

Europe on Five Ideas A Day

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with invaluable assistance from

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*For Jenny & Michele,
Pat & Harold,
Gordon & Pam,
and,
most of all,
Kathy & Jack*

In memory of Margaret & Ern.

Preface

In 1991, as a form of relaxation therapy, I started to write a travel book, based on our European adventures of 1979, 1982 and 1985. I had access to some marvelous word processing equipment – an Apple Macintosh Plus with a 9" black and white screen, one megabyte of RAM, two 1.44 megabyte floppy disk drives and a legal copy of Microsoft Word version 3. I thought that my sisters, my four-year-old son (when he was older), and my parents-in-law might be interested to read about our travels, and maybe one or two others.

For Christmas 1991, I created final versions of the first four chapters. I printed copies in loose-leaf binders, with a beautiful photo taken by Kathy on the cover, and gave them to the intended primary readership. I promised that the rest would follow, and I did draft the remaining chapters but I became enchanted by the subject of information retrieval (search engine technology) and started publishing academic papers. This led to a PhD, to a change of career, to abandonment of travel writing, and to a sad case of chronic workaholia.

In August 2020, I came across binders containing the full printed manuscript, complete with green slips of amendments and errata on the later chapters, plus scribbled editorial comments from Kathy – Like dozens of ANU PhD students, I'd been "Griffiths-ed". I thought that, in my retirement, it might be feasible to reactivate the book project and to finally deliver on my nearly 30-year-old promise.

I shied away from the idea of looking for floppy disks and trying to fire up my 35-year-old Mac Plus (which I believe is still under the stairs). Even if I managed to get it going and read the floppy, how would I export the data from the computer with no USB interface and no way of connecting to my home network? If I somehow solved that, would I be able to read a Word-3 file using a current word-processing system? Instead, I scanned the printed pages and used an OCR package to turn it into text. With a quite manageable amount of effort I was able to re-create the book, and to set about the now simple task of scanning and incorporating photos and maps. Being able to include photos has added considerable value to the book. Using a nice big screen will show them off to maximum advantage.

It has been quite an experience to read the manuscript 40 years since our first overseas trip. The world has changed, people have changed, travel has changed, access to information has changed, technology has changed, I have changed, and attitudes to travel have changed. If I were to start writing about our travels now the result would be very different, but I probably wouldn't bother starting, because an overseas holiday is now a very commonplace thing. I have read that in 2019, ten million Australians left the country.

Apart from a little copy-editing, I have left the ten chapters of the manuscript untouched. The viewpoints I expressed now seem a little naïve, and I now see that my love of word play in the section headings may be excessive. However, I hope you will find that the book provides an interesting snapshot of a long gone Europe, with hard borders and twenty or more currencies. In case you are interested I have provided an Afterword which lists some of the really big differences between the world of 1979 and the world of now. I hope you will also be moved by the stories of the first world war – Colonel Padieu's "Story of the Boche" and the extracts from Kathy's Grandad's diary and letters.

I hope you enjoy reading the book half as much as I enjoyed writing it. I also hope it doesn't take you 29 years to finish!

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Chapter 1

In The Beginning ...

“An icy cold spell now gripping Britain and the continent has claimed many lives and has brought activity in some areas to a virtual standstill. Belgium and Holland are among the worst affected with freezing fogs, icy roads and temperatures reportedly dropping below minus twenty Celsius. Transport is severely disrupted with several major airports closed and many road links cut. In Britain, fears are held for the safety of passengers stranded overnight in a snow-bound commuter train in Kent, south-east of London, and both of London’s major airports are closed. Incoming flights to Heathrow and Gatwick are being diverted to Shannon in Ireland and to Paris...”

Such was the encouragement offered by the radio newsreader shortly before we drove to Tullamarine airport to catch our flight to a destination shown as London Heathrow on our tickets but now seemingly poised delicately between an Irish Sea too far and a Channel too short. As we really wanted to go to Leiden (Holland), the prospect of landing in Paris or, even better, Schiphol (Holland’s international airport) was more of a hope than a fear. In the crazy, distorted world of international aviation, we were saving hundreds of dollars by flying further than we needed to!



1979: Welcome to London, David!

This was our first overseas adventure and although we were well prepared, as it turned out, for freezing temperatures, we found it hard to imagine our surroundings a mere 30 hours from now. The 36C heat and the Australian summer sun glaring through the windows of the Toyota seemed a trifle too warm as we drove past sun-golden paddocks and traces of recent fires but it did cross our minds that lowering the temperature by more than 55C, as we proposed, might be going just a little too far. Kathy, then a PhD student, was travelling to London to spend ten weeks working with the leading researchers in her field. I was going along for company and, armed with Eurail and Britrail passes, to “see” Europe while I was there. We were looking forward very much to starting the trip with a visit to our closest but most distant friends who were then living in the ancient University town of Leiden in Holland.



1979: Frozen bikes near Amsterdam railway station.

Gordon, a lecturer in Geophysics at the University, was in a most unenviable position. He was a geologist in a country devoid of rocks! Ever since his arrival he had been toiling to remedy his adopted country's meagre heritage and selflessly passing up opportunities to spend his summers in Holland. Each year he disappeared for months at a time collecting rocks in such inhospitable places as the Greek Islands, the Alps, Norway, Scotland and the scenic regions of America. We were told that on one such rock-collecting trip, the family Renault had been loaded so heavily with prize rocks that all four tyres had burst going over a bump. Years later we learned that the “bump” had in fact been the island in the middle of a traffic roundabout!

Pam also made a contribution to the Dutch heritage when she earned second prize in a recipe competition organized by a Dutch magazine. At the presentation ceremony, the prize-winning recipes were prepared by the magazine's chefs. Pam was highly critical of their efforts, noting that they had left out one of the ingredients. What particularly impressed us about all this was that Pam herself had never made the recipe she invented and submitted!

The four powerful engines of our mobile aerial township droned on hour after hour, and we were taken further and further from the safety net of the familiar. We had both flown on aeroplanes many times before but this flight felt totally different. This was a real venture into the unknown, a voyage to the far side of the planet. Had it not been for our four hundred fellow travellers and an

endless stream of near-gourmet meals, we might even have felt a little like Amy Johnson or Charles Kingsford-Smith.

After crossing Turkey our jumbo-jet entered cloud and denied us any glimpse of the continent we had come so far to see. No announcement had been made to tell us where we were actually going to land. Perhaps weather conditions had worsened and we would have to fly on to the Azores! However, after steadily losing altitude for some time, we suddenly broke through the cloud and there, just below us, were the Thames, Tower Bridge and London's famous buildings liberally coated with fresh snow. How exciting!

Twenty-six hours after leaving Melbourne we landed at Heathrow; it was not a particularly en-dearing experience as, like most airports, Heathrow is security-ridden, characterless and distanced from the city it serves. This time we were lucky enough to arrive during a special exhibition of "Life in the Frozen North". Huge drifts of snow had been piled to great effect beside the runways and arctic gales were being simulated in the passenger corridors. Queues in front of the immigration and customs desks did their British reputation proud. Eager to see something of this our first city on the "dark side" of the planet, we were compelled to fritter away what seemed like hours waiting for souvenir rubber stamps in our passports and then for the luggage we hoped had not been off-loaded in Bombay.

Although anxious to explore London, we were already quite sleepy and it crossed our minds that we could avoid the looming ordeal by sleep deprivation if we squandered some of our cheap APEX ticket savings on air tickets to Schiphol instead of taking the boat train to Holland as we had intended.

Unfortunately, I didn't know where to purchase a ticket at the airport and, on attempting to enquire, found that every airline desk operating had a queue of at least 200 people in front of it. I refused to stand in such a queue in case I found, when I reached the desk, that it was the wrong one. I deduced from the crowds that air services were severely disrupted by the weather conditions and that Schiphol was most likely closed. I still haven't explained the queues in front of Air Malawi!

We reverted to Plan A and took the Underground instead, bumping and clanking our way into the city. To two Australians who had never previously left home territory, even the chimney pots on the terrace houses beside the Underground line were fascinating. In case you imagine that we possess X-ray vision, I should point out that the ends of each of the lines on the London Underground are actually above ground. We were later to discover that "Underground" trains, which draw power from a third rail, are immobilized when snow falls heavily enough to cover the rails. When the tracks are only partially covered, power is collected intermittently and trains advance in fits and starts, their carriage lights flickering on and off in a quite amusing fashion.

We mastered the schematic diagram of the Underground layout and arrived without incident at Liverpool St Station, familiar to us from childhood Monopoly games. After buying rail and boat tickets to Leiden, we spent some time window shopping but, fascinated as we were by the unfamiliar surroundings, the biting cold and the intense concentration needed to avoid embarrassing falls on icy footpaths eventually sapped our enthusiasm. We decided that being able to sit in the warmth was worth the discomfort and the health risks associated with passive smoking and retreated to the station waiting room. "Arben darben arb arb darben arb arben darben darb. Click." No-one seemed to take any notice of the intermittent and unintelligible babble from the public address system. We listened to it for hours and never managed to understand a word of what was said.

"Arben darben arb arb darben arb arben darben Click." This time everyone in the waiting room hurriedly rose, gathered their luggage and hurried off. Not knowing what was going on but not wanting to miss out, we followed. Faster and faster they walked, jockeying for position while trying to maintain a nonchalant air. We found ourselves in a civilised British queue at the barrier to platform 7 at which a decrepit old train steamed quietly.

Abusing the assembled company for going to the wrong platform, a red-faced British Rail employee sent us scuttling around to platform 15, neatly reversing the queue in the process. Those of us foolishly optimistic enough to have hoped to find a shiny new Intercity 125 at platform 15 were disappointed; there was no train there at all. A more helpful BR employee, when questioned, directed the group to platform 4, where we found the train for Harwich and Hoek van Holland. We were

even allowed to board it, only to discover that every seat was reserved.

One last interrogation of the British Rail officials finally extracted the information needed to resolve the confusion. BR had provided an extra train to cope with increased passenger demand but were too shy to tell even their own employees about it! When we eventually found ourselves on board the old train back at platform 7, those of us who had seen M. Hulot's Holiday were convinced that Jacques Tati was now in charge at Liverpool Street!

Before I fell asleep sitting upright in the lounge of the ferry to Hoek van Holland, I remember a drunken British NATO soldier returning to service in Germany telling his unconscious German NATO comrade in slurred but contemptuous tones that it was no wonder Hitler lost the war if German soldiers were under the table after only 19 glasses.

Finally in Leiden after 62 hours without proper sleep, we swept aside Gordon's protestations that we were missing the best skating conditions for 20 years and gratefully retired to a warm, stable bed, happy that our first European adventure had now started in earnest.



1982: Pam and Gordon in Marken, Netherlands.



1979: Pam in Saalbach, Austria.

Chapter 2

P&P for R&R

I had always known that an overseas holiday would be an investment in future pleasure through reminiscence. I had not realized how much enjoyment there would be in deciding beforehand where to go and what to do. Each of our three voyages to Europe (R&R) was preceded by a lengthy period of preparation and planning (P&P) during which I ransacked bookshops, travel agencies, libraries, embassies and newsagencies for reading material to guide us. Our floors still groan under the weight of the material I collected.

Although my haul was heavy, disappointment with much of the content led to my desire to write a travel book which would simultaneously stimulate travel ideas, impart useful information and provide enjoyable reading. If you, the reader, have reached this point without falling asleep, then I have succeeded in the final objective rather better than the authors of some other travel material I have encountered!

2.1 Should We Put Our Faith In The Stars?

Guide books of the compendious modern kind were not particularly conducive to planning pleasure. We found them useful enough when actually walking among the delights they described, but most of them made very dull reading while we sat at home deciding where to go. Their highly condensed and coded presentation also seemed to ignore the possibility that different people may appreciate different things.

One series of guide books presented its information in a way which suggests that one day soon it will be published as a computer database. An accompanying computer program will ask the tourist to type in the starting point of their trip, the length of their holiday in days and how much money they have. In return, it will print the itinerary which maximizes the total number of stars awarded to the sites they can afford to visit in the time available.

We are now wary of many of the best-selling guides to continents and countries, which purport to be constantly updated and which tell you where to go and what to see, provided that you don't want to leave the major centres. They tell you what sort of razor you can plug in and how many cigarettes you can import. Please don't smoke your excess on our flight; we're still recovering from 27 hours spent against our will in Smoking seats on a plane to London.

The accommodation recommendations in this type of book are seldom as useful as they seem. That charming, inexpensive little hotel run by the genuinely friendly Frau Schwarz who loves to get to know her guests personally has, by the time you get there, been so inundated with visitors clutching Lots of Comers Go To Atlantis on Five Dollars a Day that it has been pulled down and replaced by a 30 storey steel and glass tower in whose penthouse suite the avaricious Frau Schwarz ceaselessly counts her millions. We found that an astonishingly high proportion of hotels recommended by the popular guides were either undergoing renovation, closed for holidays, booked out, under new management or several times as expensive as listed.

In 1982, I bought one of these books before we left Australia and ripped out the irrelevant sections to save weight. After we visited each new place, another section found its way to the rubbish bin. It

would have been even more economical of weight, and hardly any less useful, to have thrown the lot into the bin prior to departure!

Brochures published by tourist commissions, boards, offices and authorities also exhibited failings but failings of a different kind. They made use of photographs of once-in-a-decade events or conditions in a way which suggested that, no matter when we visited, we too would experience them. Women in these glossy, sun-drenched photographs were either young, attractive and bikini-clad or elderly villagers wearing traditional regional costume. I found some of the photos tempting (those of mountains and lakes rather than those of elderly villagers!) but the written information was usually too empty of substance to be of use in planning a trip.

We wanted to devise our own itinerary and to travel at our own pace and in our own fashion. It soon became clear that we would have to look beyond explicitly tourist-oriented reading matter.

We wished to spend some of our time in Europe pursuing our ordinary leisure interests. To this end, we found that textbooks, encyclopaedia entries and hobby magazines in the areas of embroidery, woodwork, art, architecture, science, history, alpinism and railways stimulated tour ideas much more than did guidebooks. Unfortunately, text books and encyclopaedias seldom specify details of transport services to the attractions they mention.

Our decision to visit places unknown to the tourist guidebooks led to a need to acquire a second mass of reference material. I pored over detailed maps of France, Switzerland and Britain, rail timetables, tide tables for Cornwall and compilations of climatic statistics. I also wrote to cycling and walking organizations in France and England and acquired recommendations on subjects ranging from bicycle specifications and applicable law to accommodation and itineraries.

Among the many other types of reference work I consulted were travel books specific to a particular mode of transport England by Bus, The Eurail Guide, A Guide to Britain's Long Distance Footpaths, Cycle Touring in France are but a few examples. In them I found some good ideas which could be fitted into the framework of our tours.

2.2 Novel Guide Books

Although I enjoyed the detailed research, I must confess that adventure and romance novels such as *Killer Mine* by Hammond Innes and *A Farewell to France* by Noel Barber were easier to read. They were better written than most guide books and evoked a desire to visit the regions in which they are set far more effectively than did the knowledge that the areas concerned contained many three-star sites. In particular, they managed to communicate the feeling of being there. Some accounts of epic journeys were also very enjoyable and were the source of good ideas in areas where our route and their's overlapped. *Full Tilt - Ireland to India on a Bicycle* by Dervla Murphy was a source of inspiration but I am forced to admit that, unlike Dervla Murphy, we never had occasion to discharge a pistol in our hotel room or to throw bicycles down a glacier! Books like Peter Pinney's *Dust on My Shoes*, the BBC's *Great Railway Journeys Of The World* and various Himalayan epics, communicated the excitement of travel even though they had little to do with Europe. John Hillaby's *Journey Through Europe* and *Journey Through Britain* were also inspirational and more specifically relevant. We are eagerly awaiting the appearance of *Yvelines to Yalta: A Year on a Yak*.

Books which described journeys on foot or on bicycle possessed an extra dimension of achievement through physical effort but, in addition, their authors typically managed to acquire a full appreciation of the countryside through which they passed and an empathy with the people they met. Such communion with landscape and people is denied to those who spend their holidays constantly wheeling in sealed metal capsules. The latter sometimes appear to associate exclusively with other tourists and to shun local inhabitants apart from employees of the tourist and hospitality industries.

We shared a desire for independence from the tourist industry and a wish to taste the undiluted flavours of the places we visited. These were two of the reasons why we forsook organized tours. There were others ...

2.3 We Did It On Our Own, Without A Coach!

Although organized tours can sometimes be very rewarding and enjoyable, an organized tour itinerary cannot hope to match the itineraries that the people on it would devise if they planned their own. These hypothetical itineraries probably differ from the actual and from each other both in the places visited and the relative time spent on them. The differences can lead to frustration and unhappiness in sensitive souls.

Another problem with organized tours is that you may have no choice of travelling companions. We had heard that the passengers on overland buses from Nepal to Europe sometimes divided into ideologically incompatible factions who refused to talk to each other. This must have been rather wearing after ninety days! In addition, there is always the risk, too awful to contemplate, of finding yourself trapped in a seat surrounded by social misfits with negligible “personal space” and unpleasant personal habits.

We had had such an experience on a tour in the Northern Territory. Among our companions in the back of a four-wheel-drive troop carrier was a lady who we privately christened Mrs Ha-Ha. She wore Edna Everidge butterfly-shaped spectacles and there was an unbreakable link between her brain and her voice box; Everything she thought she said aloud. “I’m going to put on my socks. They’re nice socks, these cotton ones. My sister works in Target. That’s the place to buy socks. Of course, I didn’t buy these ones there. ...” If you were her chosen conversation partner she would place her face a few centimetres from yours and turn on a long playing record. Just in case you might spoil things by allowing a second or two of silence, she answered her own questions and kept up your end of the conversation as well.

One of her stories concerned a bus tour in which the passengers failed to get on with each other to such an extent that their driver had been compelled to call on the driver of a second bus to help break up a fight. What we couldn’t believe was that Mrs Ha-Ha claimed to have been on the second bus! In the end we resorted to communicating with each other in sign language. So oblivious was she to the reactions of those around her that she failed to notice.

Our worst opinions of organized tours were confirmed one rainy morning in Paris, when Kathy and I overcame our reluctance and joined a half-day bus tour of the city. Four headphone outlets in front of each seat permitted a choice between recorded commentaries in different languages. Unfortunately, the tape machine was faulty and the slowing down and speeding up of the tape caused sound-effects worthy of the Goon Show. It was difficult to be certain whether the sights referred to on the tape corresponded to the ones we were passing at the time. This was not as serious as it sounds because, despite continuous wiping, the bus windows were permanently fogged up and nothing could be seen through them!

Not all the blame for the deficiencies of our half-day tour of Paris should be directed at the tour company. We had increased the probability of unpleasant weather conditions by choosing to visit Paris in winter. Unfortunately, in deciding when to travel there were many constraints to satisfy and many factors to take into account. In 1979, our work dictated that we must chance poor weather.

2.4 Choosing The Perfect Moment

Europe’s weather is subject to extremes and there are, as might be expected in a continent larger than Australia, great variations from region to region and year to year.

Fort William, Scotland has a four metre average annual rainfall and, in planning to visit it at any time, we knew the odds were against our remaining dry. In fact it was raining steadily when we arrived at Fort William in winter 1979, it rained steadily the whole time we were there and it was raining steadily when we left. In all probability it still is. In most other places, choosing a good time to travel increases the probability of favourable weather but, of course, there are no guarantees! English friends informed us that one year 30 cm of snow had fallen in London in August, normally the warmest month of the year.

Despite the risk of inclement weather, I would not rule out the idea of again travelling to Europe in winter. The worst aspects of the season were the closure of many buildings, the non-operation of

many tourist services and the disruption of transport links by snow. Within the constraints imposed, it was still possible to devise an enjoyable and rewarding trip free from hordes of [other] tourists and to relish winter's unique advantages.

We became great appreciators of falling and freshly fallen snow. Ski resorts and cities which would be drab in summer were transformed into places of beauty by a coat of fresh snow. We also found misty moorlands and grey, stormy coasts more stimulating than the same areas in hot, sunny conditions. We found the atmosphere created by granite houses and wheeling gulls in Cornish fishing villages just as beguiling in winter as in summer. Furthermore, as we strolled around these narrow, ancient streets with the odour of coal smoke strong in the salty air, we gloated each time we glimpsed enormous expanses of empty tourist car parks.

We've been to Europe in every season except high summer. We've consciously avoided the peak summer months of July and August. The wisdom of this decision was confirmed by a visit to the Mediterranean resort of Nice where, even in late September, we could not find a parking space closer than twenty minutes walk from our hotel! In peak tourist season we might have had to park in Paris!

If this book sells a million copies we may be able to afford to travel to Europe whenever we please. Until then we have to take into account seasonal variations in the cost of air fares and accommodation and the variation of costs in general due to changes in currency exchange rates.

The cost in Australian dollars of a given standard commodity such as a cup of coffee purchased in different foreign economies varied greatly. Some countries definitely represented better travel bargains than others but in some cases inflation or exchange rate adjustments quickly changed the picture. It was obviously better to travel overseas when the Australian dollar was strong but guessing when this might be was rather difficult.

Having decided to go to Europe at a particular time and having no faith in our ability to predict exchange rate trends, we bought our traveller's cheques in three lots at regular intervals prior to departure. Where possible, we bought the currency of the country to be visited so as to eliminate the need for a second conversion. Having Deutschmarks in Germany meant we knew exactly how much we had to spend. If we had carried a different currency such as US Dollars, a sudden change in the Deutschmark-US dollar exchange rate at any time during our trip could have left us much richer or poorer than we thought. Furthermore, there was usually no fee for cashing traveller's cheques in the local currency.

We visited Britain in 1982 during the Falklands/Malvinas conflict and France in 1985 during the repercussions of the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*. There is a lot to recommend being in a country during a period of agitation or turmoil but unless you are a well-organized terrorist or particularly gifted agitator, turmoil can be difficult to predict. In wars or revolutions it may be difficult to appreciate the interesting while at the same time avoiding the dangerous.

2.5 Travelling In Our Own Style

Different travellers have their own characteristic styles of travel. Some are transported heavily laden from one luxurious palace to the next and gain pleasure proportional to the outflow of money. Others, like a German hitch-hiker we met near Cooma, sleep in church porches and refuse shouts in pubs because their round would cost more than a whole day's budget. Some spend long days sipping cider by a pool while others enthusiastically try to cover the Louvre and the Tower of London in the same day! Some swim the Channel or bivouac on the North Wall of the Eiger while others respond to the challenge of appearing for breakfast before midday.

In making preparations for our tours of Europe we were, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, determining the character of the holidays we were about to enjoy. We were making decisions about what we wanted to see and do, how we were going to move from place to place, how long we were going to be away, how much money we could afford to take and what clothing and equipment we would need. All these decisions facilitated certain types of activity and effectively ruled out others.

We felt that fares to Europe were too expensive to spend our time there lazing on beaches, especially ones inferior to those within two hours drive of our home. We also chose not to emulate either

the Australians who visit Europe only to take control of a newspaper industry or the others who go only to drink themselves silly at Oktoberfest. We knew that Europe was different in very many ways from Australia and it became our objective to sample as many of its interesting aspects as we could, as deeply as we could, without turning our holiday into an assignment. The title of this book reflects our philosophy that where to go and what to do should be considered ahead of both luxury and cost.

As to cost, our goal became neither to save money nor to waste it but to have the most enjoyable holiday possible. We felt that it would be illogical to travel so frugally that we were unable to experience the charms which had attracted us to Europe. However, we knew that luxuries costing disproportionate amounts would necessarily shorten the length of our holiday and avoided them accordingly. I often envied the comfort of flying First Class but I knew that I would always choose to fly APEX and stay twice as long, or fly twice as often. One day, however, we may decide that having a slap-up dinner at Maxim's is so important to us that we are prepared to stay in Europe three days less.

We planned to pay the lowest price possible for accommodation consistent with our minimum standards of cleanliness and comfort. We didn't consider it worth paying \$50 extra per night just because the soap was provided free. On the other hand, choking on dust, risking plague and pestilence, feeling that you are likely to be robbed, and sleeping on beds in which the springs have sprung do make it hard to enjoy a holiday. If we were content to sleep under bridges to save money on holiday, surely we'd be doing so already at home in Australia!

We do not approve of rich Australians who travel for months on a shoestring by taking advantage of the generosity of people in poor countries, but their style of travel has the great advantage of close contact with the local inhabitants. We planned to meet as many locals as our natural reticence would permit without imposing ourselves unreasonably on people's hospitality.

2.6 A Swag All On My Shoulder, Black Billy In My Hand

In 1979, Kathy had carried her belongings in a large suitcase and found it awkward and cumbersome, particularly in the escalators and crowded tunnels of the London Underground. My external framed pack was much more sensible but was sometimes difficult to fit into luggage lockers.

As part of our preparation for our 1982 trip, we both bought superbly comfortable internal frame rucksacks, made of a material claimed to resist cutting. We found them far more practical than suitcases even within cities. It was far easier to carry 20 kg in a backpack than to wheel it or, worse still, carry it in a suitcase. And both our hands remained free. Packs also protected us against jostling when standing up in crowded public transport but we had to be a bit careful not to knock frail people out of the train when turning around quickly!

Unfortunately, backpacks were not designed for transporting ball gowns and morning suits. We subconsciously decided to hire formal wear if we were ever invited to dinner at the Élysée palace or given tickets to the opera, and left such formal wear as we possessed at home.

Our clothes were general purpose items chosen to look moderately respectable even though worn for long periods and not kept flat. In 1982 I foolishly chose to take a pair of light coloured brushed denim trousers which exhibited a remarkable affinity for both seagull droppings and the ink on British newspapers. It is only recently that I have begun to ponder a possible connection between the two! We tried to take as small a weight and volume of clothes as possible while keeping a reasonable interval between laundromat stops.

2.7 My Family Lies Over The Ocean ...

In 1979, for various reasons, we set off with a swag of ideas and information but no detailed itinerary. For subsequent trips, I planned itineraries in considerable detail, all the while aware that we could and would change them as we saw fit.

Since becoming more organized, and so as to make them as jealous as possible, we have adopted the practice of leaving our families a map marked with our intended approximate route and also a copy of our sketched out itinerary. Last time we also named three towns that we guaranteed to visit

on or after particular dates. We quite looked forward to checking our mail in the Poste Restante at each of them. It was very nice to read the news from home.

