

Year 2, Weeks 39 - 41

Of food and teeth: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

Everyday life in Entre-deux resumed as normal (though what is normal?) at the beginning of February. John had returned early in January, but I'd stayed on in Nottingham after Christmas until my mother was making really good progress after her unpleasant bout of cystitis which had caused memory loss. Thank you to everyone who kept up my morale (and hence hers) with phone calls and visits. You'll be glad to hear that she's doing well and seems to have regained most of her old acuity.

After December's candlelight and illuminated outdoor trees, January and February can seem very dull and grey here. A time for hibernation. The underfloor heating envelops us in warmth, the barn is stocked with logs and wine, and the shelves are temptingly full of books – old favourites and newly purchased. To which should be added TV and all the new information resources at our disposal: the new, faster computer, networked older computers, and the broadband link. These latter have been providing John with car reviews (but no decision). There are times when we really miss a large car with versatile extra seating or luggage space. Our Yaris, Snowy, has coped with our great move, but was originally chosen as a small second car. Sometime perhaps, Tintin will arrive?

We have also been reading up about Marrakech. Last Sunday was dull and grey, my mother seemed stable, and we'd long been wanting to visit Morocco. Last year's plans seemed inadvisable after the Casablanca bomb and with the Iraq war looming. So it was an exciting moment on Sunday when John found and booked us a last minute French package. We fly out from the regional Metz/Nancy airport on Wednesday. "Do not engage in political discussion" advises one web-site. And the guide books we hastily ordered from Amazon offer dire warnings about faux guides. But it will be interesting staying at a hotel geared up for French tourists – the food at least should be good! Watch this space.

When I flew back from the UK, it felt odd to land in Germany rather than France. We still lament the untimely transfer of Ryanair flights from Strasbourg to the more distant Baden-Baden, which Ryanair misleadingly call Karlsruhe-Baden. (However, Easyjet start cheap flights from Stansted to Basel from the end of March, and friends have already booked a May visit using that route). With the late evening flight arrival time and the prospect of a long drive through a snow-laden landscape, I suggested that we should stay the weekend in Baden-Baden, John promptly faxed me downloaded hotel and restaurant descriptions. The hotels all sounded much the same, so selecting one of those was easy. Choosing a restaurant from the computer-translated descriptions of Gault Millau recommendations was more difficult. Did we fancy Mueller's with its "many Accessoires and Trophaeen gathered of the passionierten hunter Joachim Mueller, whose kitchen of Baden is impressing like a sheet shot"? There we could be served by "friendly hall and / or garden daughters" and could regale ourselves on "a patiently scorched cattle hip" or "a grumblng ash of Baden". Rather cryptically it concluded "Bekehren it would

know the Andersglaebigen however possibly by its *zuenftige Bauernvesper* with all Drum and to, it on *vorbestellung* for table rounds prepared” Neither John’s long-ago school German nor his university “German for Chemists” course was of any help in disentangling this (or the original!). On the other hand we could choose the Alde Gott restaurant where “if necessary guests can resist the tenderly scorched *Ochsenbaeckle* in *Spaetburgunder*”. We chose Mueller’s.

We were not obedient tourists. We didn’t avail ourselves of the many spa facilities, though we did have an enjoyable walk round the outside of them whilst exploring the rest of the snow-covered town. We didn’t succumb to any the tempting Black Forest *kuchen*, though we did sit outside in the sun and snow, drinking coffee and watching the world go by. And we didn’t find the most spectacular of the Black Forest lakes, though John did assess the flow (“challenging, with the snow melt starting”) of the river Murg for canoeing. But by evening time we were ready for a hearty meal at Herr Mueller’s. I’d imagined a gloomy baronial hall with stags’ heads. So it was a pleasant surprise to be in a small, bright, road-side inn. We prudently settled for the menu of the day as Chemists’ German was also inadequate to deal with the full menu which was lengthy both in choices and words. After cold followed by hot *amuse gueule*, we were not surprised when the serious eating started with venison *paté*. The surprise was that the food was so light - the *paté* being more of a *mousse*. After that, the daintily presented river trout *strudel* was delicious. Then we finished with a frothy apple and ice cream desert. As for the local white wine - with hindsight we should have gone to the village it came from and stocked up!

It wasn’t until we reached *Entre-deux-Eaux* the next day that I realised quite how neat the Black Forest was. All our geography lessons about the Vosges and the Black Forest being mirror images might have been geologically accurate, but didn’t take into account national differences. *Entre-deux-Eaux* looked positively untidy with its sagging barn roofs, haphazardly parked rusting tractors and vans, muckheaps spilling onto the roads, crumbling farmhouses, and unsymmetrically sited woodpiles. How homely it all felt!

