

TRIP TO FRANCE (LOIRE VALLEY AND BRETAGNE) SEPTEMBER 20 TO OCTOBER 10, 2011

In the months leading up to our departure, we (i.e., Lee) did yeoman (yeowoman? yo, woman?) work in these areas: (1) deciding which regions of the Loire Valley and Bretagne (Brittany) to visit; (2) scouring web sites for suitable lodging; (3) negotiating with super travel agent Stefan Bisciglia of *Specialty Cruise and Villas*, a family-run travel agency in Gig Harbor and part of the *Virtuoso* network of travel agents around the world, about the arrangements; (4) working with Stefan's French contact, Florent Maillet, of the French* travel agency *Chocolatine*, about which places to visit, where to stay, and how to secure a private guide (Simon Jeannet) for the châteaux of the Loire valley; and (5) reading helpful web sites and blogs.**

*Well, we thought that Florent lived in France, but we later discovered that he's based right here, in West Seattle. The guides (like Simon), we assume, are in France.

**Two of the most useful were: <http://parisandbeyondinfrance.blogspot.com/> for its advice on blending-in at French restaurants and not acting like a tourist; and "Any Port in a Storm" (<http://tinyurl.com/2555vaf>) by an American stone mason living in Paris - it's a well-written guide (with glorious photos) to Brittany's menhirs and dolmens, a.k.a. "more stupid stones" according to his wife and (sometime) reluctant travel companion.

Readers of my Baltic/Denmark travelog (<http://web.utk.edu/~rmagid/Europe2010.pdf>) may recall the sciatica pain that arose intermittently during the trip, most noticeably in the last couple of days. Since that time, I had surgery (laminectomy, if you please) to "cure" the problem. Alas, it is not cured. I still suffer from significant numbness of both lower legs and feet and occasional bursts of pain. I was lucky that there were no flare-ups of pain on this 2011 trip until near the end. (On October 17, the day that I begin writing this travelog, the pain is severe. Lucky me! I've since had two corticosteroid shot, but the pain is still present.) Of course I still suffer from frequent and unpredictable nosebleeds, but they are neither painful nor life-threatening (I think).

In the Baltic/Denmark travelog, and in several of its predecessors, I used the acronyms **TWOU** and **TMOU** to refer to Lee and me. These are shorthand for "the woman of us" and "the man of us," expressions used by John Barth throughout his wonderful *Tidewater Tales*. I do not plan to use these in the present journal; nor will I use other acronyms associated with my wife during her brilliant (and often peripatetic) career in chemical research and science administration. These include: **OBLOTN** (our blessed lady of the neutrons), **EATCOUT** (executive assistant to [the] chancellor of UT), **VPUK** (vice president of UK), and **SWMBO** (she who must be obeyed). Instead, I will refer to her as Lee and to myself as I. How novel!

In the course of the trip, I took some 2400 pictures!! I considered uploading *all* of them to my Picasa account but finally decided against it: some of the pictures were awful; others were poorly lit; some were very very very very repetitious; and some showed the two intrepid travelers in a less than flattering light. At this point, I don't know how many I'll upload, but by the time this account is "published" you'll be able to view them at <http://picasaweb.google.com/ronmagid>. (To put the eight French albums in the order that we visited the sites, click on *upload date* at the top of the picasa page.)

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 TO WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21

For our 1:50 pm nonstop flight on Air France* from Seattle to Paris, we arrange for the ever-reliable

*This flight is code-shared with Delta, but all attempts to print boarding passes and luggage claim

checks from the Delta web site, the day before, failed. Apparently, Air France insists that passengers present themselves at the airport counter to be inspected for worthiness.

Harbor Towncar and Airport Service to pick us up at home at 10:45. It's a beautiful day in Gig Harbor and we regret (but just for a moment) that we have to leave it behind because we know that rainy/cloudy fall weather is coming soon. We arrive at Seatac at 11:30, check our luggage at the counter, and breeze through Security, taking advantage of an expedited lane for Business Class passengers. (A word about this: yes, there's much greater comfort and leg room in Business Class than in Coach, but the extra expense is really hard for me to justify, especially since I rarely sleep well on a plane. But, as always, I get outvoted 1 to 1 by Lee.) I'm not sure what triggers it, but the gendarmerie must have detected something threatening on my person because, after going through the magnetometer, I am required to subject my aging frame to a full body scanner. (The video of this event has, undoubtedly, already been posted to YouTube under the title "Who knows what evil lurks on the body of this man?") We get to the Air France Business Class lounge (in an area shared with several other foreign carriers) by noon and remain there until 1:00 when there is an announcement that the plane is boarding.

The plane is an Airbus A330-200. Sacrilege! Only the arrogant French would fly an Airbus into and out of Boeing territory! As for comfort, there is ample leg room, but clearly this is an older plane. For example, the video/movies/flight info/etc. displays seem primitive compared to others we've encountered; and some of them don't work especially well. The pilot announces that the flying time to Paris is 9 hr 20 min, a little faster than that advertised. The doors are closed at 1:45, push-back occurs at 1:50, and we are air-borne at 2:05. (Surprising - the attendants serve juice or wine after the doors have closed - and, of course, they have to scramble to recover the glasses before the plane takes off.) During the course of the flight, I finish the *TIME* magazine that I've brought, along with one issue each of *Yale Alumni Magazine* and *The New Yorker*; I also work some NYT crossword puzzles.

At about 2:45 PDT, the flight attendant offers drinks. I note that they have single malt scotch (Glenlivet) so I ask for one. Had I not stopped her, I think she might have filled a drinking glass as if she were pouring soda. As it was, the portion was *very* generous. Hic! At 3:15, lunch/dinner/whatever is offered - and it is quite elegant: an *amuse bouche* (quail with chestnuts and cranberry preserves), an appetizer (smoked breast of duck and scallop flan), a main course (from the five choices I pick tournedos of beef in shallot sauce with potatoes and vegetables), a cheese selection, and a dessert (from the three, I choose sorbet and fresh fruit), and coffee. There is also accompanying wine ... and, of course, I'm still sipping that "family-sized" scotch.

In contrast to our trip to Stockholm last summer, when it never got dark during the entire flight, this time (following a similar route over Canada, Greenland, and Iceland), it gets dark at about 5:30 pm PDT as we cross Hudson Bay (the local time is probably 7:30 at this point). Although it's probably a hopeless exercise, I recline my seat and close my eyes at 6:30 PDT and try to sleep. Nada! Try again at 7:00. Rien! I make a final try at 8:00 - and this time I get about 15 minutes of sleep before I'm wide awake. So I resume reading *The New Yorker* and I re-set my watch nine hours ahead for Paris time. At about 5:30 am (Paris time), the flight attendant brings a couple of boxes of cookies and a 3.7 oz container of Häagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream that comes with its own spoon inside the lid; I eat about 1/3 of it. Lee, bless her untroubled conscience, sleeps well and misses this treat.

After Iceland, we fly southeastward, just touching the western edge of Scotland and then over Manchester (not New Hampshire), Birmingham (not Alabama), and London (not Kentucky). First light comes at about 7:20 as we are passing over England's Lake District, but cloud cover prevents our seeing any of the major cities on the route. Breakfast is served at 7:30: juice, fresh fruit, coffee, pastries and rolls, and from a selection of three possibilities, I choose blueberry crêpes with vanilla sauce. The clouds persist as we cross the English Channel and invade (I mean enter) French air space near Rouen. In fact, we will not finally see French soil until we break through the cloud cover at 8:20 at an altitude of 4,000 feet. And it is a lovely scene, as are all European countrysides from this vantage point: well-groomed farms, nice

villages well separated from others, many of the houses with red roofs.

The plane lands at 8:25, 10 minutes ahead of schedule. Good, say I to my own self, this will give us the opportunity to make a brief diversion to Chartres on our drive from Paris to Amboise. But the mean-spirited "gods of the airports" have other things in mind for us. To begin, *Charles de Gaulle* airport is enormous and we taxi up and down numerous paths as we head to the terminal for Air France's international flights. We *finally* arrive at about 8:55 ... and come to a dead stop on the tarmac. The pilot says that there'll be a brief delay. Hah! We see a yellow-vested crew that seem to be preparing for our arrival at the gate, but mostly they are just milling around and having long conferences. The wheel blocks that had been readied are put away. Ditto for the orange wands. The person operating the jet-way comes down to the tarmac to join the conversation, as do two additional people (one man and one woman) in suits. The jet-way person returns to his post, then comes down again, and the conference continues. How French! We imagine that they are debating the question of whether this flight is worthy of being unloaded at their own gate. A baggage truck arrives, then departs. And we are still on the taxi strip, not more than 50 m from the gate. The pilot then moves the plane to a different terminal but finds no welcome mat there, so he heads to an open area, nowhere near a terminal, where staircases are brought up to the plane and we are bused to passport control/immigration. By this time, it's about 9:30, a full hour after landing .

The luggage arrives very slowly (so much for the value of "priority" tags!) and we make our way into the main terminal. We choose an ATM that seems to be very popular because there is already a long line to use it, but we really have no choice as it seems to be the final one before the exit door. We then locate and enter the AutoEurope building, which is very hot - not because of the weather but because they have their damned heaters on! Sharing the building with AutoEurope are Avis, National, and Hertz - these latter three have either short lines or none, but AutoEurope is much more popular: the line is long and moves slowly, very very slowly. Lee thinks that she sees an alternative counter in an adjacent building, so she goes there to investigate. I remain on the original line which is still just creeping forward. After about 10 minutes, Lee comes to the window and signals for me to join her. Turns out that the man at the second counter told her that it's not really his job to do the paperwork for the car, but he agrees to do so. Even so, it's still a slow process. Then he gives us the "good news" - "We don't have the Audi A3* that you

*We wanted a car with air-conditioning, but that required that we choose a manual transmission. (Only the higher end cars have A/C and automatic transmission.) The Audi, while smaller than the A4 that we drive here, is a hatchback that we hoped would allow us to stow our luggage.

requested, so we're giving you an upgrade at no additional cost." "What kind of car?" "It's like a Jeep." "No! That's too big, we don't want it." "You don't understand - it's not big like an American Jeep, it's much smaller. Check it out. It's a Peugeot 3008."

PEUGEOT 3008 We locate the car in the lot. It's a crossover, smaller than an American SUV but still larger than we would have liked. Nevertheless, we decide to give it a try. Among its features, for better or worse, are: a heads-up display of the speedometer and other gauges (which we finally figure out how to get rid of); warning beeps and colored visuals (green bars that become yellow and then red, along with increasingly loud beeps) that tell when the car is too close, either at the front or rear, to an obstacle (this is also annoying, but does come in handy when we're in a terribly-designed parking garage in Quimper, a few days from now; however the warning signals it do not distinguish between a solid barrier and a bush or shrub); a "cielo" roof (i.e., a sliding cover that still leaves the glass/plastic roof intact); cruise control (which we never use); and separate A/C controls for each passenger. (For a picture and details, see: <http://www.peugeot.com/en/products/cars/peugeot-3008.aspx> although ours was a depressing dark brown instead of the slick silver shown at the web site.) According to the specs at this web site, the length (after converting from metric to God's units) is 172" and the width of the body is 74" (the width between the edges of the side mirrors is 83"); for comparison, our Audi is a bit longer (181") and barely narrower (70"). The Peugeot gives the impression of being much bigger because there is no protruding trunk and hood,

as in a regular sedan. It is also higher off the road at 64" vs. 56" for the Audi.

As we drive it, we are pleased that it handles well, accelerates with gusto, and is quite thrifty in its consumption of fuel. It does take some getting accustomed to the clutch which, unlike that in our 1999 Passat, engages with only a short displacement from full extension - the first few times I start up, the car tends to shoot ahead until I become accustomed to the clutch behavior. The car has a six-speed transmission (I have to be careful, back in the U.S., not to shift the Passat from 5th gear to a non-existent 6th, lest I put the car into reverse at highway speeds) along with an indicator light on the dash that tells the driver when the car "wants" to go to a higher gear; I'm surprised at how low a speed the car "demands" 4th gear, for example: at about 40 k/h). The instruction manual, alas, is in French, no surprise; but what is most terminally weird is that the display panel that gives the warning signals (see above) is programmed in German! That is, when starting one is greeted by a warning message that the *Feststellbremse* is on. (There's probably a way to switch languages but, as I said, the instruction manual is in French.) Two nice features are window shades that can be raised on the windows in the back seat, and a "hill assist function" that holds the car for two seconds and prevents it from rolling backwards when one is starting on a hill of at least 3%. Very nice, eh? One strange feature: unlike cars imported to the U.S., in which only the passenger-side outside mirror has the words "Objects are closer than they appear," in this car both mirrors are thus "afflicted"; it takes some getting accustomed-to before one realizes that the small car in the driver's side mirror is actually very close. The car has a diesel engine and gets very good mileage (kilometerage??); over the trip, we average about 38 mpg. [There are all sorts of "helpful" videos available online, among which are: <http://tinyurl.com/3fr9fh9> for the hill assist function; <http://tinyurl.com> with its "Jaws"-like music; <http://tinyurl.com/3oczjsn> for a Dutch-language review, accompanied by misspelled English subtitles; <http://tinyurl.com/3px7l6y> for a Brit and his lovely assistant Jenny who show the features of the "boot"; and <http://tinyurl.com/3h8n4v9> and <http://tinyurl.com/3qbt4k2> for untranslated Russian descriptions of the car's behavior in snow or in good weather, respectively.]

Armed with instructions from the web site of our first hotel; and with maps from Google, from *The New York Times*, and from the car rental agency, we boldly set our sights on the drive to Amboise, some 250 km distant (which Google estimates should take just under three hours). Hah! First, Google doesn't account for our missing a turn, while still in Paris, and finding ourselves headed in the wrong direction. So we exit the highway, re-enter, and point the car the right way. This wrong turn plus the time wasted at the car rental plus the interminable wait for an airport gate convince us that we cannot take the detour to Chartres. The drive to get past Paris is harrowing. Not only do the highways change names (e.g., Google instructs: "Take the Périphérique Sud exit on the left toward A4/A6/A10/Aéroport Orly/Porte de Montreuil") but the drivers are very aggressive and not very willing to let a visitor (moi!) change lanes. On top of this, there are numerous instances of lanes closed for construction, forcing me to switch lanes without much advance notice.

But worst of all are the motorcyclists. I had read about them, but didn't believe their behavior until I witnessed it. While cars are proceeding at speeds of about 70 k/h, the motorcycles would wind through traffic, passing us at speeds of at least 100 k/h, and (most frightening) doing so within a lane that already has a car in it. That is, I would find myself passed simultaneously by a bike on my left and another on my right, both of them within the white lines that define my lane (or what I naively believe is "my" lane). Well, we escape Paris unscathed (somehow) and hit the open road where the speed limits gradually rise from 90 to 110 to 130 k/h (the maximum for French roads). After about 100 km, we stop for coffee - and Lee drives the rest of the way to Amboise. What I just love about driving in Europe and Canada is how the odometer "spins" so rapidly when calibrated in kilometers rather than miles.

Although the day started cloudy and cool in Paris, as we drive south to Amboise the clouds part and the day becomes warmer (maybe 25°C?). We locate the hotel, *Le Manoir les Minimes*, easily but can't figure how to enter its grounds. Its address is 34 Quai Charles Guinot, a road that we drive from east to west, with buildings on our left and the Loire on our right. We see a wall with Numéro 34 on the left, but the street onto which we'd like to turn left has a "no entry" sign. Huh? So we continue along the road for some distance until we finally find a place to turn around. Returning to the corner where we couldn't turn,

we see the problem: the entrance to the hotel's parking area would have been a 310°-turn when approaching from the east, but a very easy turn, although through a relatively narrow gateway, when coming from the west. (Over the next three days, when our guide drives the car with us as passengers, he has difficulty negotiating this turn until he devises a scheme: approaching the gateway, he swings to the *right* - much like an 80-year-old inexperienced American driver - turns on his *left* signal, and sticks his hand out the window to warn cars behind him - even so, he barely makes it in one shot.)

The hotel and its grounds are beautiful: <http://www.lemanoirlesminimes.com/index.html> And that's a good thing because we'll be here for five nights as we explore this part of the Loire Valley. Our room is on the "first-floor" (which, of course, means *second* floor). The clerk at the front desk helps to carry our suitcases to the room. His English is better than my French, but not by much - nevertheless, we do converse mostly in English. As advertised, the room is air-conditioned and, *mirabile dictu*, has an American-style thermostat on the wall. Although the afternoon is warm and not particularly hot, we are advised to use the A/C and not to open the windows, lest we allow entry of mosquitoes from the banks of the Loire. (He called them *moustiques*, a word that I actually knew; I also know that one can use a shot of *répulsif* to kill the beasties, if so desired). According to the clerk, the hotel was a former convent whose religious order was called *Minime*. (Indeed, there is a *Couvent Des Minimes* in Lille that has been converted into a luxury hotel with air-conditioning; and there are several such convents throughout Italy.) The free wi-fi in the room is a welcome surprise, considering that their web site claimed free internet access only in the business center. (I note that they've now changed this wording.)

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT FRENCH ROADS: The highway system in France lived up to its positive press, not only for today's drive but over the rest of the trip. Aside from our problems negotiating our way through Paris, we found that the roads were well-marked, clearly signed, relatively free of potholes, and not congested. (Of course there were the road construction crews, here and there, with lane changes and reduced speeds.) The major *autoroutes* are designated A followed by a number; often they also have the simultaneous designation E and, sometimes, a third sobriquet N. For example, on the way to Amboise we were on the A10/E05/E50. (For an explanation, see **FINAL OBSERVATION**, below.) The high-speed roads have maximum speeds of 110 or 130 k/h, depending on congestion; and most people do follow the speed limits. (Exceptions were various high-end German vehicles like Mercedes and BMWs, but bearing French license plates so that the excesses cannot be blamed on foreigners.) For the most part, drivers stay to the right, unless they want to pass. Trucks, however, have lower speed limits. Every truck has decals on the rear that show, for example, 50, 70, 90 which are their maxima for roads that are 70, 90, 110/130. (Farm vehicles display only one decal: 25, which is *very very* slow if one gets stuck behind one.) Interestingly, all of the speed limits (except for that 25) begin with odd digits; so does the speedometer display on our dashboard (and on all cars?).

MORE ABOUT FRENCH ROADS: Several of the *autoroutes* are privately owned and, therefore, tolled. We paid 18.30€ on the way to Amboise and will pay 25.60€ when we return on October 9 from Fougères to Paris. (There were also a few smaller tolls on other days.) Paying a toll has its own complications. Although toll plazas, either on the highway or at an exit, have multiple lanes, there usually is only one lane that we could use because we did not have a transponder that would allow us to sail through nor a European-style credit card with a computer chip buried within. The chip-less American credit cards proved to be useless at toll booths, car parks, pay-and-display stations, and even one restaurant. So on the toll roads, we had to pay cash, and, therefore, we had to find a lane that had a booth with an attendant. Related to this, we had to be careful where we stopped for diesel fuel. The lowest prices (perhaps 1.30€ per liter) were available in service stations associated with super markets, but they were all unmanned - and, as was the case for toll booths, our credit cards would not work in them. To re-fuel, we had to find a station that was associated with a convenience store (or whatever these are called in France) which one enters to pay for the fuel, either with cash or an American card; some of these were free-standing in or near cities, but most were on the various high-speed roads and, as is also true in the U.S., more expensive (typically 1.45€). The excellent Michelin maps showed all roadside service stations as well as all rest stops, so it was easy to plan the day's drive.

FINAL OBSERVATION ABOUT FRENCH ROADS: The N roads are maintained by local governments. Often they are two- or three-laned with fairly high speed limits. But, invariably, upon entering a town the speed limit drops to 50 or even to 30. To "encourage" drivers to go slowly through towns, the road often becomes very narrow and there are concrete abutments protruding into the lane causing the driver to zig-zag and to yield to oncoming traffic if it has priority. Even more minor than the N roads are the D and still more minor are the C. <http://www.france4families.com/drivinginfrance/FrenchRoads.htm> tells us:

"Sometimes the French road numbers can be confusing, especially where you see two or even three road numbers on the same sign. A common one is to get an 'A' and an 'E' number on the same sign, for example the A18-E402. A18 is the French autoroute number, E402 is the road this becomes when it heads into another European country. Less common, but more confusing is where roads join and numbers combine temporarily; for example you may see road number A15-N14-D55. This would mean that these roads all follow the same route at this point, so if you're following the N14, you're still on the right road."

We had purchased excellent Michelin maps for each region* that we'd be in: *Centre* (which includes Blois,

*Julius Caesar may have written that "all Gaul is divided into three parts," but modern France is divided into 26 *régions*, which are further sub-divided into 101 *départments*, whose further sub-division leads to 36,382 *communes*. According to Wikipedia, "The *départments* are subdivided into 342 *arrondissements*, which in turn, are divided into *cantons*. Each *canton* consists of a small number of *communes*." These older-series Michelin maps, 17 in number, are being replaced by an even smaller scale set of 45 local maps; perhaps these would show some of the very minor roads on which we would get lost, from time to time.

Tours, and Amboise), *Vallée de la Loire* (which includes Angers and Nantes), and *Bretagne*; alas, we had none for Paris and environs, which we could have made good use of when leaving the airport. (Lee recalls our trying to navigate our way along "community" roads designated VC: for example, when we were trying to reach the *Grand Cairn De Barnenez*, my intrepid navigator located these very minor roads (see the entry for October 4), shown in white outline (or even not shown at all) on the Michelin map, and not even carrying a printed number designation, that we wound around ... and around ... and around before giving up, returning to "GO," and finding an alternative.

Back to Amboise. After unpacking, I wander through the hotel to take pictures (of our room, of the public rooms, and of the breakfast room) before going outside to take pictures of the grounds and of the Loire with its beautiful (characteristic) bridge. Two of these images show clearly the very difficult 310° turn that's needed to enter the hotel parking area from the east. We ask the clerk for a dinner recommendation. He directs us to a table in the entryway that has *cartes* from a large number of restaurants, all in walking distance. We choose L'Épicerie (<http://www.lepicerie-amboise.com/>), which is on Rue Victor Hugo, a pedestrian street/mall (well, sort of a pedestrian street/mall) just west our hotel, and in the shadow of *Château* Royal d'Amboise*. A huge edifice, high on the hill above town, the *château* has an interesting

*To our American ears, a chateau is a mansion; but in France, the designation *château* is used for royal mansions, fortresses, castles, whatever. We will visit a great many of them throughout the Loire valley, but we skip this one (*château-overload*) despite Simon's urging that we visit it. His reasons: it has the grave of Leonardo da Vinci and, according to Simon, indecent (even lewd) sculptures high up on the outside walls. (Simon seems obsessed by sex, but who's to say that that's a bad thing, eh?)

and bloody history. According to Wikipedia,

"Expanded and improved over time, on 4 September 1434 it was seized by Charles VII of France, after its owner, Louis d'Amboise, was convicted of plotting against Louis XI and condemned to be

executed in 1431. However, the king pardoned him but took his chateau at Amboise. Once in royal hands, the château became a favorite of French kings; Charles VIII decided to rebuild it extensively, beginning in 1492 at first in the French late Gothic Flamboyant style and then after 1495 employing two Italian mason-builders, Domenico da Cortona and Fra Giocondo, who provided at Amboise some of the first Renaissance decorative motifs seen in French architecture.

"King Francis I was raised at Amboise, which belonged to his mother, Louise of Savoy, and during the first few years of his reign the château reached the pinnacle of its glory. As a guest of the King, Leonardo da Vinci came to Château Amboise in December 1515 and lived and worked in the nearby Clos Lucé, connected to the château by an underground passage. Tourists are told that he is buried in the Chapel of Saint-Hubert, adjoining the Château, which had been built in 1491–96. Henry II and his wife, Catherine de' Medici, raised their children in Château Amboise along with Mary Stuart, the child Queen of Scotland who had been promised in marriage to the future French Francis II."

Note the sly "tourists are told" - clearly a da Vinci code for "it ain't necessarily so." According to a footnote at the same Wikipedia site, "Records show that Leonardo da Vinci was buried in the church of Saint-Florentin, part of the Château Amboise. At the time of Napoleon this church was in such a ruinous state, dilapidated during the French Revolution, that the engineer appointed by Napoleon decided it was not worth preserving; it was demolished and the stonework was used to repair the château. Some sixty years later the site of Saint-Florentin was excavated: a complete skeleton was found with fragments of a stone inscription containing some of the letters of Leonardo's name. It is this collection of bones that is now in the chapel of Saint-Hubert." Oh well, I guess that bones is bones, but their existence (or not) was not enough to entice us to visit.

The hotel clerk reserves for us at 7:00, typically the earliest hour that French restaurants open for dinner. So we linger in the room, use the internet to check email, and read: I begin Jane Gardam's *The Man in the Wooden Hat*. (This is a sequel to her wonderful *Old Filth* which I had read in Wales in 2009; well, not really a "sequel" as it relates the same events, but from the viewpoint of Betty Feathers, the wife of Sir Edward. I read an unrelated Gardam book, *The Queen of the Tambourine*, last summer on the Baltic cruise. Ms. Gardam had better get busy and provide some new reading matter before we take our Iceland-Norway cruise next summer.) My lack of sleep (just 15 minutes on the plane since arising in the morning on September 19) is catching up with me as I find myself dozing while trying to read. So we leave the hotel at 6:15 and take advantage of the late afternoon sun to wander through the streets of the town, observe the shops (and, of course, the massive château), take pictures of the scene, wander into a restored old church, and then make our way to the restaurant where we choose to eat outside, along with most of the other customers. French restaurants do not allow smoking inside, but the restriction does not apply to outdoor diners; and, of course, there are passersby who are also smoking. Even more annoying are the many cars and motorcycles that whiz by (on a pedestrian street?), all of them with mufflers designed to cause as loud a noise as possible. Even with such distractions, I come close to falling asleep in my plate several times.

The day is warm when we begin our meal, but as nightfall comes the temperature falls and it is actually chilly by the time we finish. I try to stay in French as much as possible when ordering our meals, but when I falter one of the servers comes to the rescue with excellent English translations (e.g., I can't remember to how to order my steak medium - the key words are *à point*). Lee orders *le menu: foie gras de canard, escalope de sandre, plateau de fromages* (which she gives to me), and *tartallette à la vanille mouselline aux poires*, all for a reasonable 28.90€. Burp! I order *à la carte*: green salad, *tournedos de boeuf*, vegetables, potatoes of some sort. And of course the cheese plate from Lee's *menu*: a wide variety of cheeses from the region of which I sample three - the only one I didn't care for was a strong-tasting goat cheese.

We return to the hotel by 10:00 and I am ready of crash! Alas, I awaken at 2:00 am and can't fall back to sleep, so I get up and read for two hours, then return to bed and sleep until 6:45.

A final comment: all of the plumbing in our room is very new and modern, but with a most curious quirk. Both the sink and the tub have a single handle faucet with a blue dot (for cold) to the right and a red dot (for hot) to the left. Sounds reasonable, eh? Well, it turns out that, for both of them, one must turn to the blue side to get hot water and to the red for cold. (We can even see the pipes under the sink that cross one another before connection to the faucet.)

PUN ALERT: This gives me the chance to use a wonderful two-language pun coined by Alvin Nielsen, former Dean of Liberal Arts at UT, when he encountered the identical situation in a French hotel many years ago. Alvin told the desk clerk the next morning, "Your *chaud* is a *fraud*!"

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22

In the morning, there is a new clerk at the desk and his English is even spottier than the one from yesterday. Nevertheless I try Nielsen's pun on him ... and he just doesn't get it. I discover that he doesn't know the English word "pun" (and may not even understand what a pun is in French). To appreciate Alvin's witticism, he would have to know that I'm saying *chaud* in French, not *show* in English; and that I'm saying *fraud* in English, not *froid* in French. Finally I give up. Never did I think I'd ever have the chance to appropriate this pun from years ago ... and never did I think that I'd be unable to explain it. When sending emails to several friends concerning this, some took it very literally: one said that puns have to rhyme, and mine fails because *fraud* and *froid* do not rhyme. Nuts, say!! Another friend, who knows French, wrote "A pun is a *calembour* (or more simply a *jeu de mots*). If you had said *fraude* for *fraud*, he would have understood the whole thing (Votre chaude est une fraude), but perhaps it would not have been a real pun."

The morning begins cloudy and very overcast, but it will soon change to sunny and mild. In fact, we will not encounter rain until late into the trip, on October 6. We are told by several hotel clerks that France, like the Northwestern U.S., had had no summer weather in June through August, but that they welcome the unexpected warmth here at the end of September. We are not so pleased, because as we go through the next two weeks, the daily highs will rise from about 25°C to 33°C, and the three hotels that we have booked in Brittany will have had no air-conditioning.

Although *Le Manoir les Minimes* has no restaurant, it does have a charming breakfast room where orange juice, a basket of rolls and breads, and a pot of coffee are brought to the table. (At most breakfasts, Lee wanted *café au lait*, so a pitcher of hot milk is brought as well.) The rest of the food was self-service: cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, ham, dry cereals (of various kinds). The man who brings the juice and coffee is dressed in a rather typical French fashion: he is wearing a long-sleeved dress shirt, but the shirt hangs loose outside his pants and the cuffs are unbuttoned under his casual jacket. Simon, the guide whom we will meet in a couple of hours, similarly affects the unbuttoned cuff motif; he takes his casual jacket off when in the car, but always puts it back on (along with a lanyard-ID indicating that he is an official guide) whenever we enter a *château* or other attraction.

After breakfast, we peruse the collection of *cartes* and ask the clerk to make a reservation for us at 7:00 at *L'Alliance*, relatively near where we ate last night. Our schedule for today takes us to *Château Chambord* (some 50 km and one hour's drive northeast of Amboise) in the morning, to the town of Blois (about 20 km west of Chambord) in the afternoon, and then back to Amboise (about 35 km). We meet Simon downstairs at 9:30. He is a slender, well-groomed, late-30s(?) Frenchman, who proves to be exceedingly knowledgeable about French history, agriculture, scenery, the various *châteaux* (of course!), and politics, which he carefully skirts when I try to gauge his opinion of current events (the Eurozone, immigration, Arab headdress, etc.) He offers to drive and I gleefully accept, thus allowing me to make notes and take pictures from the car. And he likes "our" car very much: the way it handles, the transmission, and (especially) the acceleration; he drives relatively fast, but not dangerously and, almost always, within the speed limit. I greet him in French and he, thinking that I actually can speak the language, offers to do his spiels in French; I squelch that idea, but I am pleased that he answers *Oui* when I ask, *Vous comprenez mon français?* Throughout this day and the next three, I will try to formulate my questions in French, but

most of the time we speak English.

We drive through rolling farm land and along the Loire for much of the drive to Chambord. I remark that the river seems broad but shallow and, indeed, this is the case. Although it is France's longest river, it is not navigable, except by small privately-owned fishing boats. In fact, the "Loire cruises" that ones sees advertised actually take place on the Cher, a tributary of the Loire, and various canals.

