

Mistletoe, mud and snow: September - December 2012 in Entre-deux-Eaux

December 1st and the fields and trees outside are crisp and white with frost in the morning sunshine. Yesterday we had a light sprinkling of overnight snow (not the first end of the year, as there had also been flurries at the end of October). Cheered by the sunshine at the end of a grey week, we decided to go to Nancy. The hilly scenery soon opened out into flat fields of pasture, winter wheat or bare ploughed furrows, and a more distant horizon. A bird of prey hunched on the overhead cables, huge balls of mistletoe festooned the copses of bare trees, reed plumes and teazles along rivers, ponds and ditches glistened regally in the sunlight, and there were flashes of scarlet hips and lemon yellow birch leaves.

Nancy's Place Stanislas was tarted up for its 250th anniversary seven years ago and still presents scrubbed white façades and flashy gold on the ornamental wrought ironwork. Having bought photo quality printing paper (for some of our Christmas cards), we parked near Place Stanislas and headed for a scruffy looking but well-recommended, tiny, unimposing on the outside, restaurant, *Le Cosmopolitain*, behind the covered market. Inside it was small but elegant and packed, mostly with young business people. It's not often, these days, that you find a good two-course meal with coffee for 10.90€, which added to the pleasure. After setting out in different directions to explore the shops, we later met up unexpectedly in the covered market and had another coffee. Outside the market, wooden cabins were being erected and Christmas trees planted ready for the Christmas market and tomorrow the main streets will be closed for the Saint Nicolas procession. We were glad to enjoy Nancy and its shops on a "normal" day and equally happy to see the distant whiteness of the mountains as we drove home.

The last two and a half months feel as if they've been dominated by maintenance work — house, body and car. But there have been the usual autumn highlights like the patchwork festival and the geography festival and the pleasure of sharing some of them with visitors.

The patchwork festival brings to life the surprising number of old churches (also a former bank, the theatre and a mansion) in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and neighbouring villages in the Val d'Argent, trailing and draping colour from the organ lofts, pulpits, stage and counter as well as walls and windows. John came, rather reluctantly, for the first time (as we had visiting friends of his), and outside the first large church of the Madeleine spotted a stall with Moroccan leather slippers (no trace of patchwork!); the perfect birthday present to replace his old ones, which he'd bought in Marrakesh in 2004, through which a toe had bored a hole. You always see things differently through the eyes of friends, with Julia's focus on techniques, Graham's scientific/mathematical approach and John's photographic approach. The colours, as ever, were stunning. The former tobacco industrialist's Villa Burrus in Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines displayed delicate Japanese quilts indoors and patchwork flowerbeds with eye-catching sculpted heads outside. From there we drove down the wine-route, with the vine leaves golden in the evening sun,

to the mediaeval walled village of Riquewihr. Near the upper gateway we had an enjoyable dinner at one of our current favourite restaurants, *Au Trotthus*.

We had an equally good lunch there the following month when Leila, Stella and Jacob were with us. This time it was grey and drizzly outside, but we did sneak a quick walk round the cobbled streets and tiny shops. The food was as good as before, but we were very conscious of the Maitre d's disapproval at our lowering the tone of his establishment with a CHILD. Jacob, at 18 months, had no such inhibitions and, when not eating the food we'd brought, relished dipping into Leila's creamy mushroom amuse bouche, and munching pieces of chicken wakame, shrimps, mussels, toast and terrine, and apple tart, though considered the service rather slow, so got down and played by the table, which of course incommoded the bustling Maitre d'. However, chef kindly came several times and gave him great bear hugs.

We had brilliant sunshine for the Saint Dié braderie while Graham and Julia were with us. We headed through the food, clothes, linen, leather, balloon and boiled sweet stalls to the flea market at the centre and browsed among old books, furniture and knick-knacks, emerging after a couple of hours with the Little House on the Prairie series of books (in French) and some new tea towels. On the other hand, the weather was grey and miserable for the Ban-de-Laveline flea-market while Leila, Stella and Jacob were with us. Our car Bluto was reluctant to start, Jacob wasn't feeling happy (probably still tired from their journey out the previous day), and everything seemed pricey, so it was not such a successful event!

