time span. It’s just a pity, the two hours usually have passed by the time this baker’s bread hits the shelves at Arna.

Luckily, the supermarket next door provides a large variety of crusty bread, dark brown or white. They’re all great in taste and really fresh, as they bake up every few hours. These are just the way we like it and taste far superior to normal crisp-up bread. If you don’t want to cook by yourself, there are three restaurants on the site. A very good Pizzeria, a Spanish style fish restaurant and a French restaurant that serves traditional fare at fair prices.

It was interesting to see, how the season built up, during our stage at Arna. The mobile homes were very well occupied all the time, the pre-erected tents and the chalets filled on the beginning of July, and the campground around famous Bastille Day, but then: with a bang! As most French and Spaniards see August as their main holiday month, everything was in full swing, when we left on the 3rd of August.

From the naturist places we visited, we liked the atmosphere at Arna best. It feels very natural and has a very international, and rather young clientele. It’s certainly a place to go back to and we’re looking forward to do so.

Domaine Laborde: a side trip to the interior

We enjoyed our time at the Atlantic, but what we missed were charming, naturally grown villages and a good choice of restaurants. So, as of August 3rd 2013, we had booked a small cottage at [Domaine Laborde](#), a naturist camping on the border between the districts Garonne. We had discovered owned place with some 40 homes and ~150 pitches two ha of farm- and woodland, scenic ponds, a swimming toboggans, as well as an and hamam. The Dutch not only their compatriots, nationals. They do quite well stay on a Dutch owned doesn't feel like "a Dutch August, more than half of French families; that's what



of Dordogne and Lot-et- this well equipped, family rental chalets and mobile years ago. Spread over 20 guests find two small but pool, two thrilling indoor pool with sauna owners try hard to attract but also French and other and it's the first time we naturist-ground, which Embassy". Now in the guests were in fact we call success!

As there are many beautiful villages in the surroundings, we took the opportunity and drove out several times, passing green rolling hills, full of shiny sunflower fields. Along the way, we found several spots worthy of a stop, like the viewpoint in Montsegur or the converted mill on the River Lot near Trentels. We stopped so often, it was 6 P.M., by the time we reached Penne d'Agenais, the village we initially wanted to visit.

Sure enough, one of the reasons to visit the Dordogne region, is always good food. We sampled quite a few gastronomic menus and enjoyed a Vietnamese Restaurant and an extra-ordinary Ferme Auberge (Farm-Restaurant) in between. On these gourmet-trips, we re-visited a few nice towns we knew from last time, like Monpazier, Villereal or Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Our sunny two weeks at Laborde made for a nice change from the Atlantic coast, to where we returned now.

Euronat: a popular naturist village on the Atlantic

When we arrived back at [Euronat](#) on August 17th, 2013, it was peak season and therefore quite different to our previous stay in spring. We instantly knew that check-in wouldn't be fast, when we were greeted by hostesses distributing free refreshments to all new arrivals, before we joined the queues at reception. It looked like on an airport with several booths. We were a bit unlucky, as we joined a queue behind a family, who arrived without reservation. For some reason, this always seems to take ages, whereas check-in for those with a reservation and pictures in hand for their "dog-mark" (guest-pass), is always quite efficient.

Anyway, we got the same luxurious mobile home we had occupied already in spring. Upon arrival, we met again the neighbours who are permanents and they exclaimed: "Dieu merci; you are back. The families that were here in the



meantime, all made sooo much noise". Despite the mobile home being clean, it showed quite a few scars it had gotten during the last 9 weeks. However, we couldn't complain about any noise, as all our present neighbours were rather quiet.