We arrive at Chambord at about 10:45. Our first view of this flamboyant structure leaves us groping for the most extravagant adjectives. There are several excellent websites for the château, among which are these: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/france/the-loire/chateau-de-chambord> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chateau_de_Chambord

At the Lonely Planet URL, one reads,

"Châteaux don't get any grander than Chambord, built starting in 1519 by François I so he could hunt in the Sologne forests. You'll see his emblems – the royal monogram (a letter 'F') and salamanders of a particularly fierce disposition – adorning many parts of the complex, which has a feudal ground plan. Though forced by liquidity problems to leave his two sons unransomed in Spain and to help himself to both the wealth of his churches and his subjects' silver, François I kept 1800 workers and artisans busy here for 15 years. In the end, though, he stayed at Chambord for a total of only 42 days during his long reign (1515–47). The chateau's most famous feature is the **double-helix staircase** [four centuries before Watson and Crick's DNA structure!], attributed by some to Leonardo da Vinci, which consists of two spiral staircases that wind around a central axis but never meet. It's easy to imagine dukes in tights chasing (Loire) Valley Girls in long skirts up one spiral while countesses in crinolines pursued ruddy gardeners down the other... This giant strand of DNA leads up to the Italianate rooftop terrace, where you're surrounded by so many towers, cupolas, domes, chimneys, mosaic slate roofs and lightning rods that it's like standing on a gargantuan chessboard. It was here that the royal court assembled to watch military exercises, tournaments and the hounds and hunters returning from a day of stalking deer."

And from Wikipedia,

"The royal Château de Chambord ... is one of the most recognizable châteaux in the world because of its very distinct French Renaissance architecture which blends traditional French medieval forms with classical Renaissance structures. The building, which was never completed, was constructed by King François I in part to be near to his mistress the Comtesse de Thoury, Claude Rohan, wife of Julien de Clermont, a member of a very important family of France, whose domaine, the château de Muides, was adjacent. Her arms figure in the carved decor of the château. Chambord is the largest château in the Loire Valley; it was built to serve as a hunting lodge for François I, who maintained his royal residences at Château de Blois and Château d'Amboise. The original design of the Château de Chambord is attributed, though with several doubts, to Domenico da Cortona. Some authors claim that the French Renaissance architect Philibert Delorme had a considerable role in the château's design, and others have suggested that Leonardo da Vinci may have designed it. Chambord was altered considerably during the twenty years of its construction, (1519–1547), during which it was overseen on-site by Pierre Nepveu. With the château nearing completion, François showed off his enormous symbol of wealth and power by hosting his old archnemesis, Emperor Charles V at Chambord."

The history of the French kings makes for interesting reading and for some confusing and very bloody narratives. For an excellent chronology from Chlodio the Longhair [great name!] (428-448) through Napoleon III (1852-1870), see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_French_monarchs François I (often shown in French texts as François Ier (François Premier, but it looks like François Ler*)) loved to hunt

*Such typographic confusions often appear in internet and computer names when there is an upper

case letter in the middle of a word. For example, there is a hard drive backup program called Drivelmage (i.e., Drive Image) that I always read as Drivel Mage. Similarly the program for displaying digital images from our new Pentax camera is called MediaImpression (i.e., Media Impression).

there. Well, there was no MTV or Angry Birds (except for real ones) at that time ... and one had to fill the hours. According to several sources, he spent a fortune of treasure and human toil building this extravagance and then spent only a handful of days on the premises. Simon tells us that the only 21st-century person authorized to hunt on these grounds is the President of France. Well, I guess that one can't spend all of one's time trying to stabilize the euro and impregnate Carla Bruni.

The mammoth structure has 426 rooms, 77 staircases, 282 fireplaces (which means that 144 rooms must have been cold during the winter). Only a fraction of the rooms (and staircases and fireplaces) are accessible to visitors, a good thing because we'd have been here for days had we visited every last one. The most striking feature, as noted above, is the double spiral staircase, which climbs to the second floor (which is really the first, as we are in France) and then to the third (second), and finally to the roof (roof) where one is confronted by the grotesqueries that were viewed from afar. Numerous commentators*

Why do we write and say "commentators" when "commenters" would go just as well? Good point! I won't do it again.

have likened it to a chess* board (albeit a board whose pieces or creator thereof are on LSD). Although

*A blogger has shunned the chess pieces metaphor and replaces it with: "At first glimpse, the immense symmetrical wonder (almost as long as two football fields) flaunts a fantastic array of towers, windows, dormers and hundreds of decorative chimney stacks. The roofline resembles an Old World town whose buildings hint of Seussical whim. Certainly an ideal place for a game of hide and seek." [<http://www.bylandersea.com/2009/09/france-chateau-de-chambord-a-da-vinci-design/>]

numerous pictures of this staircase are available online, most (including mine at Picasa) fail to show how the two spirals intertwine. Nor is there a nice line drawing available anywhere. The only successful picture that I've found is about halfway down at a web site devoted to spiral staircases from around the world: <http://atlasobscura.com/blog/spiraling-out-of-control-the-greatest-spiral-stairs-in-the-world> In this image, one staircase begins on the right in the foreground, the other at the left in the background; the former winds toward the back of the building while the latter comes forward. Most amazing, eh? [Actually, one of my pictures, the second one at Picasa, is not bad, as it shows one helix in the foreground on the left winding to the background as it turns right, whereas the other (whose beginning is not seen) is in the foreground spiraling upward from left to right. I also posted a picture of Lee peeking out from one staircase at me who is standing at an opening on the other staircase. And there is an image, taken straight upward, looking into the lantern tower.]

As the excerpt from Lonely Planet explains, the salamander was the monogram chosen by François I along with a Gothic letter F. This represents not only his own initial but the first letter of France and of the French word *fort* (strength); in most of these, the king's crown is wrapped around the letter; a monk's rope surrounds the letter, signifying eternity. These are seen everywhere: on outer and inner walls, on ceilings, on floors, and (if they had existed at the time) probably on the toilets as well. Why a salamander? It sounds to me like a newt which reminds me of Newt Gingrich - and this ain't a pleasant reminder to have. Simon tries to justify it, but I don't recall his explanation. There was one image that I do recall: a stone relief with water coming out of a salamander's mouth, apparently to put out a fire (although it could also have represented an American baseball player expectorating a stream of tobacco).

We pass through the bedrooms of François I and of his descendant, Louis XIV (about whom a great deal more in a short while); the walls are adorned with paintings of noble people in noble poses wearing noble (and probably very uncomfortable) garments. Several of the paintings depict important moments in French history. (The reader is invited to skip all of the following historical interludes, although doing so will greatly diminish his/her/its appreciation of the characters whom we'll encounter at the various châteaux.) According to Wikipedia (which anglicizes the king's name):

"Much of the military activity of Francis's reign was focused on his sworn enemy, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Francis and Charles had an intense personal rivalry and a bitter mutual hatred which they inherited from their predecessors' wars in Burgundy and Orleans; Charles, in fact, bravely challenged Francis to single combat, multiple times. In addition to the Holy Roman Empire, Charles personally ruled Spain, Austria and a number of smaller possessions neighboring France, and was thus a threat to Francis's kingdom. Francis attempted to arrange an alliance with Henry VIII of England with negotiations taking place at the famous Field of Cloth of Gold on 7 June 1520 but, despite a lavish fortnight of diplomacy, they ultimately failed to reach agreement.

"Francis' most devastating defeat occurred at the Battle of Pavia (24 February 1525), where he was captured by Charles ... Francis was held captive in Madrid and in a letter to his mother he wrote, 'Of all things, nothing remains to me but honour and life, which is safe.' This line has come down in history famously as "All is lost save honour." In the Treaty of Madrid, signed on 14 January 1526, Francis I was forced to make major concessions to Charles V before he was freed on 17 March 1526. Francis was allowed to return to France in exchange for his two sons, Francis and Henry, but once he was free he argued that his agreement with Charles was made under duress, and also claimed that the agreement was void, as his sons had been taken hostage suggesting his word alone was not trusted, and he repudiated it.

"Francis continued to persevere in his hatred of Charles V and desire to control Italy via more wars in Italy. On January 27, 1534 he concluded a secret alliance treaty with the Landgrave of Hesse, directed against Charles V on the pretext of assisting the Duke of Wurttemberg (removed from power by Charles V since 1519) to regain his traditional seat. The repudiation of the Treaty of Madrid led to the War of the League of Cognac. After the failure of the league, he obtained the help of the Ottoman Empire and went to war again in Italy in the Italian War of 1536–1538 after the death of Francesco II Sforza, the ruler of Milan. He was defeated once again by Charles V and forced to sign the Treaty of Nice. However, the Treaty of Nice collapsed and led to the Francis' final attempt on Italy via the Italian War of 1542–1546. This time, Francis managed to hold off the forces of Charles V and England's Henry VIII and Charles V was forced to sign the Treaty of Crepy because of financial problems and problems with the Schmalkaldic League."

Now Simon, a Frenchman, had a different version of the encounters with Henry and Charles. He contends that the English king, Henry VIII, lost his wrestling match (depicted in one of the paintings) with François I, tore up their alliance, and returned to England in disgrace; and that the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, ultimately acknowledged that the French king was the victor because he finally said, "If I was God and had two sons, one of them would get the sky and one of them would get France." (I suppose that this is meant as a compliment to François, but it could also be interpreted as a threat.) Many of the paintings of François I are shown in profile because they were copied from images on French coins. Two of the paintings are adorned by one of his (allegedly) famous sayings which he inscribed on the windows of Chambord, "*Souvent femme varie, bien fol est qui s'y fie*" or "Women are fickle and who trusts them is a fool," words to live by, even today.

Now what about Louis XIV, The Sun King, who reigned from 1643 to 1715? He was the 12th-generation descendant of Louis IX (1226-1270) and the third of the House of Bourbon to rule France. He was the son of Louis XIII, who was the son of Henry IV, who was the grandnephew of François I and also the second cousin and, by first marriage, brother-in-law of Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III. Got it? According to Wikipedia,

"For more than 80 years after the death of King François, French kings abandoned the château, allowing it to fall into decay. Finally, in 1639 King Louis XIII gave it to his brother, Gaston d'Orleans, who saved the château from ruin by carrying out much restoration work. King Louis XIV had the great keep restored and furnished the royal apartments. The king then added a 1,200-horse stable, enabling him to use the château as a hunting lodge and a place to entertain a few weeks each year. Nonetheless, Louis XIV abandoned the château in 1685. From 1725 to 1733, Stanislas Leszczyński (Stanislas I), the deposed King of Poland and father-in-law of King Louis XV, lived at Chambord. In 1745, as a reward for valor, the king gave the château to Maurice de Saxe, Marshal of France who installed his military regiment there. Maurice de Saxe died in 1750 and once again the colossal château sat empty for many years."

Louis XV had the good fortune to die in 1774, just 15 years before he might have lost his head. Wikipedia completes its description of Chambord's history:

"In 1792, the Revolutionary government ordered the sale of the furnishings; the wall panelings were removed and even floors were taken up and sold for the value of their timber, and, according to M. de la Saussaye, the paneled doors were burned to keep the rooms warm during the sales; the empty château was left abandoned until Napoleon Bonaparte gave it to his subordinate, Louis Alexandre Berthier. The château was subsequently purchased from his widow for the infant Duke of Bordeaux, Henri Charles Dieudonné (1820–1883), who took the title Comte de Chambord. A brief attempt at restoration and occupation was made by his grandfather King Charles X (1824–1830) but in 1830 both were exiled. During the Franco-Prussian War, (1870–1871) the château was used as a field hospital. The final attempt to make use of the colossus came from the Comte de Chambord but after the Comte died in 1883, the château was left to his sister's heirs, the Ducal family of Parma, Italy. First left to Robert, Duke of Parma, who died in 1907 and after him, Elias, Prince of Parma. Any attempts at restoration ended with the onset of World War I in 1914. Château Chambord was confiscated as enemy property in 1915, but the family of the Duke of Parma sued to recover it, and that suit was not settled until 1932; restoration work was not begun until a few years after World War II ended in 1945. Today, Chambord is a major tourist attraction. In 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the art collections of the Louvre and Compiègne museums (including the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo) were stored at the Château de Chambord. An American B-24 Liberator bomber crashed onto the château lawn on June 22, 1944."

At about 12:30, we leave Chambord, but the democrat in me can't help reflecting on the grotesque excesses and ego-building of royals, in France and across Europe, as they built edifices to establish their greatness. Though their subjects were starving, no expenses were spared in creation of Versailles, Schönbrunn, Buckingham Palace, Royal Palace of Budapest, and so on. And then there was the additional expense of providing these monstrosities with carpets, tapestries, furniture, linens, etc.; and of course stocking jeweled crowns and armored suits and diamond-encrusted swords in them. If we 21st century Americans are worried about the "We are the 99" crowd, who complain about the 1% who have it "made," think about what it must have been like for the 99.99999% who lived in poverty through the centuries of monarchy. And, of course, if there had been any money left in the state treasury for building roads and hospitals and (heaven forbid) schools for the multitudes, most of it was gobbled up in the construction of magnificent cathedrals, not only in the major cities but in virtually every town. (Why a pious person couldn't hitch old Bossy to a wagon and drive his family to a church in the next town is a mystery to me.) I guess that it's a good thing that I live in "enlightened" times, wherein our needless expenditures are for "important" things: modern warfare, subprime mortgages, video games, and smart phones ... but not (heaven forbid) for schools. (I gotta stop bringing my bruised sensibilities to Europe!!)

We stop for lunch at an outdoor restaurant just beyond the ticket window for Chambord. Having read about galettes at the Bretagne blog mentioned on p. 1, I decided to try one. Prior to planning this trip, I had not heard of these delicacies. I learned as much (or more) as I'd like to know from Wikipedia:

"Galette, or more properly Breton galette (French: *Galette bretonne*, Breton: *Krampouezhenn gwinizh*

du), is also the name given in most French crêperies to savoury buckwheat flour pancakes, while those made from wheat flour, much smaller in size and mostly served with a sweet filling, are branded crêpes. Galette is a type of thin large pancake mostly associated with the regions of Normandy and Brittany, where it replaced at times bread as basic food, but it is eaten countrywide. Buckwheat was introduced as a crop suitable to impoverished soils and buckwheat pancakes were known in other regions where this crop was cultivated, such as Limousin or Auvergne. It is frequently garnished with egg, meat, fish, cheese, cut vegetables, apple slices, berries, or similar ingredients. One of the most popular varieties is a galette covered with grated Emmental cheese, a slice of ham, and an egg, cooked on the galette. In France, this is known as a galette complète (a complete galette). A hot sausage wrapped in a galette (called galette saucisse, a tradition of Rennes, France) and eaten like a hot dog is becoming increasingly popular as well."

So I order a *galette au jambon et fromage* and Lee has one with mushrooms, egg, and cheese. Simon, who must have inhaled his first one, finishes his while we (not normally slow eaters) are only halfway through ours, thus dispelling the myth that the French love their food so much that they linger over a meal for hours and hours. So, he orders a second galette. And, still hungry, he moves from these savory galettes to a dessert type with butter and sugar. (So why is he so slender? The world is not fair!) I order a coffee with mine, but Simon cautions me that I'm likely to be shot if I commit such a "sin" in Bretagne. That is, the *only* acceptable beverage to accompany a galette is cider, whether alcoholic or not. I promise to keep this in mind. (Although we had clouds at the start of the day, the sun is now shining brightly and the day is quite warm. Everybody is happy ... except me. As the sainted and much missed Molly Ivins would have said, *Quel fromage!*)

We drive to Blois, a town of about 55,000 and arrive at about 2:30. The Château Royal Blois, not to be outdone by Chambord, has 564 rooms (including 100 bedrooms) and 75 staircases although only 23 were used frequently; there is a fireplace in each room. The château was the home of seven kings of France and 10 queens. The best online sources are the official web site: <http://www.chateaublois.fr/?lang=en> and, of course, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chateau_de_Blois

According to Wikipedia (and remember, you are authorized to skip any historical digressions, this one lasting for nine paragraphs) :

"The medieval castle was purchased in 1391 by Louis, duc d'Orléans, brother of Charles VI; after Louis' assassination, his widow, Valentine de Milan, retired to this castle at Blois. It was later inherited by their son, Charles d'Orléans the poet, who was taken prisoner at Agincourt and spent twenty-five years as a hostage in England, before returning to his beloved Blois, which he partly rebuilt as a more commodious dwelling. It became the favorite royal residence and the political capital of the kingdom under Charles' son, King Louis XII.*

*Louis Douze (it almost rhymes, but should more properly be Douzième) reigned from 1498 to 1515. He was the great-grandson of Charles V (called "The Wise"); the second cousin and, by first marriage, son-in-law of Louis XI (called both "The Prudent" and "The Universal Spider"); and by second marriage the husband of Anne of Brittany, widow of Charles VIII (called "The Affable"). This inbreeding is getting complicated, eh? Louis's symbol was a fearsome porcupine with a royal crown looped around its quills; Anne's was an ermine. The porcupine and ermine can be seen on wall reliefs, paintings, carvings, etc. And in Bretagne, a stylized ermine tail can be found in numerous places, including the inside and outside walls of cathedrals and on the official flag.

"At the beginning of the 16th century, the king initiated a reconstruction of the main block of the entry and the creation of an Italian garden in terraced parterres. This wing, of red brick and grey stone, forms the main entrance to the château, and features a statue of the mounted king above the entrance. Although the style is principally Gothic, as the profiles of mouldings, the lobed arches and the pinnacles attest, there are elements of Renaissance architecture present, such as a small

chandelier.

"The Château's most renowned feature is the spiral staircase in the François I wing. When François I took power in 1515, his wife Queen Claude had him refurbish Blois with the intention of moving to it from the Château d'Amboise. François initiated the construction of a new wing and created one of the period's most important libraries in the castle. But, after the death of his wife in 1524, he spent very little time at Blois* and the massive library was moved to the royal Château de Fontainebleau where it

*So, if François spent very little time at Amboise or at Chambord or at Blois, where did he stay most of the time? Well, part of it was as a prisoner of the Holy Roman Emperor. But the rest must have been spent in a restless move from château to château, building one, moving on, building another, moving on, and finding time to hunt. The life of a monarch ain't easy, y'know.

was used to form the royal library that forms the core now of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

"Henri II was born in the royal Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, the son of Francis I and Claude, Duchess of Brittany (daughter of Louis XII of France and Anne, Duchess of Brittany). His father was captured at the Battle of Pavia in 1525 by his sworn enemy, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and held prisoner in Spain. To obtain his release it was eventually agreed that Henri and his older brother be sent to Spain in his place. They remained in captivity for three years.

"Henri married Catherine de' Medici* [hiss! boo!] in 1533, when they were both fourteen years old. The

*Simon, our guide, kept calling her "the toad." I've been unable to establish that this is how she was known, either by contemporaries or by historians, so I assume that it is Simon's own sobriquet. Fact is, portraits of her are quite uncomplimentary - but to say that she looks like a toad is probably an insult to the wart-encrusted amphibian (the toad, that is).

following year, he became romantically involved with a thirty-five-year-old widow, Diane de Poitiers. [An older woman? Heavens!] They had always been very close: she had publicly embraced him on the day he set off to Spain, and during a jousting tournament, he insisted his lance carry her ribbon instead of his wife's. Diane became Henry's most trusted confidante and, for the next twenty-five years, wielded considerable influence behind the scenes, even signing royal documents. Extremely confident, mature and intelligent, she left Catherine powerless to intervene. She did, however, insist that Henry sleep with Catherine in order to produce heirs to the throne. When his elder brother, François, died in 1536 after a game of tennis [I wonder if Catherine used a poisoned ball?], Henri became heir to the throne. He succeeded his father on his 28th birthday and was crowned King of France in 1547 at Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Reims.

"Henri's reign was marked by wars with Austria, and the persecution of the Protestant Huguenots. Henri II severely punished them, particularly the ministers: burning them at the stake or cutting off their tongues for uttering heresies. Even those only suspected of being Huguenots could be imprisoned. The Edict of Châteaubriant (27 June 1551) called upon the civil and ecclesiastical courts to detect and punish all heretics and placed severe restrictions on Huguenots, including the loss of one-third of their property to informers, and confiscations. It also strictly regulated publications by prohibiting the sale, importation or printing of any unapproved book. It was during the reign of Henri II that Huguenot attempts at establishing a colony in Brazil were made, with the short-lived formation of France Antarctique.

"The Italian War of 1551–1559, sometimes known as the Hapsburg–Valois War, began when Henri declared war against Charles V with the intent of recapturing Italy and ensuring French, rather than Hapsburg, domination of European affairs. Henri II allied with German Protestant princes at the Treaty of Chambord in 1552. Simultaneously, the continuation of his father's Franco-Ottoman alliance allowed

Henri II to push for French conquests towards the Rhine while a Franco-Ottoman fleet defended southern France. An early offensive into Lorraine was successful, with Henri capturing the three episcopal cities of Metz, Toul, and Verdun, and securing them by defeating the Habsburg army at the Battle of Renty in 1554. However the attempted French invasion of Tuscany in 1553 was defeated at the Battle of Marciano. After Charles's abdication in 1556 split the Habsburg empire between Philip II of Spain and Ferdinand I, the focus of the war shifted to Flanders, where Phillip, in conjunction with Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, defeated the French at St. Quentin. England's entry into the war later that year led to the French capture of Calais, and French armies plundered Spanish possessions in the Low Countries. Henri was nonetheless forced to accept the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis, in which he renounced any further claims to Italy.

"The Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis was signed between Elizabeth I of England and Henri on 2 April and between Henri and Philip II of Spain on 3 April 1559 at Le Cateau-Cambrésis, around twenty kilometers southeast of Cambrai. Under its terms, France restored Piedmont and Savoy to the Duke of Savoy, but retained Saluzzo, Calais and the bishoprics of Metz, Toul, and Verdun. Spain retained Franche-Comté. Emmanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy, married Margaret of France, Duchess of Berry, the sister of Henry II, and Philip II of Spain married Henry's daughter Élisabeth. Henry raised the young Mary, Queen of Scots, at his court, hoping to use her ultimately to establish a dynastic claim to Scotland. On 24 April 1558, Henri's fourteen-year-old son François was married to Mary in a union intended to give the future king of France not only the throne of Scotland but a claim to the throne of England. Henri had Mary sign secret documents, illegal in Scottish law, that would ensure Valois rule in Scotland even if she died without an heir. Mary's claim to the English throne quickly became an issue when Mary I of England died later in 1558, Henri and his Catholic advisers regarding Elizabeth I unfit to reign because of her illegitimacy.

"Henri II's reign ended in 1559 and he was succeeded by his son, François II, who ruled for only one year. François's brother, Charles V, reigned from 1560 to 1574 when he was succeeded by Henri III, yet another brother of François. Henri III, driven from Paris during the French Wars of Religion, lived at Blois and held the Estates-General convention there in 1576 and 1588. It was during this convention that the king had his arch-enemy, Henri I, Duke of Guise, assassinated by the king's bodyguard known as 'the Forty-five,' when the duke came to the Chateau for a meeting with Henri in December 1588. They also killed the Duke's brother Louis II, Cardinal of Guise the following day in the dungeons.*

*This incident is treated harshly by the French. The king's bedroom has a painting depicting the assassination; below it is a signboard with these words "In the 19th century, painters re-interpreted events from the 16th century to suit the political climate of the day. The Duc de Guise is shown here as a hero, dead at the foot of the king's bed, in broad daylight. But where is the king? To the left, scarcely daring to re-enter the room, fearful and cowardly!"

"After this, the castle was occupied by Henri IV (known as 'Good King Henri' or 'The Green Gallant') , the first Bourbon monarch. On Henri's death in 1610, it became the place of exile for his widow, Marie de Medici, when she was expelled from the court of her son, Louis XIII. In 1626, Louis XIII gave the Château of Blois to his brother Gaston duc d'Orléans as a wedding gift. In 1635 there was another attempt to develop the castle but on Gaston's death in 1660, it was abandoned."

The official web site tells much the same stories. The interested reader, if he or she hasn't fallen asleep by this time, is encouraged to visit <http://www.chateaublois.fr/?lang=en> and explore its various tabs. The general impression, by this skeptical foreign visitor at least, is that Chambord is restored to its original brilliance and opulence, whereas Blois has been "Disneyfied" for the 21st century tourist. As evidence, there are a sound and light show, duels on the grounds (but only in the summer months), and an absurd display (which we were "fortunate" enough to witness) of animatronic dragons emerging from the windows of the Renaissance wing, wagging their heads, making noises, then retreating as the windows closed behind them.

Simon returns us to the hotel by 5:00, where we rest until going to our 7:00 dinner reservation at *L'Alliance* (<http://www.restaurant-amboise.com/>). This restaurant is a block east of last night's busy pedestrian street/mall and a few blocks north; until we find it, we think that we may be walking the wrong way. The food is good, but not as good as last night's, although the quantities were larger. I start with foie gras, then filet mignon, and coffee; Lee has a sautéed foie gras, pave de boeuf, and coffee. We decide not to have the cheese plate or dessert. Neither the opening *amuse bouche* nor the "weird fizzy strawberry goo" (Lee's description) that came with the coffee are especially good; and I do not care for the rubbed crust on the steak (too much pepper). Lee, who has never forgotten a meal or the wine that was served with it, recalls that we ordered a "fruity red wine from Reuilly (well south and east of Amboise) - like a light pinot noir." We get back to the hotel at 10:00 and go to bed early. (Lee is very tired and I'm somewhat so.) As happened last night, I awaken at 2:15, toss and turn until 3:45, get up to read, return to bed at 4:30 and get about two hours of sleep.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

We awaken at 6:45 and are downstairs for breakfast at 7:30. Like yesterday, the morning begins with clouds that will dissipate and yield to cloudless skies and warm sun as the day progresses. We ask the desk clerk to reserve a table for us at 7:15 at Le Choiseul, which Simon says is one of the two finest restaurants in Amboise. In the breakfast room, there is a contingent of bicyclists (most of them American, by their accents) with a tour director who drives the bus and delivers the bikes. Their voices are a bit loud, but not excessively so. (We've become very particular after just two days in *La France*!)

Simon arrives at 9:30. Today's plan is to drive to Tours (25 km due west along the Loire) and from there to Villandry (another 20 km to the west), and finally to Azay-le-Rideau (some 12 km to the south). The final return to Amboise (60 km) was planned, I'm convinced, so that Simon could approach from the west and would not have to negotiate the 310° turn into the hotel's parking lot.

Tours is a relatively large city (about 300,000 in the metropolitan area) and is the capital of *Indre-et-Loire Département*. It lies between two rivers: *La Loire** and *Le Cher*. We arrive in the city at about 10:15 and

*When planning our trip, I was surprised to learn that there are two rivers with similar names: *Loire* and *Loir*. Jana Jones, who cleans for us and who (obviously stayed awake in high school French and geography classes, told me that the rivers have different genders: *La Loire* and *Le Loir*. The former is the longest river in France (1000 km) whereas the latter runs for but 315 km. We will encounter *Le Loir* when we visit Angers, a few days hence. Lee makes the startling discovery that *le loir* is French for dormouse, which is also called *glis glis*.

stay until 12:30. Simon parks the car in an underground parking lot near the busy city center, and we walk past the train station and city hall to the old district and central square. We wander through the busy streets, filled with tourists and locals, "over-dosing" on the visual display of restaurants and storefronts that line the path. This is what I love to do in another country: see how people live, take pictures of the window displays and signboards, amuse myself with some of the more provocative names (e.g., *Bistrot Gourmand au Chien Jaune*). We walk past *Le Cèdre du Liban*, a magnificent old tree planted by Napoleon, with a spread of 33 m and a height of 31. Our walk also takes us past Elephant-Fritz, a stuffed pachyderm who escaped from the Barnum and Bailey circus in 1904, went mad, and was shot and killed. Pauvre Fritz! And we are finally at the magnificent *Cathédrale Saint-Gatien*, whose steeple can be seen from far away in the city.

The original Cathedral of Saint-Maurice was erected in the 4th century as a Romanesque building, burned down, re-built in 12th century, and burned down during the conflict between Louis VII of France and Henry II of England (also count of Anjou). The present cathedral was built in the 13th century and expanded in the 15th. In 1356, poor Maurice lost his titular claim when the cathedral was renamed in honor of Saint

Gatien, who (in the 3rd century) was sent to Tours to teach the gospel and bring the heathen into the fold. In the chapel is the tomb of two of the children of Charles VIII and Anne of Bretagne; notably, the marble angels who support the pillows of the two children, are not doing their job because their hands have been lopped off, one of many such desecrations performed by zealous *citoyens* during the French revolution.

Anne of Bretagne is one of the most interesting characters that we will encounter on this trip. And we will continue to run into her when he travel through Bretagne, starting on September 28. We've already heard about her symbol, the ermine, whose tail was seen in drawings and carvings in Blois (and is, in fact, the main element in the modern Bretagne flag). Here is some information about Anne from Wikipedia; as noted earlier, you have my permission to skip the next nine paragraphs:

"Anne, Duchess of Brittany, was born in 1477 and died in 1514. She was born in Nantes, and was the daughter of Francis II, Duke of Brittany and Margaret of Foix. Her maternal grandparents were Queen Eleanor of Navarre and Gaston IV, Count of Foix. Upon her father's death in 1488, she became sovereign Duchess of Brittany, Countess of Nantes, Montfort and Richmond and Viscountess of Limoges. In her time, she was the richest European woman. [Not bad for an 11-year old!] Brittany being an attractive prize, Anne had no shortage of suitors. She was officially promised in marriage to Edward, Prince of Wales, son of Edward IV of England in 1483; however, the boy disappeared, and was presumed dead, soon after the death of Edward IV. Others who bid for her hand included Maximilian of Austria (the widower of Mary of Burgundy, another heiress), Alain d'Albret, Jean de Châlons (Prince of Orange) and even the married Louis, Duke of Orléans.

"In 1488, however, the armies of Francis II were defeated at the Battle of Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier, ending the Guerre folle between Brittany and France. In the Treaty of Sablé, which concluded the peace settlement, the Duke was forced to accept clauses stipulating that his daughters were not to marry without the approval of the King of France. Francis died soon afterward, on 9 September 1488, as a result of a fall from his horse. Anne became Duchess, and Brittany was plunged into fresh crisis, leading to the last Franco-Breton war.

"The first necessary move for Anne was to secure a husband, preferably anti-France and powerful enough to maintain Breton independence. Maximilian I of Austria was considered to be the most suitable candidate. Her marriage with Maximilian, which took place at Rennes by proxy on 19 December 1490, conferred upon Anne the title Queen of the Romans, but proved to have serious consequences. The French regarded it as a serious provocation—it not only violated the Treaty of Verger (the King of France not having consented to the marriage), but also placed the rule of Brittany in the hands of an enemy of France. The marriage also proved ill-timed: the Habsburgs were too busy in Hungary to pay any serious attention to Brittany, and the Castilians were busy fighting in Granada. Although both Castile and England sent small numbers of troops to supplement the Ducal army, neither wished for open warfare with France. The spring of 1491 brought new successes by the French general La Trémoille, and Charles VIII of France came to lay siege to Rennes. After Maximilian failed to come to his bride's assistance, Rennes fell. Anne became engaged to Charles in the vault of the Jacobins in Rennes. Then, escorted by her army (ostensibly to show that she had willingly consented to the marriage), Anne went to Langeais to be married. Although Austria made diplomatic protests, claiming that the marriage was illegal because the bride was unwilling, that she was already legally married to Maximilian, and that Charles was legally betrothed to Margaret of Austria, Maximilian's daughter, Anne celebrated her second wedding to Charles VIII at the castle of Langeais on 6 December 1491.