It's interesting how different even Entre-deux-Eaux looks through visitors' eyes. Walking round with Shelagh, Melvyn and the excitable small Prinz (I'm not good on dogs, but think Prinz has Cavalier King Charles Spaniel pedigree), we encountered all the village dogs and cats. The Alsatian-cross, chained outside the "drug dealer's" shack, struggled, as ever, to break his bonds and gobble up this small intruder. Ex-farmer Duhaut's large aged golden dog lumbered up affably, telling us about his poorly leg. Behind him was the new pavilion (bungalow) Duhaut is having built, and behind that the new two rental apartments above old farm buildings (were they pig, cattle or machinery housing before?). Jacob was, of course equally interested in all these dogs, and specially liked the six that rushed out of the next farm, Vozelle's, and licked him enthusiastically and accompanied us till we had left "their" section of the road. But we had to stop to look at the hens by their stream and the geese, who were fortunately involved in a loud and bitter dispute of their own. But the highlight, for Jacob, was being ushered into Madame Laine's poultry enclosure and running around among her birds, then having some of the fat rabbits lifted out of their hutches and held firmly by the ears to be stroked. The little tricycle we'd bought for a euro in a flea market was great for these expeditions. Jacob was more cautious, however, about the ride-on tractor and contented himself with pushing Teddy round on it. At first he insisted on being carried by Mummy in the field to see the cows, but he was soon following John, clutching the faithful Teddy, through the long grass on masculine tours of inspection of the orchard, drains and "arboretum". The

arboretum has suffered from deer chewing the bark and rodents chewing through the base of the slender trunks. So the new trees which his sister Ann and Derek gave John for his birthday have more substantial protection, including wire fencing and bright orange plastic tubing. (And with this year's bulb plantings we're trying net onion bags and cardboard egg boxes as anti-rodent protection!) But so much for small dogs and boys to look at (and sniff out) locally.

It was the night before Leila, Stella and Jacob's flight out that we had our first snow, and it was still falling as we crossed *le Bonhomme*. The gritters, however had prepared well. Stella and I thought it would be good to take a walk through the snow and drove up one day towards *le Hohneck*. I was being cautious, as our smaller car, Snowy, does not have winter tyres. I was glad I stopped at the point I did as we later saw a car stuck on the road up to the café at the summit. "No winter tyres!" exclaimed a man in camouflage who had helped push them. But it was worth the leisurely walk up through the trees to the ridge and spectacular views. The sun was out, the snow glistening and scrunchy beneath our boots, and the orange lollipop poles marked the track out in the snow. The hot chocolate at the top was good too. Jacob had to content himself with pressing his nose to the living room window and watching the snowflakes on the balcony and the birds coming to feed. Long after they had left, I kept hearing little cries of "Birdy!" whenever a bird landed on the food.

Saint Dié's International Geography Festival (known affectionately by locals as *le FIG*) had a cover-all theme this year : *Les facettes du paysage, nature, culture, économie*. Few of the geographical lectures appealed to me, apart from one on landscape in Tolkien. I don't think the organisers realised quite what a large cult following Tolkien has. They did move the talk to a larger area of the library than the advertised one, but by the time I discovered the change, the old reference library was crowded out and it was impossible to hear from outside. However, the invited country was Turkey, and the literary talks about Turkish authors were interesting. The first I went to was in a huge hall with an audience of eight (now why didn't they use that for the Tolkien talk?), but so interesting that I ended up buying a novel by Sait Faik Abasiyanik and an autobiographical volume by his translator into French. There was another interesting talk on Pierre Loti and Turkey, and the opportunity to see the haunting film "Once upon a time in Anatolia", (a film with a 15 certificate in the UK which had no classification in the programme and a teacher had brought a junior school class to see, the teacher finally ushered the children out a few minutes before the end when a graphic autopsy took place). John only went to one of the cookery demonstrations (alas, not Turkish food), as the others had little out of the ordinary. The Turkish food tent was busy though, and there was a lively Turkish street band with dancer.

