

BONJOUR FRANCE 1974

Sunday 18th August

Bon Anniversaire Alain! It was an unusual 24th birthday, as the previous week he'd been in hospital having wisdom teeth cut out of his gum and his mouth was still very sore. However, we arrived with my parents at Millbay Docks in Plymouth at 22:00 to catch an overnight ferry, the oddly named Penn Ar Bed, for a roughly 7-hour voyage to Roscoff (although I hoped it wouldn't be rough).

As we stepped from Dad's car onto the dockside, the realisation dawned that I was actually about to desert the homeland for the first time ever and I began to have slight qualms of something that can only be described as nervousness. One fact that made me smile, however, was the sight of Alan carrying what we'd nicknamed the diplomatic bag, which contained all our important travel documents. As a far more experienced traveller than the rest of us, Alan had made it his personal responsibility not to let the bag out of his sight.

There was a slight mix-up obtaining embarkation passes, but we were eventually sent to the right place and by 22:30 were on the ferry that seemed bigger than I'd imagined. It looked romantic and inviting with its lights shining in the dark.

We left Dad's car in the hold and went to find the four seats we'd booked as our sleeping accommodation. The seats were comfortable and well-padded, but we were certain we wouldn't sleep at all and wished the seats were reclining. It would have been better, of course, to actually have had a bed on the Penn Ar Bed. However, we explored the rest of the ship in good spirits, finally locating the bar and restaurant where we each had a cup of tea costing 1F.20 (approximately 12p). It seemed expensive, but we enjoyed it.

Shortly before the ship was due to sail, we went out on deck and as the Penn Ar Bed finally pulled away from the dock, our thoughts were somewhat as follows:

Kay: I'll never be able to swim back now.

Alan: It's good to be back at sea again.

Mum: This is it, I hope it's not rough out there.

Dad: I wonder when the bar opens?

Mingled with these primary reactions was the excitement and awe of watching the lights of our beloved Plymouth receding into the dark night at a speed of 10 to 12 knots. I'd never realised before what a picturesque sight Plymouth harbour and its surroundings made from the sea. The Citadel looked most imposing illuminated in a white-green light and there were a myriad other lights from hotels and tall buildings throwing the shoreline into relief. Perhaps the most moving sight of all was the War Memorial, bathed in purple floodlight.

After about 20 minutes, Mum and Dad retired to the sleeping accommodation, Dad passing the bar without a bedtime noggin. Alan and I stayed on deck, however, still gazing at the rapidly disappearing Plymouth coastline. Gradually we reached the Eddystone lighthouse, passing a few other brightly-lit ships on the way. As Plymouth finally disappeared and the Eddystone lighthouse passed into the distance, we thought we'd better try to sleep. I was amazed to see it was 45 minutes past midnight and we'd been standing on deck for 1¾ hours!

We went back to our seats and found we were sitting opposite two young French couples, who'd quickly settled down for the night in various uncompromising positions. Mum and Dad had obviously tried to compose themselves for sleep, but Mum tended to break out in bouts of subdued sniggering every so often.

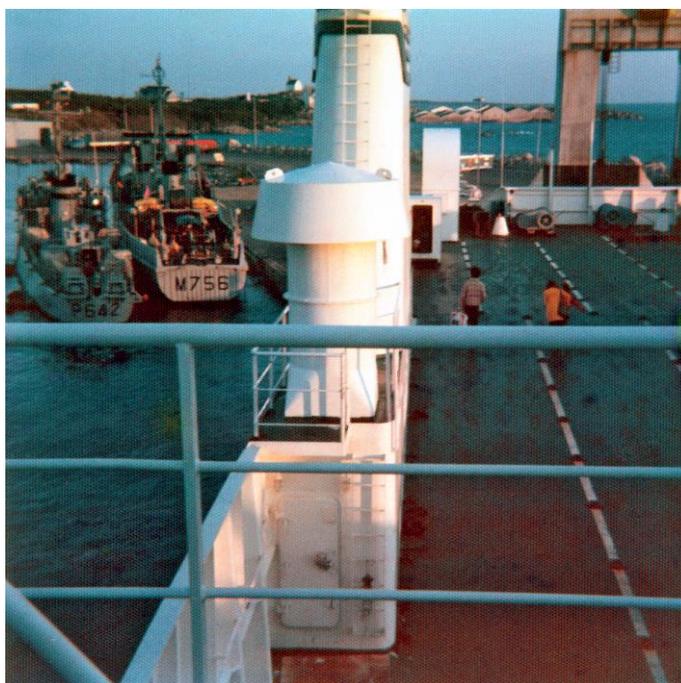
The lights were still on, so I resignedly sat in my chair at the end of the row opposite one of the young French men, trying to look as if I was asleep. I was grateful when the lights were turned off at 01:00 and darkness descended.