"The marriage was subsequently validated by Pope Innocent VIII on 15 February 1492. The marriage contract provided that whichever spouse outlived the other would retain possession of Brittany; however, it also stipulated that if Charles died without male heirs, Anne would marry his successor, thus ensuring the French kings a second chance to permanently annex Brittany. Anne's second marriage began badly: she brought two beds with her when she came to marry Charles, and the King and Queen often lived apart. She was anointed and crowned Queen of France at Saint-Denis on 8

February 1492; she was forbidden by her husband to use the title "Duchess of Brittany", which became a bone of contention between the two. When her husband fought in the wars in Italy, the regency powers were exercised by his sister Anne of Beaujeu. Pregnant for most of her married life, Anne lived primarily in the royal castles of Amboise, Loches and Plessis or in the towns of Lyon, Grenoble or Moulins (when the king was in Italy). She became Queen of Sicily and titular Queen of Jerusalem with the conquest of Naples by Charles VIII.

"The marriage produced four living children, none of whom survived early childhood. Only the first, Charles Orland (11 October 1492 – 16 December 1495), survived infancy. A healthy and intelligent child, he was doted on by his parents, who both suffered terrible grief when he died suddenly of the measles. After him was born Charles, who lived for less than a month; and Francis and Anne, who each died almost immediately after being born. These tragedies caused a great deal of pain to Anne, who prayed openly for a son after the death of Francis. [The two boys are the ones who are entombed in the cathedral.] When Charles VIII died in 1498, Anne was 21 years old and childless. Legally, she was now obliged to marry the new king, Louis XII; however, he was already married, to Joan, daughter of Louis XI and sister to Charles VIII. On 19 August 1498, at Étampes, she agreed to marry Louis if he obtained an annulment from Joan within a year. If she was gambling that the annulment would be denied, she lost: Louis's first marriage was dissolved by the Pope before the end of the year.*

*This brings to mind Tom Lehrer's introduction to his song, *Alma*: "Last December 13th, there appeared in the newspapers the juiciest, spiciest, raciest obituary that has ever been my pleasure to read. It was that of a lady named Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel, who had, in her lifetime, managed to acquire as lovers practically all of the top creative men in central Europe; and, among these lovers, who were listed in the obituary, by the way, which was what made it so interesting, there were three whom she went so far as to marry." [But I digress.]

"In the interim, in October 1498, Anne returned to rule Brittany. She restored the faithful Philippe de Montauban to the chancellery of Brittany, named the Prince of Orange as Hereditary Lieutenant General of Brittany, convened the Estates of Brittany, and ordered production of a coin bearing her name. She took the opportunity to tour the Duchy, visiting many places she had never been able to see as a child. She made triumphal entries into the cities of the duchy, where her vassals received her sumptuously. Anne's third marriage ceremony, on 8 January 1499 (she wore white, setting a precedent for future brides), was concluded under conditions radically different from those of the second. She was no longer a child, but was a dowager queen, and was determined to ensure the recognition of her rights as sovereign duchess from now on. Although her new husband exercised the ruler's powers in Brittany, he formally recognized her right to the title 'Duchess of Brittany' and issuing decisions in her name.

"As Duchess, Anne fiercely defended the independence of her Duchy. She arranged the marriage of her daughter, Claude, to Charles of Luxembourg in 1501, to reinforce the Franco-Spanish alliance and ensure French success in the Italian Wars; however, Louis broke off the marriage when it became likely that Anne would not produce a male heir. Instead, Louis arranged a marriage between Claude and the heir to the French throne, Francis of Angoulême. Anne, determined to maintain Breton independence, refused until death to sanction the marriage, pushing instead for Claude to marry Charles, or for the Duchy to be inherited by her other daughter, Renee. The marriage of Claude and Francis eventually took place in the year following Anne's death."

We leave the cathedral at about 11:00 and walk some more through the town square and market area. We pass numerous small restaurants and, for the first time on this trip, encounter ethnic restaurants (e.g., from Morocco and Pakistan), an Irish pub, and even a bagel shop. Another signboard proclaims that this restaurant is called *La Lapin qui Fume*. We enter a very old district (*Place Plumerau*) with half-timbered houses and with a plaque above one door indicating that this is the place where Joan of Arc bought her armor in 1429. The most intriguing shop is called "♥Y Loving" (which I guess means "Hearty Loving") and

proclaims that it has "jeux amoureux chics et tendances" (love games and chic trends). The name is written in lurid purple, but most of the clothing in the window seems tame: sailor suits for men and women, but no French maid outfits. On the window are displayed these slogans: "Destination 7^{ème} Ciel" and "Le No. 1 des Love Stores." Their use of "FrenGLISH" entices me to stop, but Lee says NON!

We wander to an upscale indoor food market, with well-lit cases of vegetables, cheeses, poultry, fish, meat, fruits, and (of course) breads. The displays are brilliantly illuminated; and there are many customers buying things. Then it's on to *Basilique Saint-Martin*, named for the 4th century Roman soldier who, it is alleged, cut his military coat in half and shared it with a beggar; following this, he left the military and founded a religious order. The basilica, erected on Martin's tomb, is new, dating from the late 18th - early 19th century. Its style is described as neo-Byzantine, quite a departure from the gothic cathedral we visited earlier in the day. By this time, it is just after noon and Simon is about to expire from hunger, so we stop at a bakery/sandwich shop and buy sandwiches. To forestall fainting, Simon consumes his meal as we walk back to the parking garage; Lee eats hers in the car as we drive to Villandry; and I wait until we arrive in Villandry before having mine. (The previous day, we had accepted Simon's suggestion that we skip the *Château d'Ussé*, even though it had served as the inspiration for the story *Sleeping Beauty* and even though its rooms have wax figures depicting the story - it's a "shame" to miss it, but ...). His preference is that we replace it with the gardens of Villandry and the *Château Azay-le-Rideau*. I can't say that I'm excited to be visiting a "garden" but it turns out to be much better than I had anticipated; and it does avoid our having to see the Disneyfied Sleeping Beauty Castle.

There is a bit of a problem retrieving the car from the carpark. There is no attendant on duty and the automatic *caisse* does not accept Lee's American credit cards nor mine, nor does it take cash (it's broken and will only accept coins). Finally, Lee asks Simon to use his credit card and she reimburses him in euros. We arrive in Villandry at about 1:45 and stop at an outdoor food court, which is making and selling crêpes. I eat my sandwich, while Lee and Simon buy coffees for themselves and for me.

OK, Villandry *is* a garden (of sorts) but vastly different from Butchart Gardens and other famous botanical displays around the world. Villandry is the name of the château, built in 1536, where the gardens are located. A birds-eye virtual view is available at <http://www.chateauvillandry.fr/en/virtual-tour/> where one sees seven different gardens: love, music, water, sun, maze, herb, and vegetable; there are also woods off to the side. The vegetable (or kitchen) garden consists of nine sections, each devoted to a specific type of vegetable, each having C₂-symmetry, and each planted with alternating colors (blue leeks, red cabbages, green carrots, etc.) such that it resembles a chess board. (The plan for the vegetable garden is seen best in one of my Picasa photos.) We wander through the gardens, the maze, the water garden, and gradually climb an incline leading to the château. From there, we look down on the love garden, which is divided into four sections: tender love, passionate love, fickle love, and tragic love - all of which are supposed to be readily apparent, at least according to Simon. Thus, tender love has heart-shaped hedges, passionate love has the same hearts but broken by passion, fickle love has fans in the corner that are the horns of being jilted, and tragic love has daggers and red flowers representing bloodshed. (These descriptions are lifted from the print brochure and are only barely discerned by the casual observer - i.e., moi.) The four can be seen in my Picasa photo proceeding clockwise from the upper left to the lower left; alas the fickle love in the lower right is not displayed well.

We leave at 2:30, and by 3:00 we're at *Château Azay-le-Rideau*. Built on top of an 11th century castle on an island in the Indre River, it is of relatively modest size. One of its most striking features is the mirror pool, wherein the entire building is reflected without imperfection. The best online description is found at http://www.37-online.net/gb/castles/azaylerideau_gb.php although the English is a bit spotty (e.g., "In 1791, it is bought by the marquess Charles de Biencourt. This one is an expert of the agricultural techniques of rationalization still stammering. He facilitates before all the modernization of the parts being used for agricultural exploitation." Uh-huh.) There is a tapestry depicting the legend of Psyche and Eros. I considered relating their story here, but no source tells it in anything like an abridged version. If you are curious - and you'd like to see it written in a modern (even snarky) manner [e.g., "Aphrodite got mighty pissed off, and when that happens, you don't want to be on her bad side"], - see the web site

<http://www.paleothea.com/Myths/Psyche.html> I take many pictures of the rooms and paintings, but because flash is not allowed inside some of them are badly blurred. *Tant pis*. We leave at about 4:15 and return to our hotel an hour later.

We walk to dinner at Le Choiseul at 7:15. Lee recalls having read ... somewhere ... that the restaurant might have had a Michelin* star; we can neither confirm nor deny this. This restaurant is very close to our

*We will, however, dine at three restaurants that do have a Michelin star when we're at Château de Noirieux in Briollay (September 26-27), Château de Locguénolé in Kervignac (October 2), and Le Coquillage in Cancale (October 8), *vide infra* (as we say in the science biz). For a listing of one- two- and three-star restaurants,, see <http://www.viamichelin.com/web/Restaurants>.

hotel, in a very elegant (and expensive!) hotel on the same street just east of where we are located. Pictures and descriptions of the hotel and restaurant can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/4yudywe> and <http://tinyurl.com/3qcx994> The dining room is beautiful (with a view of the garden and swimming pool) and the service is impeccable (well, we are the only diners for a while and, so, are out-numbered by the staff: there are at least three "bread wenches" who deliver rolls; and there are assorted other bringers of food). The meal is delicious: Lee has "mullet" and I have "chicken," but that hardly describes the quality or preparation.

At the Picasa web site, I've posted photos of the *Diner Menu* and the *Diner Carte*. Although the specific main courses that we eat are not precisely described by the posted menus, it's still worth quoting them for their flowery language. Lee's "mullet" may or may not be *Mulet de Loire cuit sur la peau, pomme Macaire aux coquillages, sauce vin jaune*; and my "chicken" could be *Volaille bio "Les Renouées" rôtie, la cuisse en béattiles, crème de céleri branche à truffe fraîche d'été*. (Sounds a lot more elegant than "mullet" and "chicken," eh? I wonder if "bio" means that the chicken had once been alive, but Simon explains that this means "organic." Sigh.) To learn what our meal *really* consists of, I must consult Lee's journal and steal (i.e., borrow) from it.

"To start with, we have amazing tarts with a flat disc crust and giant, intensely flavorful slices of mushroom. This is surrounded by foamy (!) bacon cream and decorated with bits of smoked duck and shaved. Ron has a chicken dish for his main, which includes a stunning truffle sauce and some cheese stuffing for the chicken; also some veg. Lee has grilled mullet from the Loire, with amazingly crisp skin and an oblong of mashed potatoes browned and covered with sauteed chard and heavenly smoked mussels. This echoed the fish shape, so that one bite of each interleaved to the end. [This girl could write the food column for a newspaper, eh?] Lee had a dessert of fresh peaches with a raspberry and a mango sorbet and these funky meringue kisses, all on a delicious tart base. Ron finished off the goodies that come with our coffees, a bargain at 4.50€ apiece. [I'm glad that I didn't want dessert!] There were four pieces of chocolate (two citrus peel, two truffles); three gourmandise; and two shot glasses with mini fruit smoothies. OK, so Lee had the grape one - nectar of the gods! We drank an excellent dry *Vouvray* - 2009 Silex Vigneau. *Vouvray* is just west of Amboise. This meal was 152€, but worth it!"

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24

I bring some laundry to the desk, despite the steep price that they charge (e.g., 5.50€ for a knit shirt, 2.50€ for underpants). The morning begins with bright sunshine; reports are that it will be warmer today, news that is greeted with universal (except by *moi*) acclaim. (Yesterday had a high of only 22°C in the afternoon.) Simon arrives at 9:30 and we head out to today's destinations: Chenonceaux (15 km due south), then Loches (another 27 km further to the south), and Montrésor (just 19 km from Loches). The distances, today, are much smaller than on the first two days.

Chenonceaux (*with* the final x) is a small village and the home of *Château de Chenonceau* (no x). We arrive at about 10:00 and walk the beautiful grounds before approaching the château; like Azay-le-Rideau, it is reflected in the surrounding River Cher. Some now-familiar royals are involved in its history. The following five paragraphs are "borrowed" from Wikipedia:

"The original manor was torched in 1411 to punish owner Jean Marques for an act of sedition. He rebuilt a castle and fortified mill on the site in the 1430s. Subsequently, his indebted heir Pierre Marques sold the castle to Thomas Bohier, Chamberlain for King Charles VIII of France in 1513. Bohier destroyed the existing castle and built an entirely new residence between 1515 and 1521; the work was sometimes overseen by his wife Katherine Briçonnet, who delighted in hosting French nobility, including King Francis I on two occasions. Eventually, the château was seized from Bohier's son by King François I of France for unpaid debts to the Crown; after François's death in 1547, Henry II offered the château as a gift to his mistress, Diane de Poitiers, who became fervently attached to the château along the river. She would have the arched bridge constructed, joining the château to its opposite bank. She then oversaw the planting of extensive flower and vegetable gardens along with a variety of fruit trees. Set along the banks of the river, but buttressed from flooding by stone terraces, the exquisite gardens were laid out in four triangles.

"Diane de Poitiers was the unquestioned mistress of the castle, but ownership remained with the crown until 1555, when years of delicate legal maneuvers finally yielded possession to her. However, after King Henry II died in 1559, his strong-willed widow and regent Catherine de' Medici had Diane expelled. Because the estate no longer belonged to the crown, she could not seize it outright, but forced Diane to exchange it for the Château Chaumont. Queen Catherine then made Chenonceau her own favorite residence, adding a new series of gardens. As Regent of France, Catherine would spend a fortune on the château and on spectacular nighttime parties. In 1560, the first ever fireworks display seen in France took place during the celebrations marking the ascension to the throne of Catherine's son Francis II. The grand gallery, which extended along the existing bridge to cross the entire river, was dedicated in 1577.

"On Catherine's death in 1589 the château went to her daughter-in-law, Louise de Lorraine-Vaudémont, wife of King Henry III. At Chenonceau Louise was told of her husband's assassination and she fell into a state of depression, spending the remainder of her days wandering aimlessly along the château's vast corridors dressed in mourning clothes amidst somber black tapestries stitched with skulls and crossbones. [And so began Skull and Bones, Yale's most famous "secret society."] Another mistress took over in 1624, when Gabrielle d'Estrées, the favourite of King Henry IV, inhabited the castle. After that, it was owned by Louise's heir César of Vendôme and his wife, Françoise of Lorraine, Duchess of Vendôme, and passed quietly down the Valois line of inheritance, alternately inhabited and abandoned for more than a hundred years.

"Château de Chenonceau was bought by the Duke of Bourbon in 1720. Little by little, he sold off all of the castle's contents. Many of the fine statues ended up at Versailles. The estate itself was finally sold to a squire named Claude Dupin. Claude's wife (daughter of financier Samuel Bernard and grandmother of George Sand), Madame Louise Dupin, brought life back to the castle by entertaining the leaders of The Enlightenment: Voltaire, Montesquieu, Buffon, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Pierre de Marivaux, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She saved the château from destruction during the French Revolution, preserving it from being destroyed by the Revolutionary Guard because it was essential to travel and commerce, being the only bridge across the river for many miles. She is said to be the one who changed the spelling of the Château (from Chenonceaux to Chenonceau) to please the villagers during the French Revolution. [Maybe she just didn't want it to be x-rated?] She dropped the "x" at the end of the Château's name to differentiate what was a symbol of royalty from the Republic. Although no official sources have been found to support this legend, the Château has been since referred to and accepted as Chenonceau.

"In 1864, Daniel Wilson, a Scotsman who had made a fortune installing gaslights throughout Paris,

bought the château for his daughter. In the tradition of Catherine de' Medici, she would spend a fortune on elaborate parties to such an extent that her finances were depleted and the château was seized and sold to José-Emilio Terry, a Cuban millionaire, in 1891. Terry sold it in 1896 to a family member, Francisco Terry, and in 1913, the Menier family, famous for their chocolates, bought the château and still own it to this day."

Whew!

An interactive tour of the château can be found at <http://www.chenonceau.com/en/tour-of-the-chateau> and a description of the grounds and rooms at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ch%C3%A2teau_de_Chenonceau. Although the two web sites show the 60-m long gallery, constructed by Catherine de' Medici, they do not mention what Simon told us about this enormous room. Catherine "installed" beautiful, scantily-clad women throughout the chamber whose role it was to spy on male visitors and relate the stories of intrigue to Catherine. After walking through the many rooms, we wander outside to the vegetable garden that features some of the largest vegetables I've seen (outside of a science-fiction movie).

OBSERVATION ABOUT FRENCH ROADS: For these first four days of traveling, on major and minor highways and roads, we see not a single pickup truck. Not one. Over the next two weeks we will finally see one such open-bed vehicle. Now granted that the French populace may not have many good ol' boys with their drawls, coon dog, gun rack, and chaw of tobakky, one does wonder how people who actually need small trucks in their professions manage. Yes, there are many enclosed vans (plastered top to bottom and front to back with ads and logos) but they don't serve very well the purpose of throwing large objects (rocks, lumber, small animals) into an open bed.

We depart at about 11:30 and head to Loches, arriving at about 12:15. We head toward the château, but don't enter. (Good. I feel châteaued-out after 2 ½ days.) But then we do go inside. Damn! According to Wikipedia,

"The town, one of the most picturesque in central France, lies at the foot of the rocky eminence on which stands the Château de Loches, the castle of the Anjou family, surrounded by an outer wall 13ft/4m thick, and consisting of the old collegiate church of St. Ours, the royal lodge, and the donjon. [Which reminds me of the Clarence Thomas nomination hearings at which Anita Hill accused him of talking about a porn star named Long Dong Silver. Probably has nothing to do with the donjon.] The church of St. Ours dates from the tenth to twelfth century; among its distinguishing features are the huge stone pyramids surmounting the nave and the beautiful carving of the west door.

"The royal lodge, built by Charles VII of France and once used as the subprefecture, contains the tomb of Agnès Sorel and the oratory of Anne of Brittany. It was here on 11 May 1429 that Joan of Arc arrived, fresh from her historic victory at Orleans, to meet the king. The donjon includes, besides the ruined keep (12th century), the Martelet, celebrated as the prison of Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, who died there in 1508, and the Tour Ronde, built by Louis XI of France and containing the famous iron cages in which state prisoners, including according to a story now discredited, the inventor Cardinal Balue, were confined."

Three women are prominently featured in carvings or paintings or sculpture in the castle at Loches: Joan of Arc, Anne of Bretagne, and Agnès Sorel. On display is the document that condemned the young Joan to death at the stake. It was in the *Logis Royal de Loches* that Joan convinced the Dauphin to travel to Rheims and be crowned King Charles VII.

PUN ALERT: I can't ever forget the definition for "Jeanne d'Arc" in a book of fractured French that I had as a child - "The light is out in the bathroom." Probably this is another pun that would not be understood by a native French speaker.

We have lunch in Loches at an outdoor café called Entr'acte. Lee and I each order a terrine, which turns

out to be enormous and very rich and very very filling; mine has ham and cheese, Lee's has ham and a local goat cheese. (The portions are large enough that the two of us could have shared one.) I don't recall what Simon orders, but once again he inhales it rapidly, then asks a woman at the next table what she's having, and orders one of those. Amazing.

We are on then to Montrésor, which Simon describes as the loveliest village in the Loire Valley, and arrive at 2:30. (<http://www.francethisway.com/places/montresor.php>) We stroll the streets, look at the buildings, stick our noses in storefronts, and observe the passing scene. Lovely, it is indeed, but Lee and I both agree that three places we'll see in Bretagne are even more so: Rochefort-en-Terre, Quimper, and Dinan (see September 28 and 30 and October 6, respectively). While strolling in a field along the Indrois River, across from the château, a woman stops us and asks Lee (in American English) "Are you really from Gig Harbor?" [No, she didn't just make a good guess. Lee was wearing her Gig Harbor cap. But you probably suspected that.] Turns out that she had visited GH (she has relatives here) and now lives in France, not far from Montrésor. We surmise that she's associated with the oil industry, as previously she had been sent by her company to Aberdeen. (That's Scotland, not Maryland nor South Dakota nor North Carolina.) Small world, eh? After Aberdeen, she was given a choice of being sent to Asia or France - I think that she made the correct decision.

We then walk up an incline to the château and note that all of the statues high up on the front are headless, once again the doings of the "We Are The 99%" group in 1789. On the drive back to Le Manoir les Minimes, Simon gives us a brief tutorial on French gas stations. As noted earlier, he cautions us to find a service station with an attendant, as our U.S.-issued credit cards will not be read by the automatic pumps. And while this may require us to pay a higher price than at a station associated with a food market, it's better than running out of fuel. All stations are self-service, and all are color coded (both the pump handle and the lane): we need bright yellow for the lower-grade diesel. A very nice feature is the dispenser of disposable plastic gloves, right next to the pump. I, of course, forget to get a glove at the next two fill-ups; and when I finally remember at the next few stations, the dispensers are empty. Simon returns us to our hotel at 4:45 and we say goodbye.* (We also give him a very nice - too generous in my

*The man does have a fixation with sex, but perhaps that's expected in a Frenchman. As we strolled through the various châteaux and viewed the paintings, he would comment not only on the historical information therein but also on the loveliness of a female face or the plumpness of a well-upholstered thigh or breast. His head would turn at every lovely or well-upholstered female on the street. He was very disappointed that we had not visited, nor had we plans to visit, the château that overlooked our hotel in Amboise - not only is it the burial place for Leonardo da Vinci, but there are erotic sculptures and reliefs everywhere, including couples "doing 69" (a universal phrase, apparently) high on the outside walls.

opinion - gratuity. But he did do a good job and he kept us well amused.)

We have dinner at 7:00 at *Le Lion d'Or* (<http://www.leliondor-amboise.com/>), a restaurant about halfway between our hotel and the now-familiar pedestrian street/mall. I start with foie gras and then have lamb. (Once again, one of Ron's "magnificent" descriptions, eh?) The food is good, but nowhere near as good as in the restaurants over the past three days. Back in the hotel room, I read and use Lee's laptop to surf the internet and read email.

And then a miracle occurs!! A week before leaving for France, I had installed WordPerfect 2002 on the laptop, despite there being many reports online that it was incompatible with Windows 7. (It had performed admirably on my new PC running Windows 7, so I had hopes for it.) When I discovered that there were glitches, just the day before we left Gig Harbor, I brought the installation CD-ROM with me; I even remembered to bring the access code that I'd need. So our first night in Amboise, I uninstalled and then re-installed the program. The program worked (more or less) but I wasn't able to save documents to disc nor retrieve them from storage. *Merde!* Well, tonight, just for kicks I try opening files and saving them - and

both functions perform just as they are supposed to do. Hooray.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 25

A card left on our bed last night suggests that today's high will be 25°C, not bad at all, eh? We have our regular breakfast downstairs. Today, we are *sans Simon** which means that we have to plan everything on

*Not the California town where one finds the Hearst Castle.

our own ... which means that Lee, who has by now earned a Ph.D. in French culture and history and has, accordingly, taken the measure of the entire Loire Valley, gets to choose where we go and in what order. I'm content to follow her suggestions, as her judgments have always proved right-on in the past. Besides, it frees me from the tasks of reading the guide books, internet sites, travel brochures, etc.

But before leaving Amboise, we decide to visit the local Sunday market which opens at 9:00. Its location is on the banks of the Loire, very close to the pedestrian street/mall and just a 10-minute walk from the hotel. What a delight! In contrast to the pristine, upscale indoor food market that we toured in Tours (mellifluous, eh?), this one seems *echt*-authentic. Yes, there are stands for meats, cheese, and charcuterie that have refrigerated display counters, but most of the vegetable and fruit stands are wide open. We see fish and seafood, some of whose names and shapes we do not recognize: *bulot*, which is whelk (and a-one and a-two ...), not that helps very much, and *noix pentocles* (scallop nuts - don't ask!), and all sorts of oysters. There are gorgeous rolls and loaves of bread. And olives of every imaginable variety. And muscles - beautiful, beautiful mussels. And every customer seems to have a dog or two in tow. (We do not see *chien* as one of the food offerings, thank heavens for that.)

There are also non-comestibles, such as T-shirts with names of non-existent entities: United Universal College; United New York College; College Ath Dep 1; Redcorner Championship; Vintage 1963 New York; and OldSchoolAth College League. (Alas, there's even a sign proclaiming ICI CHEVAL FRANÇAIS, not that I want to be a neigh-sayer.) Lee notes that a poultry vendor has left the feet on the carcasses because different colored feet represent different breeds of bird. Who knew? Near the exit are cages with live birds: chickens, ducks, turkeys. I learn that *poule pondeuse* is a laying-chicken or hen. After about a half-hour at the market, we return to the hotel to fetch our car and head out into the day's adventures.

Our first stop is Trôo* (<http://www.troo.com/>) a small village some 50 km north of Amboise. We arrive at

*A Google translation of this web page lacks elegance, although its meaning is clear ... I think. You can decide for yourselves: "Richness of the landscape, architectural and historical heritage, vineyards and groves provide, among other things, this region is a character that no idea until you have traveled. Probably overshadowed by its famous neighbor south, the valley of the Loire, the Loir was able to maintain intimacy has now become an advantage, especially as it is now served by TGV from Paris to Vendôme in 42 minutes. The site staff is dedicated to our blows of heart about the area. All that is proposed is a clear that we have the host we could book our own friends. Each location - whether accommodation or to visit - we are well known for the simple reason that we value. Behind each proposal, there are people in both original and authentic, who can give their guests something other than just memories of a weekend in the countryside. And since you have to start somewhere, it naturellement to Trôo that we will. If this village, partly cave, is not the only one to host this unique habitat, it has the merit of originality in his name alone. Curious legacy of the language of Anjou, it is immediately memorable. But the originality does not stop there: for whom has visited, it will remain one of the most notable of the Loire Valley. However, our selection of addresses is not limited to this single village - our gaze runs over Loir - even if you find in many of those proposed by the Tourist Office of Trôo." [Theme song: ♪ Love me tender, love me Trôo ♪ ... ?]

about 11:30 after having made a few wrong turns. Now I don't want to point the finger (and certainly not *that* one) at my intrepid navigator, but let the record show that not once did we make a wrong turn when Simon was both navigator and driver.

At the information office, we purchase tickets to the nearby *Grotte Pétricante* at which we get a lecture (in French, naturellement) while making our way in the dark (well, we were given small flashlights) and getting "rained on" from the water that is seeping through the rock as it makes stalactites. What a great start!

Trôo* is called a troglodyte village. I know this because its logo says *Cité Troglodyte Historique*. It is

*To my untrained ears, Trôo does not sound like a French word, nor does it look like one. When we return to Amboise this evening, I ask the clerk at the hotel about the origin of the name. He ponders a bit and says, "It's hard to explain in English." Well, that's good enough for me! (In my notes, I have the suggestion that Trôo is a word in old French meaning *domaine rural*. Perhaps.) For another stab at an explanation, see three paragraphs below in the translation of the tourist bureau's web site.

also on the "other river" (*Le Loir*). At a different web site <http://www.troovillage.com/default2.htm> there is an English translation for which I am not responsible: "While following sides of the Dormouse, Trôo profiles heights of its cliff on the horizon. This small city to the long historic past is the capital undisputed of the troglodyte in Dormouse-and-dear." So! They do call *Le Loir* dormouse, but I don't think it was necessary to translate both nouns in *Le Loir et Cher* into English.

There are troglodyte villages all over this part of France. The name derives from the cave dwellings (and the people who dwelled in them) in the distant past. We see these curious structures, dug out of the limestone cliffs, in many places. As for the troglodytes themselves, they were considered to be tiny hobbit-like creatures (think Dennis Kucinich) but nobody has seen one for millennia.

The information bureau and the grotto are in the lower city - and we need to go to the upper city to see the major attractions. We *could* have driven, but the woman at the bureau embarrasses us (even with no English in her arsenal) and tells us where to find the staircases that lead to other staircases that lead to others. We do have a city map and the staircases are easy to find, but they do not make an easy ascent for this 72-year-old, whose heart and lungs are in excellent shape but whose legs are not (i.e., the old sciatica pain and numbness). Nevertheless, we are "good sports" as we mount the 3 x 10⁹ stairs to Eglise St-Martin. This is the same Martin who gave half his coat away (see p. 19). The church, dating from the 11th century, is quite beautiful and, in comparison to the many cathedrals we've seen and will see, delightfully understated. It's also good to sit in the church for a while, to allow the buckets of sweat to pour off my fevered brow.

It's a good thing that we have a map of the city and that we don't need to rely on the tourist bureau's translation of the layout: "The city himself floor on three distinct levels. In bottom the built city of which the oldest constructions belong to the medieval time, to the middle floor troglodytes and on the tray dominating the valley, the high city and its collegiate. The site of Trôo was lived since the antique. The city that is supposed to extricate its name of the pronunciation of the word 'hole' by the English occupants, is very dug formerly. The village himself floor on three distinct dwelling levels. The superior level is today occupied by the some old houses that surround the church. It is from the bottom of Trôo that one will discover curiosities of the place. Constructions that follow today the side of the Dormouse doesn't arrive to hide the numerous cellars that pierce the cliff literally. The history of places learns us that the man seems to have occupied the rocky promontory since the Neolithic. It is only with the first Norman invasions that cellars seem to make their apparition." Got that? Good.