Most of the chalets and mobile homes were now occupied, either by their owners or then by holidayers renting. Of course, also the vast campground was now full and all over there was a lively, but not crowded atmosphere. This is thanks to Euronat's smart and generous layout. In contrast to most other naturist resorts, all accommodation at Euronat is privately owned. This results in varying standards, as every dwelling is equipped and decorated according to its owner. Hundreds of mobile homes, apartments, chalets and big houses can be rented through

reception. Some are a bit older, some a bit newer, but standards are in general higher than in places, where the company who runs the business, owns the rentals. At Euronat, probably most accommodation has satellite TV and many come with

additional trimmings, like air-con, baking oven, dishwasher or washing machine. So, if you reserve in time, you have a good chance to get what is important to you. Its best to write or phone, instead of making a reservation with the internet-booking tool. We were lucky, we managed to grab a nice 38m² mobile home with baking oven and dishwasher.

Though Euronat hosts up to 15'000 naturists during peak summer, it feels never really crowded. That's mainly thanks to its big size, allowing a smart layout with plenty of open space, strategically positioned between pitches and plots. The estate in the pine forest measures 335ha and is divided into separate areas for camping with tents, caravanning, mobile homes and chalets. If you're in a tent, it is much more pleasant if you are not cornered by rows of caravans! The extensive built up housing area, is divided into "villages" named after continents. The roads in each continent, are named after adjoining countries and islands. Many roads lead, like clover leaves, into a dead end and only a few connect to the next "continent". The plots are all located along those clover leaves, leaving much more open space than if the parcels and pitches would be in a raster shaped road layout. It's very pleasant to walk or cycle around Euronat and within a short time, you can move around the world, from Iceland all the way down to Africa.

Once you're there, it feels as if Apartheid was still in place. But here, the estates are almost exclusively owned by Germans. In Africa, it's particularly popular to let privately and this is always clearly marked with a sign in German only: "zu vermieten von privat" - after all, this is an occupied territory and not France. Maybe they are after milking their compatriots only. According to our experience, not only at Euronat, but in other holiday resorts as well, you often get the better deal, if you rent from the reception, rather than directly from owners.

A beach in the change of tides

As said, Euronat is a huge place and depending on where you're located, it's a few hundred metres, or up to three kilometres, down to the beach. From our mobile home it was a pleasant 2,2km stroll till you approach the central- or the south beach. The first things you see on each of them, are hundreds of bicycle racks, a toilet and shower block and a small snack stall. Then you stand atop of the dune and see down to the vast beach, dotted with sinking bunkers from WWII that had been washed out of the dunes. The first time we went there, was on the beginning of May. It was high tide and the waves reached the dune. We wondered, where the thousands of sun seekers that are expected for the summer, should sunbathe. Euronat has long found a solution to that: every year, they heap up large sand terraces and hope they will last for the summer. These sand terraces are also needed to suppress the ground water that leaks out from the dunes. If you walk along the beach, you find many sections where the water flow, out of the dune, is so strong and so enriched with minerals, the outflows become very colourful little creeks. In one part, black and copper coloured mineral layers cover a several metres high sand-wall, it looks now like a trickling waterfall. In some places, it formed blackish, rainbow coloured grottos, with stalactites and stalagmites.

The natural beauty of Euronat's beach has certainly lots of charms but people flock down here by the thousands, because they can strip-off in the first place. Euronat stretches for about 1.6 km along the beach, but you can walk in the nude for almost 5km in either direction, before you get to textile beaches. And much further still, if you don't mind to curtain your beauty, until you've passed the sexy covered bathing beauties and beach boys.

We really liked it that Euronat assigned only one section of the beach for dogs, whereas dogs are banned from the vast part, including the two supervised beaches. Live-savers are present from mid June to mid September and most people gather near them. Mid August, there are very many families with children, but towards mid September, they decreased more and more and the average age of beachgoers increased. At low tide, even with thousands of sun seekers, there was plenty of space, as the water retreated sometimes so much, the beach became up to 300 metres wide. At high tide however, even those who like to sunbathe in the middle of nowhere, had to retreat to the dry sand terraces and join the crowd. From there, it is fascinating to watch the crushing waves and quite relaxing, because there are no beach hawks, except one ice-cream vendor.



