

## Year 3 week 5 to 12

### The Vosges in summer: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

Tourism. Parasols, postcards, and pistachio ices outside cafes. Motorcyclists in black gear snaking up the mountains. Scarlet geraniums. Mannequin parades of storks. Low flying eagles. Luges hurtling downhill. If you're tired of descriptions of rural tranquillity with only the animation of cows, hay-bales and vegetable gardening, here's the "holiday edition" of the newsletter to tide things over (as, amongst other activities, we've been on holiday in the UK for a few weeks to see friends and relatives).

Our latest visitors stepped off the train from London via Paris and Nancy on Saturday evening, and by Sunday were fully immersed in the slightly idiosyncratic Blackmore version of tourism in the Vosges. First of all there was the *foire aux brimbelles* at Fraize. Confusingly, the word *brimbelles* does not feature in any of our dictionaries, but is another word for *myrtilles* or bilberries. The festival involved the 2004 Fraize Brimbelles Queen, various local folklore groups and singers, and a country lunch of more local specialities which don't feature in our dictionaries (rounded off with a soft cheese, purple with *brimbelles*). As we didn't get there until mid-day, all the produce and market stalls were deserted, the music had stopped and everyone was engrossed in lunch. So, since our visitors are librarians, one of whom haunts charity shops in search of rare books (he recently sold a proof copy of Harry Potter for a satisfyingly large figure), we moved on to the local old-book Mecca. This last Sunday of the month is the best time to visit our book village, Fontenoy-la-Joute. Many of the dusty stables full of books remain shut-up during the week, but on the last Sunday the stable doors are heaved open, additional stalls are set up, the paper maker demonstrates his art, the book-binder brings his lovingly tooled bindings, and musicians are crammed into a corner of the café terrace playing nostalgic Beatles tunes conducive to eating and book-purchasing. The tunes must have worked, as the rare-book friend left with a French novel he had a hunch about, the seventeen-year-old with a French comic strip book, and I with two Hammond Innes (in English) from the 1940s whose dedications I couldn't resist. On the way back we stopped at the inevitable *vide-grenier*. This was not in a picturesque village, but in a car park by the dual-carriageway on the outskirts of St Dié. But it was a real treasure trove of bric-a-brac for a euro or less. Day One of tourism was rounded off by a John-special on the terrace, with cabaret of hot air balloon overhead, followed by stars and the Milky Way, two satellites, and nearly full pink moon in the domed night sky.

The gabled houses of Colmar had featured prominently in our visitors' guide book to Alsace Lorraine. So Day Two included Colmar's cloistered Unterlinden Museum and its sixteenth century Issenheim altar (painted by Grunewald); a typical Alsace *brasserie* where even the salads were hearty; my favourite cathedral painted carving (of the Last Supper); Little Venice (gabled houses at their quaintest, with their bright yellow, mauve, turquoise or pink plaster and scarlet geraniums all mirrored in the waters of the canal); and the gift shops with their Hansi postcards (Oncle Hansi did quaint illustrations, featuring sweet little children in Alsace national costumes, exhibiting distinctly anti-

German sentiments in those pre-World War I days when Alsace was German territory). Afterwards we drove along the famous wine route to Monkey Mountain to see the macaw monkeys. Nearby are the ruins of Kintzheim castle with displays of eagle flying. I'd recently visited that with Leila and Nicola. It was impressive watching the eagles and other birds of prey soaring, gliding, vanishing from sight, then skimming the heads of the spectators on their return to the gloved arms of their trainers and their rewards of raw meat.

After a relaxing sunny day of reading, strolling, and cycling, it was back into action with a morning either canoeing on Pierre Percée or exploring the section of cobbled Roman Road that led along a forested hilltop ridge (Germany in one direction and Paris in the other). Again we speculated as to whether the deep wheel marks were worn by Roman chariots, German army gun carriages, or woodcutters' carts or sledges.

The final day of ultimate tourism pandered to everyone's tastes. First there was the dry sledge-run from the heights of the Hohneck ridge at the Col de la Schlucht. You can experience the thrills (but not spills) with John's video record. Then there was Munster, with storks gliding, storks on rooftop nests, and storks balancing on the roof ridges of churches and municipal buildings. Perhaps I should also mention the most delicious patisserie we've come across - also at Munster. And yes, we did sample its offerings, including, for one of us, a savoury croissant filled with the famous Munster cheese with its distinctive smell. Then we returned via the World War I trenches and museum at le Linge. The trenches dug by the Germans at the summit are stone-lined and you can still walk deep within them; the trenches thrown up on the slopes below by the French trying to attack the summit are long overgrown. 3,000 French soldiers are buried nearby. And after all that, and a bit more sunshine on our terrace, we still managed to eat a most agreeable farewell meal at "Le Petit Chantilly" in St Dié.

The next morning, we waved our visitors off on the Nancy train at St Dié. Whilst they enjoy a weekend in Paris with the splendours of Montmartre and the Eiffel Tower, we're back to watching the grass grow, picking the blackcurrants, and reading - oh yes and resumption of the neglected newsletter.