In recent times, telephones which operate on credit cards or on special pre-paid cards have become more common and these, combined with international direct dialling, take all the bother, if not the expense, out of instant communication back home. If you were even more desperate for communication, you could carry a cellular phone.

In a few years time, any yuppie who is prepared to risk having screeds of print-out spew from their coat pocket during *La Bohème* at Covent Garden will, no doubt, carry a cellular fax machine! Even limited by the primitive technology of today, you may still be able to fax birthday greetings to your mother as you speed over the European countryside in a train.

Chapter 3

Transports Of Delight

3.1 Life At The Cutting Edge

Slough, a little west of London, is not pronounced as you would expect from its similarity to “cough” or “rough” or even “dough” but rather rhymes with “bough”. It is most definitely not “slow” because, relative to the high speed trains which pass through it, it is one of the fastest towns in Britain!

Trains pass though landscapes more scenic than that of Slough and we’ve seen, or at least glimpsed, many of Europe’s beautiful and picturesque places from the comfort of trains. Unfortunately, our photographic records of these scenes are nearly all flawed due to an apparent synchronization of our shutter with the passing of track-side power poles.

Trains provide an excellent teleport service for walkers and cyclists but railway travel holds a fascination for me which transcends both mobile scenery and mere practicality. Although I lack the nerve to race bobsleds or motorbikes, I am strongly attracted to the excitement of high speed travel.

Britain’s contribution to my enjoyment of fast trains is the Intercity 125 or HST (High Speed Train) from which the New South Wales XPT was copied. It attains a maximum speed of 200 km/hr (125 mph). If, after experiencing a sudden urge to ride on a fast train in Britain, you seek relief in the embrace of a major railway station, chances are that you won’t have to wait long. In Bristol, for example, there are (or were) seventeen HST services to London Paddington each day and most of them allow you to whistle through Slough at close to maximum speed.

XPTs in New South Wales are much harder to stumble upon and, in any case, they are geared down and hobbled by ancient track which is neither designed nor maintained for high speed operation.

One appealing aspect of the British HST services is that the HSTs do not slow down when passing smaller stations. A prominent yellow line is painted a metre or so in from the edge of platforms in such stations and there are signs reading, “Warning, high speed TRAINS PASS THIS PLATFORM. DO NOT STAND FORWARD OF THE LINE.”. I have more than once caught fleeting glimpses of the behind-the-line inhabitants of Slough as my train whizzed through, comet-like, at 175 km/hr. Each time they were standing motionless under the station signs, as though frozen by flash photography. Sadly, they didn’t seem to be experiencing the same exhilaration as I was.

Exhilaration! The feeling overcomes me as I blast through built-up areas and rocket alongside motorways, leaving sports cars standing. The flashing of the countryside thrills me, five counties in an hour and still the train powers on. Holding the tail of a steel-starved ferrosaurus, we tear through the landscape, devouring rails at incredible speed. We, the passengers, have no say in where we go, we just hang on and enjoy the ride.

At points choices open up; which line will the monster take? A clatter and the answer has come and gone. The train sails over hills, scythes through cuttings, plunges into tunnels and bursts forth into a different country. And it’s all very safe, relaxing and comfortable. “Shall I get us a cup of tea from the buffet?”

I have to confess that I am a railway speed freak. I have gone to places I didn’t particularly want to visit in order to ride somewhere else on a fast train. In 1982, we waited in the booking office in Sion, Switzerland trying to reserve seats on the new TGV (Track Gobbling Vehicle?) service from



1982: A first class carriage in a British HST (Intercity 125) train.

Lyon to Paris. It seemed that we waited longer for our tickets than the TGV journey itself would take!

The computerized booking system was rather primitive and based on mark-sense cards. The booking clerk filled in squares on a computer card with a pencil and fed it into a reader. Perhaps there was considered to be too great a danger to the staff for railway bookings to be done on-line!

I felt a little apprehensive about this process because the only previous time I had booked on a European luxury train and paid a supplement to my Eurail pass, the system had reserved me a non-existent seat! Fortunately, there had been one vacant seat on the train (*le Mistral*), albeit in the smoking section. It would have been ironic indeed to have travelled standing up for several hours in the then most luxurious train in Europe!

Back in Sion, our details were recorded on the card: June 3rd, 9.05am, 2 First Class, nonsmoking, Lyon-Paris. Two minutes later the machine said, "Not accepted." That was all. Were there vacant second-class, non-smoking seats, we wondered. Or first-class, smoking? What about seats on the 10.13am? We persevered with different combinations and eventually, TGV tickets in hand, and wallets lightened to the extent of the TGV supplement, we found ourselves in Lyon, believed by some to be the gastronomic capital of the world. I certainly enjoyed the pizza I ate before we went off to watch *Chariots of Fire*. You, and the gourmets among our friends, would be right in thinking that we behaved like uncultured Philistines, but you must appreciate that I had higher motives. The sole reason for our visit was to ride on the TGV.

The next day we duly presented ourselves at Lyon-Perrache station, to fulfil my dream. In front of us was the gleaming orange, needle-nosed rail rocket which was to take us to Paris in remarkably quick time. First we were required to "compost" our tickets. This French verb has nothing to do with bacterial decomposition. It means to insert your ticket in a machine which takes the place of a station porter.

TGVs, like HSTs, are made up of a fixed configuration of several passenger cars (modern railway jargon for carriage), a buffet car and, at each end, a power car (modern railway jargon for locomotive).



1982: A TGV at Perrache station. The world's fastest train. Lyon, France.

I estimate that such a unit would seat over 400 passengers. The day we travelled was the day after a holiday and passenger demand was heavy. Our train consisted of two units coupled together. An extra single unit train was to follow six minutes later.

"Mesdames et messieurs, ici la cabine de controle. J'ai l'honneur de vous informer que nous roulons maintenant a 260 km/hr." (Ladies & Gentleman, this is the driver speaking. I have the honour to inform you that we are now travelling at 260 km/hr.) There was certainly no public relations harm in informing the passengers on the fastest train in the world of how fast they were travelling. Idle thoughts of cows on the track and the other train 6 minutes behind were dispelled by the very secure track-side fences and the amazingly smooth and comfortable ride.

Only half of the Paris-Lyon special TGV track was in service in 1982. I understand that the rest was completed some time ago and that TGV standard track also links Paris with cities to the north and with Bordeaux in the South-West. The statutory speed limit has now been increased from 260 to 300 km/hr. Should I go back now and ride the new improved TGV? Should I wait a little longer in case they increase the legal limit even closer to the TGV record speed of 480 km/hr?

The special track we rode on was a little too insulated from the rest of the world to provide the extreme level of exhilaration I had hoped for, but it was very enjoyable none the less! With luck the newly completed sections of the special track will run parallel to an autoroute or pass close to some towns and give me the opportunity to really thumb my nose at motorists.

On the other hand, some trains make even speed maniacs wish they'd travel more slowly. Returning to London in the winter of 1979, I journeyed from Folkestone to London Victoria in a set of antique British Rail coaches overdue for retirement or restoration but hooked up to a runaway locomotive. The combination bore similarities to a ride-on lawn mower powered by an engine from a jumbo jet!

The ride was so rough that I had the impression that the wheels on the carriages were designed for a narrower gauge track! Perhaps they pre-dated the invention of standard gauge. The train hurtled along and the carriages whipped from side to side in a most alarming fashion. I was reminded of a

friend's comment years before while riding in my old car that he had "never travelled so fast at such a low speed."

These decrepit carriages had no luggage space at the end and none between the seats. The only possible spot for my back pack was the tiny parcel shelf whose narrow width combined with the curved roof above to create an impression of instability which made me fear for the safety of the passenger above whom I had been forced to wedge my luggage. Fortunately, he had gone to the buffet car when the 20kg pack actually did crash down on his seat!

My father claimed to have slept on a parcel shelf in a crowded Australian train decades ago. I don't think that he would have accepted the challenge of this one.

The train made a lengthy stop at Sevenoaks station, presumably because it had gained fifteen minutes on the timetable. While we were there, British Rail did its best to keep us entertained. Hundreds of would-be passengers on the platform eagerly descended on the train only to hesitate and then stand back, looking uncertain and anxious, as a harassed and officious station announcer exhorted them, "Do not board this train. DO NOT BOARD THIS TRAIN." Repeated over and over but never explained, this announcement was sufficient to repel all boarders. To my great amusement, the passengers waiting at the next stop were cheerfully permitted to board!

Somewhere near Clapham we spent another 20 minutes stationary in a spot where there was ample evidence that many other trains had waited. Yes, old British trains do have that sort of toilet! Toilets on the Intercity 125s are of a different variety, however, apparently because its designers calculated that air pressure changes during a high speed run through a narrow tunnel could cause horrible consequences for a person using more air-conditioned facilities!

All in all, it was a pleasant journey that day. The wind had been delightfully bracing on the deck of the Channel ferry and a pale imitation of the sun hovered above the horizon and cast its cheering if not warming rays over the countryside as we lurched through Kent. Finding myself revelling in this fine weather, I marvelled at how I had acclimatized!

Leaving the ferry in Folkestone, we passengers in the lower lounge had been courteously directed by handsomely uniformed crew members stationed at each doorway up to the level above, across to the other side of the ship, down a stairway, into a corridor and back into the lounge we had just left. An Asian lady and I were in stitches with mirth but a besuited British businessman snarled, "I say, this is a bit of a bloody joke."

Kathy came to meet me at Victoria station but we missed each other. We were re-united in South Kensington at the flat belonging to Helen, a charming doctoral student at Imperial College. She had helped Kathy find temporary accommodation in the college.

Kathy's solo journey from Paris to London three weeks before had been far less amusing than mine. She arrived in Britain at the beginning of a very widespread and very prolonged period of industrial action, widely referred to as "the Winter of Discontent". The train from Paris to the Channel coast changed its mind several times about where it was headed and it seemed highly unlikely that there would be either a ferry or a train on the other side to meet it.

Luckily, Kathy managed to stitch together enough of the last shreds of the British transport system to get her to London where she was able to observe at first hand the effect of the strike by teachers, hospital workers, transport workers, council employees and garbage collectors. Seven weeks later, Leicester Square was piled two metres deep in uncollected garbage! No doubt it would have been deeper had there not been a severe shortage of items on the supermarket shelves.

Helen's fiancé Bill was as friendly as Helen and he had another appealing attribute; he worked in the Mars bars factory in Slough and received payment in kind. English Mars bars are nicer than the Australian variety and in cold, gloomy weather they are very restorative. They were almost as nice as the Belgian chocolate elephants to whom Huw and Debbie introduced us at much the same time.

Huw and Debbie were then living in Cambridge where Huw, a chronic student, was studying for a doctorate in Philosophy, having previously gained a masters degree in Mathematics at Oxford. Kathy needed to spend time in Cambridge for her work and we set off to visit Huw and Debbie the very day I arrived back in London. So pleased were Kathy and I to see each other again that we rode from Liverpool St station to Cambridge, hardly noticing the deficiencies of our dank, musty compartment in which steam issued from the floor in frightening quantities and made rivers of conden-



1979: A rag-and-bone cart in South Kensington. London.



1979: Finding pleasure despite London's gloom.



1979: Leicester Square is rubbish! London.

sation flow down the windows. Incidentally, we deny any part in causing these steamy phenomena, notwithstanding our already-mentioned pleasure at seeing each other again!

After a pleasant sojourn in Cambridge, we returned to London which was experiencing a long period in which the minimum and maximum temperatures were both zero and the skies were endlessly grey. Initially, I spent a week or two of sightseeing and shopping in London but I eventually reached the limits of my tolerance for the Underground's noise, grime and oppressive crowds and, on the spur of the moment, I broke loose from my routine.

Clutching my recently validated Britrail pass and timetable tome, I strolled into Kings Cross station to catch the 1135 for York. I chose this particular journey because it would enable me to ride on an Intercity 125 (HST) for the first time and because the timetable informed me that I would have time to travel to York, spend an hour or two at the Railway Museum and be back in London in time to keep my rendezvous with Kathy at 1700.

We pulled out of the station dead on time. The sophisticated air suspension of the carriages deadened the usual clickety-clack and the two turbo charged Valenta 2600 horsepower engines built up speed at a very satisfying rate. The decor, comfort and good design of the carriages could not be faulted. The staff even brought filter coffee to me in my seat. Someone had told me that the British, particularly Britrail, could not make a decent cup of coffee. It was patently untrue.

We were nearing cruising speed when the train slowed to a crawl, stopped for 20 minutes, crawled on a bit more and then stopped for another twenty minutes. The conductor eventually informed us that there were three other trains just ahead of us, including one which had left King's Cross four hours before us! The problem was ice on the track and frozen points and signals. Rail workers were moving ahead of the trains and clearing the line on foot. So much for high speed travel!

I subsequently read that four Britrail employees were killed that day in different parts of the country, struck by trains they could not see or hear because of the weather conditions.

It took four hours to reach Doncaster, still well short of York. Just as we pulled in, the first southbound train we had passed pulled out. At Doncaster station I warmed my toes and cooled my heels awaiting the uncertain arrival of another train for London. It was fortunate that I was able to contact Kathy by telephone because I was five hours late when I finally arrived back in London.

3.2 Fantastic Plastic

In 1979 I made extensive use of my Eurail and Britrail passes. I covered 10,000 km in a fortnight on my Eurail pass and 6,000 km on my Britrail pass. I'm not sure that I would organize a trip in the same way again but I enjoyed it at the time. When I felt in the mood for travelling, I consulted my Thomas Cook or Britrail timetable, went down to the station and boarded a train. I never had to queue at ticket offices, and was never without a valid ticket for the journey I was undertaking. Financial considerations were not a factor in deciding where to go or by what route.

To fogeys like us, over the age of 26 years, Eurail passes were only available in first class versions. This meant that we had to pay more for our passes but could travel in extra comfort and with greater flexibility. I still believe that first class passengers may ride in second class whenever they wish, despite a Swiss conductor's persistent efforts to persuade us to move from second class to a carriage less well suited to sight-seeing but more befitting our station!

One day on our first trip, Kathy had made arrangements to visit researchers in Bristol for the day. She was at that stage living in staff-quarters in a convalescent home in East Finchley (north London); I was residing in a guest house in Finchley Central, one stop further on the tube. I knew that Kathy was due in Bristol at 9am and that she would have to take the 0700 from Paddington. I guessed which tube she would catch in order to reach Paddington in time. I caught it at Finchley Central and she was very surprised to see me in her carriage when she boarded at the next station! My plan was to spend a few days in Cornwall, after sampling some other British countryside on the way. Kathy alighted at Bristol and I continued on to Swansea in Wales.

Swansea had the most polluted atmosphere I have ever experienced but I managed to buy an excellent set of wood carving chisels there, before an atmospherically-induced sore throat forced me to retreat indoors. From Swansea, I caught a train which travelled north through central Wales and terminated in Shrewsbury. A local train took me to Wolverhampton and another, necessitated by an industrial dispute on the main line from the North, took me to Birmingham where I caught an electric train to London Euston. Euston was a mere hop, step and a jump by Underground back to Paddington where I caught the overnight sleeper to Penzance. This rounded out a nice day trip, one which you wouldn't think of making if you were paying for each journey individually!

On that occasion I paid extra and enjoyed my own sleeping compartment but, in general a rail pass permits you to save on accommodation by making overnight journeys. I slept four nights in first-class compartments on the train to Narvik (Norway) and back. I found that wealthy people who pay full fare to travel first class almost invariably pay the supplement to have a sleeping berth overnight, leaving the first class compartments entirely to the Eurail passers. With the armrests raised, the seats are quite long enough for me to stretch out to my full 185 cm.

I heard of an Australian in Britain who had completely run out of money but whose rail pass was still valid. While he waited for funds to be transferred from home, he rode back and forth between London and Scotland, north one night and south the next. It was much warmer and more comfortable than sleeping on the embankment.

Prior to our departure from Australia, I had learned that Narvik was the northernmost station accessible by Eurail pass. It became a very appealing destination. Well inside the Arctic circle, it is a good place to view the midnight sun in summer. I felt that to be there in winter and experience a day on which the sun failed to rise would be more unusual and just as interesting.

Starting my journey in Leiden (Holland), I caught a local train to Amersfoort and then the Nord-West Express to Copenhagen. On this dated but luxurious express I was alone in my compartment. I drew the curtains, turned off the lights, took off my shoes, raised the armrests and stretched out full-length under my coat. I fell asleep just before the German border only to be woken by the conductor who opened the curtains, turned on the light and checked my rail pass and passport.



1979: Convalescent home, East Finchley where Kathy stayed. London.

Afterwards he very politely closed the curtains again and turned off the light. Unfortunately, this ritual was repeated soon after by the Dutch border inspector and then by the German immigration officer and finally by the German conductor. All of them were quite friendly and very polite but the four separate interruptions were not conducive to sleep.

We arrived at Puttgarden (Germany) in the small hours of the morning where it was painlessly obvious how privileged we passengers were. From our warm and comfortable compartments we looked out at the railway workers moving levers, hitching chains and standing about in the freezing, near white-out conditions. Our train was loaded on to a ferry and carried across to Rødby Færge in Denmark.

After that I spent two hours in Copenhagen, then caught a ferry to Malmö in Sweden. I was fascinated to find that the Skagerrak (the strait which separates the two countries) was liberally littered with floating pieces of ice. When I tired of looking at the ice, I uncomprehendingly watched a middle-aged woman feed a very large sum of money into a poker machine. Suddenly, with a dramatic roar, an avalanche of coins poured out of the machine. At last I understood!

My feeling of understanding survived until she had fed the last piece of this spectacular jackpot back into the machine which produced it! I turned away and chatted for a while with some Swedish "mittel bangers" (panel beaters, I presume) who were returning from a session of duty-free drinking in Copenhagen.

There was a direct train service from Malmö to Narvik, which would take me there in a mere 36 hours. The distance is over 2,000 km and that there was a service at all to this arctic outpost seemed remarkable in the conditions. The clickety-clack as the train crossed the gaps between rails was unusually pronounced; I imagined that this was because the extreme cold had caused the rails to shrink and the gaps to widen. At the bidding of a Swedish fellow traveller, I went strolling on the platform of a station in the depths of inland Sweden. The temperature was -30C and I discovered that the unaccustomed cold first caused my nose to run and then to freeze, a most uncomfortable

experience.

Fortunately for my nose, Narvik was much warmer; it reached a subtropical -14C. In fact it is usually so much warmer as to have a reputation as an ice-free port. The Swedish northern railway line was extended to Narvik (in Norway) to enable Swedish iron-ore mined near Kiruna to be railed to the port. Norway is so narrow at that latitude that the Norwegian section of the line is only 42 km long, yet this short section carries as much freight as the rest of the Norwegian rail system combined. Road transport is so difficult in these Lapland regions in the winter that the railway in northern Sweden becomes a vital link. Several of the passengers in my carriage were travelling to the major hospital at Boden for treatment. One I spoke to travelled there three times a week for dialysis.

Delayed an hour because of a fractured rail, the train did not arrive in Narvik until midnight and I was a little apprehensive about accommodation. I wasn't sure that Narvik was big enough to boast a hotel, and, even if it were, would the hotel management welcome a guest arriving unheralded in the middle of a freezing arctic night? I needn't have worried. There were two separate parties in full swing in the pension which the stationmaster had recommended. One was still going strong the next morning. Narvik, it appeared, was quite a popular destination for skiers from the north of Britain. It was, however, a rather unusual town.

By the time I arrived I had been train travelling for over fifty hours and had adapted to the regular motion to such an extent that I found that the solid ground on which I now stood appeared to be jolting up and down. When I walked around the town in an attempt to cure myself of this strange feeling, I encountered dozens of people window shopping, after midnight! I presumed that the strange behaviour of the sun in this northern land reduced the significance of day and night.

I was only in Narvik for one full day and was very fortunate to experience almost cloudless weather and thus be able to verify for myself that the sun did not rise. Between about 9am and 3pm there was a dawn-like glow on the horizon but the sun itself never made an appearance.

Early in the return journey from Narvik, this time headed for Freiburg (Germany), a conductor pointed out a herd of reindeer beside the line. I was even more grateful to an unseen railway employee when I returned from the very stylish restaurant car after enjoying a characteristically Scandinavian meal of open sandwiches. My carriage no longer formed part of the train! Fortunately, I eventually found all my belongings in another compartment, thoughtfully transferred by a vigilant and caring conductor. A curious aspect was that, before dining, I had decided to move to a better seat and he had put my possessions in the very compartment I had selected.

At one stage on this lengthy journey I shared my compartment with a non English-speaking woman who tried to help me improve my non-existent Swedish. She pointed at numerous things and told me their Swedish names. On one occasion she kept pointing out the window and repeating the word "fenster". I desperately scanned the scene beside the track, trying to guess what it was she was indicating and, most of all, wondering how it could possibly be visible after so long. Eventually, the penny dropped; it was the window itself!

The first three weeks of our 1982 European expedition were to be spent in Britain. We planned to walk extensively and use local bus services for our mechanized sight-seeing. We would rely on trains only when we needed to travel long distances over less interesting or previously visited country. It seemed that Britrail passes would be uneconomic and so we foolishly decided to purchase individual tickets as needed, like natives. As we intended to start our holiday with ten days walking in Cornwall, we forsook London as the place to spend our first night in Europe and instead caught a bus from Heathrow to Reading to meet an Intercity 125 service to Plymouth. We purchased the ticket at the British Rail counter at Heathrow and were surprised at how expensive it was. Examining the ticket during the journey I noticed that it was marked "Return" when I had clearly requested "Single". This must be the explanation! We had paid to travel twice the distance we required.

Working up a good dose of righteous indignation, I presented myself at the ticket office in Plymouth and demanded a refund of the difference in price between single and return tickets. The lady said that she would replace the offending ticket with a Single if I insisted but that it would cost me a pound! She explained that British Rail had a special promotion at the time which offered a return ticket to Plymouth from London or Reading for less than the cost of the normal single ticket from Reading! After our walking tour in Cornwall we had planned to travel by local buses to Leicester-

shire where I had enrolled in a woodturning course. However, after consulting timetables, we soon realized that this would be an excessively time consuming proposition. Far better, we reasoned, to capitalize on the unused portions of our original Reading to Plymouth rail tickets. We arranged the other necessary tickets at the major station in Penzance rather than attempting it in the tiny station at St Ives. In Penzance station there were dozens of posters advertising British Rail bargains. Of considerable interest was the one which read "ANY STATION IN CORNWALL TO PLYMOUTH, ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, £3.50". This represented a 50% discount. I accordingly explained our circumstances and asked for half-price singles from St Ives to Plymouth, and singles from Reading to London and London to Leicester.

– "For a start, it'll cost you £7.00 to Plymouth. The half-price fares are only available on certain trains. [One each day!] On the day you want to travel you'd have to catch the 2317 [or some other ungodly hour] from St Ives and that wouldn't connect so you'd have to stay overnight in Plymouth."

– "Secondly, you don't need a ticket for Reading to London. The ticket you've got'll be accepted into Paddington. Thirdly, I can't sell you a ticket to Leicester, you'll have to buy that in St Pancras when you get there. Oh and by the way I've given you Penzance to Plymouth instead of St Ives to Plymouth; it saves a bit of writing and they cost the same. You'll have no difficulties."

Our experiences were not quite those which had been predicted by this representative of British Rail. The conductor on the St Ives to St Erth branch line was astonished and suspicious when he saw our Penzance tickets. Our explanations didn't convince him and he went off with the air of a small-town policeman who has just uncovered a major fraud but, in the presence of Mr and Mrs Big, doesn't quite know what to do about it.

The conductor who took over at Reading didn't think much of our explanation of how we came to be travelling to Paddington on a ticket marked Reading and coolly charged us the additional fare plus a 100% fine for fare evasion. On arrival at Paddington he helpfully showed us to the Complaints Counter in the Area Manager's Office.

This department gave the impression of being staffed by deaf simpletons who understood little English but had no trouble speaking it and who were especially chosen for their ability not to flinch no matter what horrific stories are recounted to them. "Oh, yes", said Her Majesty's Obedient Servant as she filed her nails. "We'll look into it, Sir." In the unlikely event that they should carry out this rash promise I doubted that we would gain much benefit as they had no way of contacting us and didn't want any! We might as well have played tiddlywinks.

This was the first and only occasion on which I have felt any temptation at all to slash railway seats.

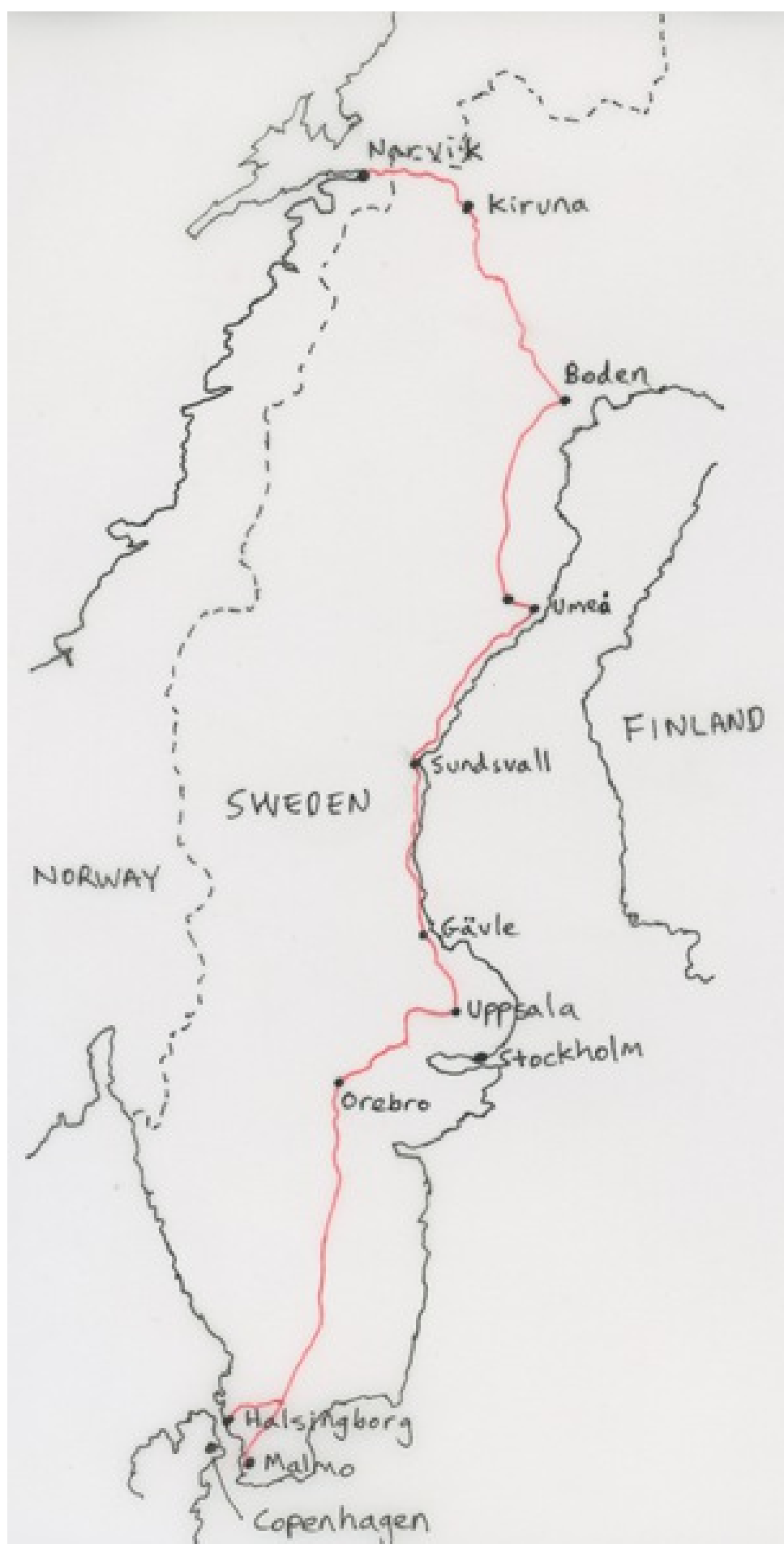
In 1982, all the English railway stations in which we were forced to loiter were plastered with posters advertising seductive deals allowing other people to travel more cheaply than us. Every time we approached close enough to read the fine print on signs apparently referring to us, we discovered that we were excluded. I failed in my attempt to purchase a Family Railcard, which entitled two adults and any number of children to travel for one adult fare plus £5.00 for each child. We didn't have any children but with a Family Railcard I would have been happy to pay for a child's fare and leave a third seat empty or even to broaden the mind of any urchin who happened to be playing at the station.