As much as we liked the beach, if we really wanted to swim, we had to go to the pool. There is a big indoor pool, two outdoor pools, a paddling pool and two small toboggans. It's all supervised and very well organized, but we didn't feel very attracted to it. Apart from July and August, it's only open on 6 days a week, and only, for some three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon. The indoor pool feels functional and cool, perfect if you train for a swimming competition, but not much fun for children, as it's mostly very deep. However, the outdoor toboggans are open from Mai till October.

Loosing and gaining weight

Apart from normal holiday activities, Euronat has a wealth of organized animations and workshops on offer during season and most are for free i.e. included in the price... On the other hand, outdoor pursuits like mini-golf or tennis, are organized as in "other towns" of 15'000 inhabitants: you go to the privately run sports-centre and there it's pay and play. Unusual for true naturists: most tennis players wore atrocious white dress, instead of their beautiful birthday suit.

Euronat's biggest profit-centre is certainly the Thalasso. There, you can treat yourself to a few hours in the sauna, hammam or saltwater pool. But that's not how they earn their money. They prefer you to buy one of their 6-day health and slimming, or anti-stress and relaxation packages. However, we suspect that those treatments produce more stress than they take off you. At least, many of those patients who pay to be looked after for a whole week, are so stressed, they don't even take time for the healthiest part of their treatment: a relaxing walk or bike-ride to get to the Thalasso Centre, so they have to resort to their cars!

At least most holidayers use bicycles to move around Euronat's vast ground. Some bring their own, others rent one here. Of course, it makes you much faster than if you leg it. Heinz took every morning half an hour, to walk to the bakery and back, as the loop was more than two kilometres return. However, it was worth every millimetre. Euronat has the best bakery we had ever seen all over France - and we know many! The selection of breads they sell, is just amazing! There are more than 40 different types of loaves on offer, some brown, some white, all crusty fresh (...if toast munchers know what we mean...). It took us a solid three weeks, until we had tried them all. The bakery remains open 365 days a year, as many people live permanently on the ground. For the busiest time, the bakers have worked out a smart system, so that

nobody has to queue for too long. Up to five vendors are giving out breads and with it, you go to one of three cash registers. Euronat's bakery manages to keep its high standard even if it's very busy, and they certainly do much better business than any out in the greater region. The bakers take into consideration that the majority of holidayers come from Germany and they like dark brown bread.

At the bakery, you feel certainly the upside of German influence, whereas at the two supermarkets in Euronat's shopping centre, you feel rather the downside, as they are quite badly stocked. If it comes to grocery shopping, many Germans unfortunately stick to the habit "Geiz ist geil" (greed turns you up). As the closest supermarket outside, is a German super-discounter, there is not much business left to the shops inside Euronat and this is reflected in their selection. Luckily, Euronat's 25 stores and restaurants do include also a deli, a butcher and a fish monger. So, between June and mid September, it's easier to deal with the limited selection of the supermarkets. We loved to get fresh fish regularly and a good piece of meat, once a while. Many campers took advantage of the carbon grill, the butcher fired every day for his customers. There are many more shops and Restaurants. Noteworthy businesses include a Crêperie and the Petit Café that serves Japanese dishes like Sushi, among more popular dishes. To make sure, people don't run out of money, a cash dispenser is located amidst the shops.



Sights around Euronat



More shops and restaurants (not necessarily better ones), can be found in the nearby village of Montalivet, which is so dead during most of the year, every cemetery appears lively, compared to it. During summer holidays however, it's so bustling, you can't tumble over. The surroundings don't offer many sights and there are hardly any bigger (naturally grown) villages to be found - only resort villages. Tourist managers of Montalivet know, how much tourists love visiting markets and that they usually loosen the purse strings, while on holiday. So they filled the void and organized a big market to fill their streets and to cash up. We couldn't believe our eyes, how big this market is, and still less believe our ears, when we were told that it is

held every single day, from July to mid September! But if you're looking for something useful, you probably drop before you find it. It's almost only about tourist crap!