From the church we walk to *Le Puits qui Parle* (the talking well)* and find that we don't even need to shout

*It's at this point that I discover that the memory card in the camera is full. Fact is, I have not being

paying attention - and I have on it all of the pictures starting with last summer's Baltic/Denmark trip and this summer's Alaska/Haida Gwaii adventures. I delete some pictures, but back in the hotel room, later in the day, I delete many more.

into the well to hear an echo. Whispering from a distance of 10 feet creates an eerie return of our words. I make some uncomplimentary comments about George W. Bush in the hope that they will resound and resound forever within the stone structure. At about 1:00, we make our way down, via 3×10^9 stairs, and retrieve our car. And we drive to Lavardin, about 10 km away, a tiny town (population less than 300) on the banks of Le Loir. It is a proud member of *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* ("The most beautiful villages of France"). At the entrance to the town, there is a map of the city. That's not so unusual. What is distinctive is that it's a mosaic: vividly-colored stone chips embedded in a rough stone background and showing saints, knights, castles, etc. (see the photos at the Picasa site). The town has attractive streets and homes, lots of flowers, a castle ruin, and an 11th century Romanesque church (Saint-Genest de Lavardin) with faded frescoes on the interior walls - not bad for a town of only 300. We wander about the village for about 30 minutes until heading back to Amboise, which we reach at about 3:00. We say a prayer to the gods of the highways as we negotiate, for the last time, the nasty 310° turn into the hotel's parking area. In the lobby, we order coffees (we had not stopped for lunch or beverage during the day) and retreat to our room to read and to pack for tomorrow's trip. (One can get spoiled not having to unpack and re-pack on a daily basis, but we do need to move on.)

Having done our tummies and other digestive organs no favors with the quantities of rich food over the past days, we choose to eat at La Scala (<http://www.lascalas-amboise.fr/>), a casual Italian restaurant right on Quai du Général de Gaulle, near the now familiar pedestrian street/mall. We choose to sit outdoors under a large canopy that covers the tables. And it's a good thing that it's there, not that there's any threat of rain (or even bird droppings): from time to time, leaves and horse chestnuts (I think) rain down on the canopy and, in one instance, make their way through an opening, bonk a patron on the head, and crash to the floor. The food is good, plentiful, and relatively inexpensive. I have a green salad followed by pasta bolognese; Lee has a salad and *Pasta la Scala* (which is bolognese sauce with sausage, ham, chorizo, and mushrooms); I have a beer and Lee drinks a glass of the house red wine. Aside from the aerial bombardment, the only other negatives are the large number of smokers, the screaming sirens of emergency vehicles (an unusual number, it seems, for such a peaceful town), and the noisy engines of speeding motorcycles and cars. There is also a very loud table of "ugly Americans": the women with faces that look spackled and plastered, their hair bleached-blond; and the men behaving condescendingly to the waiters who commit the unpardonable offense of not speaking English very well. (A note let on our bed in the hotel informs us that tomorrow will be a bit warmer: 26°C, still not too bad.)

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Speaking of "ugly Americans," in the hotel's breakfast room are two tables of American bicyclists, all shouting to make themselves heard over the others who are also shouting to make themselves heard. Not only are they loud but their English is execrable, laced with *y'know* and *like* and *sorta* and *kinda* and with grammatical atrocities such as incorrect past participles ("she done good") and wrong pronouns ("him and me were ..."). On top of this, at least two had syrupy southern accents, something that we thought we'd escaped when we moved from Tennessee. It's so *difficult* to be a cultured person in these parlous days, eh?

We check out of the hotel at 9:30. As was true when we arrived, one of the men from the front desk helps us with our luggage, which seems to have gotten heavier and more plentiful (which is, of course, impossible). Our destination is the Abbey of Fontevraud, about 100 km to the west; along the way, we drive through Chinon and take some pictures of the château* high on the hill. We arrive at *Abbaye Royal*

*Chinon was not on our original itinerary, but in an email Peter Gaspar instructed us thus: "If you have a car, be sure to visit, on the other side of the Loire, the wine village of Chinon. Nearby is one the most impressive moated castles I have ever seen." We ignored his advice, as we usually do, and it's a good thing because in a later email he realized that it was Azay-le-Rideau that he had had in mind.

Fontevraud (<http://www.abbayedefontevraud.com/v3/>) at about 11:30. The abbey, almost a small city with many buildings, dates from early in the 12th century. It is at the junction of two estates: that of King Henry II of England (reign 1154-1189), a.k.a. Peter O'Toole,* a.k.a. Henri d'Anjou, Count of Maine, Duke of

*Talk about typecasting: Peter O'Toole not only played Henry II in the movie *The Lion in Winter*, but also in *Beckett*, wherein he conspired to have his boyhood friend Richard Burton - I mean Thomas Beckett - murdered.

Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine, Duke of Gascony, Count of Nantes, Lord of Ireland, and Commissioner of Major League Baseball; and of Eleanor (Aliénor) d'Aquitaine, a.k.a. Katherine Hepburn (b.1122). This was her second marriage, the first to Louis VII of France having been annulled. Henry and Eleanor had five sons and three daughters who survived into adulthood; three of the sons became kings of England: *Henri le Jeune Roy* (who ruled along with his father from 1170-1183), *Richard Coeur de Lion* (Richard I) a.k.a. Anthony Hopkins (1189-1199), and *Jean sans Terre* a.k.a. John Lackland (1199-1216). Henry II and this three sons constitute the House of Plantagenêt whose name derives from the sprig of broom in his hat sported by Henry's father, Geoffrey of Anjou; broom in Latin is *planta genesta*. The abbey has the tombs of Henry, Eleanor, Richard, and Isabella d'Angoulême, the second wife of John.

We wander through the grounds, but spend most of our time inside the abbey. It is a beautiful building whose relative simplicity reinforces its splendor. We also tour the cloister, the kitchens, and the gardens. In the garden is a modern sculpture, made of wood, that is supposed to represent some lofty ideal but which, to my untutored eyes, looks like a roller coaster under construction. As was true in other churches and cathedrals on this trip, several statues are missing various limbs either because of vandalism or the decomposition of stone over time.

Channeling (and improving on?) Thomas Hobbes, Lee opines about these 12th century folk that "their lives were nasty, brutish, short, and probably very smelly"! (So much for value judgments from a 21st century woman!).

PUN ALERT: A woman walks past us in the abbey. Lee says, "She smells like bathroom deodorizer," to which Ron replies, "Of course - it's eau de toilette!"

We have coffees and a madeleine (the pastry, not the waitress, but for some silly reason I have a "Remembrance of Things Proust") in the abbey at *Le Café d'Aliénor*. We are pleased that the WC (this name seems to persist no matter what the language) has plumbing that is in surprisingly good shape for 12th century construction.

OBSERVATION: At the café and on earlier occasions, I notice that money is rarely handed directly to the vendor; rather, it is placed on the counter. Similarly, the return of any change also has a detour to the counter top. I assume that this is for reasons of hygiene, but it does seem a bit incongruous in a country that, among other things, allows dogs inside restaurants and food stores; and that has unisex toilets without doors (e.g., at Trô, there was what Lee described as a porcelain opening that requires one to squat without having any place to sit or brace oneself; there is an automatic flush but no toilet paper).

We leave the abbey at about 1:30. On this drive (and on previous days), we see many trees with mistletoe throughout their branches. As this is France, Ron wonders if it's spelled Mistleaux. Probably not. And we

are heading to the region of more troglodyte villages. Our "tour director" is intrigued by the description of a troglodyte tour in *DK Eyewitness Travel*: "Caves, cut into the Tufa cliffs beside the Loire ... are used as dovecotes, chapels, farms, wine cellars, and even homes ... Life in and among these caves is the subject of this fascinating tour." We make an unscheduled stop or two to take pictures, but our destination is *Doué-la-Fontaine* which boasts an ancient amphitheater cut from the rock. A woman at the tourist bureau tells us that the gates are padlocked and we won't be able to go inside, but Lee thinks it would be neat to take a look anyway. So we walk several blocks, find the padlocked gates, note the amphitheater by peering through the bars, and return to the car. (*Doué-la-Fontaine* did have one thing of distinction: the large city map in the town square was interactive. That is, by pushing a button to indicate the location one would like to drive or walk to, a series of light bulbs would come on to show the preferred route. Cool!)

Our real destination, which we reach at about 3:45 some 30 km to the west, is Rochemenier, which DK describes thus: "This former troglodyte farming community has been turned into a museum displaying underground farmyards, barns, houses, and a simple rock chapel." This appeals to Lee, although Ron is sure that it will be kitschy and more like an amusement park than a museum. Ron is correct. We buy our tickets, descend the stairs, explore the buildings, visit the tunnels, observe the farm implements, note the animals,* and (to the consternation of two employees who tell us that there is still more to see) make our

***PUN ALERT:** There are rabbits, ducks, geese, and turkeys on display. Any suggestion that the ducks are aggressive beasts is nothing but a *fowl canard*.

exit at about 4:15 because we still need to drive about 45 km northward to get to our hotel in Briollay, where we arrive at about 5:30.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT DRIVERS: Many drivers partake of an interesting "custom": they turn on their left directional signal to move to the passing lane ... and they leave it illuminated until they're ready to turn on the right signal and return to the slow lane. The first few times I see these cars with their left-lights flashing over a considerable distance, I imagine that there has been an invasion of old retired guys from Florida. So, I decide to do as the French do - and I keep my signal on, only to discover later on that not everyone does this - the drivers I pass probably think that I am one of those senescent Floridians. Fact is, it makes sense to do this: it tells the car or truck that you're passing that you plan to spend only a limited time in the fast lane; and it tells cars or trucks behind you that your intention is to pull over at the earliest opportunity. I think it's a good system. So there!

Our hotel, Château de Noirieux (<http://www.chateaudenoirieux.com/uk/navigation.php>), is a magnificent place, with spectacular grounds (and prices to match). The driving instructions at the web site ("Exit A11 at No. 14, take the D52 until reaching Briollay; turn at the roundabout toward Soucelles on the D109. The Château is situated on your right at 4km") are accurate. Would that the instructions for finding all of the hotels were equally clear. I'm talkin' 'bout you, L'Agapa and Château Richeux! There are nine guest rooms in the château and ten in the manor house. We are in the latter, on the first (i.e., second!) floor. In addition to these two main buildings, there are several smaller ones. All are old and are constructed of stone. The grounds (tree-filled) are enormous and slope down toward Le Loir. Our room has a "portable air-conditioner," a large, noisy, floor-standing monstrosity with a clothes-drier hose vented to the outside. It may not look good, but it does work.* (Alas, this is the last hotel in which we'll find air-conditioning. Over

*Actually, when we turn it on and fiddle with all of the controls, nothing happens. Absolutely nothing! I report this to the desk clerk. Shortly, a maid arrives, determines that the unit *ne marche pas*, fiddles with the plug, and then discovers that it's plugged into an outlet far across the room. Well, it's supposed to be plugged in there, but isn't. So she plugs it into the outlet, *et voilà*** we have air-conditioning.

**It's surprising how many "educated people" (including at least one well-know organic chemist) think that the word is *viola*!

the next few days, as the temps rise, some cooling would have been appreciated.)

The hotel's glossy brochure has some of the most *purple* of purple prose. (It is also seen at the English version of the official website.) Are you ready?

"Down in the valley, the veil of mist pales and melts away. The rising sun wakens the golden glow of the blocks of tufa, and lingeringly caresses the blue-grey states of the manor-house and château. Shape and color flood gently back over the surrounding grounds. On the horizon, the Loire sky brightens into the pastel glory so beloved of Turner. Noirieux wakes to the dawn. The clear voice of the river invites you to dally and fall under the spell of the joyful choirs of birds that live in Noirieux's woods. And when you return, how enjoyable to sit by the fireside in the great hall in a moment of quiet solitude, until the marquetry grand piano tempts you irresistibly to sit down at the keyboard.

"As you walk beneath the immemorial trees of Noirieux's grounds, the carpeted lawns unfold, their borders of flower-beds and urns brimming with rich scents. The delicate pleasure of afternoon tea in the little garden, beneath a hundred-year-old lime tree whose perfume wafts into the bedrooms, only to dissolve into the tablets of guest-soap laid out for visitors. And of course, the heady sensation of tasting the floral, fruity and sometimes spicy aromas of the marvelous wines from the Loire Valley.

"From the ovens where Gérard Côme and his team are cooking rises the delicious smell of creative French gastronomy based on the natural, flavorsome produce. It changes with the rhythm of the seasons, and is elegantly served either in the Orangery room, the adjoining Victorian-style conservatory, or in summer on the terrace looking out over green fields gently sloping down to the River Loir. As darkness falls, the soft lamplight comes on throughout Noirieux and soft bed linens are turned back. A gentle glow plays on the beams of the bedrooms in the manor-house, caresses the warm stone of the open fireplaces. As visitors to the château return to their rooms, they walk back in time to the period of Louis XIII, French Regency, Louis XV, Louis XVI, Directoire, or Art Deco. The furniture is antique, the decoration carefully chosen."

Whew! Well, I *did* say that the prose was purple, so don't claim that you weren't warned. As I read through this promotional material, I was reminded of Mark Twain's* advice: "When you catch an adjective, kill it!"

*This comes from a letter that he wrote to a fledgling writer: "I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English - it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them - then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice."

There are two dining rooms: a gourmet restaurant and a bistrot (the final "t" seems to be used from time to time); the latter is also where breakfast is served. Because there are no restaurants nearby and because the *Côté Gastronomique** is closed to outsiders on Mondays (i.e., today), the hotel offers its guests "a nice

*This is the first of three restaurants that we'll visit that have received a Michelin star. This one is very well-deserved as is the one that we'll go to in Locguénolé; Lee and I are not so sure about the one in Cancale (*vide infra*).

single menu at 65€ consisting of entrance (sic), fish or meat, cheese, and dessert, excluding drinks" and it is magnificent. I'm so sorry that I neglected to take pictures of each course, because they were all visual as well as gustatory delights. (A photo of the menu is posted at the Picasa web site.) We arrive at 7:30 and finally roll out at about 10:00. Sitting outside, we enjoy the setting sun and the sounds of nature,

particularly the frogs and armies of crows.

Before the entrée, there was an *amuse bouche* of some sort, then *Le Marbré de Foie Gras ...* (full name on the photo of the menu), then an intermezzo of some sort, then the main course (the only course for which there's a choice): Lee has *Le Filet de Barbue ...*" (which is brill) and I have "*Le Classique Filet de Boeuf Rouge ...*" The server then wheels out *Le Chariot de Fromages frais et affinés*, and then comes the dessert, *Les Fraises et Framboises de Pays frappées au Kirsch, crème légère "Cheese Cake" Sorbet Chocolat blanc.*" I quote the full name, but it does not justice to what arrived. And here is where I really regret not having taken any pictures. The dessert is served in a champagne-like glass in which there is a ring of chocolate (I originally thought it might have been something inedible, like wax), decorated with a flower pattern, floating on the concoction of fruit and liqueur. Amazing.

Fully stuffed, but remarkably content, we return to our room and are disappointed to find that the internet connection is slow. Well, at least it works. I finish reading Jane Gardam's *The Man in the Wooden Hat* - excellent!

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

It is a sunny morning, and the hotel clerk joyfully tells us that the predicted high is 30°C. Why is he smiling (or is it grinning maliciously)? We have a nice continental breakfast (menu posted at Picasa) in the bistro, then spend some time in our room where I begin reading *Island* by Alistair MacLeod. This is at least the third overseas trip on which I've taken this book - I'm determined that this will be the last. It's a collection of short stories, some fifteen in number, centered in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. And it is excellent! Each tale is vastly different from the others, in both subject matter and style. I am enjoying it immensely.

We drive about 15 km south to Angers, a good-sized city with about 280,000 in its metropolitan area, arriving at about 11:00 and we park near the château/castle/fortress. It is a magnificent building, dating from the 12th century, with beautifully sculpted gardens surrounding it. One of its great attractions is the Apocalypse Tapestries (alas, no photos allowed) dating from the 14th century, illustrating visions of St. John from the Book of Revelations; St. John is in every individual tapestry, larger than any of the other figures, observing and commenting on what he sees. The originals were badly damaged or discarded during the French Revolution <http://sourcebook.fsc.edu/history/apocalypse.html> Only seventy of the original one hundred remain (and the length is 100 m of the original 140 m). According to the official brochure, "the tapestry shows the influence of the Hundred Years Wars, a series of conflicts between France and England, that lasted from 1337 to 1453. The tapestry offers a realistic representation of the ravages of war with raids, plague, and famine." The visions of Hell reminded me of the triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch, a near-contemporary of the painter Hennequin de Bruges and the Parisian tapestry-weaver Nicolas Bataille who created the original work in the 1370s.

We stay for about one hour, then head to the nearby Cathédrale St. Maurice (quite beautiful!) where we get to see a "*RELIQUE de SAINT-MARTIAL extraite de la CATACOMBE de SAINT LAURENT-HORS les MURS à ROME 1er SIÈCLE du CHRISTIANISME.*" Cool! We then wander through the old town center, looking for Maison d'Adam, a 15th century merchant's home and considered the best of the nearly 50 timber-framed houses in the city. Of course we also take the opportunity to walk the narrow streets, take pictures of the inviting shops, and watch the passing scene. (We even see an authentic English red telephone booth with a working phone). Finally we visit *Collégiale St-Martin*,* a 9th century church which,

*This is the same Saint Martin whom we encountered in Tours (p. 19) and Trôo (p. 25). I'm surprised that his name has not been appropriated for commercial gain: e.g., Saint Martin Shopping Mall, Saint Martin Airport, Saint Martin Boutique and Sex Shoppe, etc.

alas, has been turned into a museum of clerical garb and papal vestments and, accordingly, charges for

admission. Boo! During our time walking about the church and taking pictures, a plump older woman keeps an eye on us. She "pretends" to be a visitor, but it's clear that she's really a spy. As there are no bone fragments, vials of blood, or nails from Jesus's cross to steal, it's not clear what she's guarding against.

PUN ALERT: Inside the church, Lee comments, "That's a high vault!" to which Ron replies. "It was brought in from Eastern Europe. It's a pole vault."

INADVERTENT PUN: Again, inside the church, Lee says "What a huge organ!" to which Ron replies, "Oops, is my fly unzipped?"

By the time we leave Angers at 2:00, the temperature on the car's thermometer is reading 33°C, although it drops to 28°C as we drive the 25 km southward to Chalonnes-sur-Loire, where we stop for coffee. The purpose of this side trip is to drive along Corniche Angevine for its views of cliffside homes and, more important, to buy diesel fuel. Alas, the first two places we try do not accept our credit cards nor do they have an attendant. We will have to wait until we're on the autoroute tomorrow morning. But we do stop for coffee and pastry at a small Italian restaurant associated with a gas station/supermarket. The proprietor is very pleasant and, when he learns that I'm American, implores me to teach him the numbers from 5 to 10 in English. This I can do!! Without a dictionary!!!

CLASSICAL MUSIC RADIO: Although we never turned on the car's radio when Simon was driving, we did listen to it when leaving Amboise yesterday. I find a classical station of sorts (*Radio Classique*) whose signal weakens, but we pick it up in Angers, today. They play a wide variety (symphonies, concertos, sonatas, etc.) of mostly well-known works, *but* never more than a single movement. Do the French really have such short attention spans? (The station plays too much Chopin and Liszt, but I am admittedly prejudiced.) And there are long intervals of chit-chat between pieces. Although the station is commercial-free, there are numerous promos for their own programming and for concerts throughout the country. Frequently, they alternate the voices of a male and female speaker who, in breathless (sexy?) whispers inform us that we are listening to *Radio Classique*. At one point, the woman whispers (in a hoarse - not horse - voice), *Radio Classique* and the man, also breathless, responds, "*Radio Classique* ... la première en France." (I'll have more to say later after we locate a different classical station.)

We return to the hotel. Having eaten at the *Côté Gastronomique* last night, tonight we choose the somewhat more casual *Côté Bistrot* which offers a menu at 34€ (entrée + dinner + dessert) or a menu at 28€ (two of the three). Prudent Ron chooses the two-course menu whereas Lee chooses the three. The food is excellent and the service is beautiful, but no comparison to last night's production. And even though I have "only" two courses, there are still the appetizers (that go with the *apéritif*,* that we never order), the

*Every restaurant, from the most modest to the most elegant, begins by asking if we want an *apéritif*. From the wine list at Château de Noirieux, these are sweet wines, sparkling wines, or champagne from the region. These differ from a *digestif* which is offered "as an aid to digestion" at the end of a meal: sweet wine, liqueurs like brandy or cognac, port, etc. We partake of neither. But it interests me that we never have trouble ordering simple tap water instead of an expensive (and often carbonated) name brand. All one needs to do is ask for *un carafe d'eau* and, without complaint, it arrives.

amuse bouche, and the little pastries at the end. (I suppose it's a good thing that we went to the gourmet restaurant on an evening when it is officially "closed" because their offerings on other days range from *Menu Vallée du Loir* (entrée, fish or meat, cheese course, and dessert) at 65€ to *Menu Dégustation Anniversaire 20 ans* (seven courses! at 125€!) Lee and I both have a salad of potatoes, greens, and gravlax (it sounds a lot more elegant in French: see the photo of the *carte* at the Picasa site). For our mains, Lee chooses *La Fricassée de Veau de Lait* and I *Les Filets de Sole*. Both are served in black metal skillets. Having not had the presence of mind to take pictures of last night's meal, I decide that I shouldn't immortalize this "lesser" feast with photos. Lee has an apple-raisin crumble with vanilla ice cream for

dessert. And we drink a *demi-bouteille* of Anjou Chateau de Passavant, a nice white. (Because Ron has been prudent and has eschewed [gesundheit!] the cheese course and dessert, he rewards himself in our room with some fruit and walnuts from yesterday's welcome basket; and he eats the two mini muffins that are delivered while we are having dinner.) The dining room is fairly warm, and even with the large doors open to the outside there is not much of a breeze. As was true at last night's dinner, we are serenaded by frogs and birds, who sing their special songs with a decided French accent; the din dies down at about 8:30 when the critters go to sleep or watch TV or have sex or whatever.

OBSERVATION ABOUT THE FRENCH: Aside from the shockingly red-headed woman (I suspect a wig!) at Chenonceau (see Picasa), there are very few wild hair colors, body piercings, tattoos. Alas, cigarette smoking is very popular among younger people, as witnessed on the streets of Angers. Also, we see very few people of non-European ethnicity (Asian, African, Indian, Arab) during our travels through the Loire valley. Paris, itself, is a melting pot of cultures and religions (not always living in harmony) but that seems not to be true even in the larger cities (e.g., Tours, Angers, Amboise) of the Loire.

During the night, at about 2:30 am, the phone in our room rings four times, but by the time that Lee can reach it there is only a dial tone. We have no idea who it could have been, but we doubt that the U.S.-based telemarketers could have followed us to France.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28:

We follow the advice of the clerk at the hotel desk for how to find a gas station that will accept our credit cards: instead of leaving the hotel in a westward direction, we travel east from the hotel to Soucelles (a mere 8 km), then south (6 km) to the E60/A11 autoroute. Sounds easy, eh? Well, Mrs. Intrepid Guide gets us lost in the metropolis(?) of Soucelles, but we finally get to the autoroute only to discover that there is no gas station (or else we missed it) between here and Angers. Fortunately, we find one after driving around Angers. The car registers a morning temperature of 26°C; it will rise throughout the day. As we enter Bretagne (Brittany), all of the road signs are in French and Breton, a language that looks nothing like anything I've seen before. Our initial destination is Rochefort-en-Terre* (*Roc'h-an-Argoed* in Breton),

*Rochefort is a popular town name in France, but there seems to be only one Rochefort-en-Terre. A literal translation is "hard rock of the earth" or "hard rock clay" but it has nothing to do, we assume, with any Hard Rock Café. We also hope that it has no relationship to the ubiquitous SEE ROCK CITY billboards that line the highways in Tennessee and Georgia. Of the many cities and towns that we'll visit during our 11 days in Brittany, this is one of only four that are listed as a *Petite Cité de Caractère*, an official government classification (<http://tinyurl.com/3eb6m8i>); the others are Josselin, Roscoff, and Tréguier. Rochefort-en-Terre also receives four flowers from *Les Villes et Villages Floris* (see the description under Vannes, below).

due west of here, although the best route takes us some 100 km southwest and another 100 km northwest. On the way, we pass through small towns and villages. In one, we see a woman on a bicycle, balancing her morning baguette across the handlebars. In another, a man on a bike has his morning baguette in a basket behind him. We arrive at Rochefort-en-Terre at about 1:00, but not without a little bit of a problem. One of the roads we are on (the A11-E60) has toll booths, perhaps a dozen lanes strung out across the highway. The first lane we try has no place for a credit card (it must have been for cars with transponders), so we shut our eyes tightly and back out! The next one does have credit card slots, but only for European cards with chips. So, we ignorant tourists back out again, managing not to hit any other cars. We find a third booth that has an attendant on duty. Whew. (Unlike the tolls that we paid earlier, where we had been issue a card upon entering and were charged according to distance traveled, this one collected a set fee from everyone, regardless of distance.)

PUN ALERT: Driving through the countryside, this conversation occurs: Lee, "Look at the sheep, *les*

agneaux" [showing off her French]; Ron, "I dub them Spiro." Lee, "I don't understand." Ron, "You know, Spiro Agneau?"

PUN ALERT: On the radio, they play back-to-back pieces by César Franck, leading Ron to say "Hey, that's two franks in a row. I thought that the country had switched to the euro!"

Why visit this tiny town (population about 600)? Because every guide book and traveler extols its virtues as a beautiful medieval town with gorgeous flowers, half-timbered or all-stone houses, brightly-painted doors, inviting alleyways, and nice restaurants and shops. As I review the 50 or so pictures that I snap, what stands out most are the flowers: in window boxes, in the public square, alongside buildings, etc. The town lives up to its reputation and then some. (Alas, because we are arriving past the tourist season, nearly every store and restaurant is closed "for lunch" although one assumes that even if a posted sign says that they'll re-open, say, at 2:00, this could mean 3:00 or 5:00 ... or maybe tomorrow. These "lunch" closings are something we'll encounter throughout Bretagne - even museums and touristic sites fall victim to it. But there is a positive aspect to it: the streets are not packed with tourists nor are the roads and parking lots filled with tour buses.) Although the day has become quite warm, there is a nice cool breeze when one is in the shade - is it possible that they have some sort of outdoor air-conditioning? Nah.

We leave after about 45 minutes and head to Vannes* (*Gwened* in Breton), population about 50,000, some

*There exist official designations called *Les Cités d'art de Bretagne* (<http://tinyurl.com/4xxqaxn>) and *Les Villes et Villages Floris* (<http://www.cnvfvf.fr/>); the latter assigns from one to four *fleurs*, depending on the quality of the flowers and gardens throughout. Vannes rates four flowers and is also listed as a *City of Art*. The other Bretagne cities that we'll visit that are listed as *Cities of Art* are Nantes, Quimper, Concarneau, Fougères, Rennes, and Dinan. In the other category, the following rate four flowers: Dinard, Rochefort-en-Terre, Quimper, Fougères, and St Malo, whereas these boast three flowers: Cancale, Carnac, Concarneau, Dinan, Hennebont, and Saint Brieuc.

40 km due west and relatively close to the Atlantic Ocean. (Bretagne is a peninsula, with the Atlantic to the south and the English Channel to the north. The principal cities are Rennes, inland at its eastern border, and Brest to the west.) On the way, we find another classical music station that, to its credit, plays full-length symphonies and other works; sadly, it has extensive learned discussions between musical selections, which might be very interesting except that they're in French. This is not a nice way to treat visitors, eh? (For more details, see the bold-face entry Classical Music Radio on p. 35.)

After searching for a parking lot, we park just outside the gate to the medieval walled town; we then invest some time in finding the tourist bureau, where we acquire a map. The day is warm (28°C, according to the car's thermometer) and even Lee reports that "we are fading." We then do our typical exploration of streets, shops, half-timbered houses, store windows, and people. There is a fish market, alas open only from 8 am to 1 pm, where fishermen bring their catch to sell to the public and to wholesalers. There's a delightful sign at the door: *Chien non admis, même tenu en laisse*. One storefront has, on display, a Redskins satchel with a tag identifying it as National Redskins Department 1984. Uh-huh. Several people are sporting New York Yankees caps. Boo! We visit the Cathédrale-St.-Pierre, built in the 16th century and we take the requisite photos of the interior architecture, statuary, and stained glass windows. We find a staircase that allows us to go on top of the city wall from which vantage point we take pictures of the grounds. (Lee recalls that I was hot and grumpy as we walked though the town, but as no such comment appears in my own notes I can only conclude that it's not true. In fact, she doesn't even mention it in her journal.)

OBSERVATION ABOUT VENNIANS(?): I observe that, for the most part, the women here are prettier than those we've seen in other towns. I ask Lee for confirmation of this, but she claims that she never noticed. Perhaps.

We leave Vannes at 3:30 and head to Kervignac, about 45 km to the west, where Château de Locguénolé (<http://www.chateau-de-locguenole.com/uk/navigation.php>), our hotel for the next four nights, is located. The temperature is now 30°C. This is the last hotel that will present no challenge in locating it. One exits the E60/N165 at Exit 40, drives about 3 km south on the D9, hangs a right at the sign for the château, and drives onto the property. As can be seen in the photos at their web site, there are two principal buildings: the château and the manor house; we are in the former. (The château dates from the 16th century, but its present form didn't take shape until the 1800s; the manor house dates from the early 18th century.) They are situated on a vast spread of greenery that goes down to a lake. Upon checking in, we reserve for 7:30 in their restaurant, which like the one at Noirieux, has a Michelin star.

Our room, of course, is on the first (i.e., second) floor, a tiring 28 steps (with a 180° turn) from the ground floor. A young man is assigned to help with the luggage. Good. The *good* news is that the room, which we get for a special rate (exorbitant for the first night, but half that for each of the next three), is a corner room with windows on two sides, and is huge; and the bathroom has modern plumbing with correctly labeled hot and cold taps - that's two in a row! The *bad* news is that not only is it not air-conditioned (I had anticipated this) but there is absolutely no air flow in the room. It is stifling.* And the late afternoon sun is

*I know that the French enjoy the warmth of summer, but why would they also put on our bed two heavy blankets and a very heavy bedspread?

pouring through the windows on the west side (one in the bedroom, one in the bathroom). My strategy is to collapse in a chair and not move a muscle, waiting for the sweat to stop. When I finally pry my bulk out of the chair, we unpack and go outside (fresh air!) where we order coffees. I take many pictures of our room, the public rooms on the ground floor, and the vast grounds that surround the buildings.

We discover that our room is not only 28 steps above the ground floor but it is then an additional 25 steps (with another 180° turn) down to the lower floor where the formal dining room and breakfast room are located. Going down ain't so bad, but re-mounting the 53 steps with a full tummy takes some endurance. Puff, puff. But the meal is excellent, if also quite pricey. Oh, what the hell, it's only money. Right? (Upon looking at the *carte*, I had noted that many items had curry or cumin, but I did find some that I could eat.)

OBSERVATION ABOUT FRENCH DRIVERS: They're good, much to my surprise. I certainly would not have expected this, based on our wild drive through the suburbs of Paris. And I'm impressed by their staying within the speed limit (for the most part), not tail-gating (except for some who'll be mentioned later), and signaling when changing lanes. I also recall (at least I think I recall) that the highways are not littered with billboard after billboard. Yes, there are large advertisements inside cities, but I don't recall any on the highways. All that I can remember are government-sponsored information boards about châteaux (or other attractions), upcoming rest areas, the next gas station, and the next few exits.