In 1979, a conductor had jokingly announced his intention to charge a fare for Kathy's borrowed fur hat, pretending he had mistaken it for a dog. What a pity we didn't have it with us in 1982; we could have qualified for a Rail Rover pass and travelled more cheaply!

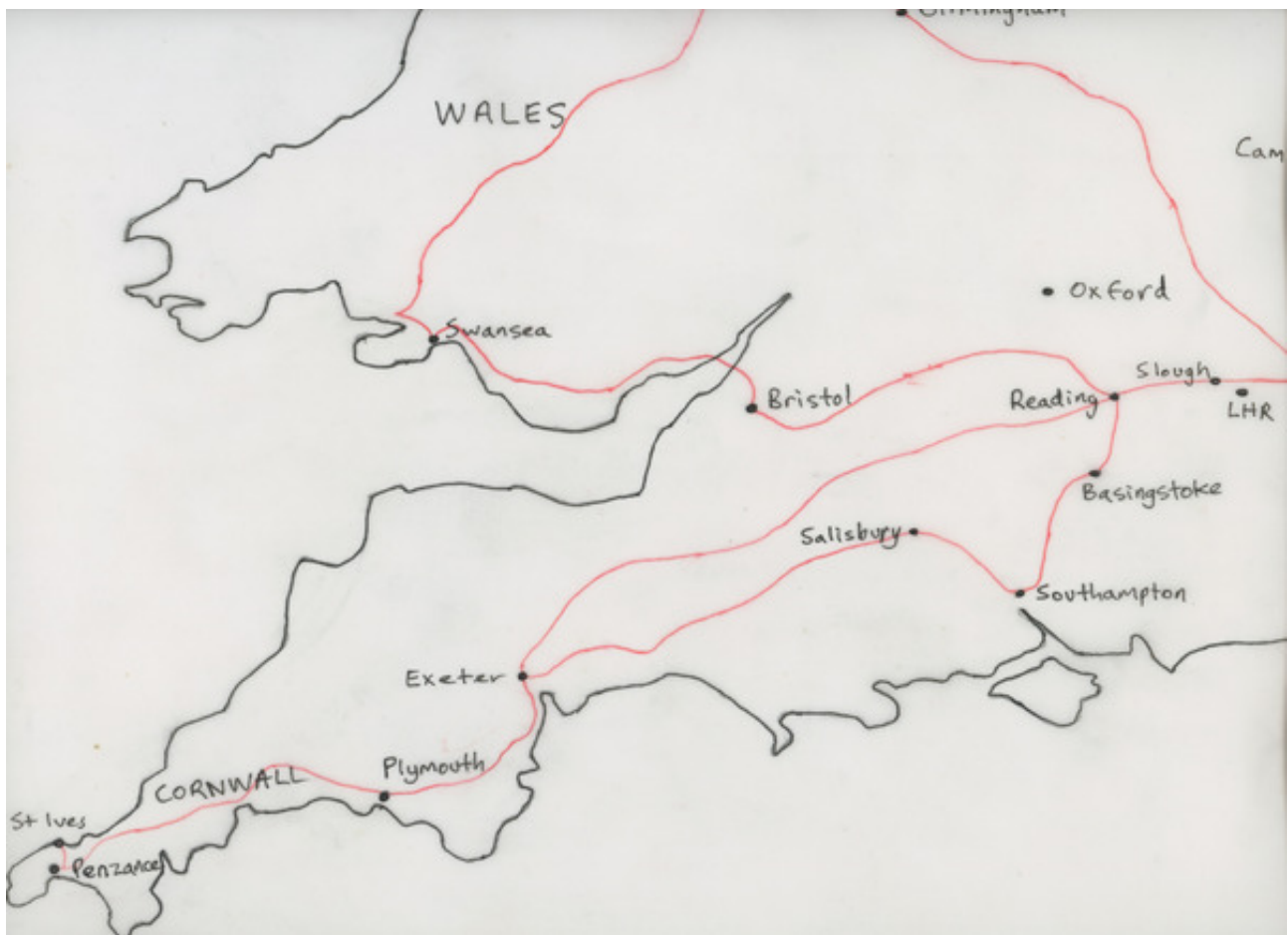
It may have been slightly cheaper to do as we did and buy individual tickets but travelling on British Rail would have been a completely different and more pleasant experience with a Britrail pass.

Unfortunately, rail passes do not cover travel on the restored Orient Express. It commenced service between London and Venice some time prior to our 1982 trip. There were actually two separate trains, one operating between London and Dover and the other with sleeping compartments which operated between the French coast and Venice. No longer are coaches ferried across the Channel.

The British Orient Express was standing in Dover station when we arrived in the jetboat from Ostende. Peering through the windows, it was obvious that these antique carriages had been exquisitely and expertly restored. Those responsible had re-created a bygone and very luxurious world. I experienced a temptation to re-Orient our voyage but, mindful of the cost, we managed to keep our feet planted firmly on the ground.



1979: Approximate route of Dave's rail journey Malmö-Narvik and Narvik-Helsingborg.



1979: South west Britain. Rail routes in red.



1982: Dining table on the Orient Express. Dover, England.

3.3 The World's Best Train Set?

The number of lines in some European networks, particularly those of Switzerland, Holland and England is incredible by Australian standards. The number of trains is correspondingly enormous. In Britain in 1979, a more or less full service was possible despite there being ninety locomotives simultaneously out of service, due to accidents, breakdowns and vandalism. In contrast, I think that there are only six XPTs in New South Wales.

The difference between Australian and European networks is, of course, largely explained by geography and population distribution. Holland, for example, has the population of Australia but only half the area of Tasmania (and no hills).

Interestingly, where nine million Australians live in cities of (approximately) one million or more, the corresponding figure for Holland is only two million. The far more even distribution of population in Holland makes the task of organizing a transport system far easier and the benefits are enjoyed by the travelling public. Whatever the reason for the extensive services, I made good use of them! I also appreciated the high standard of comfort provided in most trains.



1979: Kathy on a train in Scotland.

The heating systems in European trains seem to be capable of neutralizing the worst of cold weather, except when they break down. Once, in a French first class carriage the heating failed completely and I was driven to suffer the ignominy of travelling in second! Later in the same winter, Kathy and I travelled from Glasgow to Dundee in a carriage which seemed to have a broken thermostat and a thermonuclear device as a heater. Despite the freezing conditions outside, we stripped as far as we thought Scottish propriety would permit and still perspired profusely.

On the other hand, we found that Northern European trains were not particularly designed for

hot weather. Switzerland's summers can be rather warm but its trains were not air-conditioned. When the outside temperature exceeded 30C, we began to appreciate long, dark tunnels and the fact that the windows opened. Another Australian railways standard fitting which we particularly missed on European trains during warm weather was the chilled water dispenser. Some trains, particularly in Scandinavia, have a flask of drinking water at the end of each carriage but many do not.

Dutch and Swiss railway systems are the most convenient to use. They have all the advantages of British Rail and, in addition, they run on time. I have caught over 40 trains in Switzerland and have never left or arrived as much as one minute late. France has the fastest trains but, for various geographical reasons, the coverage of the French rail network is more sparse.

The Dutch railways are very concerned about punctuality and would not have been at all happy with Pam when she and Gordon were returning to Australia for a visit. Unlike the Dutch trains, Pam and Gordon are always late. They had bought APEX return tickets from Heathrow to Sydney whose conditions were such that to miss their flight was to forfeit their money. Intending to travel to Heathrow by rail, they drove into Leiden station just as the last connecting train was scheduled to depart. Pam jumped out, ran to the train and jammed her arm between the automatic doors to prevent the train leaving until Gordon parked the car in a nearby street and brought the luggage.

Pam has proven her railway resourcefulness on at least two other occasions. Once she jammed her heel down hard on the instep of a male in a crowded Underground train who was a bit of a goose and couldn't keep his hands to himself. Another time she bashed a would-be bag-snatcher with the purse he was trying to steal. The injuries inflicted could well have been fatal, as Pam always carried a full range of coins from each of the European countries. Fortunately, they were not and the offender-turned-victim did not stay around long enough to lodge a complaint.

British Rail in general operates a very comprehensive and high standard service. The HST is a superb train and even the older generation electric trains on the London-Glasgow route can average 130 km/hr over the nearly 650km journey despite five stops. There are, however, deficiencies in the British system which can be caricatured in the following fictitious but nonetheless believable station announcement:

– "The next train for London Euston, stopping at Birmingham New Street and Watford Junction, which was due at 1103 has been delayed due to an industrial dispute and is no longer scheduled to stop at this station. Passengers are advised to catch the 1045 to Birmingham New Street, departing at 1127 from platform 6, connecting with the 1251 to London Euston, stopping all stations."

Britrail announcements do not have the apologetic air of those I have frequently heard on British Airways.

– "British Airways would like to advise that, due to circumstances entirely beyond their control, our departure will be delayed by two hours. Because of an industrial dispute at Heathrow, the fuel to enable us to reach Bombay is being loaded from one-gallon drums. We would like to apologize for this inconvenience and trust that it will not prevent you from choosing British Airways when next you fly."

The extent of the British rail network means that often there is more than one way of getting from A to B. In 1979 I made use of alternative routes twice on the same day. I was returning from a brief sojourn in Cornwall and had arranged to meet Kathy at Euston station from where we would travel to visit a friend in Manchester. For variety, I eschewed the main line, leaving it at Exeter, then travelled to Salisbury and on to Southampton.

From there I intended to return to London Waterloo via Portsmouth, but a station announcement informed me that a derailment at Waterloo had massively disrupted services. Nothing dismayed, I travelled on the Southampton-Waterloo line as far as Basingstoke and caught an ancient compartment train (lots of external doors and no corridors) to Reading where a shiny new HST took me to Paddington. I arrived at Euston in plenty of time to meet Kathy.

Travelling by train, I found it almost essential to carry a Thomas Cook Timetable or the appropri-

ate national timetable. These publications are quite easy to use because they have maps which show rail routes marked with the numbers of the relevant timetables.

A timetable can show you alternatives to the standard route between A and B which is useful because booking offices always assume that travellers wish to reach their destination by the cheapest or quickest route but holiday makers armed with rail passes may adopt different criteria I went out of my way to travel by scenic or previously untravelled routes and, having my own timetable, I planned all my connections in advance and managed to avoid being stranded in places longer than I wished. I also managed to avoid the heartbreak experienced by some travellers who arrive at the railway station in A five minutes after the departure of the only train with connections to B on that day.

In 1982 we had Eurail passes but used them quite sparingly. We chose a number of towns to serve as bases for exploring particular areas and stayed several days in each of them. Trains were mostly used for transport when we changed our base but, in Switzerland, services were so good that we also used them for scenic trips.

While we were in Bern, there was a total reorganization of the Swiss rail timetable. Under the slogan “*Wir fahren mit takt*”, which is, I am led to believe, a German pun, the railways introduced a timetable system under which, from early in the morning until late at night, trains for the same destination left a town at the same number of minutes past each hour. For example, if there was a train from Bern to Fribourg at 0515, there would also be one at 0615, 0715 and so on throughout the day.

The Swiss rail timetable contains 630 pages of passenger services. Miraculously, the whole schedule was changed overnight without any reported foul-ups.

One day we left Bern early and travelled to Fribourg, an historic town on the boundary of French and German speaking areas of Switzerland. We walked around the town along the route suggested in the Michelin green guide and pondered over the species of some domestic animals bearing equal resemblance to both sheep and goats. (Geep, perhaps or shoats?)

With the afternoon still before us, we took a train on the main line to Geneva and revelled in the scenery as we travelled in warm sunshine along the northern shore of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva). We raided the bookshops there, picking up a magnificent book of chocolate recipes and a book of Swiss embroidery patterns. We also admired the original of the Captain Cook memorial water jet in our home town of Canberra. Late in the day, we decided to try to explore some unfamiliar country on the way back to Bern.

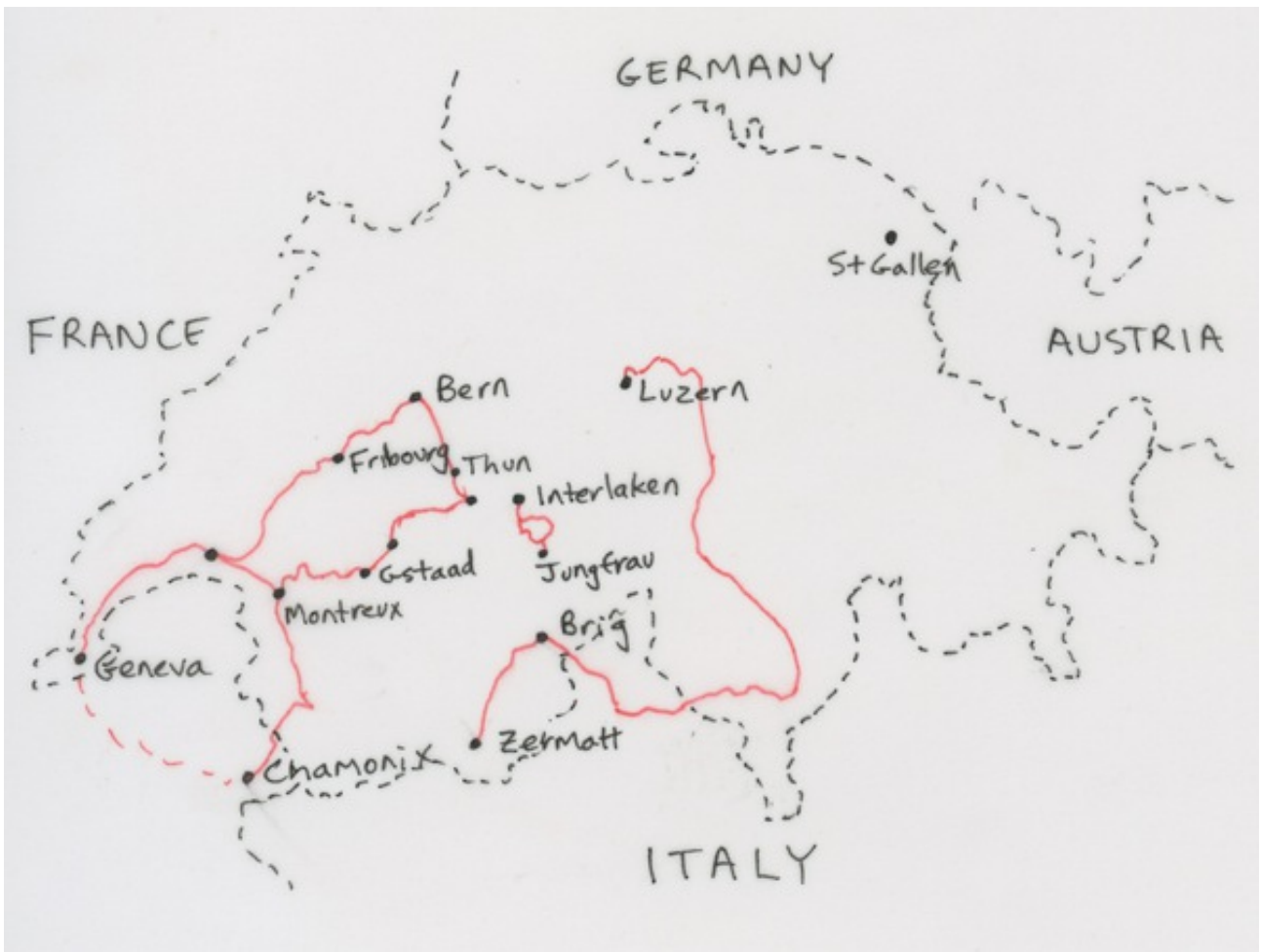
Consulting my ever-useful timetable, I found that we could avoid retracing our tracks by returning to our hotel in Bern via Montreux, Château d’Oex, Gstaad, Zweisimmen, Spiez and Thun. Many famous foreigners have made their home in the area of Château d’Oex and, having passed through, we can easily understand why. The scenery was so magnificent that, as the light gradually failed, we opened the windows and turned the lights out in our carriage so as to be able to continue to view it until the last possible moment.



1979: Dave on one train ride, planning the next.



1979: The Tay rail bridge, seen from Dundee to Glasgow train. (Not the one which collapsed in 1879.)



1979, 1982: Some of our rail journeys in Switzerland.



1982: The railway station at Château d'Oex, Switzerland.

3.4 Making Connections

Some European trains are very well designed for meeting people. In British HSTs and some Swiss trains, pairs of seats face each other across a fixed table. This is a very good arrangement if the people opposite you are interesting to talk to. We have chatted across such tables with a Swiss chemist, German and Dutch business people, an English lady with a son in Canada, wheat farmers from Alberta and a variety of others. One Scandinavian carriage we rode in was even better. There was no fixed furniture at all. The carriage was like a long narrow lounge room with loose armchairs which could be moved about to accommodate groups of friends.

At the station in Narvik, I met a couple with whom I later corresponded at length, exchanging wine labels and newspaper titles. Coco was keen to obtain as many Australian wine labels as possible but it wasn't until later that we learned that her ambition was to open a cafe and to paper the walls with exotic labels. Given the rate at which we consume alcohol and the formidable glues used by many Australian vignerons, it is unlikely that she will achieve her goal this century. Our most recent meeting was in Australia when our children were able to begin each other's education in a new language and where Coco was able to inspect Australian vineyards and wineries at first hand.

Many Australian travellers report meeting friends unexpectedly in out-of-the-way foreign places. This has not happened to us but once when my passport was being checked on a Dutch train, the inspector asked,

— "You were born in Wangaratta?"

I was a little wary because on a previous occasion not long before, three huge Dutch border guards clad in knee-length leather coats and heavy boots burst into the carriage and snapped, "Passports!" One poor soul, obviously the object of this search, was told to, "Kindly accompany us off the train" and given no opportunity to decline the invitation.

— "Er, Yes."

However, having confessed my origins, I was not manhandled out into the bleak night. Instead, the conductor smiled and said,

— "How interesting. My sister lives in [the nearby Victorian town of] Wodonga."

3.5 Off The Rails!

Unfortunately, railways cannot take you everywhere. Elisabeth Gundry's *England by Bus* persuaded us of the benefits of using local bus services in England and we planned our sightseeing in Cornwall in 1982 around a combination of bus travel and walking. We didn't quite follow her advice to the extent of carrying a 100 Watt light globe, however. Her suggestion was to use it to temporarily replace the 5 Watt one she said we'd find in most Bed and Breakfast bedrooms when we needed to read bus timetables!

We hoped that we'd be able to use local bus services to ferry us between the little towns we wished to visit or to use as bases for walking expeditions. We were successful to a certain extent, but not completely. For example, the bus service to Lands End from St Ives only operates in summer (literally) and it was not possible to make a connection to Boscastle on a Wednesday, which was the only day we were free to visit it. However, reliant as we were on public transport, buses provided the best means of reaching towns such as Fowey, Mevagissey, Helston, the Lizard and Marazion.

Indeed, there were bus services to most places we wished to go and the sightseeing from the top deck of a double-decker bus has much to recommend it. Many minor English roads are constricted by tall hedgerows which not only endanger the lives of pedestrians foolish enough to use them but also prevent them and the occupants of cars from seeing anything except the road in front. From our double-decker, all was revealed.

The front row of seats on the top deck of a bus offered the most favourable vantage point. It also offered the most excitement as the driver threaded his or her way along the very narrow, winding streets between rows of two-storey stone houses in towns like Marazion. Cornerstones of many buildings were badly scarred at top-deck level.

3.6 On A Different Plane

For our type of European holiday there has been no alternative to the aeroplane as the means of reaching the starting point and returning from the finish. From my perspective as an employee, it is almost impossible to imagine a holiday so long that a twelve-week return sea voyage would not significantly diminish it. In our three journeys to Europe, we have flown one leg with Cathay Pacific, several with British Airways and more with Qantas. We would unhesitatingly choose Qantas for our next journey although there are cheaper airlines. For us, safety outweighs all other considerations and, besides, the service we have received from Qantas in the air has been excellent.

Our friend Peter is a very generous person but he is unable to sleep unless he buys the best at the best possible price. He agonizes for months over his purchases fearing that, after parting with his money, he will discover a cheaper or better alternative. When flying to Europe in 1982 he bought tickets from a small travel agent who offered remarkably good deals.

— “We’ve some very low Advance Purchase fares for you sir.”

— “What exactly do you mean by ‘Advance Purchase’?”

— “Oh, you know. Pay before you fly!”

Apparently the agent would make bogus Advance Purchase bookings with the airlines and then change the passenger names when real clients turned up.

Peter probably lost sleep over the uncertainties of doing business with such a dubious operator but the deal was irresistible. When he paid for his ticket he handed over the money in one hand while taking the tickets in the other.

As it happened, Peter and Margaret shared our departure date from Australia. I casually asked Peter how they were getting to Sydney and mentioned that we had received a healthy discount on the Canberra-Sydney fare because it was linked to an international flight Peter had forgotten to make such an arrangement and although their overall fares were many hundreds of dollars cheaper than ours, it caused him anguish to contemplate travelling to Sydney at other than the best possible price.

Nights of worry finally produced a solution. When we met them at Canberra airport, they were at the Standby counter! If this gambit failed they would forfeit their APEX ticket to Amsterdam, so their car was ready for a lightning dash to Mascot to make the international connection only four hours away. I don’t know where they would have left the car in Sydney. Six weeks seems a long time to leave a car in an airport car park.

Although I find international flights exciting, not to say atmospheric, I cannot describe them as comfortable. I also experience great difficulty in sleeping on aeroplanes and consequently I was very interested to observe the results of the strategy employed by the lady next to me on the flight home from Hong Kong in 1985. Every time a steward passed her, she would tap him on the sleeve and say, “You couldn’t get me a double scotch, could you?” Soon she was asleep, no doubt dreaming of pink jumbos. She slept soundly until we were descending into Sydney but her appearance on waking exhibited the confusion and bleary-eyedness of a chronic insomniac. After only a meagre hour’s sleep, I was in considerably better condition!

In 1982, we flew from Sydney to London in two of the (almost) best seats on a Boeing 747. We were allocated seats among the total of twelve Economy seats which are located behind emergency exits and opposite the galleys. We appreciated them not because we anticipated the need for a hurried exit in mid-flight or because we planned a raid on the food supplies. Rather, the exit aisle provided more than enough room for my longer-than-average legs. Furthermore there was no seat back to stare into at close range. Indeed our visual senses were able to benefit from the stimulation of the two different

movies it was possible to watch at the same time. The exit seats opposite the toilets offer similar advantages but are not quite as appealing.

Probably the only chance of us flying in real First Class is if Qantas repeats a promotion of some years ago in which they gave away First Class return tickets to London. The only condition was that the winners were required to depart the very next day. Our bags are packed and our passports are ready, just in case.

Qantas also organized a promotion to celebrate the successful landing of their one millionth passenger (or was it two millionth? I can't remember.) A reception committee of Qantas dignitaries and the press was in Manchester for the counting off of the passengers. One report suggests that the official recorder hiccupped on 999,999 and used that number twice. The second number 999,999 was an obese and intoxicated individual dressed in thongs, stubbies and a tee-shirt emblazoned with the message: "Are you under .05? Or pissed like the rest of us?"

Although we are very particular to fly on reputable airlines with good safety records, we flew from Newcastle to Bergen in 1982 with an airline called DANAIR. Temporarily forgetting about SAS, I assumed that DANAIR must be the Danish national carrier. In fact it stands for Davies And Newman Air! We survived the experience, of course, and it would be unfair to blame the extreme sinus pain I suffered on landing at Stavanger on either Davies or Newman.

One curious aspect of the brief flight was that instead of plying us with food and drink, the trolleys were stacked with duty-free perfumes and watches.

The airport at Bergen was a small complex set among forests of conifers. What bare ground there was gave a convincing impression of having been recently covered with snow. Unfortunately, Bergen airport, like many others, lacked the character and the interest of airports at Bahrain, Roissy (Paris) and Singapore.

Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris has a visually striking and creative design which seems to be both welcoming and efficient. It is known affectionately as "le Fromage (the Cheese)" because its cylindrical central core is criss-crossed by rising and dipping transparent tubes carrying moving footpaths, like the holes in a wheel of Swiss cheese.

