

Monday 27 June

I shall just have to draw a veil over a quiet weekend. I wake to cloudy skies but as the cloud lifts so do my spirits and I have two pilgrims tonight.

My plan to visit Château Meillant comes to nought as, despite saying it is open, it is not. I should have trusted my instinct, very little is open in France on a Monday. Instead, I head for Dun-sur-Auron. I don't know anything particular about the place but it has a belfry and ramparts so a walk may be interesting. During my walk, I am accosted by a Jehovah's Witness who sees it as her mission to persuade me of the right path to salvation – in french. Do I need that?! I extricate myself firmly and hopefully diplomatically.

The stand out feature of this town of 3,600, souls, much smaller than Fordingbridge, is the ¹Mairie. The mayor of any french town is an important chap and wields a certain amount of power, his fiefdom, the Town Hall is generally large and important, proudly proclaiming the values of the french republic In our travels we have seen many fine examples of the genre, even Bouzais has a smart modern Town Hall. Dun-sur-Auron is no exception and the flower display is to die for but what on earth do they find to **do** in all those



¹ Town Hall

rooms?

Time to head back, within minutes of arriving Sarah, a 25 year old student of history of art in Paris arrives at the door. She has turned up on spec now we will be three tonight. Sarah is a charming, sensitive soul and veggie, thought this might be the case. She tells me she was standing but 10 metres from the cathedral of Notre Dame when the spire fell during the fire of 2019.

Soon after Françoise and Michel arrive. They are leaving their car in Gérard's garden and walking as far as Limoges where they will take the train back to St Amand-MD. Michel is an old hand at pilgrimage, Françoise is a beginner.



Rémi did not stay at Bouzais but dropped by this morning just to see what the refuge was like. I could not even persuade him to have a cup of coffee

Tuesday, 28 June

There's no doubt I'm starting to feel de-mob happy. This is not because I am not enjoying myself, I am but it is a strain talking in french most of the time.



Sarah



Françoise and Michel

Today I want to ride along the Canal de Berry. It will be beautiful and peaceful and remind me of the happy time Damian and I had riding along the Canal du Midi during Manche-Med. I only have three days left and I never like to leave that sort of thing to the last day.

As I expect, the canal cycle track is leafy and tranquil; in its previous life it was the canal tow-path. To my surprise, I pass a turn-off to the château of Ainay-le-Viel. I wish I had known this last Sunday, this route would have been quicker and oh sooo much cooler. I also

pass the site and remains of a roman amphitheatre at Drevant, built in the first century AD. I am not particularly a fancier of roman buildings it is nevertheless pretty astonishing for it to have lasted twenty centuries.

Just as I am riding into St Amand-MD, I meet someone who can only be a pilgrim. He's walking with a staff and has the typical brown felt hat St James is shown wearing in all representations of the Saint as pilgrim. It should be noted that St James has another representation as St James Matamoros, St James the Moor-Slayer, an altogether a more belligerent representation.

I remember I am expecting Bruno tonight and in this serendipitous moment we realise we have bumped into each other but it will be an hour at least before he is on the doorstep. In addition to Bruno I am also expecting Edwin from Holland.

Bruno has some blister issues but he's philosophical about them – blisters are just part of the journey.



Edwin and Bruno

Wednesday, 29 June

Today is my last day of good weather. The forecast has been unequivocal; it will rain tomorrow 'pleuvra des cordes' as the french would say. I must make best use of this day.

Bruno is first off on his way, complete with his 'camelbak'. This is the go-to accessory for walkers indeed any endurance endeavour and a far cry from the dried gourd the medieval pilgrim would have used.



Edwin



Bruno

I'm out of the door at 10.00 am heading for Château de Jussy which has a garden. It is at quite some distance but it is a fabulous day and I want to be outside. I am the only visitor to this quintessential french château, all chisel pointed roofs but it doesn't really have a garden, certainly not in the sense of Prieuré d'Orsan. There is no opportunity to visit the château, shutters are firmly closed. It is not

so much a garden as open parkland . I walk round but feel a tiny bit uncomfortable, nobody knows I'm here and, not for the first time during this fortnight, I find myself thinking what am I even **doing** here?



Château de Jussy

In truth, Jussy is a bit of a disappointment but I must get back. I have a belgian couple this evening. Jean-Pierre and Roos. We spend another happy supper together; they want to be on their way at 7.00 am and are well prepared for rain which is scheduled.



Roos and Jean-Pierre

Thursday, 30 June

As predicted, it is pouring with rain when we all wake up but my pilgrims are well prepared with all-covering bright orange ponchos, nobody is going to miss this pair as they walk along. They settle up and prove to be the most generous of all the pilgrims.