FRACTURED FRENCH: At one point during this day, we get into the car and discover that the radio station is playing a Mendelssohn symphony, either No. 3 (Scottish) or No. 4 (Italian). It's amazing how many times we've entered our car in Washington State and confronted the same question - which one is it? It's become a game, where I let Lee guess first and I take the alternate (because I can't really tell which one reeks of the Mediterranean and which of the Scottish highlands). At the end of the piece, today, we learn that my guess of Italian is correct, so I say to my traveling companion, *Donnez-moi cinq!* and slap her palm. (But then I begin to wonder, should it be *Donnez-m'en cinq* ... or something else entirely? When we get to the hotel in Perros-Guirec, I ask one of the desk clerks, whose English is very good. She laughs and says that neither is correct. What the French say is "Gimme five!" In English!)

I have to admit: in both Vannes and here at the hotel, the sky is a cloudless crystal-clear blue, exactly like those that we have in Gig Harbor (during the one week of the year when it's not raining). What is not like Gig Harbor is the temperature. I ask the desk clerk at the hotel about the advisability of opening the windows but, as was true in Amboise, I'm cautioned not to do so ... because of *les moustiques*. (Of course

the windows have no screens. We've been coming to France since 1982, almost always in the summer and almost always staying at non-air-conditioned hotels. And we've never found a place with window screens. It's hard to believe that some enterprising entrepreneur hasn't decided to market screens throughout the country - I suspect that a fortune could be made.) So tomorrow morning I'll ask if a fan could be found for the room. (In fact, one will be delivered later the next day ... and although it does help somewhat, the room is just too large for a fan to exert its full effect.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC RADIO: As mentioned earlier, we find a second station that does play full-length compositions. This station broadcasts on at least five different frequencies, but the car's radio switches seamlessly from one to another if a stronger signal is available. There is a great deal of learned discussion about the various pieces - and I try very hard to comprehend what is being said, but about all that I can pick up are the names of composers and performers. Still, it's nice not to have to hear the breathy/whispering promotions on *Radio Classique*. A peculiarity of the car's radio is that, despite all of its myriad controls, there is none to control treble and bass, nor to control front/back or left/right stereo. Because much of the music on both stations sounds shrill to me, it's unfortunate that I can't adjust the tone.

The dining room on the *real* ground floor is very attractive, and our dinner is delicious. We each start with a salad, not listed on the *carte*; mine is a simple green salad with balsamic vinaigrette, while Lee has a mixed salad to which cantaloup, cucumbers, and tomatoes have been added; these add, respectively, 9€ and 14€ to the bill, but they are less expensive than the listed *entrées* (see the 2011 *carte* at: <http://miseajour.apicius.com/chateaudelocguenole/images/201110CARTE.pdf>). For our mains, Lee has *L'agneau : le filet rôti, étuvé de chou rouge à l'orange l'épaule confite en cannelloni, consommé d'agneau à l'estragon et royale d'oignon* at 32€ and I choose *Le filet de boeuf (origine France), condiment de carotte noire champignons et velouté de châtaigne « à boire »* at 30€. For dessert ... well, let me "borrow" the description from Lee's journal: "Dessert* was a vision - three giant poached figs balanced by three logs of

*The *carte* describes it as *Les figues, pochées puis laquées d'un Porto aux épices crème prise au lait d'amande et miel* but I like Lee's English version better. I should also mention that Lee's notes describe "go-withs" for the main courses quite different from what's shown on the *carte*: hers was "a roast lamb on a bed of red cabbage and an accompanying onion custard rectangle with a ravioli stuffed with lamb shoulder topping it. On top of the ravioli was a 'dragon' of Brussel sprouts leaves. Beautiful!" And mine had eggplant, tomatoes, and zucchini, which is not even close to what *condiment de carotte noire champignons et velouté de châtaigne « à boire »* means.)

white chocolate mousse and a star-anise, ruby red sauce. There was also a digestif-sized spoon of Tahitian vanilla bean ice cream" at 13€ each. We drink a *demi-bouteille* of a red from the Reuilly region of the Loire. But this is not the full story. No, sir, not, indeedy! Again, quoting from my favorite restaurant critic, "Before the salads came, we had two 'beginnings': a plate of canapes - assorted puff pastries - sardine, smoked salmon, leek; sesame stick. Next a warm *amuse bouche* 'coquillage' - baby mussels, clams in a warm red pepper coulis" and at the end "Coffees came - of course with more nibbles! The tab (which only appeared on the final bill [i.e., at checkout on October 2] was 145€, really pretty reasonable." I will make three comments: (1) who in his/her/its right mind would call 145€ reasonable? (2) it's a good thing that we had Lee's descriptions and access to the *carte* because the only thing I had written in my notes was "Lee - lamb, Ron - steak"; and (3) something that I've not seen in many years - my *carte* showed the prices, Lee's did not, which is ironic because she was signing for all of the hotel and restaurant purchases for the simple reason that her Capital One Visa card does not charge a foreign currency conversion fee. We leave our table at 9:30, two hours after having arrived. (I make a mental note to bring my camera when we eat here again on October 1.)

AMERICANS ARE NOT THE ONLY "UGLY" TRAVELERS: The room, the food, and the service were all memorable but what really cements the experience in my mind is a couple who sat at a table near ours. By their accents, they are an English pair, probably in their forties and, from the nature of the conversation that we (and the rest of the patrons) can't help overhearing, probably casual acquaintances rather than

close friends or lovers or husband-and-wife. She has a low-class, nearly cockney accent and is described by my discerning wife as "frumpy, 1980s hair, crummy clothes." (Lee is even cattier in her journal: "She is dressed in the cheapest synthetic crepe dress imaginable; she must unscrew her head at night to tease her hair.") Tsk, Tsk. Because they are seated behind me, I never get a good look at them, but Lee would apply Molly Ivins's expression to the woman: "She looks like she's been rode hard and put up wet." He has an ultra-affected pseudo upper-class accent (think Tony Blair raised to the Tony Blair power) and he pontificates about *everything* from travel to wine to cheese to food. At one time he's trying to recall "the name of the Irish playwright who wrote 'Waiting for Godot'"; several times I whisper "Samuel Beckett" but my voice is too low to penetrate his field of sound, especially since he's filling it with pronouncements on other topics by this time. As we leave, I decide that it would be rude for me to turn around to see what they look like; my hope that they will show up at tomorrow's breakfast is not fulfilled.

We return to our room, still sauna-like hot and humid and devoid of any air flow. Because of the "Amazonian" climate I have a restless night.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

A *good* thing about this hotel: this is the best shower/tub of the three places we've stayed because it has a single-handle faucet (making it much easier to regulate temperature), the flow of water is powerful, the half-glass window forms a good seal with the edge of the tub, and the hand-held shower "thingie" can be raised/lowered to any desired height. But a *bad* thing: the half-glass shield is fixed in place (i.e., it does not swing outward), making it impossible to reach the faucet without first climbing into the tub.

As we descend the 53 stairs, we're met by a hostess who ushers us to the breakfast room - a cheerful and bright place, next to the more formal dining room. There's a nice assortment of breads (loaves and baguettes), cold cereals, fruit, a variety of cheeses, ham and other cold meats, and cold crêpes or galettes on a side table. Brought to our table are glasses of juice and a pot of coffee. Very nice.

Even in the "cool" of the morning, our room is still very hot and "close"; there is no air movement at all. After breakfast, I ask at the desk if a fan could be brought to the room ("Oui, monsieur," is the reply) and if the maids could be instructed to leave the shutters on the bathroom window closed to prevent the afternoon sun from frying the place ("Oui, monsieur"). The desk is manned by a person with better English than the man yesterday (a good thing because I know neither the French word for fan or shutters). We ask for a dinner recommendation. He suggests two places in Port-Louis, a town south of here: *Le Bistroy* for tonight and *L'Avel Vor* for tomorrow. We also reserve a table here at the hotel for Saturday.

I ask him if Breton is spoken in this region. He says not really, but parents and schools are making some effort to teach it to the children so that the language is not lost. He also tells us that France has had a summer like ours in the Pacific Northwest: relatively cold days in June, July, and August followed by an unusually warm September (see p. 8 for the first mention of this).

Well, our room may feel like an oven, but the outside temperature, as measured by the car's thermometer, is a delightful 13°C. We make the 35-km drive southward to Carnac (population about 4,500) on the Gulf of Morbihan, arriving at about 10:00. On the way, we pass through many small towns, some charming and some not so nice. What they all have in common are devices to force cars to slow down: speed limits as low as 30 k/h and concrete abutments* from the curbs, forcing cars to zig and zag. The guide books tell us

*Not to raise a sore point, but ... I can't help being reminded of the time that we were in Poulsbo (a pleasant city about 40 miles north of Gig Harbor) and, having eaten dinner at a favorite Italian restaurant, were driving through a quiet neighborhood as we headed home. Even though going only 20 mph (or so she alleges) Lee managed to slash the front and rear tires on the passenger side against a similar concrete abutment. The time is about 7:00. What to do? We call AAA, but their tow truck won't arrive for about two hours. We determine that no hotel in the city has an available room. I stay

with the car while Lee walks to the main street, looking for an open store (preferably a gas station that might sell tires) - there is one place that is just closing (after all, it's really late - about 8:00!), but they can't offer much help. There is a Sears auto center in Silverdale, some 10 miles south of here, and they'll be open until 9:00. The tow truck finally arrives (maybe around 8:45), I call Sears to beg them to stay open, and we (plus the car) travel as fast as the tow truck can deliver us, to the Sears auto center in Silverdale. Yes, the woman who spoke to us did keep the doors open, but we had to leave the car until next morning. All of the hotel rooms in Silverdale are also booked, so we do the only thing we can: we hire a taxi to drive us home at a cost of about \$95 (not including the tip). We return to Silverdale the next morning and turn over most of the dwindling funds in our bank account because (1) the Audi takes special high performance tires and (2) even though only two tires were ruined, all four had to be replaced. But I digress. Again. And not for the last time.

that Carnac is inundated with tourists during the summer months, but we are relieved to find it quite uncrowded today. Our first destination is *Le Musée de Préhistoire* (<http://www.museedecarnac.com/>), which we finally locate after a considerable search. This is not one of my high points, but Lee can't be more delighted. The museum has a collection of rocks, wall displays of prehistoric rock formations, videos about the archeologists who found the stones that make Carnac famous, and information about the different kinds of stone formations. I had already learned, from the stone mason's blog that I mentioned on p. 1, the definitions of *menhir* and *dolmen*. The former is a Breton word meaning "long stone" and refers to the large rocks, some of them engraved, either standing alone or in rows, some as high as 20 m; the latter, a Breton word for "table of stone," is a chamber or burial passage of a megalithic tomb; it consists of vertical stones (walls) topped with a large horizontal stone (ceiling). According to our blogger, "Brittany has the highest concentration of megalithic features in the world" and by the time these days will have passed I am quite willing to believe it. The museum also has drawings and descriptions, speculating on how the stones, some of them enormous, were transported to their final destination and, in some cases, turned to stand upright or lifted to serve as roofs.

We leave the museum at about 11:00 (the temperature is now 22°C) and drive to Locmariaquer, 13 km east of Carnac, arriving half an hour later. According to the Wikipedia entry, "This small town contains the Locmariaquer megaliths, some of the most significant neolithic remains in Europe, including the Broken Menhir of Er Grah, the largest known single block of stone to have been transported and erected by Neolithic man. It is beside the Table des Marchands, a famous dolmen with notable carvings." The Menhir of Er Grah (from about 4700 B.C.) is an impressive object: originally it stood 21 m high as a 280-ton block, but something caused it to topple and break into the four large pieces we see today. We enter (low bridge!) the Table des Marchands, where a guide is already conducting a lecture (in French, of course). And we circle the enormous Er-Grah tumulus. Turning, again, to Wikipedia, "The Er-Grah tumulus is 140 meters (460 ft) long. It was probably originally constructed in the fifth millennium BC as a cairn, which was extended in both directions. A pavement surrounded the stepped structure. The capstone indicates that the monument was completed at around 3,300 BC."

At about noon, we are on our way again, back to a town just east of Carnac called La Trinité sur Mer, where we hope to board the touristic train (really a gasoline powered "engine" and three "passenger cars") for a circular tour that will take us past the numerous fields of ancient stones that surround Carnac. The train is scheduled to stop in this town at 12:30, but we don't know where nor do we have a town map. We manage to find the tourist bureau, just before it closes for lunch; we get a city map and are directed to a bus stop a few blocks away where the train is supposed to pick up passengers. We wait until 12:40. No train. As we walk back to our car, you-know-what passes us. Merde! So we drive to the location in Carnac where the train is scheduled to arrive at 1:00 and, lo and behold, it arrives at 1:03. (Somehow, the driver made up the time he had lost earlier.) We congratulate ourselves on getting there before the train, only to learn that the driver is going to take a one-hour lunch break and won't depart until 2:00. Double Merde!!

This origination point for the train is also the location of the Visitor's Center for *Les alignements du Ménéac*,

which consists of 1,099 menhirs in 11 files on a field 1165 m by 100 m; the highest rocks are 4 m tall. The center is open to the extent that we can enter and look at some exhibits, but not much else. Access to the rocks is possible only with a guide (not available out of season, *tant pis*) but Lee walks over to take a look over the fence while I find a shady spot to sit and wait for the train to leave. We are on board at 1:55, but the driver chooses not to depart until 2:10. The train follows a counter-clockwise circuit, first swinging down into the city and along the beaches at Gulf of Morbihan. Bretagne has some of the most extreme tides in Europe, especially on the English Channel coast, and we see some evidence of low tide here. And then we swing north, past *L'alignement de Kerlescan* (540 menhirs in 13 lines), then *L'alignement de Kermario* (982 menhirs in 10 lines), and we return to *Les alignements du Ménéac*. I do my best to take pictures from the moving train, but after a while they all look alike. We are back at the starting point at 3:00 and, mercifully, some clouds have rolled in, causing the temperature to drop from 24°C to 21°C.

But as we head to Auray, a town of 10,000 lying 13 km northwest of Carnac, the sun comes out in force and the temperature rises to 25°C. (All of these readings are with the car's temperature gauge which we assume is reliable, to $\pm 10^\circ$.) We arrive at 3:45 and stroll along the streets, enjoying the shops and the people. The town is built on a cliff high above the River Auray. One vantage point allows us to look down from the old city on the port city of Saint-Goustan. Walking back to the car, we see a man wearing the shirt Official U.S. Marshall (obviously an undocumented alien because the correct spelling would be "marshal"). Of course I take a picture. From Auray, we drive 5 km to Le Bono (I have no recollection of why, except to say that we've been there); maybe we thought that Bono would be there to greet visitors.

PUN ALERT: It is *not* true that the town motto is Hip, Hip, Auray!

It's an easy drive, under a half-hour, back to our sun-baked/-roasted/-broiled hotel room, arriving at 5:00 when the car's reading is 25°C. We learn from the desk clerk that our reservation for Le Bistroy had to be changed to tomorrow (the restaurant is not open today), so he offers to make a reservation for us in Au Jardin Des Sens in Hennebont, a town just 7 km north of the hotel. He cannot call until 6:30 (that's when the restaurant opens) but the call is successful for a 7:30 arrival. He even draws a remarkably detailed map, showing rivers, bridges, traffic lights, and buildings.

Our room is a bit cooler than it was yesterday because *all* of the shutters, not just those in the bathroom, are closed and because there is a large floor-standing fan that does give some air circulation. We have coffees outside on the deck where we had sat yesterday.

Hennebont, population 14,000, is a very attractive town, but certainly not charming in the way that Rochefort-en-Terre and some others have been. We make a point to return when there is more daylight so that we can take pictures. At the restaurant, we ask to be seated outdoors, but after every course someone comes to ask if we wouldn't rather come inside. "Crazy Americans!" they must be thinking, "It is much too cold outdoors." Well, maybe for a Frenchman it is, but not for us. The food is good but not anywhere near the class of what we experienced not only at the elegant restaurants in Amboise, Briollay, and yesterday at Locguénolé, but also at the simpler eateries that we have gone to. I order *sole meunière*, the same meal that I had at *Château Noirieux*, but my first bite produced an unpleasant surprise: a bone. So did my second. Lee noticed the problem. This was not a filet; rather the entire skeleton was still present. So, after performing a "skeletonectomy" on the little beastie, I did get to enjoy some boneless fish. The service also was somewhat spotty, perhaps because the employees found it too cold to venture outside to check on their guests. (There were a few people eating inside in the very warm room, too hot for our tastes.)

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

After descending the 53 stairs for breakfast and then ascending them to return to our room, we get ready for the day's adventures. We drive some 30 km northwest to Quimperlé to visit their open-air market, but it looks uninteresting and we exit immediately (or as immediately as we can figure out how to get out of the

central district, with its one-way and dead-end streets, and to a recognizable highway sign). From there, it's 35 km due west to Concarneau (*Konk Kerne* in Breton), where we arrive a little after 10:00. The town, population about 20,000, is a fishing port on the Bay of Biscay. The temperature when we left the hotel was 15°C but it is now 19°C ... and rising.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE DRIVE: Many towns have McDonald's restaurants - that's no surprise - but the signs announcing their presence show the familiar script M on a green background, no words, merely a subliminal message about how "green" the restaurants are. One of the most popular restaurant chains - they seem to be everywhere - is Buffalo Grill.* Who woulda thunked it? Also, many of the towns

*With red buffalo horns to identify themselves, they have an extensive *carte*, including the following: *Menu Pony Express*, *Menu Rapido*, *Menu Buffalo*, *Menu Shérif*, and others. We do not stop.

that we pass have French names that don't look very French to my unpracticed eye: e.g., Melgven, Kerhonit, Beuz, and Clun Cam.

It's market day in Concarneau, so parking is at a premium. We find a place in a large commercial lot along the waterfront, where we take some pictures and then head toward the old walled town (*Ville close*), which is on an island in the harbor. We cross a cobblestone road and then a wooden draw bridge to get to the town gate. On the stone wall is a large sundial with the message (in both Latin and French): "Time passes like clouds." The old town market is a pleasure to walk through - lots of people (but not as attractive as in Vannes), interesting shops, delicious-looking food in display windows. We buy a box of Bretagne cookies as a gift for our neighbor, Lois. And Lee buys *un haut* (i.e., a top) for herself, Armor-Lux brand, if you must know. I'm the only one who gets nothing. We walk to the water's edge to see a water taxi that transports locals from the modern city to the old town. The local food products that the people of Bretagne are noted for are butter cookies (because butter from this region is considered the best in France), galettes, and salted caramels. We purchase a mixed selection of the latter and, although good, they seemed no different from other caramels that I've had over the years.

At 11:00 we leave the old city and wander through the bustling modern market (which was the reason that there was no parking nearby). There is a wide variety of food vendors, including one who is selling sausages and who gets angry at having his picture taken. Well, how could I resist? He is wearing a Breton sailor's hat with a streaming ribbon and he looks ... adorable. (Perhaps he's angry because he didn't get a clean shave this morning.) He has posted several large signs that read "STOP ANDOUILLES, Vente directe sur le lieu de fabrication." According to Google Translate, *andouilles* are chitterlings (i.e., chitlins to those of us who had spent time in the southern U.S.). My guess is that he means that by buying from him, the sausages he sells will not have chitterlings. But maybe it means something else entirely. Nearby is a display case of chickens, all with their heads and feet still attached, but dead-dead-dead (we hope). There are also lots of non-food vendors, who are selling hats, jackets, flowers, and assorted what-nots. As we return to the parking lot, we see one of the boats that had been floating in the water, now on dry land just a little over one hour later. Those tides, again!

There is a nice sea breeze, but as we reach our car we find that the temperature is now 21°C. We continue driving west, heading toward Pointe du Raz, some 80 km away and at the very tip of the peninsula.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE DRIVE TOWARD THE POINT: We drive through many small towns, but the most memorable is Plouhinec. As in many towns, both in France and in the U.S., there are some strategically placed electronic monitors that display a car's speed, as compared to the posted limit of 50 k/h. But what makes these displays unique is that if one is going faster than 50, the number is displayed, along with a "frowny face" ☹; but if one is under the limit, the reward is an electronic "smiley face" ☺. (We are not quick enough to snap a picture on the way to Pointe du Raz, but we will capture a "smiley face" on our return.) Also, we observe that in every town and city (without exception) that has a traffic light on a pole at

an intersection, there is a second (smaller) light lower down on the pole at the level of the driver's eyes. And the two change in concert from green to yellow to red. (It would be amusing if the two lights didn't act in concert, no?)

Still driving westward, we stop in Audierne at about 12:45. It is an attractive town, so we take pictures of the main square, the shops, and waterfront with quite a few pleasure craft sitting on dry land. Tides,* again!

*As a person who drew 36 years of paychecks from The University of Tennessee, it is with great pain that I bring myself to say "Roll Tide"! But I do so anyway. And then there's the story of the young man who wanted to impress his lady friend by quoting Lord Byron's, "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean – roll!" to which she replied, "Ooh, look Ralphie, it's doing it."

We continue our drive alongside the shore through beautiful small towns, all of them with well-kept and with brightly painted homes. At about 1:15, we are at Pointe du Raz (<http://www.pointe-du-raz.com/>) and the temperature is now 24°C, despite the cooling winds from the ocean. There is some confusion about paying to park, but nobody stops us as we enter the parking area. And when we exit a few hours from now, there's still nobody in the booth to ask us for payment.

The first thing we have to do is ... eat! There are several restaurants and gift shops in a row. Although we've seen no women wearing the weird very tall white hats that are part of traditional Breton garb, I am at least able to take pictures of several postcards that show them (as well as their colorful frocks). At the restaurant, I order a galette *au jambon et champignons* to be washed down with a glass of *pression cidre* (having taken Simon's warning not to dare order any other drink when in Bretagne). Lee has a huge plate of mussels and a glass of cider.

And now it's time to do the 25-minute walk to Pointe du Raz, the tip of the peninsula that juts into the Atlantic Ocean. There are two paths between the restaurant area and the promontory; we go out on one and return by the other. There is lots of barren scrub land, but shortly we see the violent crashing waves and the cliffs that make this place so popular. What is not so popular with us are the fierce winds coming off the ocean. Because it's a sunny day, I'm heeding my dermatologist's warning that I must wear a hat - but managing to keep it on my head is a challenge. It has a draw string that can be tightened under the chin, but there are several gusts that feel as if they'll lift the hat (and me) off the ground. Either that or strangle me. I am philosophical in concluding, "If the hat goes, so do I. Sic transit gloria Magid!" Mercifully, the "tourniquet" doesn't slice my carotid artery or, worse, my vocal cords. (Somehow, Lee manages to keep her Houston Astros cap on her head throughout.) I should mention that these winds, strong as they are, are "weaklings" compared to what we'll encounter on October 7 at Cap Fréhel.

For most of the walk, there is a packed gravel road. But the final 100 meters consists of large stones, firmly embedded in the dirt (*Gott sei dank!*). We see several inukshuks (I have no idea what they're called in French or Breton) along the way. Nearing the tip, we can see three small islands (or large rocks) in a straight line, one of them having a lighthouse and the more distant one a beacon. On the mainland is a statue with the legend *Notre Dame de Naufragés* (the last word means "shipwrecks").

On the 130 km drive back toward the hotel, we again go through the town of Plouhinec and, this time, we have the camera ready to take a picture of the speed monitor. Because we are traveling below the speed limit, the sign reads VOUS ROULEZ À 48 KM/H and the numeral alternates with a smiley face. Delightful! When we get to Exit 40 on the E60/N165, instead of turning south toward Chateau de Locguénolé, we turn north to Hennebont, where we had dinner last evening. This is a medieval walled town and it has traces of the ramparts and stone wall, surrounded by gardens with lots of flowers. What also strikes the eye are an impressive cathedral, from the 16th century and a high railroad bridge over the river.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PARKING: Bretagne does its best *not* to discourage parking. We have all sorts of evidence to support this claim: (1) In Angers when we park in a lot near the fortress, we insert enough

money in the pay-and-display meter for two hours, but are rewarded with *four* hours from 11:30 to 3:30. Why? Because the two-hour block between noon and 2:00 is free! (2) In Rochefort-en-Terre, we arrive at 12:30, but the pay-and-display machine rejects our monetary offering - once again, free parking between noon and 2:00. (3) In Concarneau, we did have to pay a 2€ fee for parking, but only because it was market day; all other days are free. (4) Today at Pointe du Raz, we had expected to pay 6€ upon leaving, but the booth was unattended.

Back to our very hot room, we are dismayed to discover that the maids have left all of the windows open (contrary to the instructions we had received on checking in) resulting in a large number of dead insects on the window sills. (Why they are all dead is a matter I wish not to address - I shudder to think that the air is filled with lethal doses of insecticide.) Tomorrow morning, I'll leave a note (in impeccable French, I hope) asking that the windows be kept closed.

Downstairs, the hotel clerk informs us that we have a 7:30 reservation at *Le Bistroy* (yet another spelling of bistro), the place that was closed yesterday, in Port-Louis, 13 km to the south. As he did yesterday, he draws a map of where the restaurant is, but because we decide to drive around Port-Louis and take pictures of the waterfront and of the 17th century citadel, we do have a bit of trouble finding the restaurant. But find it we do - and we are glad for that. (A sign in the window says that they are closed on Sunday, Wednesday, and Thursday. This explains yesterday's failure.) We are seated at a window with a view of the river and many pleasure boats, but nightfall comes too soon and we can enjoy the scene for just a short while. Our server is a jokester - when I ask for the now mandatory *carafe d'eau*, he points to the river and suggests that we use it as our water supply. The restaurant has no printed *carte*. Instead, there are *ardoises* (slates) around the room, one of which is brought to our table. The same slate is also posted on the outside wall, near the entrance. We both start with an *entrée* of some sort of salmon (gravlax-like) with grapes on a bed of lettuce. For our *plats*, I choose *pintade* (guinea fowl) with a fruity sauce and Lee has *mille feuilles des fonds marins* (literally "a thousand leaves of sea bed!"), a white fish (Lee thinks it's *loup* or European seabass) with goat cheese, potatoes, and brussels sprouts, which she, a noted brussels sprouts hater, calls delicious! With two glasses of white wine (of an unfamiliar label), the total bill is a startlingly low 57€.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1

When we leave for Quimper at about 9:15, the temperature is already 17°C. Quimper (population 20,000) is some 40 km west of Quimperlé, to which it has no connection; the latter is a city already on our "do not visit again" list for having made it so difficult for us to exit yesterday. According to Wikipedia,

"Quimper is the ancient capital of La Cornouaille, Brittany's most traditional region, and has a distinctive Breton character. Shops and flags celebrating the region's Celtic heritage can be found throughout the city. Quimper was originally settled during Roman times. By AD 495, the town had become a Bishopric. It subsequently became the capital of the counts of Cornouailles. In the 11th century, it was united with the Duchy of Brittany. During the civil wars of the 14th century, the town suffered considerable ruin. In 1364, the duchy passed to the House of Montfort.

"The town has a rustic atmosphere with footbridges spanning the rivers that flow through it. The Church of Locmaria, a Romanesque structure, dates from the eleventh century. The Cathedral of Saint-Corentin, with its Gothic-style façade, was constructed between the 13th and 16th centuries. It is the oldest Gothic structure in lower Brittany. Its two towers are 76 m (250 feet); its spires were added in the 19th century. The 15th century stained glass windows are exceptional. The cathedral is dedicated to Quimper's first bishop, Corentin. To the cathedral's west are the pedestrianized [is this a word??] streets of Vieux Quimper with a wide array of crêperies, half-timbered houses, and shops. Near the Episcopal palace, which now holds the Musée départemental Breton (devoted to regional history, archaeology, ethnology and economy), are the ruins of the town's 15th century walls. Nearby is the Musée des Beaux-Arts. The museum has a nineteenth century façade and an entirely rebuilt interior. It houses a collection of 14th to 21st century paintings that includes works by Boucher, Corot, Oudry and

Rubens along with canvases by such Pont-Aven School painters as Bernard, Denis, Lacombe, Maufra and Paul Sérusier.

"The town's best known product is Quimper faïence pottery. It has been made here since 1690, using bold provincial designs of Jean-Baptiste Bousquet. The town's eating establishments boast some of the best crêpes and cider in Brittany. The town has also been known for copper and bronze work, food items, galvanized ironware, hosiery, leather, paper and woollen goods. Its inhabitants are called Quimpérois."

We arrive in Quimper at about 10:15. Immediately we are confronted with an unexpected problem: the indoor parking lot that we choose has perilously narrow ramps and extraordinarily tight turns. Because we need to drive to an upper floor, it takes several hair-raising (but not car-scraping, thanks to the car's visual and audible warning signals) turns but we are finally safely in a space. When we leave a couple of hours later, once again we need to negotiate these ridiculously tight turns. The walls are covered with the evidence that many cars have not negotiated the ramps successfully, but (by swinging wide right and approaching at a 90° angle) we do not add to the unintended graffiti. (In her journal, Lee describes this as "the parking garage from hell!")

The town lives up to its reputation. We walk past bridges over the river Odet, old stone walls, the public square, and the cathedral. Our first stop is at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, which has a wing devoted to a native son, Max Jacob (1876-1944) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Jacob, a painter and writer; see also <http://blogs.princeton.edu/wri152-3/bmasters/archives/001941.html>). As a young man, Jacob went to Paris and became friends with the great artists, writers, and poets of the time. The gallery has portraits of Jacob done by Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and others. Although he had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a camp where he died of pneumonia. Not only are we unfamiliar with his work, but an even greater revelation are the paintings of his friend from Paris days, Pierre de Belay (1890-1947) (http://www.fineoldart.com/browse_by_essay.html?essay=186), who invented a very compelling technique called *trellisme*, which gives an effect not unlike Seurat's pointillism.

The permanent collection houses the painters of the Pont-Aven school, among whom (for a short while) was Paul Gauguin http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pont-Aven_School. Lucien Simon is represented by paintings of Breton peasants, Henri Moret by landscapes of villages, and Paul Sérusier by portraits of Breton women. The museum also features a huge room, a replica of the restaurant of Hôtel de l'Épée in Quimper; in 1907 local artist Jean-Julien Lemordant was commissioned to fill the walls of the restaurants with paintings of Breton scenes. These very paintings are displayed in this replica of the restaurant walls.

At about 11:30, we leave the museum and walk to the Cathédrale Saint-Corentin, the oldest Gothic structure in Brittany, dating from the 15th century. We walk to Rue Kéréon and stroll, with delight, past its half-timbered houses, restaurants, and shops. We enter Halles Saint-François, an enclosed market place that is the equal of (or better than) the one in Tours. The stalls of fruits, flowers, vegetables, fish, seafood, meat (yes, they do proudly sell horse meat), cold cuts, and cheese are spectacular. A woman flipping crêpes has an audience of one enthralled boy (and a 72-year-old American man). The market is crowded with prosperous-looking clientele. Lee, enticed by the sights and smells, buys a *tartelette aux saumons*; Ron, who is feeling stuffed after all the fine eating, abstains. We notice numerous dogs, either on leash or in the arms of an owner, browsing about the market, salivating at the meat cases. Afterwards, we wander some more through the city, dreading the inevitable when we have to retrieve the car from the garage.