Bahrain airport is rather small but much more interesting than most and incorporates displays of local craft, history and culture. The majority of the toilets there are of the "squat" variety and, in my hour of need, I avoided queues for the few western-style ones by using them. In any case they are probably more hygienic than the Western variety. However, I wouldn't like to have to keep my balance on the two little foot supports if I were an octogenarian!

On our first stop in Bahrain we saw some Arab men dressed in traditional flowing robes waiting for a much delayed flight. They were sleeping stretched across rows of adjacent seats and, to make room, overlapping each other in ways which would be unthinkable in Western society!

Of all the airports I have seen, Changi airport in Singapore is the largest, smoothest and most professional. It is reminiscent of an Edelsten medical clinic magnified a hundred fold but do not let this put you off. When we visited, the duty-free operation was breathtakingly efficient. The range of duty-free goods was so wide, the prices so attractive and currency exchange so painless that a large number of purchases were made in the short time of a refuelling stop.

According to a Singaporean taxi driver in Sydney, the Changi Airport we saw is only the first of several stages. He said that security at the airport is even tighter than it seems because both anti-terrorist and engineering units of the armed forces are based under the terminal. In an emergency, part of the freeway linking Changi with the city can be turned into a runway within minutes.

Our duty-free binge in Changi Airport followed a spectacularly beautiful approach to Singapore in which we descended at dusk over a cluster of small islands. The approach to Hong Kong is at least as beautiful but offers more for thrill-seekers who no doubt appreciate the tall buildings and steeply rising slopes in the vicinity of Kai-Tak airport.

3.7 Cheap Air Travel

We have little experience of flying within Europe, but we can offer some tips on cheap air travel. On the summit of Mt Rigi, near Lucerne in Switzerland, we observed someone assembling a hang

glider and preparing for what might be a superbly scenic flight over the Vierwaldstattersee (Lake of Lucerne). Unfortunately, the scenic potential of this person's flight was ruined by heavy cloud which rolled in before he "took off."

I confess to being tempted by silent, soaring flight but until Qantas starts offering services. I'm deterred by the risk. Other opportunities for cheap flights exist courtesy of the ski jumps in Innsbruck (Austria) and Oslo (Norway). Bernt took us up the hill from his apartment in Oslo to see the ski jump. It looked incredibly dangerous to me but I suppose it would be safer in winter when there was snow to land on!

3.8 Curious Customs

Even the best airlines cannot shield you from the minor indignities associated with border hopping. It is an unpleasant, but fortunately only fleeting moment when an arriving aircraft's passengers are fumigated.

Yes, fumigated! A person with two aerosol spray cans held above his or her head walks purposefully down each aisle, spraying constantly. No-one seems to know what species of pest is being targeted nor indeed if any pests succumb to such a cursory fumigation. Some passengers cover their faces but others stoically ignore the onslaught, having experienced far worse in the days when it was considered acceptable to blow cigarette smoke in other people's faces.

Sometimes the passage through immigration, customs and quarantine control can be more wearing than the flight that preceded it. This was not the case when, in a French train, a customs official walked down the corridor, half-heartedly incanting, "Rien à déclarer. (Nothing to declare.)" in a rhetorical manner.

In Britain, people pass through customs control in two channels: Red for those with dutiable goods to declare, and Green for those with nothing to declare. Re-entering that country via Folkestone after crossing the Grey channel, I attempted to walk through the Green channel (as I was entitled to do) but something about my appearance tripped the suspicion circuits in three separate officials and one after the other, they went through HM Customs' standard conversation no. 27A:

— "Good morning. Sir. You do realize that this is the Green Channel sir?"

— "Good morning. Yes, of course."

— "You don't have anything to declare do you sir? No tobacco or alcohol?"

— "None at all."

— "Are you staying long in Britain, Sir?"

n weeks."

— "And where might you be staying, Sir?"

As you can guess, this little game became very tedious after the first round, but at least the officials were scrupulously polite. Debbie was not so fortunate when she entered Britain and was subjected to aggressive rudeness and a minute search. The officers up-ended her bag and squeezed out her entire tube of toothpaste, apparently searching for drugs. When she asked how she was now expected to clean her teeth, they helpfully handed her the sheet of paper with all the toothpaste on it!

3.9 Picking Up A Good-Looking Model

In 1985 we chose to use a Citroën BX car as our principal mode of long-distance transport during our seven weeks in France. It was certainly more flexible than public transport, but it forced us to concentrate more while travelling and to take responsibility for ourselves and for others on the

the rear entrance of a multi-level subterranean car park with a garage at the bottom. It was there that we found our new car.

As we drove up the ramp to the front entrance, the fuel emergency light started flashing. We emerged onto a previously unseen boulevard and were soon stopped at traffic lights. The driver of an adjacent vehicle leaned over, wound down his window and asked (in French of course):

— “Is that the new BX?”

— “Yes.”

— “How does it go?”

— “Good so far, but we’ve only had it a few minutes.”

At this point the lights turned green and he continued his interrogation as we accelerated across the intersection.

— “Diesel or petrol?”

— “Petrol.”

— “What’s the power rating of the engine?”

— “90 KW”, I guessed.

— “Humph. Is that all!”

He sniffed disparagingly and roared off. Having managed to converse in a second language while driving an unfamiliar car in stressful circumstances, I was not in the least discouraged by his comments.



1985: Our brand new Citroën BX. Fontainebleau, France.

Under a special hire plan, we actually owned our Citroën, albeit temporarily. A French government scheme to support local car manufacturers permitted them to sell cars tax free to tourists and buy them (the cars) back later. The tourist did not have to pay the full purchase cost of the car but rather a sum which may be regarded as the difference between the tax-free new car price and the almost-new second hand price plus interest, insurance and a profit margin.

The cost per day was quite competitive with rental cars and declined as the length of ownership increased. The cars were, of course, brand new. It was the temporary owner's responsibility to arrange for service at the recommended intervals (After 1,500km and then after every 10,000km in the case of our car). The first service was free apart from the cost of lubricants. These were ten times as expensive as we expected but, averaged over the 6,000 km we covered, the cost was negligible.

Considerable support was offered in the event of breakdown, accident or other misfortune. Fortunately we did not require it. Before we left Australia, we had been warned by a number of people that there was a very high probability that our car would be broken into and our belongings stolen. The chances of this happening were said to be increased if the car was not registered in France.

Our car was registered in Paris but was distinguished by special, different coloured "TT" tax-free plates. We wondered for about five weeks whether thieves would categorize us as wealthy foreigners deserving to be relieved of their financial load or generous foreigners supporting French industry. The question was possibly answered in St. Hilaire-St. Mesmin on the Loiret river not far from Orléans. There we enjoyed a gourmet meal and stayed the night at a very appealingly located hotel listed in Arthur Eperon's French Selection, parking our car in the specially designated hotel car park a short distance away.

In the morning it was discovered that the quarter vent windows of a number of British-registered cars belonging to guests at the hotel had been smashed in order to steal radios and other items. Ours had escaped attention, possibly because of the registration plates.

Like other cars in France, our Citroën sported yellow headlights (only). Its hydropneumatic suspension caused us amusement every time we drove. The car rose up one end at a time like a horse when we turned on the engine and slowly sank when we turned it off. The suspension worked well however; the ride was comfortable and the handling was good.

Interestingly, there was a control lever which enabled us to alter the height of the suspension. Normally left in a low position for economy and handling on highways, the car can be raised when travelling over rough ground or for maintenance. It proved very useful when driving over ploughed paddocks near Villers-Bretonneux.

The goal of our first day's driving was merely to escape Paris; we drove only as far as Fontainebleau. Our first real destination was the Vanoise national park in the Alps, but because we planned to use minor D (Départementale) roads as much as possible, we set our second day's sights on Dole, a mere 320 km away. Despite the apparent modesty of this target, I had difficulty in reaching it.



1985: A fearless hunter searches for prey in a ploughed field. Mice, perhaps? Loire valley, France.



1985: Symbolic of all the dogs in France, Fontainebleau.

3.10 Motoring Madness

I nearly started the day with a fatal mistake. Approaching an intersection with the divided road from Paris, I continued forward on the inappropriate grounds that the near carriageway was clear of traffic on our right. Fortunately, the brakes of the Citroën were highly effective and I was able to avoid, at the last minute, a collision with a car approaching at about 130 km/hr from the left! The lesson was well learned and the mistake never repeated.

By the time we arrived in Dole I was acclimatised to the conditions but totally exhausted mentally. Every kilometre of the route had demanded intense concentration. Roads had been narrow, speed limits had changed every couple of kilometres, there had been a never ending sequence of priority signs, and I had been constantly on the lookout for other drivers' unpredictable actions. I swore that if we could not find accommodation in Dole I would abandon the car; I refused to drive a single kilometre further.

There was also the shared problem of navigation:

- “We want to turn off soon to Dobreville.”
- “The sign coming up says ‘Louvagny’.”
- “How do you spell that?”
- “L.o.u.v.a.g.n.y”
- “Hmm! Hang on, I’ve found it. We take that turn!”
- “No we don’t! We’ve just passed it.”

It was on occasions like these that I learned the knack of “creative driving” which is commonly practised in France. Even the N (Nationale) roads, which were France’s main highways prior to the introduction of the Autoroutes, pass through a town every five or ten kilometres. When this happens the road typically becomes unbelievably narrow and funnels through traffic into the middle of a busy market place. On at least one occasion I was convinced that the road was so narrow that two cars could not possibly pass. When the oncoming driver, who I assumed to be a local, advanced confidently, I kept as far as possible to the right and hoped. Fortunately we never did scrape paint or lose a doorhandle.

Incidentally, amongst the profusion of road signs, the most curious we encountered was near Bayeux. It read “Attention -betteraves” (Caution - Sugarbeet)!

As an undergraduate I saw Jean Luc Goddard’s film *Weekend* more than once. A vivid, shockingly presented theme of this surrealistic fantasy draws attention to the twin evils affecting weekend travellers in France: incredible traffic jams and nightmarish road accidents. I hasten to assure those who have seen it that we did not find it representative of driving conditions in France, although Kathy informs me that we did pass the bloodstained scene of a recent accident very early in the trip. My brain has conveniently blotted out the memory.

Kathy, who is in the process of writing a book on head injury, has in her possession a 1985 table of road deaths per 100,000 population for various countries. She informs me that France had the highest rate among the countries listed but only marginally higher than Australia and the USA. The rates in these countries were almost double that for Japan. We were always careful crossing roads in France, having read elsewhere that French pedestrians are a very endangered species.

In general French roads are much narrower than comparable Australian roads. I recently had occasion to measure the width of seal on a two-lane section of the Hume Highway; it was more than five times as wide as our car. The ratio for comparable French roads would be closer to three. On the other hand the surface condition of French roads is almost invariably better, even in areas subject to heavy snow. Gravel roads are extremely rare.

While in the mood for rash generalizations, we were impressed with the skill of French drivers and the order which underlies apparently chaotic traffic. When it was necessary to change lanes to

make a turn, we found that, provided we communicated our intention, gaps opened up in apparently impenetrable lines of cars. Subtle movements of the car are relied on more than are indicators. Because they are part of a Parisian motorist's daily life, unusual manoeuvres and conditions are accommodated without fuss.

Continuing our journey from Dole, and having abandoned our desire to reach the Vanoise by minor roads that day, or preferably the day before, we drove toward Annecy and took a small detour to walk through the Gorges du Fier which are similar to but not as long as the Aareslucht near Meiringen in Switzerland. The Fier is a small river which has cut a deep and narrow channel through a ridge of rock. Over time the course of the river has varied, so that the sides of the chasm are not vertical. Because of this, walking along a gangway built along one wall above the normal water level creates the feeling of being in a tunnel. A flood level indicator shows that in 1960 the depth of water in the chasm reached 27 m which would have been awful news for tourists on the gangway!

We decided to bypass the town of Annecy and took the closest equivalent of a logging track we encountered, sealed of course, over a mountain and down to the shore of Lake Annecy. The forest surroundings were very enjoyable apart from a large cylindrical stone memorial to civilians shot in the vicinity by the Nazis.

Certain motorists find that the Autoroutes offer the potential for travel at speeds comparable to that of the TGV. We, on the other hand, were more than happy to stay below the legal limit of 130km/hr. I generally drove at between 110 and 120 km/hr in the slow lane, accelerating to 130 only to pass trucks. On one occasion when I started such a manoeuvre, my rear-vision mirror showed no following traffic, but while travelling at 130km/hr and before I had overtaken the truck, I was flashed aggressively by a large Mercedes sedan which must have been exceeding my speed by at least 50 or 60 km/hr.

Amazingly, following the Mercedes and flashing and honking frantically while veering from side to side trying to find a gap beside the safety rail or between the lanes of traffic was a sporty version of a Peugeot 205. This lent some veracity to the advertisements we had seen which read "205 GTI - A car maker unsheathes its claws", or was it, "A car maker unlocks the asylum?"

Tolls are an ever present feature of autoroute driving and the cost can be quite significant. However, as implied previously, autoroutes are indeed the only sensible way of travelling long distances quickly by car.

We travelled long distances on the La Provencale autoroute from Nice at between 110 and 120 km/hr but still only managed to average 90 because we had to queue up for fifteen minutes at the toll gates even though there were seventeen operating. In August, we predict that the toll-gate queues would be so long that it would be hard to tell whether cars were queuing for the toll gates in front of them or for the next set 100 km ahead!

We saw billboard signs leaving Nice which had informed summer holidaymakers returning to Paris on which days and at which hours of the day they should start their homeward journey so as to avoid peak traffic. We imagined the 900km traffic jam to Paris on the weekend before the end-of-summer return to school and breathed a sigh of relief that we hadn't participated in it.

Wheels In Winter

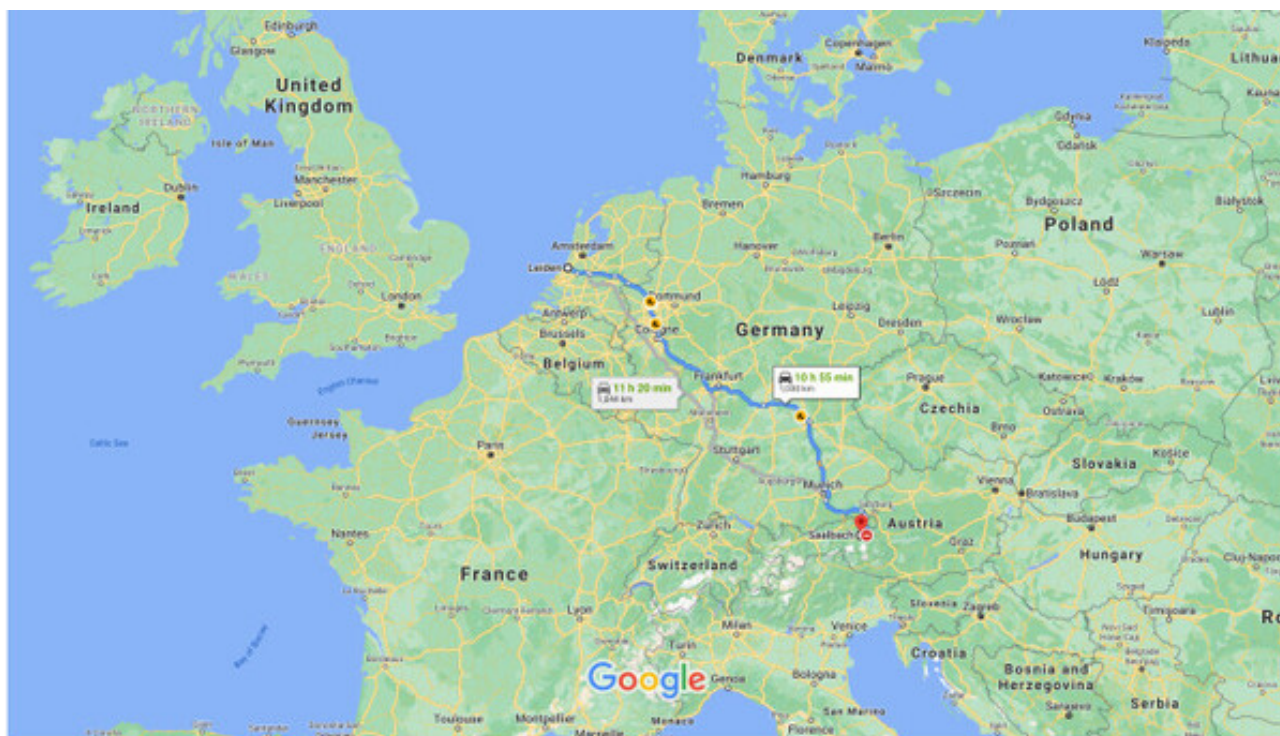
In 1979, I travelled great distances on Dutch and German autobahns while en route from Holland to the Austrian resort of Saalbach with Gordon and Pam in their Renault 4, which, for those who do not know the type, is a rather ungainly, box shaped car. Seeing an umbrella handle poking out of the dashboard, I assumed that the car featured an umbrella holder for the convenience of the driver; it turned out to be the gear lever! Despite its oddities, the Renault 4 was quite a practical vehicle and delivered fuel economy far superior to any popular car sold in Australia.

Weather conditions were awful at the time of our departure. One of the heavy machines which spread salt on snow-covered roads to prevent them icing up had itself slipped on ice and fallen into a canal. Rescue was impossible until conditions improved.

Ice on roads was an ever-present hazard for all drivers. Gordon decided that an early morning departure would minimize the risks and at 2.00am we set off after scraping the ice off the windscreen.

In such conditions, using warm water to clear windscreens is counterproductive as it almost instantly freezes. Another distinctly un-Australian hazard was that of having your skin freeze-welded to the cold metal door handles.

What a journey! We proceeded cautiously in a world turned white except for the haloes of frosty yellow around the roadside lamps. Holland's 16 million inhabitants are squeezed into a relatively minute area, but there was very little evidence of them on this occasion. All we saw were turnoff signs to a long series of towns many of which I had previously only heard of in a World War II context: Arnhem, Essen, Dortmund. The autobahn in Germany was kept open by huge mobile vacuum cleaners which cruised the road at 100 km/hr. "Attention mobile 73: Snowflake reported in sector 41". We travelled the thousand kilometres between Leiden and Munich without passing through a single town.



1979: Google Maps route (2020) for drive from Leiden, Netherlands to Saalbach, Austria.

We only stopped in Munich because I burst a tyre during my brief spell at the wheel, but I'd prefer not to go into details. There are service points, each comprising petrol station, restaurant, picnic spot (shiver) and toilet, at intervals along the autobahns. The lesson that, in German public toilets, one acquires toilet paper before going into the cubicle is quickly learned! In fact most German motorists bring their own toilet paper with them, something which may be confirmed by observing the embroidered toilet-roll holder on the rear parcel-shelf of many German cars.

Pam was not feeling well and I was gradually succumbing to the 'flu. The heater was working flat out but was losing the battle for control of the lower part of the passenger compartment. Circulation in my feet had ceased hours ago and numbness was rising toward my knees. As we crossed the border into Austria, I knew we couldn't possibly reach Saalbach that night. Feeling frazzled and hungry, we stopped for dinner at a roadside restaurant as snow began to fall heavily.

The restaurant was warm and pleasant. Through its large picture windows overlooking the brightly lit carpark, we watched the snow pouring from the sky and covering our green Renault in a thick layer of white icing. It seemed like a fruitcake and it was fairly clear that we were the nuts!

One or two cuckoo clocks and a few mounted deer antlers were displayed in the restaurant but nowhere near as many of either as you are likely to find in the "genuine" Austrian establishments back in Australia.

The staff were so friendly, the atmosphere so cheering and warming and the food so well suited to our requirements that our spirits revived and we did indeed reach the pension in Saalbach that night, after 19 hours on the road.

The age of the doona not yet having reached Australia, I was non-plussed to find that my bed had nothing more on it than a neatly fitted sheet and a big bag lying in a heap at one end. I asked the manager why my bed had not been made up! I was a little red-faced when the system was explained to me! Since I have always found bed making an activity to be avoided as much as possible, we acquired a duvet (doona) in London and brought it back to Australia.

Winter driving in northern and central Europe is not to be recommended. Once off the major, regularly cleared roads, snow and ice became a hazard which could easily cause disaster. We lost traction many times on the way to Saalbach and on other occasions I was prevented by snow from visiting the Lakes District in England and the hills in the Black Forest near Freiburg, West Germany. The Norwegian ambassador in Canberra was horrified at the thought that I might be planning to drive in Norway in January. (I wasn't.)

While Kathy was working at Maida Vale (London) Neurological Diseases hospital and staying in a convalescent home in Finchley, or at least the staff quarters thereof, transport between the two places was normally provided by ambulance. One morning there was so much ice about that the ambulance driver chose to drive his own private car instead because it held the road better than the ambulance. Unfortunately, while negotiating a roundabout, his car slid out of control and hit a safety barrier in an accident which could have been much worse if anyone else had been so brave (or foolhardy) as to drive in such challenging conditions.

3.11 The World's Largest Condom

A car has many advantages over other forms of transport. In 1985 our Citroën served as a very useful mobile base in which replaceable and not-too-valuable items could be left. In addition, we were able to travel to places which would have been virtually inaccessible by train and bus. We were free to choose our own route and to stop where we chose. This factor was much more important in France than in Switzerland where the vast majority of tourist destinations are easily accessible by train. In France, even Mont St Michel, tourist Mecca of the North, is far from the nearest railway line.

There are so many other examples of places we visited which would have been very difficult to reach without a car that to list them would be excessive. It will probably suffice to mention the small town of Condom, which, as far as we could ascertain, has nothing to with AIDS prevention.

Condom is nonetheless very popular with English-speaking tourists as witnessed by the fact that it is the only town of its size in which British newspapers are readily available. It has a restaurant and hotel which are highly rated in the Michelin Guide. We stayed in the hotel but could not bring ourselves to spend the required amount of money to partake of the gastronomic pleasures on offer in the restaurant. This must be counted as an opportunity lost as, in the end, we returned to Australia with enough money left to have paid for such a meal.

To outline the benefits of travelling by car in France is not to deny the possibility of having an extremely enjoyable holiday travelling by some other means. In seven weeks it was only possible to visit a tiny fraction of the interesting possibilities, no matter what means of transport we employed. We could have enjoyably filled seven weeks travelling by another method but the itinerary would have been completely different.



1985: Better safe than sorry. We stayed here for protection. Condom, France. (Postcard)

3.12 Pedalling Dopes

In 1985 we both contracted masochism and planned to travel around France by bicycle. Fortunately we thought up enough excuses to enable us to defer this mad scheme. However, as we drove around France in our car we did spend some time thinking about what we would do on our bicycles if we ever ran out of excuses.

It seemed to us that a desire to enjoy mountains and a desire to cycle are mutually inconsistent. Storming over alpine passes on steep, narrow successions of hairpin bends without the benefit of safety rails while jostling with buses and trucks seems more like pain than pleasure. Even cycling through narrow, winding, dark tunnels with only careless, speeding motorists for company has its down side.

After the alps, the Vercors mountains near Grenoble are quite stunted but even they have some incredibly daunting climbs. At the top of one of them is a memorial to a Tour de France rider who made it to the top and then died. In general I doubt that competitors in the Tour de France enjoy the scenery much.

Narrow roads and blind corners do not deter large numbers of athletic cyclists from taking to the mountains in France. We found this to be further testimony to French drivers' ability to cope with the unexpected.

It is significant that the vast majority of the 20 cycle tours listed in Rob Hunter's *Cycle Touring in France* avoid both mountainous areas and large cities. We would almost certainly do the same. In fact it would be quite tempting to follow, with minor modifications, one or more of his itineraries or perhaps to combine pieces of them. As mentioned earlier, it is essential to tailor an itinerary to suit the means of transport employed. Even restricted to areas which offer "easy" cycling, there is more than enough to do and see.

We did cycle in Holland in 1982 with Gordon and Pam. We drove to a railway station in a pleasant part of the country and hired bicycles. They were in good condition and pedalling was easy along

peaceful, tree-lined lanes beside canals. Variety came in the form of small villages with un-Australian architecture and cobblestoned streets. Our route took us through an open-air market and across a wooden bridge which could be raised to permit the passage of tall vessels along the canal it spanned.

Dutch cyclists appear to be undeterred by ice and snow. In 1979, we saw them cycling in temperatures approaching -20C after prising their ice-festooned bicycles away from the metal railings to which they had stuck fast. In those conditions, we regard cycling as strictly a spectator sport.

3.13 Our Plans On Ice

Skating in Canberra involves a long drive, perhaps in 35C temperatures, to a big shed with an ice rink driven by a huge refrigerator which needs a rest every now and then to let the surface harden up again. One of the nicest things about Holland in the winter of '79 was the way in which skating became a significant part of ordinary life.

From our temporary home in Leiden, we walked to a small canal at the end of the street, strapped on borrowed skates and surveyed our gateway to a network of canals spanning a large part of Holland. With this exciting possibility in front of me, I tottered unsteadily and fell on my backside. Those with more skill embarked on 50 km journeys.

The many children in attendance were scathing: "My two year old sister skates better than you." Gordon told one small boy among them that Kathy and I were from the land of the kangaroos and the boy skated off in great excitement to tell his friends, pointing back at us and saying things of which "kangaroo" was the only word we could understand. An obstacle which caused one of my many skating downfalls was a supermarket trolley which had been dumped in a canal with only about 3 cm of one corner protruding through the ice.

A large percentage of the Dutch population was to be found on the ice in those freezing days. People left work early to go skating and others skated at night under the street lamps. We even saw people on skates carrying bags of groceries. We bumped into (not literally, as I was getting better after a few days practice) a colleague of Gordon's late at night on the canal outside his apartment block. He and his wife were both on skates, taking turns to push their young baby around the ice in a pram.

Transporting babies must be a vexing problem for parents in snow-prone countries. Far worse than the inconvenience of getting a stroller bogged in snow drifts, must be the serious hazard of falling on icy footpaths while carrying a baby or even while pushing a pram. In Austria, I saw a creative solution to both problems. A window-shopping mother was pulling a very warmly wrapped baby in a tiny wooden sled around the footpaths of Saalbach. Just in case it was for the benefit of tourists, I took a photo.

In Zermatt, the horse-drawn sleighs which jingle about the streets in winter are definitely oriented toward the tourist population. In combination with the ban on motor cars in the town, the sleighs do create a very peaceful and old-world atmosphere. The absence of roaring petrol engines makes a very pleasant change and the frequent electric trains gliding into the station do little to disturb it. The only other vehicles I saw were some battery powered mini vans used by the hotels to transport supplies and luggage from the station and a Volkswagen which scuttled across the street, sneaked down a lane and secreted itself behind an old wooden door.



