

The French Open and the World Cup: from the sofas of Entre-deux-Eaux: Year 5, weeks 1 - 8

It is one of the laws of nature that strawberries should ripen in time for Wimbledon. But despite their slow start, due to late snow, ours peaked in time for the World Cup. So, as the world's best footballers kicked and fouled and collected yellow cards by the handful (I blame the humidity and extreme heat), we have been gorging ourselves on strawberries, cherries and ice cream.

But the last two weeks of May and the first week of June were wet. Very wet. This was a shame as first Leila and then Toby and his girl friend Stella visited during this period. It even snowed on the day I took Leila back to the airport. And this was May 30th. Another record was broken, apparently, for the coldest first day of June.

So, much of Leila's holiday here was spent a) helping us to track down a new TV (as figures and scenery on our old one were reduced to lurid pink and turquoise) and b) lying on the sofa reading and watching the French Open Tennis on the new TV. All those French players you never see at Wimbledon! Fortunately Paris was enjoying better weather than us. It was galling to hear the Eurosport commentators complaining about the cold weather there. For while all we could see outside our windows was rain, on our screens we could see shafts of Parisian sunlight. What were they moaning about?

On a linguistic note: having heard the exciting tennis tie-breaks referred to (in English) as "breakers", I was not surprised to see the word "*breaker*" appear on the grid of our Sainte Marguerite Scrabble game, and to hear groans about the continuing encroachment of English on the French language. However, it turned out not to be a noun meaning "tie break", but to have been adapted to form the French infinitive of the verb meaning "to break service".

However, back to the rain and snow. It somehow seemed appropriate to round off a day we had spent in Alsace with Toby and Stella (lunching at one of our favourite restaurants, the Frankenbourg, then visiting Haut Koenigsbourg castle - which Kaiser Wilhelm graciously restored to Disneyland magnificence before losing it at the end of the First World War) with a visit to the Christmas shop in Riquewihr. Two floors of tree decorations, cribs, musical boxes, nut-cracker figures, table napkins and icicled foliage!

A couple of days earlier we'd had a more typically French trip to Nancy, where the great square of Stanislaus, last Duke of Lorraine (yes, I know he was Polish, but all these nobles and royalty married each other), was restored to magnificent fully gilded splendour last year. Having missed a turning, instead of parking near the railway station, as we usually do, we parked on the first floor of what looked like an abandoned textile factory, then emerged into an unfamiliar part of town. Bright and strange vegetables spilled out of the tiny shops onto the narrow pavements. Interesting breads and pâtisseries glistened in other windows, and the butchers were halal. We'd inadvertently discovered the North African quarter, a stone's throw from the glories of Stanislaus. And

beyond it, even against the grey skies, the gold of the statues, fountains, gateways and grills shone out in arrogant splendour. After lunch in the arboretum, and with rain threatening, we went to the old palace which houses the museum of Lorraine history, and wandered through pre-historic grave goods, mediaeval statues, formal paintings from the era of Stanislaus, and a fascinating collection based on the Jews in Lorraine.

But some people have all the luck. When the Tulls (John's sister Ann, her husband Derek and their two sons, Steven and David) came over a week later for a mid-June break, the sun shone gloriously all the time. In fact, it was uncomfortably hot during most of their visit. We abandoned all plans to visit historic sites, and sought out shady forest walks and ate leisurely meals. So one day we explored some nearby German World War One trenches and block houses (which had been under snow the first time I saw them) and French war graves. We retreated to the *Relais de la Poste* for cooling beers. A couple of the tables in the bar were covered with check table cloths, and soon after mid-day, Madame served the two sets of waiting diners with steaming tureens of spicy vegetable broth, aromatic kebabs and mounds of couscous. We were unexpectedly offered some kittens - presumably as pets rather than food. One afternoon we strolled part way round the glacial Lake Longemer, then sat under parasols by the lake sampling colourful sorbet and ice cream cornets. Another morning we walked down a track by a noisy stream, before lunching *Au Bon Gîte* in Senones. On a slightly cooler day, we introduced the boys to the thrills and spills of the downhill luge, the high peak of Hohneck, the clusters of storks nests in Munster and the delectable Gilg patisserie. And there had also been the Tendon waterfall to round off a hot Sunday of flea markets.