Meanwhile, Alan had borrowed a blanket from Mum and was lying face down on the floor in the gangway. After 15 minutes or so, the wife of the French man I was sitting opposite decided to lie on the floor beside Alan, much to my amusement. During that short but deceptively long night, there were many noises - banging of doors, clinking of bottles and people whispering and snoring.

Monday 19th August

At approximately 04:30, the ship began to roll slightly, but this didn't seem to disturb anyone except me. Gradually the dawn came, cold and grey. At 06:00 the lights were turned on and we decided to have breakfast, which consisted of a roll, butter and coffee. Being in a holiday mood, Mum splashed out and also had a bowl of cornflakes. None of us had slept well, but ... we'd arrived safely!

After breakfast, we went out on deck to watch the ship berth and were pleased to see the early morning sun shining on the French countryside. We made our way to the car and Alan drove off the ferry somewhat apprehensively, trying to remember to drive on the right-hand side of the road for the first time. His gum was sore, but he'd packed a decent supply of painkillers.



The Penn Ar Bed arrives at Roscoff

At the checkout, Dad handed our passports to a gendarme. We were expecting to be closely scrutinised, but he merely glanced at our passports and didn't even look at us. We were legitimately in France, ready to begin our adventure!

At 07:00, it was a beautifully sunny morning as we drove along the coast of Brittany, passing through Morlaix, Guingamp, Saint-Brieuc and Dinan. Our first impression of France was that it was flat and there was a distinct lack of roadside toilets. Another observation was that the detached houses we saw were very pretty with sloping roofs and shutters at every window.

We stopped at Dinan for some refreshment in a likely looking café, where Mum successfully practised her French by asking for "quatre cafés au lait, s'il vous plaît." Alan had already experienced his first confrontation with the French language when he'd stopped to ask the way to Dinan earlier in the journey and had found himself resorting to creative gesticulations.

While we were drinking our coffee, Mum asked Dad to go to the toilet. This is not as peculiar as it sounds, because there was only one door marked *Toilettes* that we had seen just men use and Mum wanted Dad to suss out the situation. He obliged and came back grinning, but wouldn't tell us why. Alan was despatched next and when he returned, Mum and I managed to persuade him to explain. It was an old-fashioned French toilet, a mere hole in the floor with foot rests and a flush. Mum and I finally plucked up courage and went together, unable to stop giggling hysterically when we finally saw our first example of a French toilet.

After this educative experience, we walked along the street for a while, stopping to buy some cheese and crispbread. We then drove on until we found a suitable place to stop by the roadside for a picnic lunch of cheese and/or sandwich spread on crispbread, Alan's home-made flapjack, biscuits and tea brewed on Dad's portable gas stove. I had unfortunately forgotten to pack the teapot and so the tea had to be made in the kettle itself.

We continued on our way until we arrived at Bayeux, where our first priority was finding a place to sleep for the night. We therefore accepted the first place we came across, called Hotel Luxembourg, costing us 39F a night for a double room. After depositing our cases, we explored the town of Bayeux and naturally went to see the famous Bayeux Tapestry, depicting events leading up to the Battle of Hastings in 1066, whereby William of France became William the Conqueror, King of England. We also visited a nearby art museum.

Somewhat exhausted, we returned to the hotel for dinner (dîner) and had some fun ordering our meal. The first course turned out to be salami sausage and pâté, the second course was steak and fried potatoes with French beans (haricots verts) and the third course was lettuce dressed in a vinegary oil dressing. The coffee was then served in the bar.