In between these activities and visits, house improvements continued with the installation of photovoltaic panels on the south-facing roof. Fortunately there were no serious mishaps in the process. The man who measured up arrived on a wet day and scrambled around on the slippery roof with no safety helmet or

other protection - and looked considerably paler-faced by the time he descended. The van bringing ladders and safety netting on the first day decided to turn on the field and got stuck in the mud; fortunately the milk tanker was just returning from the cattle shed at the end of the road and kindly pulled it out. The lorry delivering the panels and electrical boxes was more prudent and turned at the end of the road before unloading. While it was blocking our narrow road the impatient farmers in a car attempted a turn in the other field and also got stuck (it has been rather a wet autumn). But after that things proceeded smoothly, and we now await connection to the grid by EDF and possible inspection by the mysterious sounding Consuel. Their approval (they only physically visit about one-in-five installations of electricians they generally trust) and certificate is necessary before EDF will return and put the final fuse in. But when we went to change our house insurance, we learned of an unforeseen French hazard for solar panels: huntsmen firing at them when hunting (was the man joking?) Perhaps we shouldn't risk cheering as the deer cunningly zig-zag up the side of the orchard away from the shots (we've seen that twice already this autumn). Autumn maintenance included a boiler check, a once-in-twelve years oil tank sludge clean-out and fresh oil delivery for the winter ahead. John is currently making enquiries about geothermal heating, and we are finally arranging to have the now muddy area at the front and side of the house tarmaced.

As for body maintenance: John had day surgery (in Saint Dié's new hospital block) on his out-turning eyelid which had been causing scratching of the eye, redness and irritation. He was allocated his own room with bed, ensuite shower and loo. English patients must be a rarity (or else I was a very bad patient) as one of the nurses remembered me from five years ago. Work was still being done in parts of the new hospital block and some of the accommodation was temporary, so there were no signs up at that stage, just one very busy lady directing bewildered patients to different sections along multi-coloured but otherwise bare corridors. Arriving in the right place felt quite a triumph. There is a shortage currently of ophthalmologists and dentists in France, so perhaps it was fortunate that John was critical enough to be seen within a week at the hospital and operated on a fortnight later. I had to travel over an hour to Strasbourg to get a routine eye test. Then, clutching my new prescription, I toured the opticians in Sainte Marguerite and Saint Dié (no shortage of retail outlets) obtaining widely varying quotes for supplying lenses to my existing glasses. Ophthalmologists (eleven years of medical training and many now charging a lot more than the state will reimburse for an examination) and dispensing opticians are mostly separate businesses in France. More recently, opticians have been allowed to do simple eye tests just to check for minor variations from prescriptions up to three-years old, presumably to try to alleviate the shortage? Jacob seemed entranced by all the long mirrors in the optician I chose (the cheapest quote), and ran round looking in all the mirrors as I tried on my new glasses. As for my dentist, he was looking well-tanned when I got an appointment after his month away (more shortages and long waits). And his surgery has a lot of new paintings up (all his own work, presumably over his long break). However, he has had time to do some temporary work (so I can stop chewing the cloves), and proposes

expensive work after Christmas.

Our main car, Bluto, however is in a less fortunate state. We were getting increasingly worried about problems starting and had booked a service and check in Epinal where there is a larger Toyota workshop. But the day before the service, Bluto refused point-blank to start. Unfortunately he was in the garage, and his insurance only covers break-downs over 25 km from home (no AA/RAC in France but most car insurance policies include it as an extra). Even the break-down driver was unable to elicit any signs of life and Bluto was towed out of the garage and taken ignominiously away to the Toyota garage in Saint Dié. Unfortunately there is only one mechanic/lad working there (who, incidentally, looks remarkably like Tintin) and they could give us no idea when Tintin could look at Bluto, who currently is now languishing forlornly in the car park. Our pleas that we wish to drive to England shortly fell on deaf ears. Since I started writing, snow has been falling. Will snow-covered Bluto recover in time for Christmas? Will Snowy have to be pressed back into long-distance service? Will we see you?

Next week the postman will call with his calendars, Saint Nicolas will visit the children in Entre-deux-Eaux and the neighbouring villages will turn on their Christmas lights. We hope you have all escaped the autumn floods and landslides and enjoy your December preparations. We hope to catch up with as many as possible of you over Christmas and New Year.