Entre-deux-Eaux had thoughtfully laid on our annual flea market to coincide with their visit. So, after a leisurely breakfast on the balcony, we drove up to the football pitch. Yes, drove. I'm afraid it felt too hot to bother walking the three km uphill to the other side of the commune! On our star-rating system for flea markets, E2E regularly scores the maximum three stars. For a start it has the best view. The ridge of a hill may seem an unlikely spot for a football pitch, but the higher mountains spread out spectacularly beyond. It also has reasonable prices. We stopped at the very first stall to spend our first euro on a glass butter dish with a cow embossed on the lid. Then Ann spotted a cow-shaped milk jug with a lid. So that was another euro spent. Our other bargain was a box of long nails for two euro (read on for purpose of said nails). The boys had meanwhile investigated the beer tent, and then we all drove home for coffee and cold drinks. We thought that might have been sufficient on the flea market front for the boys. But John's mention of a more distant flea market, Docelles, with the best ever chips, was irresistible.

It was rather a shock, therefore, to arrive in the mid-day heat in Docelles and find that the whole layout of the market had changed. It is one of the villages which closes off its streets to traffic and has stalls radiating along streets from the village church. But the old building from which in previous years tantalising smells of mussels as well as chicken and chips had issued, was shuttered and deserted. But finally, after following the stalls up the side of a

factory wall, we emerged into a large open space on the outskirts of the village. Amid the clustered stalls was a stage where line-dancers, hands on hips, rhythmically stomped their booted feet. And beyond it was a huge tent. And within the tent, the complex ordering system for village food had to be explained to us. First we studied the extensive menu. Then we bought tickets for the agreed combinations of *frites*, *saucisson*, *lard* (large chunks of smoked pork), *bière*, and *jus d'abricot*. Then we were instructed to take a seat and wait for the waitress. The tables under the awning were packed, so we headed into a semi-permanent bar structure, where hits of yesteryear were being belted out by two wiry middle aged men. When a waitress eventually noticed us, our tickets were examined and she ticked the appropriate boxes on an order form. The food, when it arrived was excellent, two small children were dancing to the music, and we were beginning to tire of the loud music! We rounded off the feast with ice-creams from one of the stalls. After all that bustle and heat and noise, the Tendon waterfall on the way home provided a cooling contrast.

But we didn't really need to stir from our balcony. Entre-deux-Eaux's fauna seemed determined to show off to the Tulls. (The only wildlife we'd seen while Leila was here had been a dead boar on the road). It is rare to see storks on our side of the Vosges, but as we breakfasted one morning, a stork strolled nonchalantly between the freshly made bales of hay. In the heat eagles passed overhead, scanning the cut fields for prey. And a small deer ambled past David as he read peacefully in the orchard. The four visitors found it interesting to almost tread on a large basking grass snake while out walking by a stream (I was just so relieved that I'd turned back a minute earlier to fetch the car!) And as well as local wildlife, the Saulcy hot air balloon obligingly put in evening appearances above our fields.

The neighbouring village of Saulcy was also responsible for the grand finale to their visit. Last year, we'd enjoyed watching Saulcy's *Feu de St Jean*, when a huge bonfire, shaped like a wooden horse, had lit up the night sky. This year, in honour of the World Cup, and perhaps remembering France's former triumphs, the three-storey high tree-trunk bonfire was constructed in the shape of the World Cup itself, complete with a shining golden disc at the top. At this point, I should mention that we'd all been avidly watching all the World Cup matches and even the friendlies before-hand. With our French hats on, we'd groaned as Cisse had been immobilised in a friendly and had urged on "our" man Henry. With our English hats on, John had been almost lynched for not succeeding in recording the first England game on the new TV on the afternoon the Tulls flew here (fortunately the highlights shown later proved that we hadn't missed much!) and helpful advice like "take him off!" and on substitutions had been shouted at the screen.