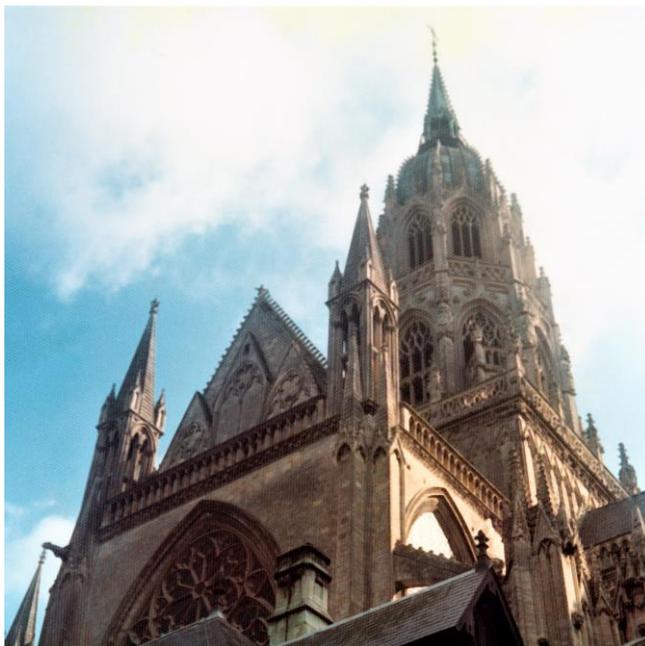
As we were almost completely worn out, we stayed in the hotel for the rest of the evening and talked about our forthcoming trip to Paris. Dad and Alan had a quick drink in the bar and then we went to bed at 21:30. Bonne nuit!

Tuesday 20th August

We awoke at 07:30 and at 08:30 breakfasted on bread, butter, jam, croissants and coffee. Alan had a shock when he went to pay the bill and discovered it was 200F, so we decided we must find much less expensive accommodation in future. Alan had been recommended by a young French man he knew to stay in places with a *Les Routiers* sign, so this was the new plan.

It was another sunny day as we continued on our way towards Paris. We had a picnic lunch again on a likely looking roadside verge and at about 15:30, stopped in Chartres, located about 56 miles/90 kilometres from Paris, at a *Les Routiers* hotel that would cost 22F per double room.

After depositing our cases, we drove into the centre of Chartres to visit the cathedral. Three women dressed in national costume were sitting outside, selling lace. They made a pretty picture, but there were too many people around them to take a decent photo. We entered the cathedral and walked around in the pleasant coolness, impressed with the many beautiful stained-glass windows.



Cathédrale de Chartres (top of)

We then strolled around Chartres, moved by a memorial to Jean Moulin of the French Resistance, exalted as a hero for his courageous death at German hands.



Memorial to Jean Moulin, 1899-1943

We also visited the railway station to ask about trains to Paris for the following day, before returning to the hotel for dîner. Mum, Alan and I chose mushroom omelette (omelette au champignons) and Dad chose pork, which we enjoyed with the customary accompanying bread, water and a bottle of wine. For dessert there was ice cream, but unlike the creamy ice cream of Devon and Cornwall.

Dad and Alan stayed behind for a drink (pernod and pastis) while Mum and I went to Mum and Dad's bedroom and perused our postcards. When Dad and Alan returned, we all had a scintillating game that involved taking turns to go through the alphabet thinking of names connected with our French holiday, such as A for Arc de Triomphe, B for Bayeux. It kept us amused until bedtime!

Wednesday 21st August

We convened at 08:00 and had the usual breakfast (petit déjeuner) of bread, butter, marmalade and coffee. I prepared sandwiches and then we drove to Chartres to catch the train to Paris. As we arrived early, we stopped in a café for some coffee. While we were there, a dirty, smelly old man came in and approached us, presumably asking for money. Mum quickly replied, "Je ne comprends pas, sorry." The pathetic old man turned around and shuffled out again. Once he had gone, the proprietor of the café opened the door as wide as possible and sprayed the room with air freshener.

It was then time to make our way to the station, where we stood on the platform waiting for our train. Who should we see but the poor unfortunate smelly old man – whereupon Dad joked with Mum, telling her that the smelly old man was sure to sit next to her on the train...

When the train arrived exactly on time, we managed to find a comfortable, empty compartment. The train started and we were only there for a few minutes when the smelly old man came shuffling down the corridor in our direction. To our amazement, he stopped outside the compartment door and slowly came inside. That was enough for Mum, who escaped through the door as quickly as possible, closely followed by Alan, me and finally Dad. We managed to find seats in the next carriage and enjoyed the rest of the journey without the company of 'Harry Lime' as Dad laughingly nicknamed him.

On arrival at Paris-Montparnasse, we were overwhelmed by the sheer size of the railway station and took a while to discover that we needed to catch the 22:00 train back to Chartres. We also discovered that we would have to catch an underground train (metro) to the Champs Elysées, which we managed with surprising ease. As soon as we emerged from the underground, the first thing we noticed was the Eiffel Tower (Tour Eiffel) in the hazy distance. The second thing we noticed was the traffic racing madly along the wide road of the Champs Elysées in several lanes.