1979: Toddler transport. Saalbach, Austria.

3.14 Shanks's Pony

Our appreciation of Zermatt and its surroundings was all the greater for our having explored the area on foot. Indeed, as I relate in the chapter on the nature of Europe, the most enjoyable moments of our European journeys were experienced while walking. Though we reached many desirable destinations using mechanical transport, we almost invariably acquainted ourselves with them by walking to ensure that we felt their full sensory impact.

Anyone who has stepped out of their car will surely admit that the visual dimension takes on greater clarity and completeness when the viewer is not enclosed. Although unable to hear them for the roar of their engine and the noise of their radio, most drivers and passengers will concede that there may be interesting sounds outside their vehicle. Some people, however, do not seem to realize that cars deprive them of the smell of rain and new-mown hay and from the velvet feel of the air on summer evenings. We, on the other hand, seized every available opportunity to walk in mountainous, coastal and lakeland districts and revelled in the simultaneous stimulation of all our senses. (We ate sun-ripened tomatoes, crisp apples, fresh bread and creamy camemberts to prevent atrophy of our taste buds.)

The pleasure of walking was so great that Kathy and I now share an envy of people who have walked from Land's End to John-o-Groats, or the entire length of the South-West Way, or from Holland to the Mediterranean, or traced the length of the Rhine, or followed in Hannibal's footsteps, or... Perhaps, one day, circumstances will permit us to emulate them.

Potential long-distance walkers have considerable choice of route in Europe. In France, for example, there are thousands of kilometres of well-marked long distance footpaths (Sentiers de Grande Randonnée). These paths are controlled by the Comité National des Sentiers de Grande Randonnée whose headquarters are curiously located in central Paris, at 65 Avenue de la Grande Armée, 75016 Paris. The paths are marked with 12cm by 12cm squares comprising two rectangular stripes, one red, one white.

The Sentiers de Grande Randonnée cover most parts of the country including the Alps and the

Pyrenees. We walked along sections of several in both mountainous areas and also came upon the distinctive GR markings in a street in the town of Chenonceau in the Loire valley.

Britain, too, is well supplied with long distance footpaths. Michael Marriott, author of *Footpaths of Britain* states that they total over 160,000 km. His book describes nine long distance paths and includes a lot of information on all aspects of walking in Britain.

One of the nine paths is the South West Way which starts near Bournemouth in Dorset, and traces the coasts of Dorset, Devon (South and North), Cornwall (South and North) and ends near Minehead on the North coast of Somerset. Its length exceeds 800 km. We walked quite a few sections of the path and found them all very enjoyable.

Even in cities we found that pedestrian travel was the best method of exploration, at least until blisters, heat or tiredness caused it to cease being pleasurable. (We reached this conclusion after having neglected to arrange a chauffeur-driven Bentley before we arrived.) In London and Paris our only real alternative was to spend hours on underground trains looking at nothing but advertising hoardings.

City walking is not without its hazards, as Kathy discovered when she crossed a very busy intersection in London. The traffic lights did not incorporate a "Walk" indicator and pedestrians were forced to back their own judgment against phalanxes of cars intermittently arriving from unexpected directions. Consequently, Kathy was keeping careful watch on the passing traffic and not looking at the footpath on the other side. Just before reaching safety, she suddenly found herself waist-deep in freshly poured concrete! There had been no barrier and no warning sign! One of the workers responsible indignantly demanded, "What'd you do that for?" and another was heard to groan, "Oh, no! Not another one!"

A prematurely grey Kathy set off for the Neurological Diseases Hospital, taking each step more slowly than the one before as her clothes and shoes gradually stiffened. On arrival, she cemented a friendship with someone kind enough to find her a scrubbing brush and an operating theatre gown. Even with a dozen safety pins, the gown was neither warm nor 100% secure, but she counted herself lucky not to have met a gangster who might have thrown her in the Thames, concrete boots and all.

That afternoon she was due to give a battery of psychological tests to a neurological patient who had suffered damage to the frontal lobes of his brain. One of the consequences of injury in this area is a dramatic diminution in inhibition, particularly sexual inhibition. (On this subject, a female British neuropsychologist told Kathy that she had far greater difficulty in recognizing the condition in Australians!)

Another feature of frontal lobe injury is a reduction in ability to think abstractly, with a consequent focusing on the concrete! It will come as no surprise to you that Kathy, in her airy gown, decided to cancel the appointment.

Walking in Europe and particularly in England is quite different from bush walking in the Budawangs. England has been "civilised" for so long that there is evidence everywhere of human modifications to the landscape. The population density is so high and the organization of society such that there is seldom more than ten kilometres separating a village from its nearest neighbour. An appreciation of human intervention as well as natural beauty is required to enjoy English walking to the full. This is not to say that it can't be enjoyed.

It is very difficult to "get away from it all" but there are countless opportunities to explore villages which take your fancy. Many of them have a great deal of character and history. There is also the benefit that you may not need to carry much with you as you can spend your nights at Bed and Breakfast places and have your lunch at a pub halfway between stops.

Unless, of course, you have the experience related to us by Michael, a friend who had taken a foreign visitor for lunch at a pub where he had previously eaten delightful sandwiches and a tasty pub-brewed ale.

— "Sorry sir, sandwiches are off. It's lunchtime now, sir, and the staff have gone to have their's."

— "Oh well, never mind. We'll just have some of the local ale."

— "Sorry sir, we don't sell that any more neither, sir. There was too much demand."



1982: A representative of the Socialist Party declaiming at Speakers Corner, Hyde Park, London

Chapter 4

Of Loos And Drips And Ceiling Cracks And Cabbages In Tins.

Hotels, restaurants and guest houses are almost as rich a topic of conversation as is travel itself. We returned from our European travels with a swag of food and shelter memories which include the despicable, the ridiculous, the astounding, the curious, the quaint, the picturesque and the charming. While certain particularly delightful establishments rescued us from depression, others would have plunged us into it but for the sure knowledge that we would be able to laugh about our sufferings when we escaped from them, as we inevitably would.

It is good for morale to have a comfortable base and good food, but homogenized international hotels and restaurants are not good examples of the cultures we travelled in order to experience. It is not our style to first decide to have a holiday at a major chain hotel and then later decide which one.

Readers are warned that our informal rating scheme for hotels bears little resemblance to those employed by governments and guide books. We were more likely to be impressed by a bare wooden room in a spectacular location than by a perfumed inner-city luxury suite cluttered with gadgets and over-priced alcohol.

4.1 Finding A Pad

I have already mentioned our disappointment with much of the mass of literature I collected, before departure, relating to the important topics of accommodation and sustenance. There was, of course, a little gold among the dross.

Two books which stand out in our minds are *The Food Lover's Guide To Paris*, by Patricia Wells and Arthur Eperon's *French Selection*. Both had a wealth of useful information and, even better, both were enjoyable to read. Eperon's *French Selection* features 50 of the best hotels in France, chosen for their combination of scenic location, charm and the standard of the accommodation. Amazingly, some were reasonably affordable and some even had vacant rooms when we arrived without booking.

We also really appreciated the accommodation recommendations in the guidebook published by the South West Way Association in Britain and in 1985 we made good use of the Michelin red guide to France. The recommendations in the latter took little or no account of scenic location or charm but seemed to guarantee an acceptable standard of comfort and convenience. We found the red guide's thumbnail maps of each significant town invaluable in locating hotels, attractions and Syndicats d'Initiative (tourist bureaux).

Generally, accommodation finding services, such as the Accueil in the Champs Élysées in Paris, the Tourist Information Centre at Victoria Station in London and the Syndicats d'Initiative in many French towns, were more useful than printed guidebooks. They were a more reliable means of finding a vacant room in the area in which we wished to stay at a price we could afford. Interestingly, not all of them were staffed by humans.

We found a computerised accommodation information service operating in, of all places, the English Lakes District. A large board outside the tourist bureau in Windermere displayed numbered photos of hotels and guest houses in the area and invited you to find out more about the ones which



1982: Scenic view from our relatively expensive hotel in Paris.

appealed by inserting a coin and keying in the appropriate number. A hidden computer would print out a description and all the necessary booking and tariff information. If all was to your liking you could then use a nearby telephone to make your booking. Although well satisfied with our temporary abode nearby (arranged by more conventional means) I couldn't resist paying a small amount of money to try out the new technology.

There seemed to be considerable advantages, however, to the more personal accommodation finding services operated by humans. They kept track of room vacancies whereas, despite its information processing prowess, the computer at Windermere did not. In addition, unlike the computer, human accommodation experts make the necessary telephone calls for you. Furthermore, because competition is so direct at the big city accommodation location services, it is occasionally possible to obtain a bargain when hotels with light bookings decide that half tariff is preferable to no tariff. They may not be as willing to cut their margins when the potential guest is already at their doorstep, however. Kathy stayed in a London hotel in 1979 for £5 per night, the limit she specified at the accommodation bureau. Other guests in similar rooms, who had arranged their accommodation directly with the hotel, were irate at being charged far more!

The only hotel we stayed in which boasted sufficient facilities to deserve a top NRMA star rating was also a genuine accommodation bargain. We deserved to find it when we did, having just arrived in Paris from Canberra and having worn out a great deal of shoe leather walking our 20 kg back packs from recommended hotel to recommended hotel, starting at Porte Maillot. Every single establishment on the list we had gleaned from the popular guide books was booked out, closed for renovations or shut. We retreated to the accommodation bureau (the *Accueil*) on the Champs Élysées and asked for accommodation in the 8th or 14th arrondissements in the category 150 - 200F.

The normal tariff for the room they located in the Hotel de Troyes in the Rue Vaugirard was 380F without breakfast but we slept and breakfasted in style there for only 200F. Our room had been recently decorated and was comfortable and well-equipped, with TV, telephone, bath and toilet. The generous breakfast of croissants and café au lait (or chocolate) was French living at its best.

The high standard of facilities at the Hotel de Troyes clearly justified an elevated tariff but, in

general, the price of accommodation is not obviously related to value. One of our favourite hotels was also the cheapest. It was located on the shore of Lake Annecy near the tiny village of Duingt and was meticulously clean, comfortable and charming. Its dining room was distinguished by an enormous window which gave uninterrupted views over the lake to a castle and craggy mountains beyond. The views were even better from a group of outdoor tables which were set idyllically among willow trees and summer flowers.

The cost of a night's accommodation for two in Duingt (in 1985) was 64F (\$A12), only slightly more than a quarter of the price we paid at a distinctly less appealing, vinyl-covered, radio-in-the-bed-head, chain motel located amidst all the romance of a shopping centre carpark in Dieppe, France. The high-school cafeteria style dining room of the latter offered a menu with English translations among whose delights were listed "singed chicken", and "hacked beef" (fine viande de boeuf haché).

The hotel in Dieppe was not particularly appealing, but at least there was nothing seriously wrong with it. The same could not be said of certain other establishments we encountered.



1985: Scenic view from our \$12 a night hotel in Duingt. Annecy, France.

4.2 Forcing A Laugh

The word “riez” is one of the imperative forms of the French verb meaning “to laugh”. It is also the name of a town in Haute Provence (France) which produces lavender essence. Its name ought to have prepared us for what would be required of us. The hotel in Riez had a modern plate-glass door bearing its name in stylish letters and an electric locking mechanism. These were the only modern aspects of the otherwise ancient premises.

The floors were covered with very worn and dusty linoleum and near-perfect sound transmission through the cardboard walls necessitated a prominent sign stating that “The silence of each is the repose of all”. The plumbing was ancient and the flushing of the toilet could be heard twenty rooms away; unfortunately our room was next door to it. Our sleep was frequently disturbed by advancing footfalls, various watery sounds and the same footsteps retreating.

This less than desirable establishment was operated by a woman who may have been forced to work to support her retired grandchildren. She hovered in the dining room in the morning ensuring that no one escaped without paying the bill. She seemed to do all the accounting in her head; one wondered whether her age caused forgetfulness, particularly at taxation time. When we left the hotel to go for a walk on the evening of our arrival, she cackled at us that the doors would be locked at 9.30pm. Her tone suggested that if we returned later than that we would end up sleeping out of doors, which, as it turned out, mightn’t have been so unpleasant.

The square in Riez was covered with sand and was totally dominated by enormous leafy plane trees. That evening it had assumed a very eerie appearance due to the nearly silent presence of a convoy of more than twenty fire fighting vehicles, all with blue spotlights slowly rotating. Uniformed firefighters communicated in low tones while remaining close to their vehicles. They were like an army waiting for the order which would send them into battle. We knew that there had been large forest fires some distance away but never did discover why this convoy was in Riez at that particular time. They were still there at 9.30 when we were compelled to retire to our room.

Earlier, we had spent some time in a cafe on the square. Kathy ordered one of those delicious ice-cream treats so popular in France which go under the names “Coupe St Jacques”, “Coupe Liégeois”, “Coupe Bavaois” and so on. I tried a “Diabolo Menthe”, the only drink I can recall which has a film named after it. This particular attempt at a filmworthy drink included so much concentrated peppermint essence that it burnt my throat and gave me indigestion. Fortunately I have tasted others elsewhere and enjoyed them.

We were not impressed with the breakfast at the hotel in Riez nor with the cleanliness of the dining room. It was the worst accommodation we experienced in France, and we would go to great lengths to escape the sound of its flushing toilet.

4.3 A Night In The Earl’s Gas Chamber

The toilets in the worst hotel in Britain caused no offence by their flushing. How could they? They were nearly all blocked! Unfortunately, this shortcoming was only one element of a uniformly execrable package. Our stay in 1979 was definitely for one night only.

The first clue to the unique features of the hotel was the fact that the reception clerk showed us to our room. It transpired that this level of personal service was necessitated by a (chronic) fault in our door lock. Part of the reception clerk’s job was to demonstrate the remarkable amount of force which could be exerted on a door without actually breaking the wood. He illustrated the approved technique of opening the door by applying a shoulder rather than a key.

After our disgust at the blocked toilets, we thought that we had found a compensating luxury in the form of green shag pile carpet lining the walls of the shower cubicles, but on closer examination the plush turned out to be a virulent species of mildew. The “double bed” in our room consisted of two single beds pushed together, one 200 mm taller than the other. The room was long and narrow and there was a gas fire against one of the long walls. The end of our bed was so close to the fire that we turned it off fearing that the nylon bed covers would be ignited by the heat. Despite the freezing temperature outside, we then hurriedly opened the window because it was instantly obvious that

the gas tap leaked. We might have been doing hundreds of future guests a favour if we had thrown a match in the direction of our former bedroom as we left!

Breakfast was said to be continental. “Continental” seemed to be a synonym for “microscopic.” The bread rolls were so small that you could have eaten them without risk to your health even if they had been poisoned. The tea cups stuck to the saucers as though they had been glued there and the saucers stuck similarly to the vinyl table cloths. This might have caused disaster when we attempted to do as we had been asked and return our dishes to the kitchen, but for a suspicious affinity between the tablecloth and the table.

The proprietress of this hotel said that she liked to have Australians as guests and asked us to tell all our Australian friends about it. We’ve told you as much as has been permitted by our solicitors.

We would normally have been deterred from staying in Earls Court by its Barry Humphries-enhanced reputation as a ghetto for Ockers. We had been led to believe that the denizens of Earls Court wore cork-bedecked hats and alternated between sucking tubes of Fosters and pointing Percy at the porcelain. We decided to risk an encounter with such dubious types only because I had to catch a plane from Heathrow very early the next morning. Besides being on the right side of London, Earls Court is on the Picadilly line which means that no train changes are required on the way to the airport.

4.4 Rooms With A View

It was only in retrospect that I realised that nearly all of the hotels we rated most highly offered spectacular views from the hotel itself. I have already mentioned the beautifully located bargain-priced hotel in Duingt on Lake Annecy (France). Other establishments worthy of our maximum astral allocation include hotels in Najac (France), Zermatt (Switzerland), Pralognan (France), Fowey (Cornwall) and Moustiers-Ste Marie (France).

Our hotel near Najac (in the south of the Massif Central), an Eperon “French Selection”, was well-designed, offered excellent meals and facilities and was magnificently located. It stood beside the river Aveyron which has carved a horseshoe shaped bed around a steep sided peninsula on top of which are the relatively intact ruins of an ancient castle and the village of Najac. It was very warm when we were there and, although we didn’t avail ourselves of the generous swimming pool, we greatly enjoyed the warm, relaxing atmosphere in the evenings as we ate our meals outside on the verandah. Amazingly, both the meals and the accommodation were very reasonably priced.

The Hotel Bahnhof in Zermatt, Switzerland was also, by Swiss standards, very reasonably priced. It was cosy, clean and convivial. A wall plaque to the memory of an alpine guide, reminded us of its strong connection with mountaineering. Pine-lined rooms and rustic wooden furniture produced a homely, welcoming atmosphere but the features which elevated the Hotel Bahnhof to my top-star category were the charm of the town in which it was located and the fact that we could, with a little effort, see the Matterhorn from our window.

The rocky crags above the village of Pralognan, although not as spectacular as the Matterhorn, were nevertheless quite inspiring as we lazed on the private balcony of our first-floor room in the Hotel Parisien. From this sunny vantage point we could also survey the flat-stone roofs of the ancient Savoyard village, nestling on the fringes of the Vanoise national park in the French alps. The hotel was spotlessly clean and efficiently run but, sadly, its dining room was adorned with stuffed specimens of very many different species of local animal.

Spectacular views also distinguished our Bed & Breakfast establishment in Fowey (pronounced Foy), Cornwall. From our own room and especially from the bow window of the enticing guest lounge, we revelled in an uninterrupted vista of the magnificent harbour dotted with sailing boats. Our B&B was one of a whole row of imposing multistorey buildings from the same bygone era. In a very prominent position on the uphill side of a winding street not far from the harbourfront, they were a major contributor to the visual character of the town.

The appeal of the last of our top-flight rooms is based not so much on its visual attractions but on a combination of sensory stimulations. We nearly missed out on this accommodation highlight when we arrived in the fifth century village of Moustiers-Ste-Marie (in Haute Provence, France) on a

Saturday afternoon after the Syndicat d'Initiative had closed and all hotel rooms had been taken. We were forced to retreat and seek accommodation nearby. We found a hotel in Riez, whose description is too painful to repeat.

So attracted were we by the village of Moustiers that we returned there the next day and succeeded in booking one of the most perfectly situated hotel rooms on the planet. The contrast between it and the doss-house in Riez was unimaginable.

Built halfway up the side of some ochre cliffs, Moustiers straddles a ravine cut by a swift flowing stream. Spread below it are open plains on which lavender and other crops are cultivated. Our hotel was adjacent to the cleft in the cliff and we were fortunate enough to secure a corner room with one window overlooking the plains of lavender and the other as close to the rushing torrent as we had been to the flushing toilet in Riez. Naturally, we left both windows wide open. The night was warm and fragrant and the unchanging sound of rushing crystal water ensured a peaceful and undisturbed sleep.

Strung between the crags at the top of either side of the ravine in Moustiers is a 227 m long chain from whose centre a gold star is suspended. Despite its considerable dimensions, the star is so far above the town as to be almost invisible. On local postcards, by some miracle, it appears as large as a full moon and shines with golden light. The chain and star were commissioned by a local noble in fulfilment of a vow made prior to his departure on one of the Crusades. The original has been replaced several times, which seems only appropriate as such a beautiful village is certainly worth more than one star!



1985: The tiny speck in the sky between the crags is the gold star. Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, France.

Of the other hotels we honoured with our presence there are several which nearly justified my top ranking. The Hotel Quic en Groigne in the old part of St Malo (Brittany) offered no view other than a narrow grey-stone cobbled street but almost raised itself to the top bracket by the tastefulness of its decor and the friendliness and efficiency of its management. In any case, the magnificent views from the ramparts of the old town were only a hop, step and a jump away.

The hotel La Renaudière in Chenonceau in the Loire Valley (France) stands out for its proximity to the nicest of the châteaux and because the owner's beautifully maintained collection of antique furniture was tastefully arranged throughout the hotel, in the guest lounge, in the hall, on the landings, along the corridors and in the rooms.

4.5 Rooms To Remember

Though ranking neither with the very best nor the very worst, many other hotels displayed attributes which set them apart from others. They augmented our collection of memories, some fond and some otherwise. In 1979, I stayed most of my time in London in pleasant quarters in the northern suburb of Finchley which, I have subsequently discovered, is in or near Mrs Thatcher's electorate. According to the British Tourist Authority register, there was no cheaper accommodation anywhere in Britain. My landlady was Mrs Kim, a likeable lady of German birth whose Korean-descended husband spoke with an unexpectedly British accent.

There were guest rooms in the Kim's home in Station Street but they also owned another house a few hundred metres away. In expectation of a flood of guests, I was installed in the other house in Rosemary Avenue. Nobody else arrived, leaving me with the run of an entire two-story dwelling for £3.50 per night. On the first few mornings Mrs Kim appeared at about 8.30 am after a brisk walk through the icy conditions to cook my breakfast. Once, mindful of my unfamiliarity with far northern winters, she opened the dining room curtains wide so that I could appreciate an unusually heavy fall of snow. After a few days, I was permitted to help myself in the kitchen, saving her a walk and allowing me to depart earlier on my voyages of discovery.

One unfortunate aspect of the house in Rosemary Avenue was that, as is the case with many British dwellings, the waste water pipes ran outside the building. After finishing a bath one cold morning, I pulled the plug, but to no effect. The pipes were frozen and even the warm water would not melt the blockage.

My cousin Gordon and his wife Ann-Marie arrived in London for a lengthy European holiday while I was staying in Rosemary Avenue. They had never travelled outside Australia before and Ann-Marie's enjoyment of the flight from Melbourne was considerably dampened by the unfortunate combination of a large quantity of liquid and a clumsy steward. By the time they landed at Heathrow, she was in a state of considerable apprehension. Relieved and delighted to find a familiar face in the arrivals hall at Heathrow, she gave me an enormous hug.

They had asked a steward on the flight where they should look for accommodation and had been told to try Earls Court! When I persuaded them to stay with me in Rosemary Avenue, I had no idea of the terrible fate from which I might have been saving them.

Down market accommodation in Paris differs markedly from its counterpart in London and is typified by hotels in the form of a thin vertical slice out of a seven-storey row of buildings. Such hotels are built around a narrow staircase, and feature uneven floors and tiny mezzanine toilets. The stairwells make you wonder about your chances in case of fire and exude a characteristic and faintly unpleasant odour.

On our return to Paris late in 1985, we took a cheap room in the 1st arrondissement. It had only basic facilities but gave us a good view of a large neon sign which flashed the word "SEX" from about 7.00am to about 3.00am. It was very inspiring!

In 1982, a less typical hotel with fewer storeys near the Gare du Nord (Paris) allocated us a more spacious room with a walkway outside it. It overlooked a tiny courtyard bounded by the most depressing smog-stained stone walls imaginable. A friendly Algerian brought us our café au lait and chocolate in the morning and complimented me on my excellent French. I spoke French better than any Australian he'd met. Come to think of it, he'd never met an Australian who spoke French at all! So much for the compliment.

The bleak outlook of this Parisian hotel was a home-away-from-home compared with the 19th century prison in which we voluntarily incarcerated ourselves in Uzerche in the Limousin region of France in 1985. Clearly, someone had ripped out the bars of the cells in E block, taken out the slop buckets, installed a few second-hand wardrobes and called it a hotel. Inmates retired to their quarters

along an elevated, open-air walkway with individual landings outside each cell. Ours was at the end of the row and, being slightly larger, was probably regarded as the pentridge suite.

If prisoners were given beds like those in a pension in Voss, Norway there would certainly be a prison riot. Possibly predating their centenarian owner, our beds featured lumps, sags and discontinuities and in the case of Kathy's wire mattress, a 40 cm diameter hole.

Our bodies retain souvenirs to this day. Next to one of the beds was a most impressive blackened cast-iron wood heater but, despite obvious signs that winter had only recently departed, the weather was not cold enough to permit us to experience its operation.

After showing us our room, the proprietor led Kathy into the bathroom and wordlessly pointed upwards. After a few moments, Kathy realized that she was not showing off the remarkable modern features of the shower, namely that water came out of the rose when you turned on the tap, but rather requesting assistance in getting down her petticoat from the top of the curtain rail, it having been placed there by tall persons unknown.

The beds in Voss were hard to take lying down but we almost missed out on a bed altogether when we arrived at the hotel Victoria in Villers-Bretonneux (in Picardy, France) on the staff's day of rest. By good fortune we arrived while the manager was doing the accounts. We were thus able to check in even though the hotel was officially closed on Sundays.

The hotel occupied one wing of a very large set of buildings built around a large courtyard. In earlier times the ensemble may have been a farmhouse or perhaps a brewery. Our room was on the first floor and overlooked the courtyard. That afternoon, Kathy was recovering from the gastric havoc induced by the "hacked beef" she had eaten in Dieppe and I was immersed in a book when our attention was attracted by a group of people calling and gesticulating from the courtyard. It took us some time to realize that we were the object of their communicative efforts. There ensued a conversation in French with a lady who explained that she was interpreting for the others, an Australian couple! At this point the language of the conversation changed to English. Our compatriots were attempting to check in and had been engaged in a diligent but fruitless search for the hotel staff.

We were unable to help but it eventually transpired that they found their way to reception through an unlocked external door, consulted the register and borrowed the key to an empty room, leaving a note for the manager. As far as we could tell, their intentions were quite honest and they eventually paid for the room. However, their behaviour did not endear them to the management.

4.6 Of Swigs And Digs

Our only personal experience of "unofficial" accommodation was not particularly satisfactory. It started when we attended a dinner organized by the biology society at a Stockholm university. After a delicious meal our scientific friends performed experiments involving the destruction of their own brain cells. They sang traditional drinking songs which required the consumption of generous measures of Snaps after each verse. We were then taken by one of the more enthusiastic experimenters to the nearby accommodation which he had insisted upon arranging for us.

Throughout the evening he had been behaving in an increasingly inebriated fashion but we were forced to rely on him because he hadn't yet told us the address of our accommodation. Following his meanderings down the footpath, we were pleased that he did not own a car.