Not too much seems to have happened in *Entre-deux-Eaux* during my seven weeks’ absence. Following his hip replacement operation, neighbour Pierre Laine is to be sighted hobbling with two sticks down the lane (when it is snow-free), but, more often, watching life from a chair by the kitchen window. Another neighbour, Georgeon, who retired from the Colmar fire brigade last year, seems to have been providing a woodpile for the remainder of his life. He’s been cutting down some of the stands of trees which used to grace the views from our French windows. He’s also demolished some wild *damson* along the roadside in which the phone lines had become entangled. The crumbling house which Fanny painted as a background to pecking hens now has scaffolding at one end. The mayor’s annual report reproves us (and all the rest of the village) for not attending the prestigious opening of the new road (back when we were tree planting). Following this summer’s drought the mayor and council also propose a pipeline to St Leonard to supply water in bad times. And I got an unexpectedly warm welcome back from the Scrabble group. And that concludes the local news.

However, for me, the most surprising event after my return was my dental appointment! You may remember the rather protracted saga of our obtaining our plastic health cards. Incidentally, I was delighted to see John referred to as my “concubin” on this year’s form. Life definitely sounds more exciting with a “concubin”. Having obtained our cards, we can currently get multiple consultations on any complaint on the same day, and be operated on with minimum delay. Alas, the system is rapidly becoming overburdened, and will soon be forced to become less lavish (or profligate!). Major reforms are due to be announced soon. Watch this space.

As I write this, Radio 4 in the background is reporting reactions on the difficulty of getting NHS dental treatment in the UK. I have vivid memories of being declared “incompatible” with my former UK dentist (presumably code for wanting to stay NHS), and of cost and options discussions with my next dentist. We were very uncertain how dental charges would be refunded in France. John was first to test the system. When he chipped a tooth, he followed the “dentists” signs into a building we’d previously assumed to be a vet’s, and was seen immediately by a handsome young dentist. (It may be that his less than perfect French was taken to be grunts of agony). And all the costs were eventually refunded (after intricate paperwork) by a combination of state and private health insurance.

However, I was still surprised to have no discussions on options for treatment when it was my turn. My dentist (older and more polished than John’s) repaired a chipped tooth on my first visit, and predicted a painful extraction for an endangered tooth on my next visit. However, as the doomed tooth had failed to flare up in time for my recent appointment, he embarked, without any consultation, on an elaborate oral beautification process. I wasn’t quite sure what was happening as I lay for three quarters of an hour with my mouth wedged open with cotton wool and my glasses covered in spray. Then, with a flourish to the mirror, the dentist proudly showed off my teeth, meticulously filed from jagged fangs to neat rows, glossed, and any gaps filled with matching filler. He then offered to replace on subsequent visits all my old silver fillings with nice matching white ones. As I expressed my amazement he said quietly, “I like to think that we French have a more modern and streamlined approach to dentistry”. My debit card was obviously shocked by the 275 euro charge, as it refused to be accepted and caused the machine to break down. Phone calls, switching off of machine, rebooting of machine, apologies, and writing of cheque followed. I await with interest the progress of the paperwork for refunding this extravagance!

With my teeth now ready to challenge all new food, one day we to set off for a DIY shop in Strasbourg sufficiently early to incorporate lunch. We’d last dined in Strasbourg in hearty Alsacienne fashion at the Old Customs House (before Pete and Bob’s flight home last August). This time we followed our noses past most of the quaint old restaurants behind the cathedral, inspecting the menus du jour of Creole, Turkish, French, and Vietnamese restaurants. John declared a desire for something “foreign” after all his home cooking; and eventually, having nearly decided nothing really caught our eye/stomach, we chose a comfortable, busy Chinese, sank into its crimson upholstery, and enjoyed a

lovely meal. I particularly enjoyed my “assiette chaude”, though John’s dim sum were more adventurous. After that we were well set for loading skirting board onto the roof-rack.

You’ll gather from all this that the roads have been kept well cleared during snowy weather. However, it’s been lovely to walk in the forests on sunny days. Sometimes the only tracks in front of you in the snow are animal tracks. And the ridges of the deserted hills, familiar from summer walks, afford such spectacular views. Two young deer bounded out across the footpath one afternoon.

John has been feeding the birds from an assortment of feeders hung from the orchard trees and seed scattered on the ground. He reports regular visits of great-spotted woodpeckers to the “fat balls”, as well as jays, blue tits, great tits, nut hatches, green finches, bullfinches, hawfinches, chaffinches, and a single green woodpecker and a robin.

The local ski resorts are currently enjoying an excellent season. They particularly appreciate fresh snow over the staggered French half-terms. Chalet accommodation within a 30km radius of Gérardmer is reported fully booked.

Hope you’ve been paying attention and have taken in all the news! Soon there will be a competition – first prize, a week in Entre-deux-Eaux and second prize – well, what better than two weeks(?) – with hard labour in the vegetable patch.