As we started to walk down the busy pavement, I could hardly believe I was actually in Paris, but the sights, sounds and smells kept reminding me that it wasn't just a dream. We stopped at a nearby refreshment stall for lunch and then sat on a wooden bench for the next half hour, eating sandwiches, drinking ice-cold drinks and generally watching the world go by. There was even a convenient convenience behind us, although it was a unisex one and cost us 1F.10 each. Still, it was Paris and all part of the experience!



Avenue des Champs Elysées

We continued to walk along the sunny Champs Elysées, which changed from parkland to shops, cinemas and roadside cafés. We noticed that several of the cinemas were advertising 'naughty' films and were highly amused to see one man stop in his tracks to take a photo of a particularly cheeky advertisement.

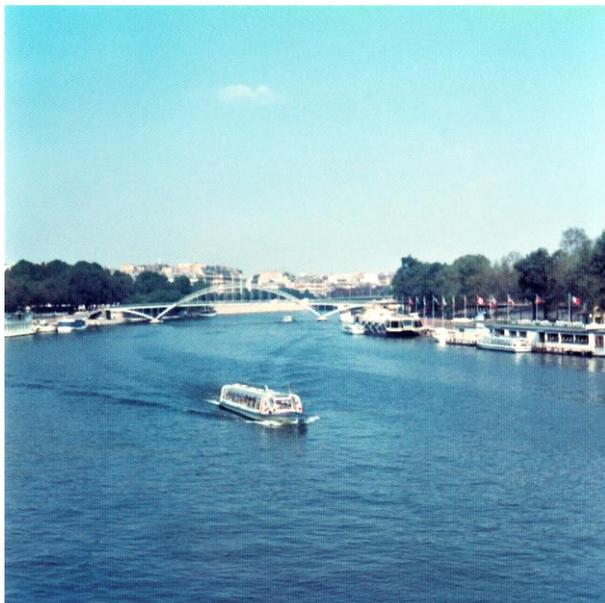
At last we reached the huge Arc de Triomphe and stopped to walk around it. There was a long queue of people waiting to climb it, so we took some photos and decided to carry on to the Eiffel Tower. On the way there, my sandal strap suddenly broke, but I was still able to walk quite comfortably. This was just as well, because there was a lot more walking to be done before the day was out.

The sun was high in the sky as we reached the Eiffel Tower, beating down on our heads. This and the fact there was a long queue to climb the tower put us off even thinking of climbing it, so we contented ourselves again with taking photos.



Dad, Mum and Alan in front of La Tour Eiffel

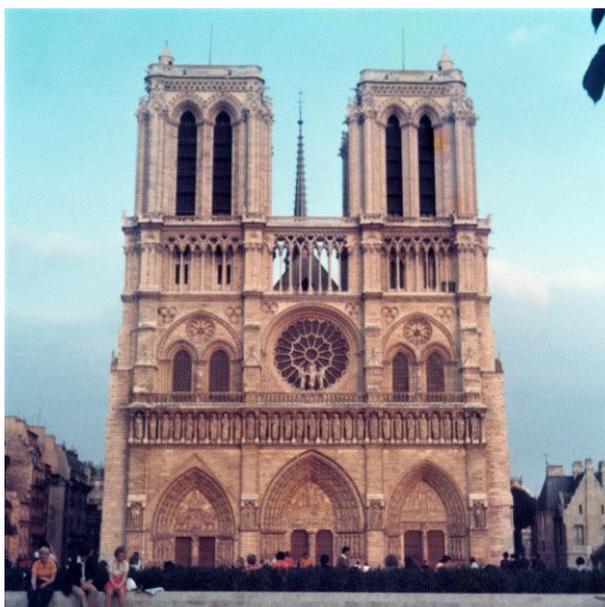
We then crossed a bridge over the river Seine and stood looking enviously at the luxury boats and barges cruising lazily up and down the river:



La Seine

Reluctantly saying au revoir to the Tour Eiffel, we walked past the marvellous nearby fountains deliberately close to their spray in an attempt to cool down. Next was Notre Dame Cathedral, for which we had to make another metro journey. On arrival at the station, we were desperate for refreshment, so went into the nearest bar for an ice-cold drink before continuing to the cathedral.