When he had difficulty finding his way, his unpredictability and our unfamiliarity with late-night Stockholm made us reluctant to relinquish our only map. However, not being able to think of a reasonable excuse, I eventually did hand it over. He studied it intently for some time, then gave it back, proclaiming that maps were stupid and that he could find his way without them, having lived in Stockholm all his life. When I glanced at it, I was immediately convulsed with laughter which I managed with great difficulty to suppress. I had unwittingly given him a map of Oslo!

It transpired that our accommodation was a room in a student residence which had been let to a former student who had left Stockholm. He retained tenancy under false pretences and sublet the room to a group of other men including our guide. This appeared to be the first our host's wife knew of the arrangement! We were less than happy about the deception but at 1.00 am there were no obvious alternatives.

We arrived at the front door and were entertained by our guide fumbling with his keys and exhorting us to be silent in a stage whisper which could be heard blocks away. This performance was repeated outside our room. In the room was a stuffed specimen of a species of owl sufficiently endangered as to qualify the possessor for a lengthy jail sentence. Before leaving, he told us that if the caretaker of the residence should ask us, we were to say that we were friends of a person whose name we couldn't pronounce.

The worst almost happened. Next morning, the caretaker knocked on our door and questioned us. This proved to be rather difficult as she spoke no English and we spoke no Swedish. She called in a resident from across the corridor to serve as interpreter. He gave a persuasive but presumably false account of our presence and she departed without evicting us. We weren't comfortable with our situation and left Stockholm ahead of schedule.

4.7 Turning Back The Clocks

When is a guest house not a guest house? In 1982 we stayed with Cliff and Joan Willetts and family in a magnificent house in Frisby-on-the-Wreake in Leicester, England. Cliff was a constructor of high-quality wooden clock cases for grandfather and other clocks. As a sideline and to justify his ownership of an expensive wood lathe, he taught wood-turning courses. I had read his advertisements in British woodworking magazines on sale in Australia and enrolled for a weekend course.

One of the attractions of the course was that full board for trainee turner and spouse was provided at reasonable cost in very pleasant surroundings. They were accommodated in the Willett's house, a residence of exceedingly generous proportions which had formerly been the seat of the local squire. The first of its three floors (plus attic) was supported on closely spaced oak beams approximately 300mm square which, if my memory serves me well, dated from the 12th century. An enormous fireplace offered sufficient room for a family to stand up in it beside the fire. A modern oil-fired Aga stove of comparable proportions contributed to the delicious meals we enjoyed with the Willetts.



1982: Massive fireplace. Frisby-on-the-Wreake, England.

The bedrooms on the first and second floors were huge. Ours was equipped with a large double bed, a wardrobe and a dressing table but there was still enough empty space for a game of indoor cricket, or at least to throw a frisbee without wreaking too much havoc.

I distinguished myself by arriving in Frisby with a dose of the 'flu. Cliff and Joan were kind enough to delay the start of my tuition and to provide sickbed accommodation in the meantime. Our stay corresponded with the sinking of HMS Sheffield near the Falklands and the news of this tragedy punctured the balloon of nationalistic euphoria we had detected over the country beforehand and brought a shadow over the household as, no doubt, it did throughout Britain.

The house in Frisby was heated by a large boiler in an outhouse. Cliff showed me that he sometimes fired the boiler with high quality furniture timbers such as Brazilian mahogany. Such unlikely fuel came from a local window manufacturer who operated an automatic machine which gobbled tree trunks and spat out multi-paned window frames. Unfortunately, "reject" quality frames, even those with only a single defect, were too expensive to repair and were broken up for firewood. Though saddened by this indictment of mass production methods, we were nonetheless able to enjoy the piping hot water.

4.8 Coming Clean About Baths

At the low priced end of market in Europe, accommodation proprietors were very mindful of energy conservation, presumably due more to its close association with profit than to a concern with the Earth's finite resources. They tended to pour cold water on the habits of guests used to the free-and-easy energy usage of Australian motels.

The hotel Kreuz in Bern, Switzerland had dastardly coin-operated showers. I hated them because I showered in rising fear of the sudden blast of cold water when time was up. The Parisian hotels which charged a fee for the key to the shower room caused less mental anguish.

Despite its showers I have a soft spot for the Kreuz and have stayed there twice. On the first occasion I had the cheapest room in the hotel. I think it was cheap because, although clean, well-equipped and cosy, it had been converted from a broom cupboard when the hotel bought a vacuum cleaner which was too big to fit! The room was tiny.

Many of the older hotels in London have added showers and bathrooms where previously there were none. Ancient bedrooms are sometimes large enough to accommodate a small shower cubicle which sits there looking like a transitory piece of furniture and almost defies you to use it. In other cases, extra communal showers have been added. There are usually problems with ventilation in the winter, however, and I regret to report that mildew has extended its tentacles far beyond our favourite stopover in Earl's Court.

In Mousehole (Cornwall), we were told that each guest was entitled to a free bath after every seven days' residence. Strange people who needed to bathe more often than once a week were required to pay for the privilege. In Penzance (also in Cornwall), a different system prevailed. Kathy had padded down the corridor in search of a warming and cleansing bath but had been unable to find a plug. I went to inform the owner of its theft

— "It's hard to believe, but I think someone has stolen your bath plug"

— "Oh no, my love. We keep the plug down here. Were you wanting to have a bath, my darling? Guests normally let us know the day before so we know to turn on the hot water service."

This Penzance guest house was well run by a likeable couple. Apart from the inconvenient bath routine, it had only two other failings, both of which it shares with a large number of English Bed and Breakfast places. The first was a tendency to decorate the establishment, and particularly the entrance hall, with samples of all the different wallpapers available in the local home decorators, and a multitudinous collection of bric-à-brac. The second was bri-nylon sheets!

4.9 Starting With A Clean Sheet

Every French hotel in which we stayed provided bed linen which was spotlessly clean and felt pleasant against the skin but tourists in Britain are often not so lucky with their beds. The sheets in a bed and breakfast place in Helston, Cornwall had clearly not been washed. Perhaps even worse, they were made out of bri-nylon.

For those who have not experienced them, bri-nylon sheets are a crime against humanity. Quick-drying sheets have considerable merit in a damp climate, but the feel of those made of bri-nylon is something to wish on your worst enemy. They seem to be always charged with static electricity, are rough and clinging when you attempt to slide into them and always feel unclean even if they have just been washed.

Having found bri-nylon very much in vogue in English guest houses, I imagined that they were a treasured British institution but at breakfast in Penzance (Cornwall) one morning the long-stay guests, who were all English, launched into spontaneous and unanimous invective against them.



1982: A tree in a pit made Bern, Switzerland a little more bearable.

4.10 Unseasoned Travellers

In the French alps in 1985, we seemed to arrive at each new accommodation just a few days before it closed at the end of the summer season. Actually, the Réfuge de l'Arpont closed for the winter even before we got there. We had planned to stay in this comfortable shelter high in the alps because the gardienne was a friend of Gordon and Pam's. We were pleasantly surprised to find that the mountain refuges have telephones and were thus able to speak to her at least.

We spent the last night of the season in each of Duingt, Pralognan and Termignon. In fact, we stayed in the hotel in Termignon several days after it closed! The proprietor said he didn't mind us staying in our room provided we didn't need meals and didn't mind paying the normal tariffs. We probably should have haggled over the price because no-one came to clean our room, but it was quite nice to have the hotel to ourselves. We were alone except for the proprietor's dog.

The dog was an exuberant red setter. The owner selflessly left it to entertain us with its vocal renditions for hours on end. It sat at the bottom of the stairs and howled. Once, when I left the hotel to obtain supplies, it executed a very cunning manoeuvre and, despite my best efforts (honestly), sneaked out between my legs and tore off like a bolt of red lightning. I was quite worried that it would be run over and I would be blamed, but fortunately no lynch mob came for me.

Termignon is a tiny town on a major transalpine route. The road descends a steep hill into the town, bends sharply on either side of the mountain stream which rushes through the town and continues on more level ground to Modane. Termignon has inspiring views up to the Dent Parrachée which, at 3697m, is the second highest peak in the Vanoise National Park and a very impressive mountain. When I arrived at the supermarket after the great canine escape, I found the shop owner scanning the slopes of the Dent Parrachée with powerful binoculars, looking at Ibex.

The weather in the Alps had been almost uniformly hot, dry and sunny, and the pattern continued and intensified as we continued our travels in the Midi. Daily maximum temperatures were still reaching 30C right up to the end of October. Australian readers have probably already deduced that October corresponds to April in the Southern Hemisphere and convinced themselves that it must have been an unusually warm French autumn. After some weeks of still heat, I was overcome with a burning desire to experience mist, rain and stormy weather.

We had already fallen quite a bit behind our planned itinerary, and were forced to choose between several intended destinations. We decided to forego time in the Massif Central in favour of a quick teleport to Brittany, stopping in Orléans to collect our mail. I wanted to find a hotel right on the coast in a situation conducive to fully experiencing any inclement weather which might come our way. We arrived on the coast late in the afternoon and spent what remained of the light assessing the suitability of hotels listed in our Michelin Guide. Many were closed as the summer season had well and truly ended. Our hopes were fading with the light.

Just on dark we came upon a little hotel, l'Auberge du Petit Matelot (The Little Sailor's Inn), located on the narrow neck of the Quiberon peninsula. At its narrowest, this neck is wide enough only for a road and a railway line, and the hotel was as close to this point as it could possibly have been.

We checked in and, arriving in our upstairs room, heard the wind gathering strength. It continued to do so all evening and when we walked outside the salt and spray in the cool breeze was very refreshing. During the night I was able to listen with pleasure to the wind and rain assaulting our windows and to the waves battering the coast I felt a great deal of satisfaction at the generous and precisely timed satisfaction of my whim by the elements.

4.11 Shelling Out To Live Like A Tortoise

One way of overcoming the difficulties of finding out-of-season accommodation is to take your own hotel with you. My cousin and various of our friends have bought camping vans in London and used them for both transport and accommodation. Some friends of Kathy's bought an old ambulance and fitted it out as a camper van. Our holidays have not seemed long enough to justify the time taken to buy and sell second-hand vehicles and we have shied away from the opposing risks of mechanical

unreliability and financial loss.

Graeme and Jennie, friends from Canberra, travelled for months in Europe in a van. One night they camped by a Norwegian lake. Next to them was a tent which, they were fascinated to discover, belonged to a student writing a thesis on "Recreation". That evening he consumed most of their only bottle of rum but still managed to commence his field work early the next morning, scuba diving in the lake!

Graeme and Jennie's van trip was also indirectly responsible for an extremely pleasant evening we spent sailing on the Stockholm archipelago. Graeme and Jennie had become lost somewhere in Sweden and were parked beside the road studying maps. Sten, an enormous, bearded Swede stopped his car and offered to lead them to their destination. In fact he invited them to stay the night and the friendship has been maintained ever since. When they heard that we were going to Stockholm in 1982, Graeme and Jennie insisted that we should telephone Sten.

Such had been their exhortations that I actually did telephone the number we had been given. A person who spoke almost no English answered. Had Sten's English become rusty with lack of practice I wondered. Was my pronunciation of his name so bad that he could not recognize it? Eventually I realised that I had dialled the number of the local hospital! I managed to find the number of directory assistance and was lucky enough to talk to an operator who spoke English like a native. Sten's number turned out to differ in one digit from the one I had written down.

Sten met us in Stockholm after work and took us home to his delightful house on the shore of the freshwater section of the Stockholm archipelago. His wife, Karin, had prepared a meal of traditional Swedish dried meats and fish and we picnicked on their yacht after sailing over to "birch" island, which, more than a thousand years ago, was a Viking stronghold. The tranquil beauty of the surroundings was increased by the colours of the setting sun playing on the silvery trunks of the birches which had given the island its name. The world was calm and peaceful apart from a momentary hiccup when we found that Sten's daughter's stroller had disappeared overboard without a trace! Fortunately, Sten's daughter was not in it at the time.



1982: Yachting in the Stockholm Archipelago in the evening twilight.

We returned to Södertälje after 11.00pm and, for the first time, heard the song of a nightingale. By the time we returned to Stockholm the main railway station was in the process of closing for its nightly hour of rest.

4.12 Close Encounters Of The Human Kind

Our introduction to Sten and Karin was an illustration of an excellent way of meeting Europeans, but when this mechanism is not available, hotel guest lounges can be an effective substitute. Remarkable as it may seem, hotels are sometimes frequented by natives. Even in these days of cheap international travel, some people still take holidays in their own country. We met the Allens, a retired English couple, in the guest lounge of our hotel in Fowey, Cornwall. We sat in the bow window looking over the beautiful estuary watching the light change as the sun set. Once it became completely dark outside, we retreated to comfortable lounge chairs and listened, fascinated, to tales of the Allen's extensive travels in their yacht and to some surprisingly convincing real-life ghost stories.

We discovered that hotels in some French tourist destinations also featured convivial guest lounges. Guests in the hotel in Pralognan who stayed more than one night were allocated fixed places in the dining room at which they could expect to find their own linen serviette, a procedure not designed to encourage social mingling. After dinner, however, most people retired to the guest lounge for coffee and perhaps a liqueur.

One evening I took a book to the guest lounge and improved my French by "eavesdropping" on other people's conversations. Eventually I found myself talking to a Belgian couple who I had seen earlier, resplendent in full leathers, on a large BMW touring motorcycle. For the past 17 years they had used all their recreation leave on walking holidays in the French alps, sometimes exploring the nearby mountain reserve of Les Écrins, but more often returning to the grandeur of the Vanoise. I drew on their wealth of experience in the Pralognan area and extracted some valuable suggestions for day-walks.

After the Belgians left I joined a group including a man who had been passing remarks critical of Anglo-Saxons in general and the British in particular. He went a bit quiet when he first heard my accent but soon realized that I bore him no malice and we shared an amicable and interesting conversation.

One can also meet people in restaurants and through this means we gained concrete evidence of the diversity of political opinion for which the French are justly famous. Arriving in Orange (Vaucluse, France) at late-lunch o'clock after several hours of Autoroute driving we found that there were no vacant tables at the open-air restaurant in the plane-shaded square. A French businessman with an air of wealth invited us to share his table. We struck up a conversation in which he expounded at length his views on defence, colonies, the then leftist government and the means he adopted to keep his wealth from the grasping clutches of the socialists. "We have the money but it won't come out until after the next election."

During this conversation, Kathy was able to observe a couple at a nearby table becoming increasingly irate at our companion's views. Later the woman came over, touched me on the shoulder and said, "Monsieur, you are a visitor to this country and do not know how things are. Please do not think that all French people believe the rubbish that this man is saying." From a safe distance her partner shook his fist and shouted "Salopard!" (Bastard).

In 1982, after a cruise on the Vierwaldstättersee (Lake of Lucerne) in Switzerland and a rack-railway ride up Mt. Rigi, we shared a table in the summit restaurant with two couples from an American tour group. Mt Rigi is only about as high as Mt Kosciusko but is well located to view the other real alps. One of our new-found companions asked me how to order food. I showed him the blackboard menu and indicated the waiters taking orders, adding that it would probably be some time before they arrived at our table because there were a great many guests and not many waiters. After I had finished my quite detailed explanation, he started talking to me in German!

I asked if we could continue talking in English as I spoke almost no German. He said that he had thought that by my [Australian] accent I must have been a German speaker and asked me where I was from. When I said "Australia", the light dawned for him and he said, "Oh that's right. You

speak mostly French over there, don't you — and a bit of English!"

Just then the other man, seemingly awaking from a daze, asked, "Say, ain't this the highest mountain in the world?" He didn't seem at all convinced by our contradiction of this proposition. Other evidence suggests that the American population, as a whole, are better informed than this sample would indicate.

Congregations of one nationality of tourists in a foreign land generally seem compelled to fabricate a temporary community isolated from its social surroundings. Tour groups often behave in less civilized fashion than they would at home. A friend of ours who lived by choice for many years in Germany, always gave roistering German tour groups a wide berth when he encountered them elsewhere in Europe.

People encountering their compatriots in another country seem to want to discuss endlessly, and at high volume, where exactly they are from, what they have seen so far on their trip and where they plan to visit. The terms in which local attractions and customs are described would surely cause mirth to residents who happened to speak the tourists' language.

We found an exception to the rules of expatriate behaviour in Oxenholme (England) in 1982 as we sat in the railway station waiting for the connection to Windermere and the Lakes District. There were twelve people in the small waiting room and it soon became apparent that the most vocal of them was a resident of Windermere. The others were more taciturn but, over a period of more than two hours, we were able to deduce that seven of them were fellow Australians. The nationalities of the other two remained a mystery as they maintained strict silence but we suspected that they too were from Australia. That so many Australians came independently to this remote junction is strange enough, but it is remarkable that none of us wanted to find out if we had common ancestors in Castlemaine or whether we shared the same views about bri-nylon sheets.

4.13 They All Managed Somehow

Several French hotels were operated by proprietors of whom we hold fond memories. A little hotel in St Rambert-en-Bugey (in the Rhone-Alps region) with a mountain in its backyard was run by a woman and her husband whose robot calculating-machine play-acting while trying to set dinner places for the expected number of guests afforded considerable amusement.

In Nice on the Côte d'Azur our hotel was run by a doctor who had given up his practice to join the tourist industry. He spoke good English and we conducted a ridiculous conversation in which I spoke French and he spoke English. I finally persuaded him to speak his own language by telling him that I had paid a lot of money and travelled 20,000 kilometres in order to improve my French. When he visited Australia I would be delighted to speak to him in English if he wished. Later, when I mentioned in passing that Kathy was feeling unwell, he offered to dust off his black bag, a level of room service you don't commonly encounter.

On our first visit to the Lakes District (England) we went to the trouble of walking several kilometres from Windermere to Ambleside in search of less tourist-infested accommodation. We found ourselves in a very unremarkable guest house operated by unremarkable people. In 1985 we eschewed the walk and enjoyed a far nicer Bed & Breakfast place only a very short distance from Windermere station! It was operated by very friendly people who told us that, unlike most such establishments, they were open at Christmas. On Christmas Day guests were treated as part of the family and joined them for the traditional Christmas dinner and also for the equally traditional washing up. Our hosts had begun lasting friendships with several Australians on such occasions, but their experience with a South African Christmas guest was less to their liking; he refused to demean himself to the extent of helping with the dishes.

In 1982 we stayed in a Mousehole (Cornwall) bed and breakfast place which prominently displayed photographs of members of the Royal National Lifeboat Service. It was operated by a lady who, at times, was unable to contain her bitterness at the lack of appreciation by the government and the country of the efforts of the lifesavers, among them several of her relatives. One of them had been with the Mousehole Lifeboat when it was lost with all hands not long before our visit.

She was vitriolic about ill-considered actions which resulted in lifesavers being required to risk

their lives. She was particularly angry at the captain of a decommissioned warship on its way to be scrapped. He refused tug assistance during a storm in order to preserve his salvage rights. The warship was driven on rocks soon after and, if I remember correctly, men from the local lifeboat service died in the attempt to rescue the crew.



1985: Evening view over Windermere.



1982: Sheep near Ambleside in the Lakes District.

4.14 Eggs: The Unknown Quantity

Bacon and eggs have pride of place in the breakfast menu of most British Bed & Breakfast establishments. Such breakfasts are very filling, but none more so than that offered by a hotel at Balloch on the southern end of Loch Lomond in Scotland. No other registered accommodation in Britain was available at lower tariff. It was thus surprising that breakfast consisted of barrelfuls of kippers, tur-reens of porridge, lashings of bacon and eggs, followed by infinite supplies of toast and marmalade, and tea. It was easy to give into gluttonous temptation then but not so easy to go walking later, as we had planned.

Breakfast at the pension in Narvik in the far north of Norway was also a veritable feast. This wonderful smorgasbord included inexhaustible supplies of cold meat cheese, smoked fish, bread, coffee and other more familiar breakfast items.

Compared with these filling repasts, the description of a continental breakfast seems skimpy and unexciting: Coffee with bread and jam. However, at least in France, Switzerland and Austria the reality outshines the description and is something to be savoured and looked forward to. French bread is ideal for the purpose. It doesn't keep like Australian bread but it seldom has to because there is an unwritten law that bread shall be consumed within hours of being baked. Only once were we given stale bread for breakfast in France. Toasting had not improved its texture!

The bread rolls in Saalbach, Austria were a tourist attraction in their own right. There are only a very few bakeries in Australia which make bread like this or in the authentic French style and since the genuine articles cannot be imported, it is unlikely that tourist travel to Europe will cease in the foreseeable future.

Real continental breakfasts are more filling than they sound because there is always a plentiful supply of delicious coffee, or chocolate if you prefer, made with milk. They can be quite rich if the hotel substitutes butter-laden croissants or even pains-au-chocolat for the bread. This was quite common in our experience. Whether we were served bread, bread rolls or croissants they were always accompanied by pats of jam and, infrequently, salt-free butter. In France, the logic seems to be that your café au lait (and your croissant pastry) includes so much dairy product that you don't need more in the form of extra butter. I adapted well to this unfamiliar regime of butterless, untoasted French stick and milk coffee and never found myself longing for a cornflake or a weetie.

The use of individual jam and butter serves at breakfast seems to be so entrenched in homes as well as hotels that you can buy little decorated buckets "for keeping your breakfast table tidy". If you are not satisfied with the breakfast provided by your hotel in France, you can always negotiate a bed-only tariff and go to a café or patisserie for breakfast. There you can be fairly sure to find a mouth-watering choice between pain au chocolat, brioche and butter-laden croissants.

4.15 Pet Hates — A Dogged Quest For Food

Dogs are a feature of hotels in France. Most hotels allow pets to share their owner's room and charge a small fee for the privilege. In St Hilaire-St Mesmin (near Orléans) we were lulled to sleep by the scraping of claws on wood as the canine guest from Alsace paced ceaselessly in the room next door.

The worst animal noises we heard in any hotel were in fact produced by a conference attendee in the room next door to us in St Nizier in the Vercors (France). Each night he drank himself stupid, retired early and snored loud enough to wake the dead. Unfortunately we were unable to bang hard enough on the wall to wake even the sleeping. Our strenuous wall-banging was, of course, motivated by a neighbourly desire to help prevent the tragic consequences of sleep apnoea rather than by any selfish yearning for sleep. Of course!

French people, particularly Parisians, seem to delight in keeping large dogs in tiny apartments. They walk them at night to allow them to defaecate on the footpaths. The copious evidence available suggests that the dogs are fed on butyl mastic. This, along with the human habit of urinating against walls, on footpaths and against historical monuments is one of the least tasteful aspects of French culture.

French culture reigns supreme in restaurants, however, where chefs, waiters and gourmet clients

play to perfection their allotted rôles in the high art of gastronomy. Knowing this, I was quite non-plussed to observe an elegant lady dropping cutlets and pastries under the table. A large Afghan dog emerging from under the starched linen table cloth after the meal provided the explanation. At the time, I was quite taken aback but I have subsequently discovered that dogs are as much at home in French restaurants as they are in hotels.

There were some restaurants in which we felt slightly embarrassed and somewhat underdressed because we didn't have a dog. If you find yourself in this difficult position, a quiet word to the waiter should be sufficient to procure the loan of one of the restaurant's own dogs for the duration of the meal!

4.16 Eating Up, Eating Out

The best way to eat well in France without risking bankruptcy is to order "le menu", a fixed or limited-choice three course meal usually offered at less than the price of a main course "à la carte". Although the English word menu derives from the French, the meanings are different. The French equivalent of the English word menu is "la carte". In 1985 we stopped in a town called Die, south of the Vercors and, despite the name of the town, ate a meal in the local Italian restaurant. Although the French pronunciation of this name does not justify it, English speaking tourists can amuse themselves for hours making killing puns based on the spelling of the name. "Would you prefer to stop in Sisteron or Die?"



1985: Dave on his way to Die.

Australian cuisine is highly cosmopolitan and international variety is not restricted to the large cities. Even Canberra boasts Chinese, Greek, Vietnamese, Thai, British, Mexican, French, German, Italian, Indian, Indonesian, Malay, Pakistani, Lebanese, Turkish and Japanese restaurants. In contrast, the cuisine of other nations is very poorly represented in French towns, even those more populous than Canberra. Surprisingly, we found an Italian restaurant with a delectable and filling "menu" in

the small town of Die.

Our meal consisted of salad, roast chicken and chocolate mousse. It was supplied in enormous quantities and was so delicious that I'm sure we'll dream of it when we know we're going to Die. The salad filled a three-litre bowl and consisted of tasty, freshly picked vegetables such as corn, tomatoes, lettuce and cucumber, combined with olives and hard boiled eggs and tossed in dressing. No sooner had we glimpsed the bottom of the bowl than a second arrived.

— "There must be some mistake", I said, "You've already given us our salad."

— "But no, there are two of you, therefore there are two salads."

The roast chicken consisted of half a chicken each, roasted to perfection and accompanied by an unbelievably huge bowl of pasta in a delicious tomato sauce. We later did our best to do justice to the excellent chocolate mousse. The price of this overwhelming feast was less than 50F (A\$8) each.

The summer salad vegetables served in French restaurants and sold in the markets put their Australian cousins to shame. The French variety possess that mysterious ingredient called taste which, in Australia, seems to have been sacrificed to appearance and durability. My first project on return from our holiday in 1985 was to start an extensive vegetable garden in order to recreate the exquisite taste sensations of fresh, garden ripened vegetables.

One of the most atmospheric of French restaurants was the Bateau Ivre (the Drunken Boat) in the Latin Quarter of Paris. We dined there early on a very quiet evening and consequently missed the advertised live entertainment in the basement. We were well compensated, however, by the antics of the proprietor, a real character, who paced around the restaurant, conducted conversations with potential clients through the closed front window and in a very melodic baritone voice sang fragments from his extensive repertoire. I asked him if it were possible that he liked music. He replied that the feeling did come upon him from time to time.

In 1979, we stayed for a few days with Huw and Debbie, two vegetarian friends living in Cambridge (England). Although meat was a major part of our normal diet, we enjoyed the fruits of their culinary skills so much that, happening upon a vegetarian restaurant in Cornwall, we entered its doors with considerable enthusiasm. Unfortunately the menu consisted of dishes such as (badly cooked) nut cutlets in which vegetables dishonestly pretended to be meat. The results were very disappointing.

One of Kathy's endeavours to taste more traditional British fare resulted in a rather unsettling experience. She visited a London takeaway fish and chip shop and was untroubled by the lack of other customers until the proprietor declared his love for her, or words to that effect. She poured cold water on his suggestions and, her purchases complete, she turned to leave the shop. Watched by an approving staff member, he sprang from behind the counter and barred the exit. Kathy hasn't explained the technique she used to escape from this predicament but is adamant that he was still alive when she left.