Sights of the Médoc include mostly castles. It's either a "chateau d'eau", a water tower, or an estate that enhances itself with the name "castle". Those wine-makers, are not interesting to teetotallers like us, because they only intend to sell legalized drugs - a pity for the sweet grapes.

As the Atlantic coast has so few permanent residents, it's hard for good restaurants to establish themselves. The only star we found in the gastronomic sky, is "chez Gilles & Marika" at the Hotel de France in Vendays-Montalivet.

We invited Valery & Alan, friends who live nearby at CHM Monta, for dinner at our mobile home in Euronat. Another time, they treated us to a day out to Blaye, at the other shore of the Gironde River. We parked the car at Lamarque and took the ferry, from where we enjoyed outstanding views to a number of little fishermen's huts on stilts, called "carrelets". The appealing town of Blaye has an ancient citadel, which was the designation of our journey.



Bookings

At Euronat, we also met up with Heidi & Michael a few times. They are a German couple we know for quite some time and they happened to arrive at Euronat the same day we did. After they saw our mobile home, which we rented through reception, they felt quite a bit cheated with the chalet they rented straight from the owner. Ours was a fair bit cheaper and looked much brighter and more appealing. Furthermore, we had loads of empty cupboards, whereas the few they had, were mostly filled with the Landlady's personal belongings. We were not that much surprised about it, because we have looked quite a few times at private rentals in naturist resorts and always found them less competitive than if you book through receptions. One thing is, that you often have to pay hefty additional fees to the resort, if you rent privately and most landlords don't seem to study the price-list and discounts properly.

We are very used to booking everything by ourselves and if we sometimes see a brochure of a travel agent, we always chuckle about how dependent they judge their clientele. Here, we found a catalogue from, a naturist travel agency (Oböna from Germany) and we couldn't believe they are no better than any other. Customers interested in visiting an American Resort, are warned that English is the only language spoken over there. Those interested in visiting some of the European resorts, are advised to bring their own sun beds, plus a caddy to carry them down to the beach, wherever sunbeds cannot be hired. To minimize the risk that their valuable clients have to talk to foreigners (non-compatriots) when checking in, at big places like Euronat, Oböna operates an own reception with German staff. To us, individual-travelling globetrotters, it was mightily amusing to flip through their brochure.

When we make our bookings and travel arrangements, we use meanwhile mostly the internet. So we took advantage of Euronat's vast Wi-Fi network that covers the entire campground and the area with mobile homes. Around the chalets, there are different private networks. Even if it wasn't cheap, it was comfortable to connect the computer from our dwelling. Luckily, Euronat offers flat fees with unlimited access for those staying a bit longer. Sometimes it got quite slow, though mostly it was reasonable, unless there were many other people around.

Those coming on weekends only, were usually the owners. Most of them didn't come here to relax in the first place, they rather came to work on smaller or bigger projects and to clean. You could tell right away, if a mobile home is being rented out regularly, or not. Those of owners, who come all the time, are clean and have tidy gardens, whereas others, of which owners only appear once a year for a holiday, but otherwise let, often have very mossy façades. Never the less, from the inside they look nice and clean too.

Change of season

It's amazing, how quick a big place like Euronat can fill up and empty again. You don't realize this so much if you walk between chalets and mobile homes. They rent out well, and many people live here year around, or at least all summer long. So, accommodations are always well occupied. Around the campground however, it is obvious how the season changes. The section for tents fills up for the shortest time, which is only about two months. Caravans, on the other hand, come and go with low off-season prices and with school holidays. Number plates on the cars reveal that also on this patch, most holidayers come from Germany, though the place is also popular among French, English and Belgians. The yellow number plates of Dutch cars seem to appear mostly in the absolute peak- and absolute off-season, but not very much in between.