It was smaller and gloomier than I had imagined, but had lovely stained-glass windows, several small chapels and an attractive shrine to the Virgin Mother. We listened to a pre-recorded cathedral guide (in English!) and learned that it was Gothic in style, with its first stone laid in the 12th century. We sat for a while in the cool interior, before girding our loins and re-entering the world outside.



Cathédrale de Notre Dame de Paris

The streets were narrow as we wandered tiredly along, looking in souvenir shops and buying a few reminders of our long, exciting day in Paris. Poor Alan had started out with dully aching gums, but as the heat had taken its toll, his mouth had swollen inside and was very sore. Thank heavens for the painkillers.

Mum wanted to take the metro back to the Champs Elysées, where earlier in the day we had noticed a stall selling waffles. We definitely needed sustenance, so complied with her desire. The metro trip was straightforward again, but when we arrived at the waffle stall, it was being closed up for the night. There was nothing much to do except sit on a nearby wooden bench to watch the Parisian world go by, while we rested our aching legs for a while.

After our final metro journey back to Paris-Montparnasse, we found a café at the station, where we each had a ham roll (sandwich jambon) and a large glass of red wine. As we hadn't eaten much all day, the wine went straight to our heads, so we strangely enjoyed that meal! Amazingly, we found the right train quite easily and sat in it for half an hour waiting to depart. Although Mum was slightly apprehensive that the smelly old man might reappear, we sat in peaceful comfort as the train left precisely at 22:00 and arrived in Chartres at 22:50. British Rail could definitely learn a trick or two.

As we drove back to the hotel, we all seemed to develop a raging thirst, so on arrival, we managed to smuggle Dad's portable gas stove and kettle up the stairs for a private and somewhat British midnight tea ceremony. After waiting for what seemed like hours for the water to boil, we finally drank some of the wonderful liquid before practically falling into bed after an exhaustingly hectic, but totally unforgettable day in la belle Paris.

Thursday 22nd August

We all surfaced at around 08:30, packed our bags and had a very late petit déjeuner at 09:50, sitting at a table that seemed to have been specially set up for us in the corridor. After paying the bill, we took to the road once more for a trek to the coast. At some time after midday, we stopped for a picnic lunch on a verge alongside the road to Le Mans. Cars and lorries seemed to be whizzing by us as if they imagined they were on the race track.

The rest of the day was uneventful, except for an unexpected fruity purchase. Whilst driving along, we'd noticed a roadside stall selling apples and pears (pommes et poires) and stopped on impulse to buy some. Alan and Dad went to deal with the transaction, but shortly after, Mum and I were dumbstruck to see them returning with a sackful of apples and a sackful of pears. Apparently, Alan thought he'd been bargaining for just a few apples, but the exasperated man had finally given in and handed him a sackful of each – oh dear! We sampled the very refreshing apples, but decided to leave the pears ripening in the window, as they looked a little green and hard.

At about 18:00, we finally booked into a *Les Routiers* hotel called Hotel de Bretagne, largely thanks to Alan's efforts in approaching French people and not giving up when they answered his ever-hopeful question, "Parlez-vous Anglais?" with an emphatic "Non!" Hotel de Bretagne turned out to be the best place we stayed in and we really enjoyed a dîner of soup, shellfish, a main course of beef and to round it all off, a choice of fruit, ice cream or cheese.

After all that food, we went for an evening walk around the town of Pont Château, returning to the hotel for a pre-bedtime drink. We then said goodnight and went to our respective bedrooms. There were two toilets at the end of the corridor, which Alan and I went to investigate. One was the ordinary sitting down type and the other was the 'hole in the floor' type, so we naturally took turns to use the more civilised, ordinary-type one.

I was still there when I heard someone go into the hole in the floor type one next door. Then, after returning to our bedroom, I recognised the unmistakable sound of Mum's footsteps coming back along the corridor. Alan and I tiptoed as quietly as we could to stand outside Mum and Dad's bedroom and heard Mum explaining in detail to Dad about the discomfort she'd just endured.

Laughing a little hysterically, Alan knocked on the door and we went inside to explain to Mum, in between great gusts of laughter, what had happened. Her face was a delight to behold, but she took it in good grace. I must confess, though, that Alan and I were unable to settle down for a long time, because we couldn't stop giggling about the incident.

Friday 23rd August

We breakfasted at 08:45 on another beautiful, sunny day and set out for the beach (la plage) as soon as we were ready. We drove to St Nazaire as planned, but decided not to stop because the town was bigger and more complex than we'd imagined and consequently too difficult to drive in. Instead, we drove on to Pornichet, a lively seaside town with a long, sandy beach.