In St Ives, Cornwall in 1982 we stayed in the same guest house as a holidaying chef from an up-market French restaurant in Knightsbridge. He was French and his wife was English. We were amused at the family divisions over the World Cup soccer match soon to be played between England and France. We all chatted in the guest lounge until Kathy and I went off in search of somewhere to dine. We passed a street sign saying "Salubrious Place" but this omen was not sufficient to protect us.

The waiter was a pimply adolescent, seemingly rather young for the job. He indicated the black-board menu which offered a choice of pork, lamb and beef roasts. We chose lamb, but were told, "Sorry, that ran out on Tuesday." We settled for beef. The waiter disappeared downstairs and after a lengthy absence returned with plates containing a few transparently thin slices of "beef" and about 5 kg each of boiled potatoes accompanied by cabbage, out of which the colloquial expression had been boiled. Here was the undoubted reason we were alone in the restaurant. We did not stay long.

Considerably later in our guest lounge we were able to greet the French chef and his family returning from dinner. They regaled us with stories of a most amazing restaurant in which a pimply waiter was also the chef and in which the food consisted of the leftovers the pigs wouldn't touch! What a terrible experience for a chef on holiday; he must have been tempted to return immediately to work!

I think that he would have been much more at home in the up-market French restaurant in Stockholm called La Brochette where our friend Coco worked as hostess. We dined there once and found the food excellent. Of course, we are not the sort of people who gain pleasure from name dropping, but readers will no doubt wish to know that we were seated only a couple of tables away from two members of the then famous pop group Abba! – Mama Mia! Ooh! Ah!

Back to earth in Amsterdam we found a sign advertising a “5 Flies Restaurant”. We didn’t eat there because we were afraid that the “fly” might be a newer and more descriptive rating token than the “star”. We kept our eyes open for hotels rated as “3 bed bugs” but didn’t find any!

4.17 But How Good Are They Really?

Fortunately, the lesson that the best hotels are only nearly as comfortable as your own home, did not cost us much to learn. While travelling, our most comfortable accommodation was in the homes of good friends.

In fact, spending time with long lost friends was a major motivation for visiting Europe. A side benefit was that, through their understanding of the local culture and familiarity with the country in which they were living, they were able to make our travels more rewarding.

On our three trips, we stayed with friends in Cambridge, Manchester, York, Edinburgh, Oslo, Stockholm, Leiden, Utrecht and Freiburg. I was also offered accommodation “with no funny business” in Zurich by a friendly Swiss lady who saw me in the railway station, noticed I was Australian and introduced herself. She had holidayed in Australia while spending a year nursing in New Zealand and wished to repay the hospitality she had received in both countries.

We were particularly appreciative of our stay with Gordon and Pam in Leiden (Holland) in 1979. We arrived there in mid-morning after travelling 62 hours by car, plane, train, foot and boat. The temperature was still only about -20C. Daylight was severely rationed and we were in a non-English speaking country for the first time. We felt tired, cold, vulnerable and out of our element.

The joy at being re-united with the friends with whom we had shared a house in Yarralumla years before quickly restored our spirits. After sleeping blissfully in a comfortable bed in our home away from home we were able to delight in our unfamiliar surroundings. Sitting on wooden boards on the top of the central heating radiators and drinking fresh-brewed coffee, we gazed at the beauty of the snow outside and the charm of the neighbours’ houses, warmly lit and displaying masses of indoor plants behind big picture windows.

During our long conversations with Gordon and Pam in Leiden, and later in Utrecht, we became aware of the extent to which they had become addicted to the European Alps, Gordon to the rocks and both of them to the scenery and the snow. Their enthusiasm for the Vanoise national park and other alpine areas rubbed off and we spent significant parts of our holidays in Europe exploring their favoured haunts.



1982: The most desirable street in St Ives, England.



1982: The 5 Flies restaurant in Spew Street, Amsterdam.

Chapter 5

The Nature of Europe (How Green Was My Parliament)

If I were to suffer from a phobia, it would certainly be agoraphobia, manifested as a fear of crowds. On one occasion, while trapped in a moving throng of people in Sydney, my discomfort was so intense that I felt a compelling need to clear a space for myself by swinging about with a pick handle. Before someone summons orderlies in white coats, let me hasten to add that I wouldn't really have used a pick handle! I'm quite normal. Really, I am.

Given my psychological makeup in this area, my visits to cities and crowded tourist destinations tend to resemble commando raids without guns (or pick handles). I make a beeline for my targets, achieve my mission objectives as quickly as possible and make good my escape. Even when I suppress my hatred of crowds and attune myself to the dynamic, exciting rhythms of a big city like London or Paris, the desire to flee and be free is never far below the surface. In cities, there is never the overwhelming feeling of freedom that comes from standing on a lofty, windswept outcrop. And, of course, cities never know the peace of a sun-drenched meadow by a creek.

It's not surprising then, that walks and other excursions in the countryside have been the source of some of our fondest memories of our European trips. Looking at the photographs we took brings memories flooding back even though the pictures are but flat and lifeless hints of the grandeur we actually experienced. I hope that the words of this chapter will stimulate similarly magical experiences, either in your imagination or in your future travel.

5.1 Switzerland: The Setting For Many A European Summit

Switzerland is less than two-thirds of the area of Tasmania but its population is larger than that of New South Wales. It probably has a greater density of spectacular mountains, rivers, waterfalls and lakes than any other country. It is a paradise for scenery hunters and its visual riches have deservedly been the subjects of countless calendars and chocolate boxes.

The Peak of Perfection

I am a great admirer of the shape of the Matterhorn; with its towering spire, it seems to epitomize what a real mountain should look like. Apart from photographs of Changabang in the Himalayas I have not seen evidence of a mountain to rival it. Zermatt, a car-free town lying in the ideal viewing position at the foot of the Matterhorn, was on my list of must-visit places from the instant I first heard of it. On my first trip to Europe I decided not to stay there, however, because I was sure that accommodation in such a beautiful resort would be beyond my means, particularly in mid-winter.

I had been travelling on my own for a day or two when I arrived in Brig, the Swiss gateway to Italy via the Simplon tunnel and also the starting point of the railway to Zermatt. The weather was bad, the evening meal at my hotel had been unappetizing and I felt lonely and depressed. Here I was in the midst of all the scenery I had been dreaming of, but, because I had no one to share it with, I

could not enjoy it. How I wished Kathy were there with me! Even the towering creamy froth of the world's best cappuccino coffee failed to lift my spirits.

The weather seemed little better the next day but, in the company of a Canadian couple I had befriended, I paid my return fare of 32 Swiss Francs and boarded the train for Zermatt, very pessimistic about the prospects of a successful first visit to the mountain of my dreams.

Despite my gloomy outlook, I soon found myself diverted by a series of beautiful ice-flows which clung, like miniature glaciers, to the sides of the railway cuttings. These icy curtains were also unfamiliar to my Canadian friends who tried to convince me that Canada was too cold to allow them to form! Perhaps they meant it was too cold for sensible people to go outside to view the works of nature.

As we drew into Zermatt, the clouds vanished, revealing the Matterhorn, glinting in the bright sunlight and every bit as spectacular as photographs had led me to believe. Close at hand and with an advantage of 3 km in altitude,¹ it towered over the town.



1979: The Matterhorn from just outside Zermatt, Switzerland.

Zermatt itself was just the white Christmas setting that European-descended Australians, nostalgic for the experiences of their ancestors, might dream of. It was actually January, rather than December, but still the snow lay round about and bells on one-horse open sleighs jingled. Some of the many merry gentlemen and ladies were playing a strange game on an outdoor ice-rink, involving brooms and heavy weights shaped like kettles.

A roar like the sound of a larrikin semi-trailer terrorizing this car-free town proved in fact to be a minor avalanche on the cliffs above. I spun around, dragged my camera from its holster, snapped a shot, and watched as my target of fugitive snow collapsed in a lifeless heap.

No psychologist, with the exception of Kathy, could prescribe a better cure for depression than this visit to Zermatt. With a feeling of great elation and boundless enthusiasm I almost ran along the snow-covered paths trying to get as close as possible, in the time available, to my favourite mountain. Eventually, in mid-afternoon, I stopped to eat my lunch on a bench I shared with a lady who said she

¹The summit of the Matterhorn is at an altitude of 4477m.



1979: A small avalanche above Zermatt.

came from Geneva. She spoke in French and I spoke in an unrelated language of the same name. She hadn't had the benefit of five years' formal French training in a Victorian high school, so it was not totally surprising that she sometimes had difficulty following what I said.

—"How long are you staying in Zermatt, Monsieur?"

—"Three hours."

—"Three weeks! You are very lucky to be here so long."

—"Not three weeks, three hours!"

—"Ah, three days - a pity you cannot stay longer."

—"I'm sorry Madame but I really did mean three hours."

—"But that is ridiculous. Monsieur. No one in their right mind would do such a thing."

—"But Madame I could not afford to stay in a resort like this."

She snorted and then wrote in my diary the name, address, price and facilities of the hotel she stayed in. I realised then that my Australian logic did not apply. By Swiss standards, Swiss resort accommodation is not excessively expensive. In fact, my acquaintance was staying in Zermatt more cheaply than I had stayed in the infinitely less inspiring town of Brig! Accommodation in Zermatt, even in high season (not a pun), is actually cheaper than in Swiss cities.

On a later summer visit we did stay in an inexpensive hotel in Zermatt and found the charm of the area as great in summer as it had been on that perfect sunny winter's day. And this time we stayed three days rather than three hours, but still it wasn't long enough. We didn't actually climb the



1979: Zermatt is very charming!

Matterhorn ourselves, though we understand that large numbers of people do succeed in reaching the summit in good weather, albeit with the assistance of local guides. In 1865 Edward Whymper and his companions, four of whom died when a rope broke, made the first “successful” ascent.

John Hillaby, in *Journey through Europe* (Palladin Books, 1974, pp. 215-216), quotes part of Whymper’s own account of an unintentional descent of the Great Staircase on the Matterhorn during a later solo expedition. He fell about 70m in a series of bounds, each longer than the one before, and sustained two serious gashes on his head. Coming to rest at last, he unsuccessfully attempted to stem the bleeding with one hand while holding on with the other. In a flash of desperate innovation he used a big lump of snow as a pressure bandage, staggered to a safe ledge and fainted.

Whymper’s zest for climbing knew few bounds and Hillaby also quotes an account of his unconventional arrival at the seventh floor window of a friend’s apartment in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Receiving an equivocal welcome from his friend who was engaged in fighting someone, he sought solace among the gargoyles of the parapet of Notre Dame!

For our part, we contemplated an assault on Gornergrat (altitude 3,130m) by rack railway or an ascent to the Schwarzsee (Black Lake, alt: 2,552m) by luftseilbahn (cable car). However, we eventually decided in favour of more active pursuits and took some easy walks on the many paths in the area around the town, revelling in bright sunshine, green grass, summer smells and generally idyllic conditions.

One such excursion took us to the hydro-electric dam near Zmutt, 300m above Zermatt. On this walk we were accosted by a number of highly curious goats who approached us so closely that we began to suspect their motives. It doesn’t sound very plausible after the event but at the time we were worried that they wanted to eat our passports!

Viewing the mountains was of course our main preoccupation but the Valaisan style of farm architecture was distinctive enough to make us momentarily lower our gaze. Small barns called raccards or mazots which are built of horizontal squared timbers notched together at the corners are very typical. They stand above the ground with large flat stones above each stump to keep out rats.

We saw no rats during our walks in the Valais, but we were captivated by some charming little furry animals playing in a most exuberant manner, diving in and out of burrows, knocking each other over, cuffing one another and rushing about in lunatic fashion. We were unable to identify them but later learned from our landlady that they were marmots. They were such delightful creatures that we wondered why they weren't as familiar to Australians as koalas are to Europeans.

Enjoyable as these rambles were, we have left a whole range (not a pun) of itineraries unexplored. A Zermatt tourist pamphlet claims that we have over 300km of well-maintained paths still to explore. And then there are the mechanical means of exploration. We really will have to stay for three weeks next time!

While extolling Zermatt's virtues I should not neglect to mention its specialist shopping facilities. Having lost his drawing pens over a precipice, geologist Gordon had occasion to discover that Zermatt, whose population is less than 3,000, is one of the few ski resorts in the world where one can purchase technical drawing equipment. Furthermore, if you feel in the mood to spend thousands of dollars on a Piaget watch you can do so in Zermatt and save yourself the fare to a large city.

Another inspiring mountain destination is Jungfraujoch, the high altitude saddle between the well-known peaks of Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. It is the culmination of one of the world's most spectacular rail journeys. The starting point is in Interlaken, a beautiful town situated on the stretch of the river Aare which connects two narrow lakes known as Thunersee and Brienersee. They used to be a single lake until the inflow of silt from tributary rivers on both sides formed the ground on which Interlaken stands. Interlaken extends 5km between the two lakes and has two railway stations. It is from Interlaken Ost (East) that the train for Jungfraujoch departs.

The route to Jungfraujoch is via Kleine Scheidegg at the base of the Eiger. There are two separate lines from Interlaken Ost to Kleine Scheidegg, one passing through Lauterbrunnen and Wengen and the other going via Grindelwald. Both journeys are magnificently scenic and consequently most tourists travel up one way and down the other. From some point on this journey (I don't remember where) it becomes apparent why Jungfrau (Young Woman) is so named.

At Kleine Scheidegg there is a change of trains to an amazing rack railway which ascends via a steeply sloping 7km long tunnel cut through the mass of rock which is the Eiger. There are two underground stations and, ironically, trains stop at both of them to let passengers look at the view! Unlike their city counterparts, the views from Eigerwand and Eismeer stations are breathtaking, panoramic and untainted by city grime. From each station, a short pedestrian tunnel leads to large observation windows from where views of the valley far below made me feel as though the subway had been suddenly transformed into an aeroplane.

Eigerwand, at an altitude of 2,825m, is located on the precipitous Nordwand (North Wall) of the Eiger some distance below "Death Bivouac" and has been used in past attempts to rescue climbers in difficulty. Eismeer, the higher of the two stations, is 3,120m above sea level. It is named after a "sea of ice" which bold skiers apparently dare to navigate down to Grindelwald. Although only 3970m high, the Eiger Nordwand is much more difficult to climb than the Matterhorn (4477m) and was not conquered until 1938. Many climbers died in unsuccessful attempts in preceding years and many have died since. The first conquest of the Eiger was a very dramatic occasion. Two Germans, Vörg and Heckmair started behind a rival team of Austrians, Kasperek and Harrer and managed to catch up with them on the second day. Instead of pushing each other off as would be expected by those who have read Trevelyan's *Eiger Sanction* (William Heineman, 1973), the two teams combined and eventually overcame blizzards and avalanches to reach the summit snow-blind and exhausted. The feat was avidly watched through telescopes from the hotel terraces below and took several days. In my opinion, these people showed very little judgment in selecting the Eiger Nordwand for a campsite! Myself, I insist on camping where there is at least enough flat ground to stand up on!

Harrer's book *The White Spider* (Palladin, 1985) is a well-written chronicle of the attempts on the Eiger North Wall, including its author's own pioneering success. It is gripping (forgive the pun) reading if you are able to overlook the wanton waste of talented human life. The glorious and heroic triumphs and the unjustifiable suffering and tragedy are strongly reminiscent of war.

Eismeer station is on the western side of the Eiger and from there the railway continues underground through the mountain called Mönch (4,066m) to terminate on the saddle between Mönch and

Jungfrau. At 3,454m, the Jungfraujoch terminus is the highest railway station in Europe. On arrival there, I spent a short time looking over the high altitude research station and a museum containing sculptures in ice. These human creations were interesting enough but, for me, the mountain itself was the main attraction.

From the observation deck, the views were superb; I could see range after range after range of snowy alps. It was mid-winter and I was higher than I had ever been on land before. It should have been an exhilarating moment and yet it seemed that something was missing. I had begun to wonder whether the ease of reaching Jungfraujoch had somehow robbed it of its excitement when a gentle but icy puff of wind cut through my warm clothing and reminded me with a shiver that the ground on which I stood was definitely in the hall of the mountain king! Thus initiated, I could almost imagine myself in the battered boots of a frost-encrusted winter rock climber arriving there with the aid of crampons and frozen ropes.

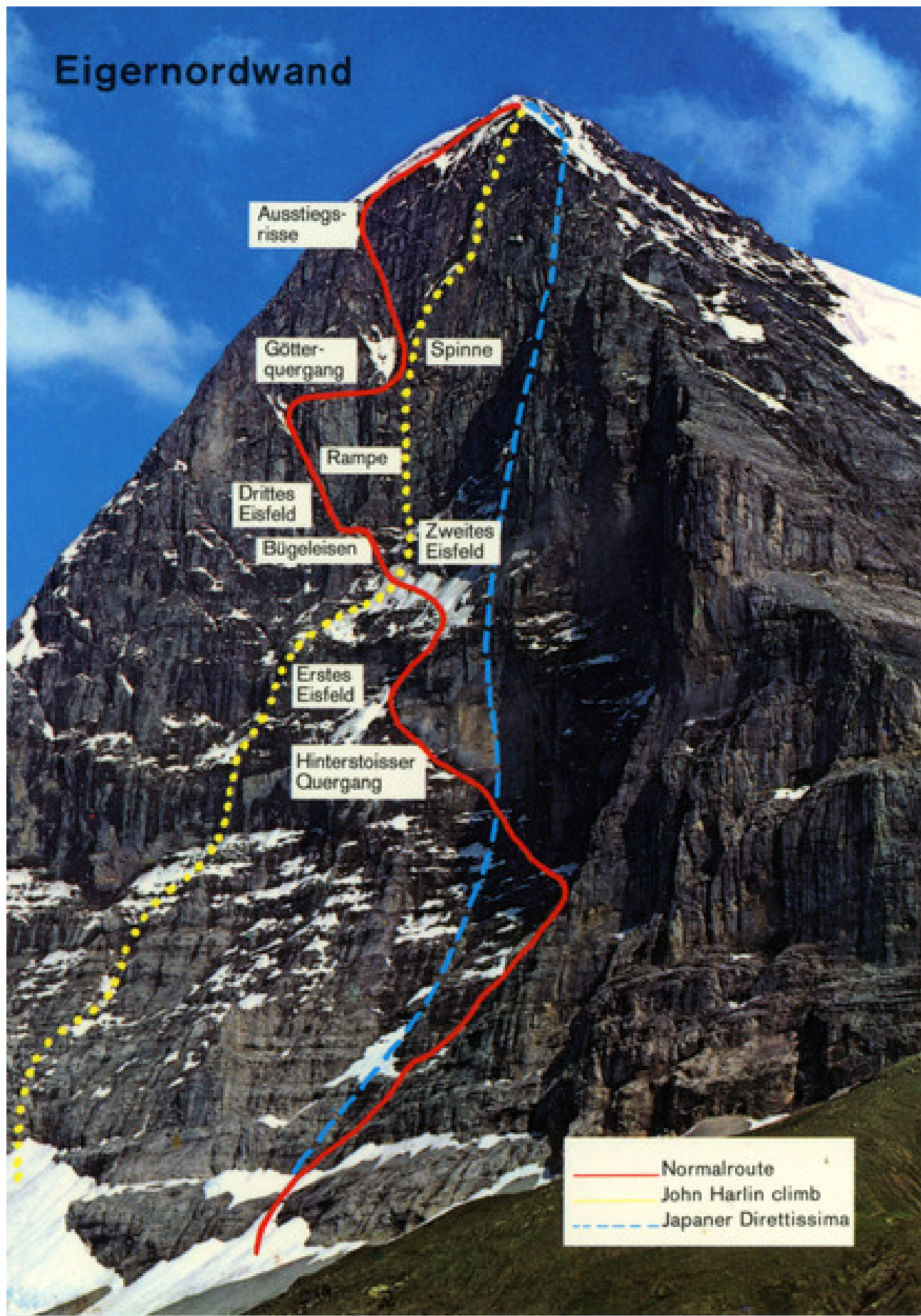
In the train on the way back from Jungfraujoch, I met an industrial chemist who had spent lengthy winter periods bivouacking near Jungfraujoch during the second world war. Surprisingly, he had actually volunteered for the mountain corps of the Swiss army. Apparently the evils of blizzards and avalanches were outweighed by the attraction of double food rations. Despite many mountains over 4,000m (cf. Mt Kosciuszko at 2,230m), the Jungfrau region is by no means a wasteland of rock and ice. In summer its valleys are rich and verdant and when we visited them in 1982, temperatures were on the hot side of warm. In Lauterbrunnen we came upon a cemetery in which the headstones were like lighthouses in a sea of living flowers. The effect was so beautiful that we imagine that Lauterbrunnen was the inspiration for the old joke about "people dying to get to the cemetery."



1982: A mazot (rat-proof barn) near Zermatt, Switzerland.



1982: Viewing post for the Eiger North Wall. Kleine Scheidegg, Switzerland.



1979: Climbing routes up the Eiger North Wall. Switzerland. (Postcard.)



1982: The beautiful cemetery in Lauterbrunnen, Switzerland.

5.2 Swiss Rivers Be Dammed

We had come to Lauterbrunnen to see the Trümmelbach waterfall, an indescribably magnificent and very unusual spectacle. From atop one steep, almost vertical side of the Lauterbrunnen valley, the Trümmelbachfalle drops nearly 300m and drains the melt water from several nearby glaciers. According to a sign nearby, the rate of flow is up to 20,000 litres per second and this scouring torrent carries away 20,200 tonnes of rock each year. It is clearly advisable to visit the Swiss alps soon, before they are worn away!



1982: The Trümmelbach waterfall roaring down the channel it has cut into the cliff.

Paradoxically for such a spectacular waterfall, the Trümmelbachfalle is almost completely hidden from view. The high-velocity stream of water with its load of stones and gravel has gouged further and further back into the rock leaving the cliff face intact but for a narrow, irregular slit. Weaknesses in the rock have caused the line of the fall to meander left and right as it snaked its way inward. As a result the water flows down a vertical “pipe” totally invisible to walkers in the valley. Transport to the Trümmelbachfalle is provided, incongruously, in the form of a lift. Alighting from it, we walked into the cliff along a gallery. We were immediately aware of a dull roar which intensified with every step. The noise reached a crescendo as we entered a final cavern, which was damp with fine spray. At its far end the water thundered down with all the sound and unstoppable momentum of a runaway freight train. Despite this, pedestrians were permitted to approach more closely than they would at any level crossing. Overhanging rock prevented us from seeing more than a short section of the torrent but I wasn’t tempted to lean my head in to look further up! The impression of awesome power was unforgettable.

The Trümmelbachfalle drains meltwaters from the western side of the Jungfrau group of peaks. It is in the glaciers slightly to the East of the same group that the Aare river has its origins, just a watershed away from the valley of the Rhône. Its waters finally join those of the Rhine after flowing through the twin lakes at Interlaken and looping around the Swiss capital of Bern. Before entering the Brienzersee near Interlaken, however, the Aare passes through a dramatic gorge known as the



1982: View up the valley from outside the Trümmelbachfalle hotel.

Aareslucht.

In 1982, we travelled to Meiringen by train in order to view the Aareslucht. On the way from the station we walked to the base of the Reichenbach falls where Sherlock Holmes and Count Moriarty were sent to their deaths by their tired creator. Unfortunately, visiting the falls required travelling in a cable railway which was closed for a lunch period which extended longer than our patience.

We continued on to the Aareslucht. This winding, narrow, steep-sided and sometimes overhanging gorge is 1400 metres long and up to 200m deep. According to our guidebook, tourists may enter it at either end. With this in mind, we walked several kilometres by road to its far end, only to find the gate barred and bolted!

Instead of giving in to temptation and using bolt-cutters or scaling the tall fence, we ate our lunch on the grass and retraced our steps. After a while we came upon a “parcourse” track through the forest and decided to take a short cut. Deep in the forest, we doubted the wisdom of this move after a heavy artillery piece opened fire and startled us out of our wits. It was particularly disconcerting because the multiple, amplified echoes of the shots bouncing back and forth from the ranges of mountains prevented us, not only from identifying the gun, but also from determining its location and direction of fire and even from being sure that there was only one of it.

Arriving in two pieces at the Meiringen end of the Aareslucht, we paid our admission fee and walked the length of the gorge along the catwalk provided. In some places, both the path and the gorge were sheltered by a natural roof. Overhanging walls, caused by the stream having changed course as it wore its way down through the rock, obstructed all view of the sky above. The gorge was well worth the visit but having to pay money to see a river was something of a shock to us at the time. The most curiously named waterfall in our experience drops into the valley of the Rhone near the little town of Martigny. It is called the Pissevache (Cow piss)!

Near Martigny, the river Drance joins the Rhône and the course of the latter makes a sharp turn to the north. Downstream from this bend are two memorable features. The first is an ancient church set into a seemingly vertical cliff face high above the valley floor. The second is the tributary gorge

of the river Trient which I explored by rail one Sunday afternoon.

A very picturesque mountain railway hugs the side of this gorge and rises steeply in a series of sharp bends and snow sheds toward the French border and Mont Blanc beyond. I relished the scenery around the boulder-strewn bed of the Trient and its steep, wooded sides. No doubt the views are even more magnificent when they are not obscured by the thick summer haze that cloaked the region that afternoon.

Stations on this line and elsewhere in Switzerland are constructed of wood and built in unmistakably Swiss style. They are very pleasing to the eye and totally different architecturally from Anglo-Saxon railway buildings. Frequent changes of train and changes between overhead and third-rail electrification appealed to the rail buff in me.

After crossing the frontier at Le Châtelard, the line headed for a considerable time straight toward an impressively looming, ever-so-gradually growing mountain which, my map informed me, was the Aiguille de Glière. Finally, when the train seemed to have run out of options, it disappeared into a tunnel which crossed into the Val de Chamonix at the foot of the Mont Blanc massif.

I could have stopped for a while at one of the famous winter resorts such as Chamonix-Mt. Blanc, St. Gervais-les Bains-le Fayet and Megève, but doubted that I would find any of my Porche-driving, Rolex-owning, après-ski loving friends in residence at this time of year. Concealing my face to avoid recognition, I continued on to the Eaux-Vives station on the French edge of Genève. I then toted my army-disposal day pack around to Genève's main Cornavin station and took a mainline train along the northern shore of Lac Léman and back up the the Rhône to my starting point in Sion.