Nature reflects the change of season more than people. When we arrived here the first time, yellow gorse bloomed everywhere, throughout May. It still rained a lot but finally the summer heat took over. As of the second week of

September, the rains set in quite often again. The now vacated pitches on the forest floor burst in purple, with a wonderful display of heather, and once a while you see even some roe deer. Exactly on the calendric beginning of autumn, summer came back with temperatures raising again close to 30°C.

Whether it's hot or cold, sunny or humid, a long walk along the beach is always rewarding and we walked between 10-30km daily, mostly in the buff. To the common man it might be hard to believe that Euronat manages to attract up to 15'000 nude sun seekers at once.



However, the demand is much bigger. Only seven kilometres down the beach, you find CHM Centre Héliomarin Montalivet, another naturist centre, hosting a further 15'000 nudies. Additionally, many bathers flock from small textile campgrounds in the hinterland, to bathe in the sea.

As we had stayed at CHM before, we were curious, how it looks there now. So we walked there twice along the beach. We carried a sarong, as we expected to pass many textile bathers, not only around the village of Montalivet. The opposite was the case! Most of the seven kilometres was one wonderful, almost uninterrupted, free beach. We only needed to wrap twice for a few hundred meters, before reaching CHM-Monta.

Euronat and CHM-Monta both have their peculiarities and choosing between two good options is hard. It's also a matter of personal preferences that come into play, but we can't mix the two. As CHM-Monta was the cradle of naturism, it attracts many modest, full hearted naturists, who were happy with simple comfort. Only recently, CHM caught up to become a modern competitive naturist resort. Euronat, on the other hand, developed from the begin, as a modern holiday village. Thereby attracting more German guests than French, whereas CHM was somehow the opposite. Meanwhile, they both became more even, though we still see differences.

After sneaking in to the area with the shops, we had a look around CHM's two supermarkets and bought a soft drink. After seeing the abundant and attractive choice of groceries, we weren't surprised that we had to queue for a while, something that never happened in Euronat's supermarkets.

We rewarded ourselves for the caloric-intense activity with a delicious piece of cake from the bakery. There, we found the selection of breads (still) to be a far cry away, from what you get at Euronat. Obviously, different nationals create different demands. If it comes to food, the Germans demand proper bread and the French proper everything. We still remember the French Lady, who asked us on a supermarket

freezer, whether we had seen her desired "Glace caramel au beurre salé de Guérande" (Caramel ice-cream with a pinch of salted butter, but not any salt; salt from the famous Guérande saline).

We took to the beach again, as we had one and a half hours to get back. Just when we reached Euronat, the sun disappeared red and romantic into the sea.



France: cross-country direction Switzerland

After an unusually long and sunny summer, we left Euronat on October 5th 2013. Slowly moving eastwards to Switzerland, we allowed plenty of time to make sure we don't have to turn our backs on the sights along the way. Behind Bordeaux, we followed the Dordogne River for the best part of the afternoon, heading thereafter to [Brive-la-Gaillarde](#). After taking a hotel room, we explored the pretty old-town that boasts - even by French standards - an unusually good choice of restaurants with sophisticated menus. Just a pity to us that those places are not only famous but also very popular. So, on that Saturday night, we had to ask in five different places, until we finally got a table.

We devoted the next day to visit picturesque villages and towns. First we got to **Turenne**, only 15km from Brive-la-Gaillarde. It's glued to a hillside with the ruins of a big fortification atop.

In the next valley, we visited [Collonges-la-Rouge](#), a pretty village famous for its red sandstone buildings. We admired the diverse architecture of the historic reddish buildings, of which many have turrets.