FUN FACT: According to the DK Guide, the man who invented the stethoscope in 1826 lived in Quimper. No, it was not Irving Steth! Rather, it was René Laënnec, whose statue we somehow miss seeing.

But we can delay no longer, so at about 12:45 we begin the delicate maneuvering of the Peugeot down the ramps, often having to back up and swing even wider (to the consternation and/or amusement of drivers behind us) but finally we are free! And now it's on to Josselin, 145 km to the east, where we arrive at 2:45. The day is warming up: the car's gauge registers 27°C when we stop for gas and peaks at 33°C, which I

don't believe, by the time we head back to the hotel. (On the road to Josselin, we see the first - and only - open-bed pickup truck that we'll see during the three weeks we're in France.)

Josselin is another *Petite Cité de Caractère* and, although not as charming as Rochefort-en-Terre, it is a most pleasant place. We walk the streets and then head to Basilique Notre-Dame-du-Roncier. According to the basilica's web site (<http://www.notre-dame-du-roncier.fr/105.htm>):

"The legend goes that in about the year 808 a peasant cutting brambles with a sickle in his field discovered a statue of the Virgin. This sickle can be seen today hanging in the vault of the altar - a souvenir of the finding of the statue. He carried the statue home but the statue returned to the field. This was repeated several times until the man decided that the Virgin wanted a sanctuary built on the spot where he had found the statue - this became Our Lady of the Rosebush. Olivier de Clisson died on the 23rd April, 1407 at Josselin. He was very attached to this chapel and he wished to be buried there with his second wife, Marguerite de Rohan. Inside the Basilica in the chapel to the right of the chancel is the mausoleum of Olivier de Clisson* and his wife."

*To my jaundiced eye, the figures of Olivier and Marguerite resemble Gort, the robot who accompanied Klaatu in "The Day the Earth Stood Still." Check out the pictures at Picasa to see if you agree.

Leaving the basilica at 3:00, we roam through the city some more, admiring (and taking pictures of) the half-timbered houses, the narrow streets, and the shops. We reach the Château de Josselin (and you thought that we were finished with châteaux when we left the Loire Valley!), but explore it only from the outside (for which I am much grateful). Then we walk through more city streets, past more half-timbered houses, some of which seem to be bulging or leaning. And finally we return to Château de Locquénolé, where we retreat to our very uncomfortable room to read and use the computer.

We head downstairs and ask for coffees to be brought to us outside on the terrace, but when we get there we discover that a wedding party has requisitioned the entire area including every chair and table. So we wander onto the lawn and sit in uncomfortable lounge chairs (under a very hot sun) and wait for our coffees. After a long wait with no coffee, we return to the desk - according to the clerk, a waiter tried to find us, failed, and brought the coffees back inside. (I don't think that he tried very hard.) So we drink the brew in an inside non air-conditioned lounge, then retreat to our own private sauna of a room to await dinner downstairs.

As was true three nights ago, dinner is a delight. And this time I remember to bring my camera to record the experience. Lee and I each have the same appetizer: *Le foie gras de canard poêlé, noisettes torrifiées butternut et coques d'oignon rouge* (I won't even try to translate it). We also choose the same main course: *Le pigeonneau du Méné Bré rôti crumble de noix et oignon blanc à l'infusion de laurier*. At the Picasa site are photos of two little courses that come before and after the appetizer. I have no idea what some of them are, but they were goooood. Lee, of course, knows everything about the food, so I'll quote from her journal: first come "puff pastry canapes, then an *amuse bouche* of crab in a vinegary herby broth topped by an orange sphere that tastes like tomato aspic (served in a conical bar glass)." (Lee, acting like the King's taster, samples everything first to be sure that it is devoid of cumin.) Her description of the foie gras doesn't quite match the French on the menu (above) but is more comprehensible: "Delectable duck foie gras with toasts, as well as a shattery translucent spice disc and a 'dormouse' made of pureed apples. The anise is his nose,* and he had some sort of spice ears as well."

*Three questions: how does she know that the dormouse is a he, how does she know that it's even a dormouse, and what in the hell is his anise (sic) doing where his nose should be?

Now saying that we had the same main courses does not do full justice to the presentation: as seen in the pictures, our waiter dissected/carved/whatever the bird at the table, and dished it and the go-withs onto a

plate for Lee. But did I get the same treatment? No! Mine was then delivered, already carved, on a covered plate. And not only was the foie gras different from the menu at the web site; so is the main course. According to the photo that I made of the *carte*, we had *Le pigeonneau du Méné Bré en 'cocotte' sur l'Os sur une étuvée de légumes à la fleur de thym*. So there!

We also manage to consume a full bottle of wine. Stuffed, we eschew the cheese course and dessert, but do not refuse the little sweets that are placed before us.

And as a special bonus, to make the meal even more enjoyable I suddenly am able to solve Will Shortz's NPR puzzle from last Sunday. The puzzle, which had stumped us for nearly a week, was "Think of a ten-letter occupation ending in 'er.' The first four letters can be rearranged to spell something that person would study, and the next four letters can be rearranged to spell something else that person would study. What is the occupation?" The answer is ASTRONOMER in which the first four letters can be rearranged to make STAR and the next four to make MOON. Whew!

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2

After breakfast, we pack and leave our miserably hot and stuffy room. We ask for some help with the luggage (and the 28 steps). We check out of the hotel at about 9:30 and head toward the English Channel coast of Brittany. Our ultimate destination is Perros-Guirec, with intermediate stops at Commana, St. Thégonnec, and Morlaix.

OBSERVATION ABOUT TRAFFIC CIRCLES (ROUNDBABOUTS): On today's drive - and on all of the other days - we note that every roundabout (*rond-point* in French) is named after some *Héro de la République*, of which there seem to be an unending supply. If one wants to achieve immortality, at least by having your name associated with a traffic circle, do something notable - like dying in a battle while singing *La Marseillaise*. Roundabouts are found in cities and in the countryside. Sometimes they seem to function merely as slow-down devices for traffic, but more often they are used to direct cars to various destinations. The more complicated ones may have as many as seven spokes emanating from them, although they are often (although not always) well-enough signed that one knows which one to take. If you miss your "exit" it's always possible to go around a second time ... or a third ... or ... The rules for entering the traffic flow are the same as in the U.S., except that they are issued in French: *Vous n'avez pas la priorité*, meaning that if a car is in the circle before you, you must wait for it to pass. Some have signs *Cédez le passage!* (i.e., Yield!) Some roundabouts, particularly at major road junctions, are quite large with a grassy hill in the middle, whereas others are small circles on the road surface that require one to steer just a little to the right and then back to the left (unless one wants to drive right over them, something that is probably frowned upon by the *gendarmerie*).

We pass very few cars on this Sunday morning. During the drive northward, the temperature gradually rises from 12°C to 18°C and we get into a hilly area* as we drive the 140 km north to Commana (population

*In addition to all of its other gizmos, the car has an altimeter. Well, not really - I think that its gps tracking system has access to a contour map. Near Commana, we're at 320 m above sea level.

about 1000) where we arrive at 11:15. Contrary to what we learned from the hotel clerk, some 45% of the children are in bilingual schools ("bi" meaning French and Breton). Our goal is to find *L'allée couverte du Mougau-Bihan* (the covered walkway of Mougau-Bihan). According to an informative web site <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=8822>:

"This is an absolutely splendid *allée couverte*, which has been dated to 3000 BC, found a couple of kilometres to the south of the village of Commana, and signposted from there. It has a little car park and picnic area, as well as a nice and spacious grassy area around it. The main chamber is 14 metres

in length and oriented approximately north to south, with its entrance at the northern end. The southern end has an extra small chamber, the "cella," the two parts being divided by a splendid "chevet" stone. The roof is made of five large capstones, four on the main chamber, and one on the cella. The internal width and height are about 1.5 metres.

"But the best thing about this monument is all the ornamental engravings on the internal faces of the stones. About half of the side slabs have engravings on them which are fairly clear to make out. Most of these engravings are what are called 'palettes', some stones having several of these of various designs next to each other. One of the stones has two pairs of the double hemispheres on it - these have been largely interpreted as pairs of breasts. The closing stone between the two chambers has a palette and also a wonderful polished axe, contained within its 'crosse,' but this is one of the least clear engravings, being much more weatherworn than some which have been better protected. I have seen Mougau Bihan translated from the Breton language to 'Fairies Cave' or 'Little House,' so take your pick."

This description seems adequate, although it is so dark inside the *allée* that, even with a small flashlight (which Lee had the presence of mind to pack) the engravings are difficult to see. It's a miracle that Lee doesn't clobber her head on the low ceiling because, just as she enters, a friendly black dog comes to greet us. Adjacent to the field where the monument stands is a field of cattle, all bulls (as best as this city-bred boy can tell). After losing interest in us, the dog crosses to the other field and decides that he's going to herd the cattle. This may work for sheepdogs with sheep, but not for our plucky canine who beats a quick retreat when three massive bulls begin walking menacingly toward him.

PUN ALERT: We pass many fields of cows (but, alas, very few sheep). I say to my unsuspecting travel partner, "Look at those cows and how filthy they are. They need a good *vaching*."

It's just 15 km further north to Saint-Thégonnec, a somewhat larger town (population 2500) and its "parish close." Wikipedia explains:

"A parish close is an enclosed area around the parish church, including the church yard and a number of other features. In common with others in the area, the Saint-Thégonnec close features a large ceremonial entrance arch, stressing the importance of the close as a focus for pilgrimage and pardons. An impressive calvary or crucifix forms the focus of the church yard. The interior of the church is exemplary of the local version of Baroque style, with a large quantity of polychrome sculpture and decoration, including a spectacular pulpit."

And according to the *DK Eyewitness Travel* guide:

"The porch of the parish close here is in a triumphal and ostentatious style that perfectly reflects the opulence that St.-Thégonnec enjoyed during the Renaissance, when it was one of the richest parishes in the Léon. Although the church was severely damaged by fire in 1988, some 16th- and 17th-century masterpieces survive. Among them is a priest's chair decorated with medallions and putti, and with armrests in the shape of dolphins' heads. There is also a Rosary altarpiece; a shuttered niche with the Tree of Jesse; a pulpit, which was originally gilded; and an organ built by Thomas Dallam. The ossuary contains a beautiful painted wood *Entombment of Christi* dating from 1702. Like the triumphal porch, the architecture of the ossuary is exuberant, with bell-turrets, windows, and slender columns."

The pictures that I take of the courtyard and the church's exterior confirm the description of "triumphal and ostentatious." A sign at the church door warns, "*S'il vous plaît! Veuillez refermez la porte à cause des pigeons. Merci.*" So! No pigeons allowed. Period. (I wonder if I ate one of their cousins at dinner last night.)*

*And I wonder if the church elders know about Tom Lehrer's technique for disposing of pigeons: "My pulse will be quickenin'/ With each drop of strych'nine/ We feed to a pigeon./ (It just takes a smidgen!)/ To poison a pigeon in the park."

We leave Saint-Thégonnec and 30 minutes later we're in Morlaix, a much larger town (15,000). We do not have a city map, but a stylized drawing in *DK Eyewitness Travel* shows us that the old town is, depending on which way one is facing, either directly behind or in front of a very impressive viaduct. The viaduct is easy to find and we park on the street near it, not knowing which side we are on. Of course, we're on the "wrong" side (yet another demerit for my intrepid navigator), so it's a pretty sizable walk to reach the viaduct, walk past it, and enter the old city, where we find some impressive half-timbered houses, cobblestone streets, and stone buildings. In *Place Salvador Allende* (well, not everything is named after a Frenchman), we see *La Maison de la Duchesse Anne* dating from the 15th century.

Morlaix lies on the southern tip of the *Baix de Morlaix*, which empties into the English channel,* so we are

*According to several online sources, the French call this body of water *la Manche*, which translates as "the sleeve." The Channel Islands are called *Les Îles Anglo-Normandes* - literally the "Anglo-Norman Islands" - or *Les Îles de la Manche* - "The Islands of the Channel".

getting quite close to our evening's destination, Perros-Guirec, just 50 km to the northeast. As we drive north, we find ourselves passing long flat beaches, filled with adults and children enjoying the unseasonably warm weather. By this time, the temperature has climbed to 29°C.

Perros-Guirec, a city of about 8,000 (although it seems larger), is a popular tourist destination with its excellent beaches, many hotels and restaurants, natural beauty, and a casino. To reach it, we drive through a considerably larger town, Lannion (population 20,000), some 13 km to the south. Over the next few days, whenever we leave or return to Perros-Guirec, we must drive through Lannion. It has several large supermarkets and we make it a point to visit one before we leave the region.

Our hotel for four nights is L'Agapa (www.lagapa.com/en) but their web site, as complete as it is, provides no driving instructions and no map. All that we have to guide us is a Google map and a vague notion that the hotel is near the water. The problem is that the entire city has a coastline on the water from the west to the north to the east. We enter along the eastern side of the city but do not see our hotel. There is a parking lot,* however, with a large city map so we park the car and try to get our bearings. There are two

*It's unfortunate that I didn't think to take a picture, but there was a parked car with a bumper sticker (in French) that translates as "If you would like to take my handicapped parking space, will you also take my handicap?" Nice.

difficulties with this large map: (1) several hotels are shown on the map, but not ours; (2) there is a plastic cover over the map (to protect it from the sea mist and/or the pigeon droppings) that is a few cm away from the map, thus making it almost impossible to read what is behind it. Undaunted, my spouse encourages me to drive on, staying as close to the shore as possible. And finally she sees a sign to the hotel.

It is modern and gorgeous, although our welcome is less than pleasant. Unlike the all-male desk personnel at each of the other hotels where we spent the last 11 nights, the entire staff of L'Agapa are young women. One of them is rather gruff, partly because her English is, perhaps, worse than my French. Having arrived at about 2:45, we learn that our room is being cleaned and will not be ready until about 3:45. The clerk is adamant that we must reserve a table in the hotel restaurant (*Le Bélouga**) for this evening, but we demur

*Having already eaten at two restaurants that boast a Michelin star, and having reserved at another in Cancale for October 8, we decide to give our tummies a "vacation" by turning down this restaurant with its Michelin star. The clerk is incredulous, all the more reason to reject it. We do, however, have all of our breakfasts there. For details and menus, click on the restaurant link at the hotel's web site.

and tell her that we would prefer to eat elsewhere. The reception area is very warm, despite the outside door's being open, a strong hint that there will be no air-conditioning in the hotel.

Accompanied by Mlle. Gruff, we descend one level (there is a funky elevator with stills from a Groucho Marx movie) and a spiral staircase - we take the latter - and the clerk shows us a door that will lead outside to a grassy area and from there, if we wish, down to the beach. So we go outside (the days is still sunny and very warm), take some pictures of the breath-taking view down to the beach, realize that it would be easy of walk *down* to the beach but, with my bad legs, a monumental task to walk back up, so we go to the car to get some reading material and we sit outside until the appointed hour.

When we return to the desk, a *plus agréable* clerk takes care of us. First she shows us around the public areas (the restaurant, the spa, etc.) and then takes us to our room. The room is on the same level as the lobby, but to get to it one must descend by the elevator or spiral staircase, go outdoors, and then ascend one flight of stairs. Because of this, we ask for some help with the luggage. She takes us to our room: it is spectacular, with a view (the same one that we had when we went outside early) of the beach, the casino, the granite rocks (in the distance), and the interesting private homes below us but still well above the beach. Pictures posted at the Picasa site show the interior of the room and the view from its windows. The room is about as modern as was our room at *The Spire* in Queenstown, NZ, still my favorite hotel ever. The L'Agapa room has a flat screen TV, DVD player, and jacks for audio devices that guests may have. It also has many remote controls (whose operation she demonstrates, including the option of dropping a movie screen, flanked by large Bose speakers, and projecting the TV image onto it); very modern (and comfortable) furniture, with two easy chairs and a table in the bump-out bay; a desk lamp that turns on merely by touching; new and very modern tub, double sink, and walk-in shower in the bathroom; a completely separate toilet room across the hall; a skylight in the cathedral ceiling with a remote-controlled blind; electrically-operated curtains for the floor-to-ceiling windows; a coffee maker; and a modernistic headboard that has controls for turning on the lights and TV, dimming the lights, and (for all I know) launching nuclear missiles. Best of all, high up on the right and left walls are figureheads (that might or, more likely, might not have been on the prow of a ship) of a mermaid with hair of gold and lower body of gold, holding a gold lobster across her ample, naked "chest." We nickname her (the two hers) Lady Booby. I'm in love! With Lady Booby, that is, and with the room. Fresh fruit has been delivered to the room. And, most surprising of all, there's no charge for any item in the mini-bar. Granted, the room is expensive and breakfast is not included, but the parking is free and the ambience is priceless.*

*According to the English version of the hotel's web site, "All the rooms have a full technological equipment" - noted. There are many photos at the hotel's web site (click on virtual tour) - you are encouraged to explore. If you click on *La Désirade* at the top of the page, you won't see our own room, but you will be able to see the elegant furnishings that all rooms have plus our personal mermaid.

There is a decent sea breeze when we open the window (of course, no window screens), so tonight it will be much more pleasant to sleep than it was at Chateau de Locguénolé. We ask the pleasant hotel clerk to recommend a casual seafood restaurant and she suggest *Le Suroît*, not far from that large city map that we encountered when we entered the town. She also gives us a city map* and shows us how to get to the

*It's easy to see how people get lost here. There is not a street on the map that retains a single name for its full length. The main street (which is precisely what the clerk calls it) changes its name (over a distance of about 3 km) from *Boulevard des Traouiero* to *Boulevard du Semaphore* to *Boulevard de la Corniche* to *Boulevard Jean Mermoz* to *Boulevard Aristide Briand* to *Boulevard Clemenceau* to *Boulevard de la Mer* to *Chaussée du Linkin* (what happened to *Boulevard*?) to *Rue Anatole le Braz* to *Rue Ernest Renan* (which is the highway by which we arrived).

restaurant without following the great circle route that we traveled to get here. We park near the harbor, take pictures of the pleasure boats, then walk to the restaurant (which is in a hotel). Well, the hotel is open but the restaurant is not! So we cross the street and, after examining some menus, decide to patronize *La Marée* (the tide), another casual seafood place.

Our waitress is difficult to understand, perhaps because her French has a Breton accent (and my French has an American accent). And we never do succeed in getting our *carafe d'eau*, despite my asking for it three times. (D'oh, *pas d'eau!*) I start with a simple salad and Lee orders *soupe des poissons* which, she writes, "probably came from a jar in the supermarket's refrigerated section and was micro-waved to its state of semi-warmth." This is not a promising beginning. But our main courses are excellent. Quoting from Lee's journal, "Ron has tagliatelle with enormous scallops in a cream sauce; Lee has the *duo de crab et langoustines* - cold, cooked seafood (including half a crab) that exercises the cracking and meat-picking skills. This comes with more garlic mayo and is fabulously messy and delicious. Lee celebrates with a chocolate *liegois* (an ice-cream sundae)." Her main course is a pleasure for the eyes, as well, as the Picasa picture of it and of my scallops will reveal.

We return to the hotel by the "inland" route shown to us by the hotel clerk. It is a narrow, winding road that goes through an interesting commercial district (we'll explore this on October 5) and past some charming stone houses. Back in our room, we enjoy the breeze and the sound of the surf. The open window has allowed some flies in, but what the hell

There is a glossy brochure, describing the hotel's history and features, sitting on a table in our room. Its descriptions are a bit "over the top." For example,

"The moment you cross the threshold of L'Agapa, you enter into a different universe. Initially, a feeling of luxury radiates from the elegantly decorated hotel and its serene Zen-spirited rooms. The spa, built directly into the rock, combines the telluric goodness of pink granite and the expertise of Nuxe, while the restaurant, helmed by the talented Mickaël Tanguy and his brigade, will delight you in the chef's inspired cuisine that honours the produce of the sea."

Well, you get the idea.

We listen to Will Shortz's quiz on NPR's *Weekend Edition Sunday* via Lee's laptop. The new quiz is "Think of a common one-word entrée and dessert. When you insert the name of the entrée into the dessert's name, it will read as a certain meal. Name the entrée, dessert and meal." [Note: "entrée" means main course in American lexicology, not the opening course as in France.] The answer, which our hero arrives at quickly, is LAMB and CAKE which become CLAMBAKE.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3

The morning begins sunny and cool, with a nice ocean breeze. Can it last all day long?

PUN ALERT, PART UNE: Lee, in the bathtub at the hotel, proclaims "I can't stretch out. My butt goes flying," to which her adoring husband replies, "I've heard of flying buttresses, but this one is new to me."

PUN ALERT, PART DEUX: We saw lots of flying buttresses in *Quimper*, but they were beyond *compare*.

Breakfast is served in the elegant room that is home to the one-star *Le Bélouga*. The offerings are, by far, the most ambitious we've seen thus far (see the pictures at Picasa). There are breads and rolls, sweet rolls, croissants, several cheeses, quiches, several kinds of ham, four kinds of cold cereal, yaourt* (i.e., yoghurt),

*Note the four consecutive vowels. Somehow the "i" is missing.

jams, applesauce, and fresh fruit. Coffee and juice are brought to the table by the one waiter on duty. Maybe we are early or maybe the hotel has very few guests, but we are the only people in the room until another person arrives about 45 minutes later.

Having read about half of the excellent short stories in Alistair MacLeod's *Island*, I decide to set it aside for a while and begin Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed*. (Lee and I had enjoyed, immensely, his first novel *Then We Came to the End*; the new book is entirely different in scope and style, but also brilliantly done.)

We drive about 20 km to the east to the town of Tréguier, arriving at about 10:30. On the way, we pass through many prosperous towns, all with homes and commercial buildings made of stone, with stone walls throughout, giving them a medieval look. Tréguier, population 2500, is another *Petite Cité de Caractère*. We park and walk via narrow streets lined with stone buildings, some of them half-timbered, to the magnificent 14th century cathedral. The spire, 72 m tall, is covered with playing card symbols because much of the funding for it came from a lottery. (It's a good thing that the church wasn't funded by a group of proctologists!) I take many interior and exterior pictures because this house of worship, admittedly Gothic in style, feels different and is on a more human scale than the seemingly hundreds of churches that we've visited over the past couple of weeks.

It's another 15 km east to Paimpol, a seaside tourist town, which we reach at about noon. It's a charming place, with cobblestone roads, attractive public squares, and stone buildings (both commercial and residential). After about 45 minutes, we retrace our steps but instead of returning to Perros-Guirec, we stop in the larger town of Lannion, just 13 km to its south. On the way, we get fuel at a station that does have a live attendant, but gets demerits because its rubber gloves dispenser is empty and its window-washing tools are missing.

Lee notes that we are in the Breton-speaking region of Brittany, although the signs are nearly all in French (except for those in the supermarket, see below). We have two missions: to find some lunch and to explore what a food supermarket is like in France. For the former, forgive us, but following many wrong turns we go to McDonald's, *Restauration rapide*, for coffees and sandwiches. Lee has a "McFish" and I opt for "Le Charolais," a hamburger on a square bun with lettuce and mayo. Oy! (See, also, the comment about mayonnaise and meat on p. 65.) We had noticed numerous stores called E.LECLERC throughout the region, so we seek one of them for our exploration of how the Bretons live. According to Wikipedia, "E.Leclerc is a French hypermarket chain ... [it has] 561 stores in France (391 hypermarkets, 131 supermarkets and 39 specialist shops)." It also owns stores in Spain, Italy, Portugal, Poland, and Slovenia.

We enter the hyper- or supermarket and head first for the food store. One is reminder of the supermarket at a Walmart superstore (or is it hyperstore?), but of much higher quality, as one would expect of the French. We are amused by the large signs hanging above each aisle, written in both French and Breton. For example, one aisle is *Boucherie, Volaille, Saurisserie* or, if you prefer, *Kig, Kig-yer, Silzigerezh* (take that, spell checker!). There are well-stocked sections of fresh breads, pastries, meat, fish, poultry, sausages, vegetables, fruits, canned goods, dairy, juices, beer and wine (of course), and anything else one's heart might desire. There are also non-food items like clothing, housewares, and some furniture. The customers and employees probably wondered if this crazy America, snapping pictures of everything, might be an industrial spy. (It is most disconcerting to enter the cereal aisle and find Rice Krispies, Kellogg's Special K, Cheerios, etc. among brands that are specifically French.)

Outside the doors to the food market, but under the same roof, are specialty shops: laundry, pharmacy, jeweler, travel agent, florist, optician, hair stylist, sporting goods, and food court. A store called *Espace Culturel* is a large book store. One could spend days-on-end in this establishment, which would probably make Monsieur E.LECLERC (if there is such a person) very happy.

From Lannion, it's just 7 km to Pleumeur-Bodou (how does my intrepid tour guide find such places?). Here is how *DK Eyewitness Travel* describes it, "Bristling with giant antennae that provide world-wide communication, Pleumeur-Bodou is well known as the site of the telecommunications centre where the first

satellite link between the United States and Europe was made in 1962. The radar dome, a gigantic sphere 50 m high, is open to visitors." Well, we took pictures, missed seeing the bristling antennae (sounds like a genetically engineered cockroach), and saw no way for visitors to get past the locked gates. So we take a few (long-distance) pictures and move on, this time to Trégastel-Plage, just 10 km west of Perros-Guirec.

This region is famous for its beaches and for the spectacular pink granite rocks that surround the sand. We see many pleasure boats, apparently "anchored" in the sand, but the anomaly is explained by the fact that it is low tide; in a matter of hours, these ships will be floating on water again. We walk along the beach, taking pictures of the rocks, the houses that overlook it, and the brave bathers who ignore the warnings about dangerous rip tides. The winds are fierce and the sun is strong, so I dutifully wear my hat which nearly blows away several times.

On the return to Perros-Guirec, we check out several restaurants and ask our hotel staff which they would recommend. But for tonight, we get a reservation for at Le Galion, near the casino below our hotel. Had we checked TripAdvisor, we might not have gone there as it was rated #30 out of the 30 restaurants in the city! Nevertheless, after doing some reading in the room and using the computer, we drive to the restaurant and have a good meal. After a mixed salad, I have brochette St. Jacques; Lee has *cassoulette de fruits de mer*, then the same mixed salad and brochette St. Jacques as I do. We order a bottle of *cidre brut*.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4

We have an excellent breakfast at the hotel, but during that time the wind picks up and it begins to rain (the first precipitation we've seen in two weeks), soaking us on our return to the room. By 8:45, the sea mist has dissipated and we can see the beach below and the granite cliffs in the distance. We leave at 9:45, heading to the *Grand Cairn de Barnenez*, located near the town of Plouezoc'h some 45 km to the southwest. Girl Navigator Extraordinaire, L. J. Magid, thinks that we can cut considerable distance off our drive by taking several unnumbered, single-track roads through farmland (and by following behind farm vehicles whose speed is limited by law to 25 k/m). This is a bad idea! Ya see, there was this town called Pen ar Guer, but who knew that there would also be towns with similar names: Roz ar Gavet, Rest ar Roué, *et al.* So we retreat, but upon rejoining the D786 highway, we head in the wrong direction and find ourselves on the outskirts of Morlaix. So after getting hopelessly lost (well, it wasn't really hopeless), we return to the more major highway and travel the more sensible route. We arrive at 11:00. (The radio reports a predicted high of 21°C which, if true, will be the lowest since we arrived in France.)

Wikipedia describes the cairn this way:

"It dates to the early Neolithic, about 4500 BC; it is considered one of the earliest megalithic monuments in Europe. It is also remarkable for the presence of megalithic art ... Today, the Barnenez cairn is 72 m long, up to 25 m wide and over 8 m high. It is built of 13,000 to 14,000 tons of stone. It contains 11 chambers entered by separate passages. The mound has steep facades and a stepped profile. Several internal walls either represent earlier facades or served the stability of the structure. The cairn consists of relatively small blocks of stone, with only the chambers being truly megalithic in character. The monument overlooks the Bay of Morlaix, probably a fertile coastal plain at the time of its erection ... The 11 chambers of the Barnenez cairn are of the type known as *Dolmen à couloir* in French archaeological terminology. The term translates roughly as 'passage grave.' They are built of large slabs of slate and granite. Originally, all the chambers were entirely enclosed by the mound. The fact that several of them are partially exposed now is the result of modern quarrying. Each of the 11 chambers is reached from the southeast via a long narrow passage (7–12 m long). They are arranged parallel to each other. Shapes and construction techniques differ slightly. In nine cases, narrow passages lead to corbelled chambers. Normally, the corbel vault rests on orthostats, in one chamber it actually sits on the ground, forming a true tholos. The passages have slab-built or dry stone walls and are covered with slabs. One of the chambers has a dry-stone vaulted ante-chamber."

OK, I admit, it's a truly impressive structure - and we take many pictures as we walk around it and peer into its chambers. But by this time on the trip, having seen dolmens and menhirs in Carnac, Locmariaquer, and Commana, I am one with the blogger's wife (p. 1) in complaining* about having to see "more stupid stones."

*After visiting one château too many, I remarked to Simon that had I been planning this vacation, we would be visiting the historic old baseball fields in the U.S. (I feel the same way about visiting the menhirs and dolmens.) But then it occurred to me: nearly all of the great old ballparks have been torn down. Only two remain: Fenway Park (1912) in Boston and Wrigley Field (1914) in Chicago, and we've been to the latter already. It is a sobering thought to realize that the next-oldest park is Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, built in 1962. One is reminded of François Villon's wistful "*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan ?*" which I would now rewrite as *Mais où sont les terrains de baseball d'antan?*

At about 11:30, we are on the eastern side of the inlet, heading south toward Morlaix (this time on purpose). We stop to take pictures of a small town and its harbor, with pleasure boats "moored" on dry land (low tide, again). We then turn north on the western side of the inlet, reaching Roscoff (*Rosc o Gozen* in Breton), population 3,500, some 30 km from Barnenez at 12:30. The day has turned cloudy (with brief sun breaks) and the temperature seems to be peaking at about 18°C.

On the way, we see our second example of a wide-load vehicle, accompanied by a car with flashing lights and bearing the sign *CONVOI EXCEPTIONNEL* (which sounds less judgmental and a lot less pejorative than *WIDE LOAD*). We are listening to *Radio Classique* (with its short selections and long interruptions) and are surprised to hear an announcement of the opening night concert by the Seattle(!) Symphony, featuring its new conductor Ludovic Morlot and guest artist Joshua Roman, with a program of Beethoven, Gershwin, Gulda,* and Ravel.

*As a boy, listening to WQXR in New York City, I learned that Friedrich Gulda was a 20th century classical pianist and composer who also played jazz under the name Freddie Gulda. Similarly, classical pianist Leonid Hambro doubled as Lenny Hambro. Whatever it takes, I guess.