Jean-Pierre and Roos. The first wet departures but the rain will clear by afternoon

So that's it, my fortnight is done and I have enjoyed it. I would have enjoyed a few more pilgrims, they are all interesting folk and I have loved hearing their stories and their backgrounds. On average, I've welcomed 1.5 pilgrims per night. I've most enjoyed two or three per night, five was fine but would have been a bit much every night. I think it unlikely any pilgrims will arrive for tonight. I can therefore reconcile my account and send it off to Chef d'Hospitalité, also check my stocks for Jean-Pierre who arrives tomorrow. He has

promised to be here by 3.00 pm which will give me enough time to drive up to Tours.

I want to take a last look at St Amand-MD. If I decide to be an hospitalière again next year I may try one of the other three refuges on the Voie de Vézelay, I feel I have seen this little corner of France.

I'm going to have lunch again in Bar des Halles but it is heaving, I guess Friday is popular and lunch time is much more popular than evening dinner in smaller towns. There is no room even for a single person. I go next door to La Lanterne, almost as busy but just room for me. I have a lovely lunch but find eating on my own a lonely, dispiriting experience.

I head back to the refuge to pack and clean. Neither task will take long.

Friday, 1 July

Jean-Pierre excels himself and arrives at midday. I don't recognise him at first as my successor as the person who climbed out of the a small magenta coloured car was wearing a skirt. This could not possibly be my successor, I'm sufficiently 'old-school' to expect J-P to be wearing trousers or shorts. I couldn't be more wrong. Jean-Pierre has a beard, skirt and blue tights – very french.



Jean-Pierre



Gérard and self

My last task is to introduce Jean-Pierre to Gérard. I'm not sure what the latter will make of J-P, Gérard seems to me a real man's man. After handing over the cash box and stock I'm heading out of Bouzais, destination Ibis Hotel, Tours Sud.

Saturday 2 July

I want to be away early from the Ibis, Tours. I have to be up at Cherbourg by 2.00 pm to meet Barbara off the Poole ferry. She is coming as a foot passenger expressly so we can visit La Marine Hotel at Carteret. Some time ago we discovered we had both visited this lovely hotel with our husbands. Damian and I had taken my parents for lunch there during a 'booze cruise', the last time to celebrate my Mother's 80th.

It will take me at least four hours but the autoroutes are marvellous, well surfaced, well signed and above all so much freer of traffic, we would kill for our motorways to be as open. However, this all comes at a price and one pays fairly handsomely for the privilege. However, it's a no-brainer and I am up at the ferry port with an hour to spare.

It all feels slightly surreal to be meeting Barbara in France.

We head back down to Carteret and check in. La Marine is just delightful, a world away from formulaic Ibis with location and views to die for.



Hotel La Marine, Barneville-Carteret

Once settled in to our rooms, we take a walk out along the beach before heading back to change for dinner. When I last visited 20 years ago, our meal was a gourmet extravaganza and we were introduced to the idea of an ²amuse bouche. I fancy La Marine is going to have upped its game considerably in the intervening years, certainly there are plenty of staff to attend to one's every need.

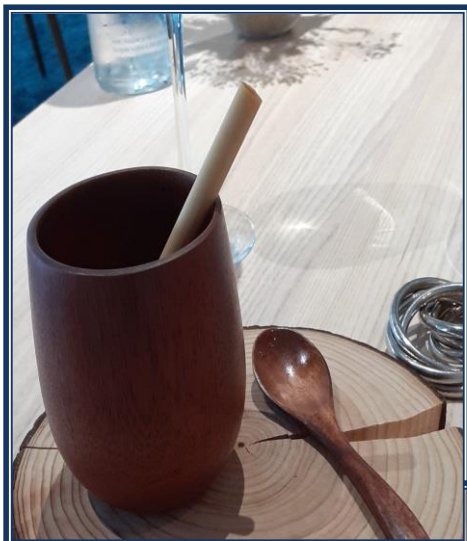


View from La Marine



Amuse bouche

² Translation: something to amuse the mouth-an appetiser



*A gourmet
extravaganza, not
much of anything
but truly delicious!*



Sunday 3 July

Barbara and I have a lazy breakfast and decide to walk round to the other half of the town, properly known as Barneville-Carteret, each village sitting either side of the estuary.



View of La Marine from the Barneville side of the estuary

It is a glorious day and, even better, there is a tiny, and I mean tiny, market in Barneville, nevertheless, it is bigger than Vallenay. We walk along the beach passing this magnificent beach front house. Was the planting intentionally to show solidarity with Ukraine? We'll never know.



We take a ride out to the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula and then head back to Cherbourg for our 6.00 pm ferry.

It's been an adventurous three weeks, so different from holidays of the past, fun in its own way and I've enjoyed it enough to say I will do it again next year. Perhaps I may go further to one of the other refuges down near Bordeaux. On va voir, as the french would say.