All went well initially at the Saulcy football pitch, where the huge bonfire had been built. We watched the Saulcy *Dauphines*, an assortment of girls aged three to fifteen, prancing and twirling their batons in rough time with the music. As the skies darkened with pink tinged storm clouds, more batons were dropped than caught, and John suggested a hasty retreat to the car. But the rain held off and with nightfall came the fireworks, which, for a small village,

were truly spectacular. After the last firework had died, there was an extremely long gap, in which lights flashed around the bonfire. It seemed that the firemen were having great difficulty lighting the bonfire. Was this a metaphor for France's struggle to score in their opening match? The crowd began to drift away. When the pyre eventually caught light, there wasn't the triumphant roar I'd expected, nor whilst the coveted Cup flamed gloriously, or when the gigantic burning timbers started crashing down. But some gods must have been propitiated by Saulcy's burnt offering, as the next evening Thierry Henry scored and France drew their second match.

A few days after the Tulls' departure, John and I attended another annual event, the Sainte Marguerite pensioners' barbecue. Such is the popularity of this event, that an extension to the awning had been purchased, and the tables under the awning covered nearly all the dry land next to the pretty tree-encircled fishing pond. After the potent welcoming sangria, we sat down to a protracted meal. Having not been cunning enough to "bag" seats in advance, we ended up in a prestigious position on one of the committee tables. We'd remembered to take our own wine, but forgotten to add metal cutlery (plastic knives and forks snap so easily). A rather frail chap at the head of our table, who turned out to be the former commune handyman, produced his all-purpose workman's folding knife (with essential workman's attachments like corkscrew). My neighbour, who'd been serving the sangria, wiped his implements on his stained apron and proceeded to tuck in, bellowing loudly in my ear throughout the meal. The retired headmaster and his wife dropped morsels to their three dogs under the table, whilst carrying on a civilised conversation with the retired gendarme next to John, about global topics such as the indolence of Tunisians and Turks.

When the conversation touched on football, I innocently asked if France was going to win the World Cup. There was a long, sad silence. The regretful consensus was that the French team was an ageing team, and that a team of Sainte Marguerite pensioners would do better. At this point the accordionist struck up, and distant tables started to sing. The President, a rather lugubrious man, produced a bottle of unidentified distilled fruit liquor (opinion varied as to whether it could have originated from plums or pears). John manfully accepted a glass, and I was urged to try it, absinthe style, on a sugar lump. I was not altogether surprised when Charlotte (wife of the ex-commune employee) explained that as a child, she had been similarly dosed to cure sore throats. By the time we left, I was convinced that a team of well-liquored Sainte Marguerite pensioners would easily have defeated Togo. Who knows what fuelled the national team, but the following day in their decisive third game, they ignored local pessimism and defeated Togo. And then went on to win both their next match and their quarter final!

Meanwhile, what about those nails I mentioned earlier? Throughout this period, rain and shine, during interludes between tourism, feasting and imbibing, John has been building a brick garage and a garden wall. Leila and Toby helped construct the wooden frames for the concrete ties and window and door lintels. Finally the shell was ready for the raising and placing of the

heavy horizontal wooden roof ridge and purlins and the fixing of the rafters (thanks, Ann, Derek, Steven and David!). The next activity will be roof tiling. And then the Entre-deux Eaux flea market nails will be just the right length for attaching tiling battens. A couple of days ago we went on an interesting shopping expedition. The shopping list comprised: working boots for Alistair, cremant (Alsace champagne), garage roof lining and piping joints (for the loo in the attic cloakroom). John's DIY projects continue!