We left the car in a nearby car park without any problem and headed towards the beach, noticing that most of the people were really quite brown. We claimed a likely-looking area on the sand for our decidedly less than brown English bodies, changed into swimsuits and enjoyed the sun for an hour.



On the beach/sur la plage

Alan and I then went for a swim in the Bay of Biscay. The water seemed quite warm after the initial plunge and we both enjoyed our first swim of the year. As soon as we returned to the beach, Mum and Dad took to the water, although when they returned, they said they didn't think it was as warm as the water had been at Seaton in Devon, earlier in the summer.

We lay again in the sun allowing our swimsuits to dry until about 14:30, when we began to feel we'd had enough of the heat. Leaving the beach, we walked to the town centre (centre ville) and browsed around some souvenir shops.

Alan and I bought a pretty glass barometer, while Mum and Dad (probably Mum) bought a pair of French wooden sabots. Pleased with our purchases, we then followed a sign that said 'Golf Miniature' and ended up playing a game of Crazy Golf, which I have to say was far more imaginative than any of the games we'd played in England. It was the perfect end to a day on the beach.



Pornichet

At 18:30, we drove back to the hotel and enjoyed a most excellent dîner that consisted of soup, an unknown type of fish in tomato sauce, a main course of spaghetti, beef and lettuce, rounded off by ice cream for Mum, Alan and me and cheese for Dad. We took one and a half hours to eat dîner altogether and were feeling so tired afterwards that we went straight to our bedrooms. Alan and I were a little disappointed that Mum didn't avail herself of the hole in the floor at the end of the corridor...

Saturday 24th August

After petit déjeuner at 08:30, we packed our cases, paid the bill (Dad bought a bottle of local wine) and we said au revoir to Hotel de Bretagne. We then had to travel nearly all day on our way back to Roscoff and I was feeling slightly sick because of the sunburn I had on the back of my legs from the day before. We stopped on the roadside as usual for a picnic lunch, but none of us were particularly hungry and just nibbled at the food we had with us.

It was a long, rather tedious day, but we managed easily enough to find a hotel near Roscoff for our final French night. We had a slight shock on counting our remaining francs and centimes, however, as there wasn't much money left in the kitty at all. In the end, we found a local food shop and were able to buy a loaf of bread, a bag of crisps and four Milky Ways.

It felt strange to sit at a roadside verge with a kettle brewing on Dad's portable stove, pretending that what was essentially a lunchtime snack was actually our last diner. However, we had a good time reminiscing about past holidays and Mum was certain this holiday in France had been the best she'd enjoyed so far.

Feeling tired but happy, we packed everything away and went back to the hotel for a good night's sleep. There was a notice on the bedroom doors requesting that no noise be made after 22:00, but to our dismay there was a great noise of crockery and cutlery crashing about in the kitchen until well past midnight. Alan and I managed to have a fair night's sleep, but Mum and Dad's room was right above the kitchens and they unfortunately had a terrible night.

Sunday 25th August

We had our final petit déjeuner at about 08:30, but it was rather an unpleasing one of hard toast, dry bread with not enough butter and terribly strong coffee. I suppose we should have complained, but we came over all English!

However, it was travelling home day, so we set about packing our cases, paying the bill and driving to the Roscoff docks. We arrived at 10:30 in plenty of time, drove on board and down into the hold, then found a seat each by the bar.

The faithful ferry left at midday and we all watched the people on the quayside becoming smaller and smaller. After a while, we went down to the duty-free shop, where between us we bought bottles of duty-free wine, spirits and perfume. I wasn't feeling too well, whether still from the sunburn or the ship's motion I couldn't tell, but I did find it better on deck in the fresh air, so stayed outside for quite a while. Alan and I played I-Spy to pass the time...

The Eddystone lighthouse eventually came into view and then the familiar sights of the Breakwater, Staddiscombe Heights and the Plymouth foreshore, until the ferry slowly turned and steered into Millbay Docks. We left the Penn Ar Bed with no hitches and drove home on a dismal, rainy Sunday evening.

Our visit to France already seemed like a fading dream, but I knew I would always have fond memories of our first family trip abroad – the ferry, the cafés au lait, the hospitality of the French people and the smelly old man of Chartres. Oui, vive la France!

NB: The photos we had in our possession from this trip have deteriorated badly over the 37 intervening years and although Alan has done his digital best with them, they remain rather an unsatisfactory reminder of a much enjoyed first foray into France. The only solution is to go back...