BrittanyFerries runs scheduled trips between Roscoff and Plymouth (six hours) or Cork (14 hours). One of their huge ferries is in port. We are amused to find along the route from the ferry to town numerous wine and beer stores with signs written exclusively in English. There is, for example, the Wine Beer Supermarket, with a red double-decker bus straight from the streets of London. In the parking lot are several cars and trucks sporting English license plates, their trunks (boots?) stuffed with spirits of all types. One old beater even has a padlock on its trunk. A Maverick truck with British plates has a decal in support of U.S. Navy Seals. An enormous wine barrel, suitable for the likes of the Jolly Green Giant, carries the slogan *Discounts and Special Offers Every Day*. (Now, listen, I don't mean to be a smart-ass, but if the French can patronize their francophobe boozers by having signs in English, why can't they do the same for the ordinary tourist ... i.e., moi?)

Because of the sea routes between Roscoff and Great Britain, even in the 18th century enterprising merchants began exporting huge quantities of onions to the British Isles. The sailors came to be called Roscoff Johnnies or Onion Johnnies. According to Wikipedia:

"Although having declined in number since the 1950s to the point where only a few remained, the Onion Johnny was once very common, and with the renewed interest since the late 1990s by the farmers and the public in small-scale agriculture, their numbers have recently made a small recovery. Dressed in striped shirt and beret, riding a bicycle hung with onions, the Onion Johnny became the stereotypical image of the Frenchman and in the past may have been the only contact that the ordinary British had with France.

"Originating from the area around the town of Roscoff known as Bro Rosko, in Brittany, Onion Johnnies

are farmers who find a more profitable market in England than at home, and typically bring their harvest across the English Channel in July to store in rented barns, returning home in December or January. They could have sold their products in Paris as well, but the roads and the railways were bad in the 19th century and going to the French capital city was still a long and difficult trip, while crossing the channel was shorter and easier. The trade apparently began in 1828 when the first successful trip was made by one Henri Olivier. Although journeys are now made by ferry, small sail ships and steamers were previously used, and the crossing could be hazardous. Seventy Johnnies died when the steamer SS Hilda sank at Saint-Malo in 1905.

"The golden age was during the 1920s; in 1929 nearly 1,400 Johnnies imported over 9,000 tonnes of onions to the UK. The Great Depression, followed by the devaluation of the Pound in the early 1930s, ended the era as trade suddenly fell, reaching a low in 1934, when fewer than 400 people imported under 3,000 tonnes."

Roscoff is also the center of seaweed "mining"; we see a crane lifting huge amounts of the slimy green stuff onto a railroad container. Just 5 km to the south is the town of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, the artichoke and cauliflower capital of the region, where we arrive at 1:15. We are seeking the 12th-century cathedral, but make the "tragic" mistake of stopping at the 14th century Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Kreisker where I take pictures. Lee says, "Wrong cathedral, stop taking pictures," but I ignore her and continue. Finally we find the "correct" cathedral - and it is a magnificent structure, both inside and out (but so was the Chapelle). The cathedral has massive columns, spectacular stained-glass windows, and whimsical carvings on the choir stalls. It also has a musty, mouldy smell, something we've not noticed in the other centuries-old structures that we've visited.

UNCHARITABLE OBSERVATIONS (but that doesn't make them any less true): The Saint-Polians (or whatever they're called) are noticeably homelier, less chic, and much less wholesome-looking than the denizens of other towns in Brittany and the Loire Valley. There are teenagers hanging around, looking like American thugs and probably dealing drugs (although we don't actually see such activities). I wonder: does eating artichokes and cauliflower cause people to turn out this way?

ANOTHER UNCHARITABLE OBSERVATION (and this is true of most towns, not just this one): The noise and smoke from wildly racing motorcycles and motor bikes over the narrow city streets is annoying, dangerous, and noxious. At least that's my opinion, no matter what the locals may think.

Lee finds a souvenir shop with a display window filled with models of the lighthouses of Bretagne, but it is closed until 2:00 (or so the sign says). So we wander about the town, biding our time, until the magic hour arrives. My wager is that the store will still not be open - and damn it, I'm right. We wait until 2:10, then give up. But, undeterred, Lee insists upon returning one more time at 2:20. Guess what? Still closed. (It's a given that these lighthouses will also be on sale in numerous other gift shops that we'll pass - and, in fact, we do manage to buy a suitable model later on.)

We return the 70 km to the western outskirts of Perros-Guirec and the town of Ploumanac'h (apparently the apostrophe is silent), where we arrive at about 3:45. According to *DK Eyewitness Travel*, "On account of its spectacular rocks, this former fishing village ... is one of the greatest tourist attractions in Brittany. *Point de Squewel*, one hour's walk along the coast path from Plage St. Guirec ... is a promontory with gigantic piles of rocks that suggest such incongruous shapes as tortoises, rabbits, and tricorn hats." [Oy! Are the Tea Partiers following us?] We do enjoy the walk along the beach and under the rocks which are, as advertised, impressive. The clouds have dissipated, the sun is out in full, and the temperature is holding at a modest 21°C. At the conclusion of the walk, while retrieving our car from the parking lot in Ploumanac'h, Lee finds a souvenir shop where she purchases a lighthouse. Told ya!

We return to the hotel at 5:00 but find that the WiFi is not working (or is working so slowly as to make loading pages unbearable). On our way to dinner, the desk staff gives us a booster to use, but it has no effect when we try it later in the evening, even with a direct ethernet connection to the computer.

Fortunately, the hotel's lounge has a strong signal, so we can check email and other things there. A man at the desk, the first male we've seen working there, promises that a technician will come in the morning.

Two days ago, we had been directed to *Le Suroit* (<http://www.lesuroitperros.com/>) but it was closed. Today, we have a reservation, and are delighted to find that the restaurant is excellent. Lee has a three-course menu, starting with *moules*, then *Aile de Raie* (skate wing), and dessert. I have *Soupe du pêcheur et ses croûtons* followed by *Cuisse de Canard confite à l'Ananas* ... but no dessert. Both food and service are elegant. It's interesting that the hotel staff recommended this fine place when they also lauded last night's *Le Galion* (recall: #30 out of 30 restaurants, according to TripAdvisor). For your information, *Le Suroit* is rated #8 in the city.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 5

The day begins partly cloudy with sun breaks, no rain yet, and relatively cool. The internet connection in our room is still painfully slow, so we carry the laptop with us to breakfast with the intention of using it in the adjacent lounge. I speak to the desk clerk, a new person whose command of English is minimal, and she says that a technician will come to our room at 9:00. (She also provides us with a new password, not that this should have anything to do with it - and, of course, it doesn't change a thing.)

The technician arrives on schedule, can't figure out what the problem is, goes to a control panel in the closet, fiddles around, comes back to the computer, and ascertains that nothing is changed. He has essentially no English, and although I know the French words for "computer" and "internet" and "very slow" most of our communication is with sign language and grunts. (There has, actually, been some progress in that URLs do open but at variable rates - some very slowly, some with normal speed. Nevertheless, it is essentially unusable in our room.)

We leave at 10:00 (the temperature is a pleasant 19°C) and head to the small, daily fish market that's located at the harbor, near the huge (and useless) map of the city and near the restaurants from last night and three nights ago. By the time we arrive, all of the iced bins are sold out, but the scene is an interesting one as the locals and their dogs walk around and visit nearby shops. We drive back toward the hotel, but park near the shopping area that is halfway between the harbor and our hotel. It proves to be a delightful collection of attractive stores, windows with delicious foods, restaurants, vendors of meats and seafood, and dogs of all kinds. Most surprising, we see a city worker with a novel technique for removing weeds from cracks in the sidewalk: he has a portable flame thrower which he uses to incinerate them.

We see a T-shirt in a store window with the words "Why learn to speak American (pourquoi apprendre parler anglais) because in the future, everyone will be speaking Breton?" [Since when did "American" become a distinct language whose French translation is *anglais*?] A furniture store that we pass has pillows with the words "Lexington Brand, Main Street, Prime Collection, The American Dream, A Tradition since 1993"; another reads "LEXINGTON NEW ENGLAND VINTAGE, AMERICAN ORIGINAL" - whoever is selling these obviously doesn't believe that everyone *will* be speaking Breton. Insatiable buyer Lee purchases a mug and some Breton cookies. We venture into a supermarket, Carrefour (one of the largest chains throughout Europe), but fail to find a box of commercial cookies to satisfy the palate of the very particular RMM. But then at a little local food store called Shopi, we do find something that passes muster (or is it mustard?)

At 11:30, we drive along *La Plage de Trestignet*, as much as the road allows us to. This is at the tip of a peninsula, not far from *La Plage de Trestaraou*, which is the beach we look down upon from our hotel window. There are some fascinating stone houses, along and above the beach, and (surprisingly) a number of hearty souls in the cool waters. We return to the hotel at about 1:00 and stop at the desk to ask if the WiFi problem is fixed. *Bien sûr*, we are told, but it ain't so - in our room, it is as slow as ever. So we retreat, with laptop, to the lounge so that we can get a decent connection.

And who should be standing near the reception desk but the technician who had come to our room earlier in the day? Once again, I have trouble negotiating an interface between my meager French and his fluent French, but with the assistance of a clerk, who serves as translator, we learn that while we were out he brought a different computer to the room and "*il marche bien*, or so he says. He also replaced the router with another and he suggested that we use Internet Explorer with a new login ID and password. OK. we'll try it, but when we get back to the room, the connection is still very slow or non-existent. *Tant pis*, but this is our last day here and we'll soon be moving on. Nevertheless, it's ironic that the finest hotel we've had on this trip also had the poorest connectivity.

I finally remember to ask the desk clerk where L'Agapa gets its name. Apparently it's named for the flowering plants near the entrance, *Agapanthus*, which is commonly known as "Lily of the Nile" even though it is not a lily and does not come from the Nile (at least according to Wikipedia). Having done as much sight-seeing in the Perros-Guirec region as we planned, we spend the rest of the afternoon in our room, reading, using the (slow) internet, and (in my case) destroying my mind by working impossible New York Times crossword puzzles. From our window, we see young surfers being taught how to get on their boards and how to stay on them, even though the surf here is very gentle compared to what one finds in other locales. Best of all, the sun has returned in the afternoon - aside from a little drizzle on our return from dinner, we've been rain-free for the entire trip. (Alas, this will change - very soon.)

We had cased out several restaurants, yesterday, when we visited Ploumanac'h, and received a recommendation from the hotel staff for La Coste Mor, located in a hotel. (Upon returning to Gig Harbor, I'm relieved to discover that TripAdvisor rates it #18 of the 30 restaurants in Perros-Guirec, although one has to wonder how they arrived at that ranking: there is precisely one review and it shows five stars. Shouldn't this have given it a #1 rating, even if the data are minimal? I'll bet that I know why it came out #18: the review is written in Italian.) Well, we like it very much. We are seated in a covered, heated terrace with fierce ocean winds buffeting the cloth protection. Lee has *palour des roses farci* (a fanciful name for stuffed pink clams with ham and parmesan) as appetizer while I start with an "Italian" salad, which is large, tasty, and impregnated with lots of cheeses and cured meats. For her main, Lee has a cold dish: "Assiette decouverte: langoustine, crevette, palourds, bulot, bigorneau, huitres, ½ crab.*" She is supplied with the

*Or, in English, lobster, shrimp, clams, whelks, winkles, and crab.

following "weapons": tiny pick, longer pick, little fork, little spoon, and crab-cracker. Photographs of this excessive gormandizing can be seen at the Picasa site. Ron's main is easier to describe: *Tagliatelle Saint Jacques*. Lee's commentary in her journal mentions that the winkles required too much effort and that the whelks had "too much sand in the intestines (but fun to pull out of the shell). The crab was really meaty - and the large claw conveniently cracked. A meal like this makes you want to feel like you need a bath.* We

*Sounds like some movies I've seen.

drink a half-bottle of Menetou-Salon with dinner; consumption of wine is getting to be a habit! The bill was 91€ and worth every penny! On the way out, we noticed 'Le Box de Woof' - a plastic container with drinking water for dogs." Woof!!!

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6

We awake to the sounds of loud wind and rain. Damn! Our luck of good weather has run out. After breakfast, we check out at about 10:00 - the rain has stopped and the skies are clearing, but it's hard to predict if we're heading into more rain or not. We drive to Saint-Brieuc (population 46,000), 80 km to the southeast and about halfway to our ultimate destination of Cancale. We arrive on the outskirts at about 11:00, but the posted directional signs are not helpful and our "map" (*DK Eyewitness Travel*) is only notional.

Finally, we get ourselves oriented for the museum and cathedral, but the first parking lot we try is full (because of a large demonstration and many police cars) as is the second. So we drive some distance from the center of the city and find an on-street parking place. There seem to be no restrictions or limitations, but Lee is uneasy about leaving the car (with our luggage) there, so after visiting the museum and cathedral, we will retrieve it and move it to one of the official lots. On the drive to Saint-Brieuc (and in the preceding days), we discover that *Radio Classique* is fascinated by Russian composers: Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff, and other such, along with French composers Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Saint-Saens. So where are the Germans? The British? The Americans? (OK, these others are not totally excluded, but their presence on the radio is surprisingly minimal.)

We find the *Musée d'Art et d'Histoire* and are delighted to learn that there is no admission fee. Even though the outside temperature is 15°C, the museum is hot and stuffy. But it is free! Lee grooves on the costumes, looms, spinning wheels, Breton hats, and kitchen appliances of earlier times while Ron, trying to stay awake, takes pictures of same. But it is free!

Next, it's on to the *Cathédrale Saint-Etienne*. It dates from the 14th century, but some of the relics of old Saint Brieuc, a Welsh monk from the 5th century, are on display. From the outside, the structure looks more like a fortress than a church. Even the interior seems to be lacking many of the trappings of other cathedrals, although it does have its share of altars, stained-glass windows, a religious statues.

All of the demonstrators are now gone. (We had simply arrived 30 minutes too early.) So we trudge up a rather steep grade (it had been more pleasant walking downhill) to retrieve the car, which - thankfully - is still there, right where we left it (contrary to Lee's fears) and drive it to one of the lots that had been full. We then wander through the old town in search of the 15th century *Maison Ribault*, the oldest house in the city. The streets are dirty and not at all well-kept. Our fellow pedestrians are grumpy and, not really their fault, unattractive. (Maybe it's the cloudy day with a threat of rain that makes them appear so.) We see numerous old stone buildings, many of them half-timbered.

While I am standing in front of *Maison Ribault* and taking pictures, a man comes up and tries to tell me that the house was built in 1430. For whatever reason, he had concluded that I am German and so he struggles to find the German words for fourteen and thirty. So I try to be helpful by saying "En anglais où français, peut-être?" and his face lights up as he realizes that I might understand him in his native tongue, French. [Do I really look German? Oy!] Upon our return to the parking lot, when we put the ticket into the *caisse* it is rejected. Of course: free parking between noon and 2:00! And the clouds have parted, leaving us with a partly blue sky. Such good luck is undeserved, but we'll take it.

AN OBSERVATION ABOUT DRIVING IN FRENCH CITIES: Every city and town that we've visited in the Loire Valley and Bretagne, regardless of size, has a common feature. Without a city map or even a guide book's stylized map, all that one has to do is to find a roundabout and then look for a sign that reads *TOUTES DIRECTIONS*. Inevitably this will lead to highways that will go in various directions, at least one of which ought to be the one that is wanted. Alternatively, one might be driving along a city street, hoping to find such a sign when one sees *AUTRES DIRECTIONS*, an indication that one should not give up all hope, that eventually the desired destination will be found. There is nowhere in the U.S. that such helpful signs appear! (Now one disadvantage of French road signs is that they often give just the direction but not the number of the road. So, if I'm looking for the E401 to take us the 60 km to Dinan, what I might see instead is a sign pointing to Saint-Malo, a larger city some 35 km further along.)

So we do find our way to Dinan (population 11,000) where we arrive at 2:30. This place is breathtakingly beautiful in numerous regards. It takes a while to reconcile the city's large map with that in the *DK Eyewitness Travel*, until we realize that the latter has been rotated nearly 180° from the traditional N/S axis. But we finally find the Tourist Information and park there. (Just as we arrive, the winds pick up, the clouds return, and rain seems imminent. But we luck out again, as there is no precipitation during our walk-about.)

Along with Quimper and Rochefort-en-Terre, this place is truly special. We enter past the castle and town

walls, hundreds of years old. And then we are in the old city: stone buildings, cobblestone streets, brightly painted doors and window frames, and Art Deco street signs* that are worthy of display in museums.

*Perros-Guirec and many other towns and cities could take a lesson from Dinan. It's not that I'm suggesting that their street signs be of museum-quality. Rather, I'm suggesting that they have street signs of whatever type. It's amazing how far one can drive - and how lost one can get - before a helpful sign comes into view in some cities.

There are funky stores with unusual fare for sale, as well as shops for furniture, clothing, and (of course) all varieties of food. There are half-timbered buildings, some with their second floor walls bulging outward. (Even the public *toilettes* has a beautiful facade, with a set of lights to indicate whether it is occupied or not.) One interesting store is selling metal signs, among which are: "Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey" and "*Interdit aux Extraterrestres*" and "Historic Route US 66."

At 3:20, we are at *Basilique Saint-Sauveur*, parts of which are from the 12th century. I am immediately impressed by stained-glass windows that read (in four successive colors) PAT RON des JARD INIERS. (I don't know who this guy Pat is, but I'm pleased to share the credit alongside him.) The gargoyles and other sculpted figures on the exterior are most amazing. We then walk to the "end" of the city and find ourselves looking far down on the River Rance at the port of Dinan and a very impressive viaduct.

We head to Cancale (population 5,300) where we arrive at 4:30. Here is an example of a city that could benefit from better-marked streets and a hotel web site that could give more than just a stylized map: <http://tinyurl.com/3te5ceg> The hotel, such as it is, seems to be spread out all over the city. There's *Château Richeux* (where the restaurant is located), somewhere in the countryside; there's *Cottages les Rimains*, somewhere in the hills; and there's *Les Gîtes Marins*, near the water. Our reservation says that we're in the Crevette Cottage, part of *Les Gîtes Marins*. But how to find it?

Not only do we not have anything but the notional map, we also discover that two-way streets often become one-way (in the wrong direction) and that normal-width streets narrow down to what can only be described as alleyways. The Google maps seems to have placed *Château Richeux* right in the middle of town, an error of several km, but we head toward the center and find nothing useful, except for the cooking school that belongs to the hotel. So I call the phone number of the *Gîtes Marins* (fortunately the woman speaks English) and ask for directions. She asks where we are and I tell her that we're near the cooking school and the town museum. She assures us that we're no more than five minutes away, but when we try to follow her directions we seem to be getting nowhere. Finally Lee sees a sign to *Les Rimains* (which seems to be one of the many names for this establishment) and although we are not in the cottages that bear that name, we figure that we should follow it. Alas, said sign was at an ambiguous angle and we find ourselves heading in the wrong direction, so we retrace our path and try again.

This time, we seem to be making progress, although the road is getting narrower and narrower. But it is still a road. (I think.) And we find ourselves on *Rue des Remains*. Driving on, we see a sign on the right to *Les Maisons de Bricourt* so we turn through the gate, a turn about as tight as the one that confounded us at *Le Manoir les Minimes*, and drive up to a two-story stone building with no markings at all. (In retrospect, I realize that this is the dwelling called *Cottage Les Rimains*.) So I walk to the door and find it locked. I knock and two Japanese women (who are fluent in English) come to the door. As I learn, they are guests in one of the rooms in the building, but they are not employees. They suggest that I push the intercom button on the outside of the building. Sure enough, the woman to whom I had spoken on the phone answers. (Where she is located, I have no idea.) I give my name. She replies that an "associate" will appear to show us our room.

So we wait. Other guests are arriving and they also seem confused. After a while, a diminutive young woman, who speaks only French, arrives and leads me through a garden path to the building that will be our home for the next three days, but only *after* showing the other guests, who arrived *after* we did, to their

rooms. This does not sit well with me. No it does not. I walk back to the car (and Lee, who is patiently sitting there) and we drive back through the narrow gate, onto the street, and through another gate (which the "associate" has helpfully opened) to find our parking space and the correct building. This is *not* a good beginning, I think, and truth be known the accommodations are not what I had expected.

We have a rustic cottage all to ourselves. (All of the cottages are named after seafood. I take offense that ours - and the assigned parking space - is called *Gîte Crevette*. I mean, perhaps I'm not the tallest person around, but that's no reason to address me as *shrimp*.) The downstairs, wood floors of course, have a living room, kitchen (fully equipped), and small dining area. The furniture is ... well, rustic, with paint peeling off the kitchenette table and faux-leather pulling off the easy chair. The refrigerator, dishwasher, and oven are all functional and relatively modern. Upstairs is the bedroom and bathroom. The latter is very hot because it has a radiator without a valve to scale it back. Did I mention rustic? Well, it is. But Lee finds it charming. To its credit, there is a lovely garden in back (with herbs and vegetables) that leads to the sea. But it is, most definitely, rustic.

On a table* is a city map on which we can locate (we think) our current location, so we head into the city at

*Also on the table are brochures about features of the establishment and all of its various "parts." Most intriguing is the opportunity to do a *séance* (alas, only the French word for "meeting" or "session") with Madame Gwenn. As described (in English) at the web site, "Gwenn is a fairy, a real fairy who is here to do us good. Formerly a reflexologist in Paris, she has settled into the heart of the Maisons de Bricourt to teach us all to take our time and to penetrate our own stories, memories and roots through her foot massages. Gwenn delicately absorbs the rhythm of each person and interrogates with her hands our fragile spots, our organs and our questions to help us rest our suitcases and leave feeling lighter in the body and spirit. Our fairy has moved upstairs from the spice warehouse from which she borrows a few wonderful oils to massage all those who still believe in fairy tales and thus know that alone they can soar above human desires. Oils perfumed with flowers and spices, oils that belong to the vibration of the living and take you on a sensory voyage that showcases smell and touch. La Maison de Gwenn is a cocoon where, by putting yourself in her hands, you can rediscover yourself." Whew! Just between *vous* and *moi*, I'm eager to have my body "interrogated" on my "fragile spots" and "organs" but Lee squelches that idea. Spoil sport! By the way, as you might expect this doesn't come cheap. According to the brochure in the room, an individual *séance* will cost you 75€, whereas one *séance* per month over the course of a year sets you back a discounted rate of 720€. In her journal, Lee rues the fact that "we've just missed [Madame Gwenn's] series on alignment with the autumnal equinox." I blame our travel agent for not having taken this into account when helping us to book our accommodations.

about 7:00 while it's still light out. I'm not sure how much the map helps, but we get lost several times trying to get past the town center and toward the port where there are bound to be restaurants. Because the rain has begun and is quite heavy, we "choose" the first seafood restaurant that we see, *Le Querrien*, in a hotel of the same name (<http://www.le-querrien.com/>). The dinner is excellent. Somehow, I have forgotten to take any notes about the meal, but Lee has written "It seems to have locals as well as hotel guests - possibly some spill-over from the British film festival going on in Dinard? The hotel guests seem to have certain menus included in their tariff - we're near a 60-something English couple having a very earnest discussion about which menu offers the more interesting pudding!" [I wonder if they've met Madame Gwenn.]

Lee continues, "There is also a French couple with an adorable and very well behaved white curly dog. The restaurant is warm and cozy, with all sorts of nautical decorations ... The food is good, too - Lee can't resist a 3-course menu that ends with that staple of mid-20th century French cooking, *crêpes Suzettes*. To start, Ron has *soupe de poissons* (he's an expert by now) and Lee has *la salade de terre et mer*, which is huge: greens plus *foie gras* (a big portion goes to Ron), smoked duck, smoked salmon, and a *sautéed* scallop. For the main course, we both have a dish with large scallops and gambas (delicious giant shrimp in shell) with a creamy sauce ... We have a half-bottle of Sancere to go along. Yum, yum!"

When it comes time to leave, we ask our server to recommend a route back to our cabin by the sea. It looks straight-forward on the map but, as in so many instances over the course of my professional life, the experimental execution is more challenging than the theoretical calculations would suggest. Thus, after many wrong turns, some the very same that we made in the afternoon (we are definitely slow learners; even rats in a maze do better) we finally find the drive to our home-away-from-home. We congratulate ourselves on having packed a flashlight because the path from the car to the door of the cottage is very very very dark.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7

'Tis a dark, gray morning with lots of clouds, gusting winds, but no rain (yet).^{*} The email reservation had

^{*}This seems an ideal place to plagiarize (I mean borrow from) the immortal lines of Edward George Bulwer-Lytton: "It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents--except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness." What a talent! The 2011 winner of the contest that bears his name wrote was is the shortest entry ever to be judged a winner: "Cheryl's mind turned like the vanes of a wind-powered turbine, chopping her sparrow-like thoughts into bloody pieces that fell onto a growing pile of forgotten memories."

promised "Viennoiseries basket will be let at your door every morning" and, in fact, a basket of rolls and breads is delivered at 7:45. On the kitchen counter, there are canisters for coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar, and salt; there is also an electric coffee maker, which I make use of. Also available are plates, cups, glasses, knives, and cutlery. In the refrigerator we find a bottle of apple juice, a stick of butter, and some jam. So we have a nice breakfast, although don't come close to consuming all of the breads and rolls. In fact, we save the uneaten date-and-nut-bread, cover it with plastic wrap, and place it in the refrigerator for tomorrow.

All of this is very nice, but there are no instructions (oral or written) about the "rules" of the cottage. That is, are we expected to wash the breakfast dishes? Will the juice and butter be replenished for tomorrow? Will our bed be made? Will the bathroom be cleaned? It's not until late in the day, when we return from our touristic activities, that we learn that the answers are No, No, No, and No. So we wash, by hand, the dishes that we had left in the sink and we make the bed. Because no maid service has been provided, this means that my note (written in what I think was impeccable French) asking that the radiator in the bathroom be turned off remained unread.

The good news is that the WiFi connectivity is excellent (far better than at Perros-Guirec). We spend the early morning using the internet and reading. I finish *The Unnamed*, an incredibly imaginative tale that is either a huge "downer" or an uplifting testimony to the resilience of the human spirit ... or both. We walk through the herb and vegetable garden in back of the cottage, down to the water's edge, and we take many pictures of the grounds and of the buildings, including the *Cottage les Rimains* which has four guest rooms and, somewhere within, the woman whom I "know" only from her amplified voice. There is a sign in the garden: *Le Mont Saint-Michel vous regarde*, but there is so much sea mist that my attempt to take a picture of the famous castle is doomed. It is some 50 km away by road, but only about 25 km over the intervening *Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel*. As we stand and stare, trying to get a glimpse of it, we are alternately warmed by the occasional sun break and chilled by the cold wind when clouds come between us and the sun. We return to the cabin for some more coffee, then set out on the day's adventures at 11:00.

Our first destination is *Cap Fréhel*, 55 km distant and at the tip of a peninsula jutting into the English Channel. We arrive at 12:30, buffeted by strong winds and rain that have begun. According to *DK Eyewitness Travel*:

"The spectacular headland of Cap Fréhel is one of the most beautiful landscapes in Brittany. Heathland

covered with heather and gorse stretches to infinity [surely an exaggeration, n'est-ce pas?], and sheer pink limestone cliffs rise vertically from the sea to heights of 70 m. The view from here stretches from Pointe du Groin [ouch!] in the east to the Île de Bréhat in the west ... There are two lighthouses on the promontory: one built by Vauban in the 17th century and the other dating from 1950."

The car's thermometer registers 14°C, but the wind-chill (with the howling winds) probably drops it to -40°C. Because the winds are so strong, we walk only part way to the tip. In true Gallic fashion, I shrug my shoulders and say "Ce n'est pas la peine, n'est-ce pas?" Besides, there is a huge sign at the parking lot warning about thieves. The French warning goes on for several lines, but the English translation at the bottom is succinct: "Beware of thieves! Please lock your car. Leave nothing attractive in show." Hmm. Well, one understands the message even if the language is quaint. (Besides, the only "attractive" thing I would worry about is walking alongside me.) Both on the way toward the cap and on the return, we get some spectacular pictures of the cliffs and the raging waters.

We drive the short distance to Fort La Latte, at the tip of another promontory. This 13th century fortress is closed, except on Saturdays and Sundays, neither of which today is. We take a brief look, but the strong winds discourage us from spending too much time gazing.

MORE ABOUT RADIO CLASSIQUE: On the way to the fort, *Radio Classique* is playing Samuel Barber's *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*. It's a beautiful piece of music, a setting for the elegant words by James Agee; this is a remarkable accomplishment given that the Knoxville that we inhabited for 36 years is not the sort of place that would inspire poets and composers to create great art. What is most surprising is that this is the *third* time that we've heard the work in the past week. What is it about it that appeals so strongly to French listeners? *Eh bien, chacun à son goût* (which is French for "Elio Chacon is swimming in goo"; Elio Chacon, for the uninitiated, was one of the original New York Mets.)

Leaving Fort La Latte, we stop at a SUPER-U market in Matignon, some 14 km distant, to buy fuel for the car and for ourselves (i.e., sandwiches that we eat in the parking lot) and some orange juice, cheese, and ham to put in the refrigerator for breakfast tomorrow. (I suppose that we assumed, as in fact it came to pass, that no supplies would be replenished in the cottage's refrigerator.) We then make our way some 25 km to Dinard (population 10,000), which is located at the tip of *Côte d'Émeraude*, just across a small body of water from Saint-Malo. According to Wikipedia (with some grammatical and stylistic missteps),

"In modern history Dinard was first settled by Saint-Malo's shipping merchants who built some of the town's magnificent houses in the town - however very few survive. In the late 19th century American and British aristocrats made Dinard popular as a fashionable summer resort, and they built stunning villas on the cliff tops and exclusive hotels such as the 'Le Grand Hotel' on the seafront during the French 'Belle Époque' ... In the late 19th century, the resort became popular with the British wealthy who built magnificent villas on the coast. Dinard rapidly expanded and became the most popular seaside resort in Europe. It started declining in the 1930s when the Jet Set started preferring the Côte d'Azur. Today, Dinard is considered one of the most 'British' of sea resorts in France, however it has retained its French charm ... Dinard's reputation as the 'Cannes of the North' has attracted a wide variety of stars. Joan Collins is a frequent visitor, and Winston Churchill enjoyed holidaying on the River Rance. It is claimed locally that Alfred Hitchcock visited Dinard and based the house used in his most famous movie *Psycho* on a villa standing over the Plage de l'Écluse, but no evidence is produced. Lawrence of Arabia lived in Dinard as a small child, long before his Arabian exploits, and Picasso painted here in the 1920s. Debussy is supposed to have had the idea for "La Mer" during a visit to St Enogat in 1902."

Along with Rochefort-en-Terre, Quimper, Fougères, and St-Malo, this is advertised as a four-flower town. Well, we've not yet been to St-Malo, but we have visited the others and, channeling Lloyd Bentsen's famous put-down of Dan Quayle in the 1988 Vice-Presidential debates, "This is no four-flower town." As we drive through the city, the English influence can't be missed. There are, indeed, magnificent estates, most of them constructed of stone. I take pictures in the drenching rain(!) but eventually give up and continue

snapping shots from the warmth and safety of the car, through rain-soaked windows. (The effect is eerie: several homes look as if they are melting. How appropriate considering the Hitchcock connection.) One of the large hotels has a plethora of British flags in the parking lot.