Of totally different appeal is the fortified renaissance village of **Salers**. Though it only has 360 permanent residents, the small town appeared extremely lively. For every inhabitant, they get more than 1000 visitors annually, bringing the number up to 400'000 tourists every year. As it rained upon arrival, we accomplished the tourist industries' expectation and headed straight to a restaurant, where we had a few excellent Crêpes.

Well fed, we toured the alleyways lined by tall houses constructed from black volcanic stone. It has been quarried from the surrounding Auvergne Mountains in the southern Massif Central. Here you find Europe's largest volcanic region, though the fire-spitting stopped long ago.

To a big part, the Massif Central consists of rolling green hills and there you often find the endemic Salers mountain cows, a red-brown breed with the unkind fate to end up as the sought-after Salers beef. With their distinctive long horns, they can be identified on up to 7000 years old rock paintings.

For the night, we headed to **Aurillac** where we found a good bed and a Vietnamese meal for a change. The town has a rather modern newer part, but also narrow alleys with old-town houses.

Extinct Volcanoes all over

The next day, we took advantage of the brilliant weather and ventured further into the Massif Central. We started with the "route des crêtes, D35" which leads over hilltops above the Jordanne Valley, offering great views all the way. To the south and west, we mainly saw green pastoral hills with Salers-cattle, to the north and east, we distinguished numerous volcano cones. Altogether, the area around Clermont-Ferrand boasts 40 "Puys" how the volcano cones are called in French. We headed to "Col du Pas de Peyrol" on 1588m, just below [Puy Mary](#), one of the extinct volcanoes. After admiring the great vistas and enjoying the multi-media show in the interesting visitors-centre, we had lunch. The very popular restaurant on the mountain pass served local specialities. Our side-dish e.g. was "Truffade", a delicious blend of mashed potatoes and Auvergne cheese.



After zigzagging through spectacular landscapes, we reached Mont-Dore, a rather touristy spa town on the Dordogne. The source of the Dordogne River is actually on Puy de Sancy, within the community borders of Mont-Dore, some 200km away from what is known as the political Dordogne District. While we continued over Col Robert, fog came in. As evening approached anyway, we looked for a quarter in **Besse-et-Saint-Anastaise**, a small village packed with old grey houses, full of character.

On the next morning, we paid a short visit to Saint-Floret, another village listed as one of the prettiest of France. It rained and so we continued without many detours, though on small roads leading through countryside and forests. The city of **Roanne** was to be our next overnight stop. While strolling through its large pedestrian area, we found more appealing eateries than we could take. The one we chose turned out to be excellent and the two kilometres back to our hotel, made a perfect digestion walk.



Touristy highlights on the next day, included the town of **Charlieu** with its many picturesque half timbered houses, and the rocky gorge of the Ain River.

That night, we ended up in **Saint-Claude**, an unexpectedly large place in the French Jura mountains. Here we were quite near the Swiss border, so we spoiled ourselves once more with “a last” (...) French gourmet meal. On the next morning, we were convinced it’s only a stone’s throw to Switzerland. However, in the mountains, roads don’t lead as straight as the crows flies and are not always down in the valleys. After a lengthy summer, it was exactly today when winter had its first rendez-vous. So we had to fight for more than two hours through ever denser snow until we finally reached lower altitudes. Though we got quite hungry, we wisely called off our initial idea of having a “last” lunch in France. Instead, we waited until we reached Orbe in the French part of Switzerland. Meanwhile, it was almost two o’clock but with some good Luck, we found parking just in front of a Thai place. The restaurant was soon closing but as Asians don’t know a word for “no”, and maybe also because we remember the Thai words for “hello”, and for some of our favourite dishes, Heinz could talk the Ladies into preparing us an excellent noodle meal in the wok.

How long we’ll stay in Switzerland, where we’re going to venture afterwards and whether we sample more Thai Food, will be revealed in the next part of our travelogue...

Brigitte & Heinz



more pictures on our Homepage



** real name know to Brigitte & Heinz, any resemblance to a living person is purely coincidental*