

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz
Winter in Switzerland and Brittany,
Tulip blossom in the Netherlands



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Switzerland: sunny, remote mountain valleys

Many of our relatives and friends probably think, we must be weird, as we stopped working 1999, to become permanent



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

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

notebook.

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

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

Zernez: a perfect holiday flat embedded in a perfect landscape

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

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

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

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

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

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



Golden autumn in the Engadin Valley

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Perfectionism and marketing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Unexpected inconveniences

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

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

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

With a stroke of Luck to the Valais Valley

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

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



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

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

Saas Grund: plenty of sun and snow

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cut off!

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

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

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



locals, but photo obsessed tourists couldn't get enough of it. With a blue sky, it looked really fantastic. Sometimes it was just challenging to bring the camera in a position higher than the snow walls. Except along winter hiking paths or cross-country ski slopes, you had sunk immediately deep into the fluffy blanket as soon as you left the car.

According to locals, most mountainous villages in the area hadn't received that much snow in decades. Anyhow, the snow masses we had seen on about 1'600m during January, were an impressive sight indeed, BUT: they piled still less than half as high of what we had seen in Norway on 800m above sea level in May 2010; all things are relative!

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



Final thoughts about our stay in Switzerland

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

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

France: passing the Loire Valley

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

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

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

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

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



Brittany: sunshine, crêpes and stunning seascapes

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

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

Summery Morbihan Coast

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

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

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

Megaliths and old customs

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



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

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

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

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

Through South-Finistère to Crozon Peninsula

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Finistère's northern coast and interior

Now it was only 1 ½ hour’s drive until we reached our second apartment in Brittany, on March 3rd 2012. This time, it was a 100m² holiday house, situated in the hamlet Moguéric, west of Roscoff. Though we were impressed how elegant the renovated house had been decorated, we laughed most about the modern trash bin. It opened its “mouth” automatically

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Côtes d'Armor: yet another highlight

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

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

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

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



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

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

Farewell from Brittany

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

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

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

Northwards through Normandy

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

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

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

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

Bruges; a Belgian jewel

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



The Netherlands in spring: flowers everywhere

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

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

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



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

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



Flevo Natuur: naturism below sea level

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

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

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

The naturist holiday park is located on Flevoland that is an interior island of 1’419km², reclaimed from the Zuiderzee. After the 32 km long Enclosure Dam (Afsluitdijk) was completed in 1932, the water was slowly pumped out. Ten years later, the first reclaimed area was inaugurated: “Noordoostpolder”, followed by “Eastern Flevoland” in 1957 and “Southern Flevoland” in 1968.

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

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

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

We rented a mobile home that was rather like a small house. On 45m² there was a generous lounge with upholstery, a big kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom. The well appointed house was very cosy and we were glad it had central heating. Due to the persisting cold spell, with temperatures between 0°C and 9°C, we only sat out in the sun for some 15 minutes. However, the saunas, the indoor pool and its location among tulip fields, made our stay at Flevo Natuur very rewarding, despite the Arctic April weather.

In Noordholland's sea of flowers

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

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

The weather was still freezing cold and we couldn't give the nearby naturist beach a thought. We didn't rent bicycles either but went sight-seeing by car or foot. But more and more tulip fields came now in bloom, of which also Northern Holland has plenty. As they don't solely grow tulips in this region, but also other flowers that bloom earlier, we were able to admire impressive flower mosaics all the time, and they got more plentiful the longer the more.

Whereas cut flowers are being grown in hot houses, the flowers in the fields are cultivated for their bulbs only, as mentioned before. Because the farmers are keen to direct the plant's energy into the bulb, rather than into the flower, the fields are being mown the way that most flowers will be "beheaded" just when they look best in tourists' eyes. With so many huge fields abound, flowers pop out quicker than farmers can cut, so flower spotters still have ample opportunities to walk, cycle or drive among a sea of flowers in a firework of different colours.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Brigitte & Heinz



[more pictures on our Homepage](#)