We return to our cottage at about 4:00 and put the perishables in the refrigerator. It's at this point that we realize that we're not going to get any cleaning service during our stay. We hang around our room for a while. The rain stops at about 4:30, but the winds remain fierce. At about 5:45, the "breakfast wench" knocks on the door and collects our basket with the uneaten bread and rolls. She asks if we want the same tomorrow. *Absolument!* we proclaim. At 5:45, we drive to *Pointe du Grouin*, just 5 km north of where we're staying. *Tourisme Bretagne* describes it this way:

"Marking the westernmost tip of the Bay of Mont St-Michel, this brilliantly located headland not only allows you to benefit from sublime views eastwards, but also splendid ones to the west. The island just offshore is off-limits though as it's the preserve of birds. The panorama is flabbergasting [is that a word?] on a clear day. To the north, far out to sea beyond the Herpin lighthouse, you can make out the Îles Chausey, a scattering of islands off Normandy's Cotentin coast. A mere 25 kilometres east, the Mont St-Michel is reduced to an intriguing spiritual speck on the horizon. The views tripping westwards along the coast reach towards St-Malo, although the corsairs' city remains hidden out of sight."

Of course, none of these things can be seen on this miserable, cloudy, windy, and wet day. There is a restaurant and hotel, also called *La Pointe du Grouin*, nearby. The posted menu looks good, so at 6:15 we make a reservation for dinner at 7:15 this evening. To consume the hour, we drive along *La Côte d'Émeraude* toward the west in the direction of Saint-Malo, taking pictures of the rugged coastline and some of the rocky islands that have (abandoned) homes on them. One is called *L'Anse du Guesclin* in the commune of *Saint-Coulomb*.^{*} We drive on to the small town of Rothéneuf which, according to Wikipedia,

*Travel is broadening, yes indeed. According to Wikipedia's entry for Saint Coulomb, "Its name derives from [the priest] who had landed on its shores in the years 580 - 590 . Accompanied by several monks, he crossed the English Channel and landed on the beach or du Guesclin, a few hundred meters to the west." This sounds familiar, said I to myself, and a quick perusal of my travelog for Scotland (2001) reveals the following: "St. Columba (Colum Cille in Gaelic), born in Ireland in 521, was a scholar-priest who raised an army and fought many 'holy battles' with the king's men. After a particularly nasty defeat in 563, at which 3000 of his men were killed, he 'repented' and went into exile, eventually coming to Iona. Supposedly he chose this place because it was the first island from which he was unable to look back and see his homeland. He is a new-found hero of mine because he banned cows and women from the island: 'Where there is a cow, there is a woman, and where there is a woman, there is mischief.' How true, how true. No wonder he achieved cult status and eventually was made a saint."

has several things to distinguish it: "The village is a seaside resort but is famous for its sculpted rocks, 'rochers sculptés.' Abbé Fouré (1839-1910), having suffered a stroke at the age of 30, which left him paralyzed on one side, retreated to a life as a hermit in the cliffs of Rothéneuf. He carved over 300 fascinating, grotesque and bizarre faces and figures into the rock ... The navigator and explorer Jacques Cartier, who is credited with being the first European discoverer of the St. Lawrence River and the first European to make a map of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, was born in Rothéneuf, where he spent the last years of his life as well. His estate, Limoëlou, in Rothéneuf, was turned into museum." We doubt that we'll meet Jacques Cartier, himself, but these sculpted stones we've got to see. Alas, they are behind locked gates. So we head back to the restaurant (<http://hotelpointedugrouin.com/frMer.php>), arriving when it opens.

Again, your devoted correspondent has neglected his duties and has forgotten to make any notes on what we eat, but here is Mrs. Dr. Prof. Magid (motto: "I've never had a meal that I couldn't remember") to the rescue:

"The restaurant ... turns out to be a real find. The meal costs 143€ and is really worth it. And there is a

charming dog with its three humans - very well-behaved. This is a formal, carpeted dining room with three walls of windows looking out to the sea ... We *do* have an *apéritif* - two "whiskey écossaise" (Lagavulin, of course), accompanied by toasts and a smoked salmon spread. The *amuse bouche* is warm cream of cauliflower soup - maybe the raw material was from the harvest we saw this a.m.? For his appetizer, Ron had *foie gras paté* with a fig confit and a jellied orb (wine, onion??); Lee had nine raw Belon oysters with mignonette. The Belons are farmed locally and are flat, opening like small jewel cases. Delicious! Ron had a beef dish (filet?) for his main course, presented in two towers, each with layers of mushrooms and scalloped potatoes, in addition to the beef. Lee had a warm main dish salad - lobster claw meat and grilled scallops on greens with a vinaigrette. This was just luscious, and completely different from anything else on the trip! We finished with coffees, since the Lagavulin plus wine (half-bottle of Pouilly-Fuisse - an appellation adjacent to Menetou-Salon and Sancerre) had made us totally mellow."

Great, isn't she? But in my defense, I would add "not so mellow that we had trouble negotiating the tricky path back to our cabin." In fact, our return might have been eased by having a mild buzz on.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8

Another gloomy, rainy, windy day. Ugh! Our breakfast rolls and bread are delivered at 7:45, and we supplement the meal with the juice, cheese, and ham purchased yesterday.

Yesterday, we discovered that the windshield washer in the car sprays fluid on the passenger's side of the window but not the driver's. This is not good! I get the manual from the glove compartment, but it's not much help (and, besides, it's written in French). There is only one washer reservoir for both sides of the window (as I suspected) and when I open the hood it does appear that both plastic tubes are still connected. So maybe all of the rain is good news - it can help to clean the grime off the windshield.

At about 10:00, we leave and head toward Saint-Malo, just 15 km to the west. According to Wikipedia, the population is about 50,000, but it "can increase to up to 200,000 in the summer tourist season. With the suburbs included, the population is about 135,000." The town traces its beginnings to 1308 when, according to *DK Eyewitness Travel*, "... the inhabitants showed their mettle by establishing the first free town in Brittany, and, in 1395, rebelling against the Duke of Brittany, they obtained leave to answer only to Charles VI, king of France ... In 1436, the English described the seamen of Saint-Malo in these terms: 'The people of Saint-Malo are the greatest thieves that ever sailed the seas. These pilferers who sail under false colours have no respect for their dukes.' Neither did they have any respect for France, as in 1590 they formed an independent, albeit short-lived, republic in defiance of Henry IV's royal authority." Well, this narrative goes on in much the same vein, right up to the present. It's tempting to describe the actions of the 16th century Saint-Malomars (or whatever they are called) as OCCUPY SAINT-MALO.

We enter this walled city through Porte St.-Vincent; this allows us to appreciate that the walls are 7 m thick. There are impressive cobblestone streets, stone buildings, and all of the characteristics of a fortress (think Welsh castles, not French châteaux). We head toward *Musée d'Histoire de St.-Malo*, located in the keep of the castle, occupying several floors and featuring paintings, armor, models of buildings, artifacts from fishing vessels, etc. Through the narrow openings on the top floor, there is a wonderful view of the city below, very suitable for picture-taking. Although it is only 11:45 when we finish our visit, we are surprised to see the museum's manager closing off and locking rooms behind us as we and other visitors begin our descent. We know that the museum closes at noon, but this is a bit over the top, *Non?*

Saint-Malo was the birthplace of many notables, among whom are Jacques Cartier (1491-1557), whose home we passed yesterday in Rothéneuf and which we'll pass by again today, and François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), writer, politician, diplomat, and historian; his personal chef, one Montmireil, developed the cut of beef tenderloin that bears his employer's name.

We walk the narrow alleyways and streets, all cobblestone, past official buildings, shops, and numerous restaurants, all with their wares displayed on chalkboards. At about 12:45, we try to drive to two other sites in the suburbs of Saint-Malo, but are blocked from what we have come to see: the Corniche d'Aleth (French name Cité d'Alet), a walled city with a 4th century fort and (it is alleged) a spectacular walk that looks out on the sea, is open only from 3:15 to 4:00 (with an appointment!) so, instead, we take a few pictures of a nearby cathedral ruin; and Tour Solidor, from the 14th century, is also closed to visitors. So we drive to nearby Rothéneuf and take pictures of Jacques Cartier's home; it, too, is not available for touring until 3:00.

We return to our cottage and walk to the main *Cottage Les Rimains* to ask about our dinner reservation at *Le Coquillage** for this evening. The "nameless" employee/manager/owner (the same one with whom we

*Lee had made a reservation for *Le Coquillage* by email and received a confirmation on August 2. But the note also told us to phone one week before arrival to tell them that we absolutely, surely, definitely, positively want the reservation. Because we were concerned about a possible language problem had we made the call ourselves, we asked one of the men at Locquéolé to make the call for us. And it's a good thing that we did, because the person in Cancale seemed to think that he wanted to book a room for us at the hotel, not just confirm a dinner reservation.

interacted upon arrival) tells us to come to the front of the cottage at 7:45 this evening when a taxi will take us to dinner. We also take advantage of this walk to "memorize" the path from this building to our 'umble abode because it will be pitch dark (and maybe even raining) when we get back after dinner.

We drive into the central square of Cancale to take pictures of the statue/fountain that celebrates the importance of the oyster harvest to the city's economy. (According to Wikipedia, "History has it that Louis XIV had his oysters brought to Versailles from Cancale.") From there, we drive to the port, *La Houle*, where we see the Belon oyster beds and the nearby stalls where fresh oysters are sold - a few of them are packaged to bring home, but most are consumed on the spot by aficionados who sit on the seawall. This is a great place for people-watching, dog-watching, and, I suppose, oyster-watching.

Several pictures that I take at about 3:00 show the oyster beds only partly submerged and many oyster boats and pleasure craft sitting on dry land. After walking a bit, past shops and restaurants,* we return to

**Au Pied d'Cheval* turns out to be an oyster shack. Whew! And for a moment, I thought that the word *Degustation* on its awning meant "disgusting."

the starting point 25 minutes later and find the boats floating and the oyster beds completely covered by the sea. These tidal fluctuations are serious!

At 7:35, we walk from our cottage to *Cottage les Rimains* and wait for the taxi. There is a light drizzle, not too bad. After about 10 minutes of getting wet, the "nameless" employee/manager/owner opens the door and invites us to wait inside. That's nice. There is another couple, French, who are also going to dinner, but they talk only to one another and to the "nameless" employee/manager/owner, not to us. (A third couple appear, Belgians, but they are driving their own car to the restaurant. All four of these people must be staying in rooms in *Cottage les Rimains*.) After a while, a man ascends from the basement to the lobby, gives the haughty French couple air-kisses on both cheeks (by "both" I mean the two on either side of the nose), and offers them little drinks. We are ignored. Then, the "nameless" employee/manager/owner comes over and tells us that this gentleman is our driver and that his car (not a taxi at all) is just outside. So we and the French couple accompany him to the car, some sort of VW station wagon. I get to sit in front, while poor Lee sits with the haughty French couple who continue to talk to one another and to the driver, but not to either of us. Lee picks up enough of their conversation to realize that they're have a heated discussion about "world-wide sourcing of spices and their uses in food." Yawn.

The drive takes about 15 minutes and traverses about 6 km. Because it is after dark, we don't get to see the scenery or the grounds of *Chateau Richeux*. It is a large building with 11 guest rooms and two apartments. We are led through a sitting area, where we reject the offer of an *apéritif* and then into a dining room, one of several, with five tables. The French couple, who traveled with us, are seated in a different room, but the Belgians, who drove their own car, are with us. There is a third table with four adults. And then ... a party of 14(!!!) arrives. That's fourteen, quatorze, vierzehn, catorce, ... ! The eight adults are seated at one table, the six children (ages ca. 5 to 12) at another.

No surprise - the children are loud and restless, although less so (I think) than American kids might be. From time to time, either an adult from the other table or one of the waiters goes to the children and requests that they PIPE DOWN (in French, of course). This works, but only for a while. As for the adult table, well this explodes that myth that the French speak quietly when dining out. They are raucous and extremely annoying for everyone else in the room. Lee is convinced that one of them is making outbursts like a Tourette victim, but I think that it's a combination of bad manners and too much alcohol. Mainly because of the adults, I can barely hear Lee who is sitting just a few feet from me.

And now for the food at this restaurant with its one Michelin star. Quoting from Lee's journal,

"We get canapes, but no *amuse bouche*. The "oyster wench" comes with a basket of unshucked oysters to show what the featured ones are tonight. The canapes are (a) some sort of raw fish; (b) tiny shrimps on crackers; and (c) sardine or anchovy mash. On inquiry, the waiter says that (b) or (c) has cumin, but the chef can't remember which one! [Ron shuns both of these, lest he pass out right there.] We both have a mussel soup to start - vaguely Indonesian, but fortunately Ron has no reaction. It is accompanied by a skewer of mussels resting on a black granite stone. There is a peasant bread in a basket on the table - no "bread waiter" as at Noirieux and Locguénolé. And we drink a half bottle of Menetou-Salon (our new love).

"The main courses come on ordinary white plates; no sense of artistry in the way the food was presented. [I wonder if anyone from *Le Coquillage* will ever read this?] Ron had pigeon and some ordinary-looking veg; it may have been a mistake to order it pink - he did not enjoy the bird the way he did the one at Locguénolé. Lee had "lamb towers" - shredded lamb (shoulder?) which had been cooked for seven hours with mystery spices and then compacted. These created considerable gas and stomach distress toward morning. The go-withs were very good - large white beans sprinkled (possibly) with samphire; beautiful sautéed chanterelle mushrooms.

"Dessert (for Lee) brought a first: a dessert cart from which you could make multiple selections. The chocolate/caramel tart was excellent; the millefeuille with vanilla whipped cream was OK; the shot glass of strawberry goo/panna cotta/goos layers was ... eh? Miraculously, we are invited to take coffee in the lounge - they might have sensed our distress over the noise level. The coffee comes with a nice mini-tin of ginger cookies."

I ask for the bill, but am told that it will be added to our hotel bill at checkout tomorrow. We wonder how we're going to call the "taxi" to get us home until we realize that the driver has also been acting as a waiter (in a different room) and is carrying out a lengthy conversation with the French couple who still won't speak to us. Eventually he comes to our little table and asks if we're ready to go back. Yes!! All in all, an unpleasant evening. And a big disappointment for this Michelin star restaurant.

There are all sorts of pamphlets and literature on the table in our cottage. Most intriguing is an envelope with a hand-written note. Now, I am not one to criticize the handwriting of others, but this person writes words in which the lower case letters u, n, and m and upper case M and P are difficult to discern. Of course, it would help if my French were better than it is. *N'importe quoi* - here is my best effort to reproduce the handwritten note:

Vous êtes maintenant entre ciel et mer

Prenez le temps ... et le vent,
 le temps de regarder la mer, monter et descendre.
 Marcher du jardin vers le sentier, respirer et goûter
 le vent de ce pays habité de fées et d'Étonnants Voyageurs.
 Jane, Olivier Roellinger et leur équipage

Which means, I think,

You are now between sky and sea
 Take time...and the wind,
 time to look at the sea, to climb up and down.
 Walk from the garden along the path, breathe and taste
 the wind of this land inhabited by fairies and by remarkable travelers.
 Jane, Oliver Roellinger and their staff

Thanks to noted Francophone and all-around good guy, Bill Agosta, for helping with this. His translation, except for a couple of words, is the same as mine. I did, however, change one of his words: he had *goûter* as "feel," whereas I have it as "taste."

Sunday, October 9

Another cloudy, rainy, and very windy day. Last evening, we plotted a good route (we hope) to Fougères, our only stop today, and from there to Charles de Gaulle airport. After passing through Chartres, it's the reverse of the route that we drove from Paris to Amboise on September 21. That should be a good thing, except ... we did get horribly lost when trying to drive on the highways that skirt the eastern side of Paris. So this time, we studied ... and studied ... and studied all of the maps that we had: Google, New York Times, a Michelin map of *Région Centre*, and the regional map given to us by Europcar. All of these maps are open to the correct page so that super-navigator Lee can follow them and advise super-driver Ron of what to do. *Pas de problème, non? Oui!!!*

The expected knock on the door, announcing the arrival of the bread wench, does not occur. I look outside once or twice, but see no basket. So I call the office and someone actually answers; we are told that the basket is on the window sill outside, not on the ground. And so it is.

After breakfast and loading the car, we walk to *Cottage les Rimains*, ring the bell, and ask the still "nameless" employee/manager/owner for the bill. I look it over and say, *L'addition est en erreur*. I explain that although Lee had the three-course menu at last night's restaurant, I had the two. Nevertheless, the bill had two charges at the higher rate. (Had I been allowed to see the bill, while still at the restaurant, it could have been quickly cleared up.) It is quite clear that we are not believed. No, it seems apparent that these shifty Americans are trying to cheat the establishment out of about 20€, a princely sum. So, Ms. "nameless" employee/manager/owner calls the restaurant and, after some discussion and two or three additional phone calls, comes to the conclusion that we are being overcharged. After another delay, a new bill is presented. We pay it and get the hell out of there.

We head some 80 km to the southeast* to Fougères (population 20,000), making only two wrong turns on

*On the way, we pass two or three exits that could have taken us to *Mont Saint-Michel*. We may be the only tourists to have come so close to the famous island abbey and disdained visiting it. We also pass exits to St. Lo, Caen, Cherbourg, and other cities whose destruction (by "friendly" bombs) I just finished reading about in Antony Beevor's *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*.

the way. This is not the fault of the navigator or driver; rather there are detours that take us off the highway

and onto smaller roads that are not well-marked. But we finally arrive just before noon; the car's thermometer registers 14°C and there are rain and clouds and mist along the way. We park near the impressive 14th century *Château de Fougères* and walk along and around it, taking many pictures. The moat that surrounds it looks forbidding, although it seems not to have been stocked with alligators. We walk a bit through town, admiring (for the last time on this trip) the half-timbered houses, the restaurants, and the food shops, including a boulangerie that displays breads in the shape of a starfish, a crab, a lobster, a shrimp, and (yes) an alligator. On the way back to the car we pass a lovely old 16th century church, *Église St. Suplice*.

And now it's time for the 350 km drive* to the airport. Lee drives the first section so that I can be

*Leaving Fourgères, we pass near the town of Mayenne. Signs erected by *La Région Mayennaise* caution us about modifications in the route. This occurs not far from the town of La Baconnière. (My Jewish heritage rebels at the thought of mayo on meat, but of course when the meat is the already forbidden bacon, maybe it's allowed under the ancient Talmudic proverb, "Two wrongs make a right!")

prepared to drive and she to navigate the final approach to and around Paris. We are confident that we'll do this correctly. Yes we are.

PUN ALERT: We pass a field of unfamiliar vegetables. I ask Lee what they are. She says, "I think they're leeks," to which Ron replies, "If we steal them, will we be charged with taking a leak?"

FRENCH CLASSICAL MUSIC ON THE RADIO: At the start of today's drive, the station called *Musique* is playing jazz, not classical music, so we switch to *Radio Classique*, with its short selections and throaty male and female announcers. One of their promos for their programming is an annoying pastiche of 10-second excerpts from a dozen composers (including Beethoven, Chopin, Bizet, and Bach) that the composers never intended to have so knitted and forcibly smashed together. On the other hand, one positive feature of this station is that the composer and title of the work being aired are shown on the car's display screen. The other station, *Musique*, does not have this function.

UNCHARITABLE (AND TRUE) OBSERVATIONS ABOUT FRENCH ROADS AND THE PEOPLE WHO

DRIVE ON THEM: The dedicated reader will have noted that, for the most part, I've had nice things to say about the quality of the roads, both major and minor, and the excellent driving habits of the locals. Now it's time to tell some of the uglier truths:

- We stop for fuel, just east of Chartres. A woman (in a car, of course) leaves the rest stop just ahead of us, at a speed of about 5 k/h. Is she a brand-new driver? Is she just very cautious? No and No. She is *drunk*. When we reach the open highway, I pass her as quickly as I can - in the rearview mirror, I see her, straddling the white lines, varying from dangerously slow to really dangerously fast speeds, shifting lanes without checking to see if another car is there, and so on. I'm glad to lose her but I worry about the people behind me who may get involved in a collision.
- At the gas station, after we fuel the car, Lee drives toward an empty space in front of the convenience store where we need to go to pay. Suddenly from the right, at high speed, a beat-up black Alfa Romeo cuts in front of us and slides into the space; the driver, a young tough with a malevolent grin, seems to be laughing at our ineptitude. Inside the store, I pay while Lee goes to the lavatory. I see the juvenile delinquent's two groupies: a trashy-looking blond and her equally trashy-looking mother or aunt or sister or whatever. I silently put one of Madame Gwenn's curses on them. It will be justice served if, when they speed out of the rest stop, they have a close encounter of the crash-kind with the drunk woman.
- As we approach Paris, the driving (and the drivers) get wilder, as was the case when we were trying to exit Paris the day we arrived. Twice, I just barely avoid collisions when drivers decide that they'd like to be in my lane even though another car (mine!) is already there. The axiom that "two moving objects

cannot occupy the same space at the same time" has not been taught to them, a clear failing of the French school system. (Or, perhaps they are quantum physicists or chemists who, following the Pauli Exclusion Principle, recognize that two objects (electrons) *can* occupy the same orbital if they have different spin quantum numbers.)

- And, of course, the damned motorcyclists and motorbikers, probably the same ones who terrorized me on September 21, are back to cause anxiety and heartburn and loss of hair and who knows what else. They are, each and every one of them, prime candidates for a Darwin Award.* Where are the

* According to Wikipedia, "The Darwin Awards are a tongue-in-cheek award ... to recognize individuals who contribute to human evolution by self-selecting themselves out of the gene pool through putting themselves (unnecessarily) in life-threatening situations."

police, I wonder? Where are the protectors of civilized society and petrified tourists?

Back to the final leg of our drive. Lee has given the controls of the car to me while she mans (womans?) the four maps, all neatly folded, paper-clipped, annotated, and cross-referenced in the hope that we can get to the airport without getting lost. As we begin the final leg, I am confident that we'll be succeed. "After all," say I, "When we get close to the airport, surely there'll be signs and maybe even a picture icon to direct us to our destination. Surely." Well, we make it up the A10/E50/E5, cut over to the A6/E5/E15, and reach the D51/E50/E5 ring road that skirts the right side of the city and leads directly to the airport. Well, that's what the theory suggests, but like all great experiments sometimes one fails to account for all possible variables. Thus, despite our careful preparation, we find ourselves in a traffic jam on a highway whose number does not seem to be on any of our maps and which, for all I know, is in Belgium or Germany. (Upon consulting the map weeks later, no longer under the pressure of finding a road and simultaneously driving the car, what I think happened is that we correctly exited the Paris loop road on the A3/E15, but when it came time to turn north on the A86 we turned south and were heading toward open country and, eventually, to the Mediterranean.)

The traffic is bumper-to-bumper, but we see a BP gas station on the highway up ahead. I stop, and with map(s) in hand and my faithful traveling companion at my side, go inside the station to seek help. The only person on duty is, judging from his complexion, either from Eastern Europe or the Middle East; and the sad fact is that he speaks no English. He does speak French, of course, but it's heavily accented. I do manage to blurt out *Aéroport Charles de Gaulle*, which he understands, and with hand motions and rapidly spoken words indicates that we need to get off at the next exit, go over the overpass, and re-enter the highway in the correct direction.

It works! And in fairly short order we find ourselves entering the airport complex at about 5:00. Our goals are to find the Hilton, dump our luggage, and get to the car rental before 6:00 after which we'd be required to pay additional money. This sounds easy, but it is not. First, we need to "top off" the gas tank, which we do at a Total station in the airport; when paying, Lee asks where the Hilton is and is told *Terminal 2, toute à droite* (or something like that). The airport is huge (no surprise there) with three terminals and numerous hotels, none of which seems to be a Hilton. We see a Novotel, a Best Western, a Sheraton, but no Hilton. From the pictures at its web site, the hotel is a large building but somehow we don't see it. We make two or three loops around the airport until we spy a sign directing us to the Hilton. "We're there!" I exult. Not so fast.

We follow the signs and, lo and behold, there it is - THE HILTON! Alas, the network of one-way roads take us not to the front entrance and check-in but to the rear where there is parking accessible only with a magnetic card. (We actually "break the law" by getting back on the one-way loops by crossing a bus transit area.) So we make another complete loop, see the signs to the Hilton, follow them carefully, and finally we are at the front entrance at 5:30. We unload the suitcases and I ask the chief porter if we can leave them while I park the car. In the meanwhile, and unbeknownst to me, Lee has gone with the suitcases to the front

desk and is checking us in. (And I suddenly realize that the pen* that I've used for the entire journey is no

*This is beginning to be a habit. Upon our return from New Zealand, I realize after exiting the plane at Los Angeles airport that I've left a folder with crossword puzzles, Sudokus, and my official puzzle-solving pen in the pocket of the seat in front of me. Lee convinces me that I do not (repeat NOT) want to go back through Security and to the plane to find it. She's right, of course. But ...

longer in my pocket; I can only surmise that it's fallen onto the car's floor, but a quick look in the dimming daylight reveals nothing.) Sigh.

The chief porter tells me that we can leave the suitcases (they'll be brought to our room) and that we should follow his colleague who will drive a VW and lead us to the car rental area. OK. Well, said colleague has two passengers, very pretty employees of the hotel, and I'm sure that he's going to get us to the Europcar after 6:00, but all works out - he drops the young lovelies at a bus stop and then, forgetting that he's not on the track at Le Mans, leads us on a wild chase (in which we seem to have circled around and headed in the wrong direction) down a ramp to Europcar. He also seems to know the car rental clerk and we transfer the car to him without delay. We are then driven back to the hotel, again at excessive speed and with turns that seem to negate others that we've made. Lee, not knowing that he's an employee of the hotel, insists that I tip him handsomely. I do so under great protest.

And we are in our hotel room at about 6:00. What a day! We have dinner at the sumptuous buffet at the Hilton dining room. It's not the elegant cuisine that we've spoiled ourselves on for three weeks, but it's still very tasty. And, for better or for worse, in the lobby and in the dining room, for the first time since Amboise on September 26, I hear English (American-accented English, at that) being spoken.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 10

We get up early and go to the breakfast buffet (very nice) at 6:05 so that we can catch the 7:15 shuttle bus to the airport. And it's a good thing that we arrive at the bus early because it fills up rapidly and many people have to wait for the next bus at 7:30. We know that Air France operates out of Terminal 2, but we have no idea which part of this immense terminal we need to enter. Actually, it matters not as the bus makes one stop only: at terminal 2E and 2F. Our flight is not scheduled to leave until 10:30 and so we assume that it will be posted (with information about where to check in) three hours ahead of time. Not so. After sitting with our luggage and staring at the departure board, the 10:30 flights (of which there are many) are not posted until nearly 8:00. For our flight, we need to go to Terminal 2E, sector 4, but when we arrive there we are told that this is for tourist class only; business class passengers must go to Terminal 2E, sector 9, a considerable walk. When we ask the Air France agent, "How were we supposed to know this? The message board showed sector 4," we get a classic Gallic shrug. We get to the sector 9, check our luggage, pass through several levels of security* and arrive at the Air France business class lounge at 8:45. In the

*Lee, because of her shifty look, gets "wanded" whereas my carry-on bag is opened, unloaded, and carefully examined for who-knows-what. Fortunately, none of my "unmentionables" are held up for all to stare at and scorn.

lounge (trying to resist the wonderful selections of cookies, savories, and beverages of all types), I continue reading Jeremy Bernstein's *Oppenheimer: Portrait of an Enigma*, which I had begun two days before; and pick up Alistair MacLeod's *Island*, the set of short stories about Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, that I had set aside on October 3. At 9:45, we walk to the gate, but see no plane. "Surely they're not going to bus us to a distant piece of tarmac where we'll mount a staircase to the plane," say I. Surely I'm wrong! A bus, stuffed to the gills and with at least three pockets of screaming infants, takes us past all sorts of seemingly open gates and to a waiting plane. Whether this is the same location where we exited the plane upon arrival

three weeks ago, I have no idea. The plane is an Airbus A330-200.

Before take-off, the pilot announces that the flying time will be slowed to 10 hr 20 min because of strong head winds on the way. (But isn't this exactly what one would expect with an announced departure time of 10:30 and arrival time of 11:50, given the nine-hour time change? Hmm.) Because of the logistics of busing some 300 passengers from the terminal, the plane's doors are not closed until 10:55, 25 minutes late. Just before shutting off my cell phone, I notice that Steve at Harbor Towncar had called at 6:20 (Paris time) but left no message. (In fact, I recall having heard two or three rings while we were having breakfast, but I assumed that it was someone else's phone.) So I quickly call back and leave a message about our new estimate of arrival time. (When we get to Seattle, he tells us that he dialed my cell phone by mistake and hung up as quickly as he could.)

After take-off at 11:10, we're almost immediately in the clouds, although they do part for a while when we are crossing the English Channel where we get a very clear view of the white cliffs of Dover. At 12:15 (Paris time), lunch is served. I start with a Glenlivet (OK, it's not food, but it's good); I reject the *amuse bouche* (scallops with spice marinade) because of its excessive use of red pepper and I reject the *L'entrée gourmande et sa salade de saison* because it contains shrimp with curry, although I do eat the salad greens that surround it. From the three choices for the main, I have *Filet de poulet fermier* and a glass of white wine; Lee has risotto with mushrooms. We both have a cheese course. I finish with a sorbet while Lee has a "dessert trio" of mini berry crumble, mini lemon shortbread, and mini-sota. No, just kidding - the third component is a chocolate mousse. As we cross Great Britain, most of it is hidden by the clouds; and there are some pockets of turbulence, but not enough to cause me to spill the whisky or the wine or coffee.

During the flight, I alternate reading *Oppenheimer* and *Island* and finish both of them - most enjoyable. Off and on, I watch the in-flight map that shows our progress. Breakfast* is served. As we enter North

*Well, it's not really breakfast. The menu calls it *L'instant fraîcheur* and it consists of an appetizer (smoked salmon fillet with zucchini, marinated in olive oil); sautéed shrimp with honey and ginger; and baked caramel apple with raspberry coulis. Burp!

America, the only U.S. cities shown are Boston, Atlanta, and ... Abilene(??). And as we proceed to the west, only Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Anchorage appear - no Vancouver, no Austin or Dallas or Houston, no Denver. Because of the fierce head winds, our speed never exceeds 520 k/h. Nevertheless, our estimated time of arrival is 12:33, only 40 minutes later than scheduled. As we move from Canada into the U.S., not far from Spokane, the clouds form again and remain for the rest of the trip while the ride becomes very bumpy. We land at 12:25, just 30 minutes late. Immigration and customs are negotiated amazingly quickly. We gather our luggage, call Steve to tell him which door we'll be at, and are driven home.

All in all, a wonderful trip!