Lac Léman is an attractive and very extensive body of water, and was, at the time, being exploited by sailboard riders. Its shoreline is picturesque although it owes much of its appearance to builders and gardeners. The shoreline of the Vierwaldstattersee (Lake of Lucerne), on the other hand, seems much less developed. Our appreciation of its beauty as we crossed in a boat was somewhat marred by our by-chance companions, the loudness of whose voices was in inverse proportion to our interest in what they had to say.

We appreciated the splendour of the lake much more from the summit of Mt Rigi to which we ascended by a steep cable railway. Mt Rigi is one of two lookouts (lookups?) easily accessible from Luzern which offer superb views of the taller alps. We chose Rigi rather than Pilatus (setting of a James Bond movie) because transport to it was subject to a Eurail Pass concession. On that day, the lake seemed even more beautiful than the alps we had come to gaze upon. Unfortunately, thick cloud too quickly brought down the curtain on this rewarding spectacle.

We have seen and appreciated many of Switzerland's natural charms but the overwhelming feeling I have in writing this section is of how much more there is left to explore! There are large tracts of scenic country we haven't even passed through! Even the places we have visited have only been subjected to cursory examination. They offer many, many further possibilities for excursions, particularly on foot.



1982: The Aareslucht, near Meiringen, Switzerland.



1982: What we presume to be tank traps in the valley near Meiringen, Switzerland.



1982: Le Châtelard-Frontière, on the border between Switzerland and France.



1982: Part of the Mont Blanc massif from near Le Châtelard-Frontière.



1982: We waited here for an hour but nothing happened. Sion, Switzerland.

5.3 Exploring The French Alps While Staying In The Savoy

In 1985 we confined our exploration of the French Alps to the Vanoise National Park, forsaking the considerable possibilities of the Écrins National Park and the Mont Blanc massif. On our way to the Vanoise, we stayed in an agreeable hotel on the edge of the tiny village of St. Rambert-en-Bugey.

St. Rambert is long and very narrow, jammed between the main railway line to Geneva and steep slopes aspiring to be cliffs. The N504 highway squeezes between the buildings of the town and the railway and makes life very hazardous for pedestrians. Our hotel was modern, well-appointed and had a mountain in its backyard. Having arrived in the afternoon, we decided to walk up the minor road leading from near the hotel to the village of Oncieux high on the mountain above.

Apart from an occasional hoon hailing hell on the hairpins, we were enjoying the solitude and the quiet of an early evening in the forest. The warm air of the day was trapped by the densely packed trees and felt still and close. The thick forest deadened all sound and the dim evening light was fading only very slowly into darkness. Suddenly, the feeling of calm and tranquility was shattered. Among the pine needles beside the road, a woman's bra, pants and shoes were laid out as though the woman inside had evaporated. Fortunately, we found no evidence of an awful sex crime and put it down to somebody's idea of humour.

Not wishing to return through the forest in complete blackness, our visit to the very agricultural hamlet of Oncieux lasted only long enough to ascertain that its streets were paved with organic fertilizer rather than with gold.

After leaving St. Rambert, we spent over a week in the Vanoise where our itinerary included five significant day walks, each quite different from the other. I say significant because climbing to a destination more than 1,000m above our starting point and descending again in a day was, for us, a significant activity. None of our walks were feats worthy of international acclaim, however, and we do not expect them to be included even in the Guinness Book of Nice Tries By Bumbling Amateurs.

The Vanoise is an irregular shaped park, taking in most of a massif bounded by two valleys running roughly east-west, the valleys of the Isère and the Arc. We avoided its highest levels because they are under permanent ice, except for dramatic rocky crags, and we had neither the equipment nor the training to tackle them. The middle levels are also very harsh and rugged, featuring extensive scree slopes, moraines (both old and new), rocky outcrops, icy lakes and freezing waterfalls. The lowest levels are greener and more hospitable, with streams, trees, flowers, wildlife and berries among rich grassland. Most of the rich valleys of the region are actually excluded from the park, a fact which does not particularly diminish the average walker's appreciation of them.

The area of the National Park is 52,800 hectares but this is effectively doubled because it shares a common boundary with the Grand Paradis National Park in Italy. The Vanoise is one of only three National Parks in France although there are also a few "Regional Natural Parks" and other reserves.

In comparison, New South Wales, which is 50% larger than France, has over 60 national parks of which Morton (152,942), Blue Mountains (215,970), Sturt (310,634), Wollemi (486,400) and Kosciusko (646,893) are all over 100,000 hectares. Australia has over five hundred national parks and its largest national parks. Lake Eyre (SA, 1,228,000 ha), Kakadu stages 1 and 2 (NT, 1,300,000 ha) and Rudall River (WA, 1,570,000 ha) are each more than twenty times the area of the Vanoise.

Nevertheless, the few National Parks that are to be found in France are spectacular. Had we the time, both the Vanoise and the Pyrenees were of sufficient area to keep us enthralled for weeks.

For the first five days in the Vanoise, we based ourselves in Pralognan, a charming town which is fortunately much less developed and much more attractive than the famous resorts of the area such as Val d'Isère. The road to Pralognan branches south-east from the N90 near Moûtiers and follows the valley of a tributary of the Isère. From Pralognan, a gently rising valley extends to the west past the tiny village of les Prioux, in the south a waterfall cascades down from the cirque of the Grand Marchet, and in the east a steeply sloping valley rises toward the hamlet of les Fontanettes.

Pralognan is surrounded by forests of conifers and watched over by tall peaks. We bought a book of suggested walks from the National Parks Office and checked its time estimates and difficulty ratings against ours on an easy walk in the forests near the town. We felt that it would be far better to find out that the time estimates were actually the current all-comers records when our lives were not at risk because of it. In fact, the times given seemed to be based on people walking a bit more slowly

than we were. Even short and undemanding walks like this provided lots to interest the Australian visitor. There were species of wildlife, flowering plants and trees which were all unfamiliar to us. It was good to see small scale logging operations in progress. These made quite a contrast to the clear-felling approaches employed in Australian pine plantations and wood-chipping forests.

5.4 5-Star Views From A Toilet And A Cirque

Vanoise - Walk 1: Cirque du Grand Marchet (1,711m - 2,584m)

Having calibrated our abilities against the book, we set off the next day for a walk from the hamlet of les Prioux (1,711m) to the Refuge de la Vallette (2,584m). We drove our car to les Prioux to save effort but we might as well have left it at home because we changed our plans during the walk and returned by a different route. In the end we had to walk a considerable distance uphill to collect it.

At les Prioux the path climbed steeply from the very start. Soon we were able to look across the valley behind us at the crumbling, weather-pulverised slopes of the Petit Mont Blanc (Little White Mountain). It was easy to see why the footpath crossing its lower levels is labelled “sentier dangereux” (dangerous footpath) on our map.

We encountered an unmarked “sentier dangereux” when we went to the toilet at the Refuge de la Vallette. The toilet was a little cabin some distance from the refuge. It was perched precariously on the edge of the cliff, looking down on les Prioux, 873m below. The path leading to it was very exposed. An attack of diarrhoea while staying the night in this refuge could be fatal! In daylight the door faced out over the cliff and, left open, provided a view unrivalled by other lavatories. From it we could see a maroon speck in the car park below and were reassured that our car had not been stolen.

We were very impressed by the several refuges we encountered in the Alps. They are lifesaving shelters in winter and offer comfortable accommodation in summer. There are 35 in the Vanoise National Park or just outside it. It cost a fair sum to stay in them but they appeared to offer many comforts, including clean mattresses in good condition. In summer they have resident caretakers who will cook a meal for you at a cost which is very low considering the circumstances.

There is considerable patronage of the refuges in summer but much less outside the holiday periods. Usually a portion of the building or buildings is set aside as a winter refuge (Refuge d’Hiver) and the rest is locked up when the caretaker descends to civilization.

If we were planning a holiday involving extensive use of refuges, we’d join the “Amis du Parc National de la Vanoise” or the Club Alpin Français and thereby qualify for considerable discounts on the nightly tariffs. The “Amis” had a special membership rate for foreigners. Incidentally, although it is forbidden to camp in the National Park, you may bivouac overnight as long as you have only a small tent which is erected after dark and packed away before dawn!

This, our first significant walk, took us considerably further than planned. The first optional extra was a side-trip up to the ruins of the Refuge des Lacs situated at 2,638m beside two small lakes. The second was much more extensive and took us to the cirque of the Grand Marchet after some challenging walking between the Roc du Tambour (drum rock) and the Petit Marchet.²

A temporary pause in the concentration-demanding task of traversing the “sentier délicat” over the rock itself revealed breathtaking views of Pralognan a kilometre vertically below. A little further on, we were grateful to have a massive safety cable to cling onto during the traverse around a large rocky outcrop, not because it was necessary in any way but because it made our photos much more dramatic!

Walking in loose scree at the base of a cliff on the side of the Petit Marchet, I looked up and, far above, saw a chamois (mountain goat) in an extremely precarious-looking position on a jagged outcrop of rock below an apparently vertical face. For a little while I wasted sympathy on it, thinking it must be stranded on the ledge after a fall from above. This feeling lasted until it kicked a few stones over the edge in my direction and, seeming to don magnetic boots, casually walked up the vertiginous slopes above it. It was then that I decided that my future did not lie in rock-climbing.

²The Petit Marchet is a peak of 2,568m just on the edge of the permanent ice cap of the Vanoise massif. Like the Grand Marchet, its name is applied to an adjacent cirque.

For those not familiar with them, a cirque is geographical feature comprising a level area almost completely surrounded by a ring of mountains. Wilpena Pound is a well-known Australian example. When we saw it, the floor of the cirque of the Grand Marchet was carpeted with green grass and flowers and the encircling rock walls were striped with waterfalls. The only gap in this natural enclosure was the lip of a 600m drop to Pralognan below and the stream, fed by the waterfalls, cascaded over it with surprising enthusiasm.

The cirque was very well sheltered from the breeze and it was a delight on this sunny afternoon to sit on the grass beside the stream and observe the activities in the valley below or to look across and up to the towering peaks of the Vanoise. It was definitely one of life's treasured moments.

My love of high places almost certainly stems from childhood expeditions to vantage points around Beechworth (Victoria) in the company of my mother and father. They used to carry me many kilometres on foot or by bicycle to places like Kelly's Lookout, the Precipice, the ZigZag and Pumpkin Rock just for the serenity of being there and for the inspiration of the views. Which young child could forget walking to One-Tree Hill in the dark to watch the lights of the Spirit of Progress as it passed through Glenrowan Gap?

Of course the rolling foothills, and even the "alps", of Victoria are a far cry from the dramatic landscape of the Vanoise with its mighty peaks, tremendously powerful though ponderous glaciers, plunging water and precipitous valleys. One of the rock walls enclosing the cirque is the Grand Marchet itself. At 2,638m it is not a particularly high mountain but nonetheless it is a striking feature in the landscape. From some viewpoints, it resembles an upside down ice-cream cone with a piece broken off the tip. This aspect reminded me of the mountain with a major rôle in Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. From the south, however, the Grand Marchet presents a broader and less regular profile. A curving horizontal band of dark rock near its summit makes a striking contrast with its powdery grey bulk.

Having unfortunately left our barrels at the hotel, we opted not to take the direct route via the waterfall and instead came down from the cirque on a very steep path down the "Pas de l'âne". Having translated the name as "the donkey's step", I wasn't quite sure what to expect. We thought we might have been donkeys to try it but it turned out to be a narrow path down a short, very steep descent over and through rocks. After this pinch the path was well made and easily negotiated though it continued to descend steeply until it entered a thick forest of conifers.

In more open areas on the lower slopes, the path took us past clumps of rhododendrons. In other places its edges were dotted with raspberry canes whose berries were ripe and delicious. We wanted to return to les Prioux without descending too far below its altitude and so, at a fork in the forest, took a gently rather than steeply descending path. This led us up the valley to the south-east rather than straight down to Pralognan. We finally hit the stream at an elevation of about 1,500m, making a difference of about 1,150m between our lowest and highest points for the walk and leaving a gentle two kilometre walk uphill to the car. In the forest beside the stream the trees were covered by a lichen doing its best to impersonate snow.

The path up the valley to les Prioux was a section of one of the long distance footpaths (sentiers de grande randonnée) which traverse most of the interesting parts of France. This one was numbered GR55 and was very well marked.

In the end we didn't use our Pralognan guide book much for finding our way. Its maps were inferior to the IGN 1:25,000 map of the Vanoise (Institut Géographique National map no. 236). Furthermore, I always prefer to choose my own route on a good contour map than to follow someone else's descriptions. The guide book was more useful for its information about flora and fauna, history and for alerting us to objects of interest which we might otherwise have walked past without seeing or understanding. On subsequent days we walked in the areas suggested by a Belgian couple I met in the hotel lounge and used the IGN map for navigation and route information.



1985: View down to les Prioux from near the world's most scenic toilet. Pralognan, France.



1985: View of Pralognan, France from near the Petit Marchet.



1985: Our first view of the Grand Marchet, with La Grande Casse towering in the background. Pralognan, France.



1985: A very different view of the Grand Marchet from further on in the walk. Pralognan, France.

5.5 The Eagle And The Goats

Vanoise • Walk 2: Lac de la Glière, Col de la Grasse (1,559m - 2,537m)

Our next walk worthy of mention took us to the vicinity of la Grande Casse (3,852m), the tallest peak in the Vanoise. It transpired that the trail we followed was of a completely different character to the one described in Walk 1 (above), being wide, even and well-defined.

Driving to the starting point of the walk at le Laisonnay, we stopped at the garage in Champagny-en-Vanoise to check that we were on the right road. I knew that my French pronunciation wasn't perfect and that my Savoyard accent was non-existent. It was therefore not surprising that when I asked the garage proprietor if this were the way to le Laisonnay d'en Haut, he cupped his hand to his ear and feigned not to understand a word I had said. "Quoi, monsieur?" "Où?"

Then, having persuaded me to attempt the pronunciation again (for his amusement) he grinned, put his arm around me, led me outside and pointed the way, wishing us a good day's walking.

The road beyond Champagny is another triumph of alpine engineering. In parts the road ran through massive concrete rock protectors which were designed to deflect avalanches into the valley below without taking tourist cars with them.

The parking area designated for people like us was at le Laisonnay d'en Bas on the Doron (mountain stream) de Champagny just outside the National Park at an altitude of 1,559m. The valley of the Doron de Champagny runs between the massive rocky outcrops of the Pointe de la Vallaisonnay (3,020m) to the left (north-west) and le Grand Bec-la Grande Casse (3,398m, 3,852m) to the right (south-east). Very sensibly, the dirt track, which was also occasionally used by farm vehicles, followed the doron. Just beyond the parking area, the magnificent Cascade (waterfall) du Py tumbled down on the left. Further on, a series of waterfalls enlivened the scenery on the right.

Our goal was the lac (lake) de la Glière at the northern foot of the Grande Casse. On the way we encountered a variety of flora and fauna which we attempted to identify, with mixed success, using a newly acquired book. We didn't need our book to identify the bumble bees we encountered, although they were enormous in comparison with their Australian cousins. Before visiting Europe we'd never realized that bumble bees were any different from ordinary (humble) bees.

Despite its name, the lac de la Glière was not at that time a lake. It was an expanse of gravel at the bottom of a cirque divided in two by a stream originating in a short but violent waterfall called the Moulin d'Enfer (Hell's Mill). In wetter conditions, waterfalls from all sides of the cirque would no doubt add to the flow. Water escapes from the cirque and into the Doron de Champagny through a narrow gap beside a large and curious mound of rock and earth whose origins are unknown to us.

Out of place in this isolated setting, a front-end loader engaged on some mysterious mission collected a huge scoop of gravel from the middle of the cirque and disappeared in the direction of the gap. The latter was sufficiently narrow to permit of the possibility that the driver was attempting to make the place into a proper lake!

Slightly downstream from the mound guarding the exit of the cirque were some buildings belonging to a goat farmer. On top of the mound was a tiny stone chapel appropriately sized for the likely congregation of one. Upon arriving at it, our attention was immediately attracted to the far side of the cirque in the direction of an enormous glacial moraine below the ice-scarred face of la Grande Casse. It was a long, thin, sharply-crested pile of stones steadily descending in a gently waving line for over a kilometre and a half. I had read about moraines in geography books but had never imagined one as long as this!

We sat high on the grassy slopes between the chapel and the floor of the cirque to eat our lunch. It included delicious big tomatoes we had bought in Pralognan for 3 cents each (!), yoghurt, grapefruit and sufficient camembert to keep an addict (me) on a high for a considerable period.

While I was occupied with the camembert Kathy went exploring on the floor of the cirque and found a group of marmot burrows. She had been keen to photograph marmots for some time and lay patiently in wait. Noises and fleeting glimpses as they disappeared down holes indicated that they were at home but did not wish to meet anyone from the press. After a while I could tell that severe frustration was setting in and was glad I'd made Kathy leave the dynamite at the hotel. The full extent of her desperation became evident later when she persuaded me to photograph her posing as a marmot!

Looking at photographs of mountains and cliffs is never the same as looking at the real thing. Photographs seem to flatten out frightening, precipitous cliffs, and rob towering mountains of their height and strength. Wide-angle pictures show a horizon of insignificant pimples between a wide band of sky and a homogenized landscape. Telephoto shots show a rectangular piece of a once-proud landmark now deprived of its context and hence its power to inspire awe.

Although unsuccessful in shooting, or photographing, its inhabitants, Kathy overcame many of the shortcomings of amateur photography in recording the spectacular beauty of the cirque. She took a set of overlapping photographs covering a wide sweep both vertically and horizontally. Because of distortions introduced by the lens, it is not possible to perfectly match the features on interlocking overlapping prints, but the inaccuracies do not seem to matter. The result is unusually effective in re-creating the visual splendour of being there but is hideously difficult to fit into a photo album (or to reproduce in this book).

Having relished the sun-drenched surroundings of the lac de la Glière for some considerable time, we decided that we were fit enough to climb even higher. We set off up to the Col (saddle) de la Grassaz along a track still wide enough for a vehicle and marked with the colours of the Sentiers de Grande Randonnée. Shortly after leaving the lake, our ears were serenaded by the multitudinous sounds of a herd of nearly 90 bovine campanologists. (Or, if you must, cows with bells around their necks.) They were grazing on the grassy slope above the track.

Soon after, we heard the by-now unfamiliar sound of a vehicle and were greeted by the three occupants of a four-wheel drive truck. We found out later that they were responsible for milking the herd of cows by hand! There was a stone chalet further up in which they turned the hard-earned milk into massive 50kg wheels of cheese called "tommies de Savoie."

The annual summer journey to the high pastures is known as transhumances and must be a pleasant change for the cows from the winters spent inside a barn in Champagny.

The walk took us past the grey scree slopes of the Aiguille Noire (Black Needle) and gave some impressive views back in the direction we had come. When we reached the Col de la Grassaz we found a neatly carved wooden sign saying "Col de la Grasse". Although unable to agree on the spelling of the name of the place, the sign and the map were unanimous that it is at an altitude of 2,637m, making a climb of 1,078m for the day. From the col, we had a fine view of the dark, snow-blotched, apparently indestructible mass of Mont Pourri (Rotten Mountain) and the nearer crumbling, pulverized sides of the Rochers Rouges (Red Rocks).

Mountains can be exhilarating places and this col was a fine example. We luxuriated in the clear mountain air and intoxicated ourselves on the views, but unfortunately we couldn't stay long. To return home before dark implied walking down in half the time we had taken for the climb. Such was our euphoria that this didn't seem as though it would pose any problem and nor did it. We strode down in our ten-league boots, carefree and enchanted by the surroundings.

Just past the lac de la Glière and some distance below the track I noticed a man, who I took to be the goat farmer, scanning the sky with binoculars. He beckoned us down and pointed out some royal eagles, including a young one. It was he who told us about the hand milking of the cows and the making of cheese. He was waiting for his goats to return to be milked. Sure enough, ten minutes further down the track we were surrounded by a multi-coloured, bell-ringing herd of tame goats methodically making their way home. Having investigated us to their satisfaction they continued on their way, completely free of human supervision.

The drive back to Pralognan was a little more eventful than I would have liked. With tired legs and heavy boots, I attempted to apply the brakes on a steep downhill stretch leading into a sharp cliff-side comer. The spacing of the pedals in the Citroën should have been familiar to me by then but somehow I missed the brake pedal! I had applied the handbrake and changed back a gear before I found the footbrake again.



1985: The very impressive moraine left by a retreating glacier. Vanoise National Park, France.



1985: Goats on their way to be milked. Lac de la Glière, France.

5.6 Getting To The Point

Vanoise - Walk 3: Pointe de l'Observatoire (1,750m - 3,015m)

In a sense this was the pinnacle of our walking in the Vanoise. It was the only time we have ever climbed above 3,000m. We parked our car near les Ruelles, another hamlet just a little beyond the starting point of walk 1. The first half and more of the walk was along GR55 which follows the valley of the doron de Chavière, climbing steadily. Just past the Pont de la Pêche (fishing bridge) we came upon a group of stone chalets (huts) near la Motte. One of them was, intentionally or not, very effectively camouflaged. We didn't recognize it for what it was until we were quite close up and even then it was difficult to precisely trace its outline.

At Ritort, little more than a name on the map, a bridge and a few chalets, we crossed the doron and started climbing in earnest. On this 1985 trip Kathy had a miniature cassette recorder with her at all times and recorded a commentary on the things we saw, heard and did. It has been invaluable in preparing this book. Unfortunately, she found the second half of the climb to the Pointe de l'Observatoire too exhausting to waste her breath talking into the microphone! Her shortness of breath can be excused as we took only 3hrs and 20 min to reach the col d'Aussois, a 6 hour journey according to the guide book.

Hairpin bends, loose stones and waterfalls were features of the second half of the climb. The waterfalls were not distant and dramatic as they had been on the way to lac de la Glière but noisy and wet. They were provided courtesy of a burbling creek with an appropriately melodic name - the ruisseau de Rossoire. The upper reaches of the path were very steep and very alpine. Where the ground was covered with damp rubble the "path" existed only in concept. We picked our way through the stones up the gully (please note that I resisted calling it a "couloir") to the col d'Aussois, intimidated and shaded by towering rocky crags on either side. The slope of the path was severe and its surface quite unstable. Remembering that descending mountains is usually more frightening and more dangerous than ascending them made us apprehensive about the return journey.

By this stage we realized that the curious and impressive pinnacle we had been observing on and off was not in fact the Pointe de l'Observatoire but the aptly named Tête (head) d'Aussois. From the lack of a track to the Tête d'Aussois, I gather that it belongs in the category of rock-climbing rather than walking. What a pity!

The col d'Aussois is the saddle between the Tête d'Aussois and the Pointe de l'Observatoire. We sat in the lee of some rocks on the col and ate our lunch. We could see that there were a large number of people on the track to the Pointe. Soon we joined them and just short of the summit, I jocularly asked a descending couple where one obtained reservation cards for the summit. To my surprise this question was received very coolly. It wasn't long before we were able to hazard an explanation for their lack of appreciation of my attempt at humour.

The summit covered only a very small area indeed and when we arrived every available place was taken by an obnoxious, arrogant young walker. These people were members of a class, encountered all too frequently in the alps, who seem to believe that walking in the mountains is a serious sport which should be the exclusive preserve of a fit, youthful elite. Women, the elderly and those not wearing the current alpine fashions are to be despised and shunned, regardless of their achievements and abilities.

We surmised that this gang of braves had denied access to the party which descended with such grim faces. We waited a few moments just below the summit and then climbed up, leaving the book of etiquette where it had been dropped by the super-heroes of the summit. We did excuse ourselves as we pushed in but we were determined to avail ourselves of our right to a share of the view. Within a few moments our temporary companions decided that the summit was far less enjoyable when shared and moved on.

The view from the top was a spectacular 360° panorama. We could see birds, including eagles, circling below us. In the direction of the twin aiguilles (needles) of Pecllet and Polset, the green waters of the Lac Blanc (white lake!) lay half a kilometre below our level beneath a mass of moraine and the remnants of a glacier. Far to the north we could see our home base of Pralognan in the intersection of two valleys and far beyond it the towering icy mass of the Grand Bec (Big Beak). To the south-east we could see beyond the limit of the national park to a hydro-electric dam called the Plan d'Amont



1985: Summit hogs on the Pointe de l'Observatoire. Vanoise National Park, France.

(upstream pond). Its wall obscured the view of another dam almost immediately below called the Plan d'Aval (you guessed it, downstream pond). This was within easy reach of the little town of Aussois where we planned to stay in a few days time.

From this vantage point, it dawned on us that we could walk to Aussois more quickly from here than it would take to drive there from Pralognan. The rigours of the day's walk also started to make us question the sense of our alpine walking strategy. Our pattern was one of slaving up a mountain in the morning and in the evening rushing down to a warm bath and a meal in a restaurant. By this means we avoided carrying heavy packs but condemned ourselves to ridiculous daily changes of altitude. It may have been better to lug our loads up into the mountains and thereby gain several days of ease, moving from refuge to refuge at more or less the same level.

It was with some disappointment that we left the Pointe and returned to the col d'Aussois. Here, an unfavourable weather forecast and supporting evidence of cloud and rain caused us to make a decision we were later to regret. We thought of walking in the Aussois direction far enough to investigate a monument marked on the map but instead decided to return home quickly to minimize the risk of being caught in bad weather. We did have warm clothes and emergency gear but were well aware of how quickly bad weather can turn a mountain dream into a dangerous nightmare. We did not relish the thought of finding our way down an unmarked path on unstable scree slopes in driving rain and zero visibility.

Our later regret at not having reached the monument was occasioned by the proprietor of our hotel who informed us that, had we gone the extra few hundred metres, we would almost certainly have seen bouquetins (ibex). The ibex is supposedly even more agile than the chamois and is reputed to specialize in the game of dislodging rocks. The males, with thick horns up to 90cm long, engage in ferocious head-butting contests, particularly in the mating season. I've read somewhere that a new-born ibex can leap up to 3 metres vertically! Ibex owe their continued existence (if indeed they do exist; we didn't see any!) to King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy who forbade ibex hunting in his private hunting reserve, now the Grand Paradis national park. The ibex in the Vanoise and in Switzerland are all descendants of Italian border-crossers.

Inexplicably, and contrary to normal experience, the descent from the col seemed easier than the ascent. We didn't complain! We spent our last day in Pralognan on a gentle walk up to the tiny hamlet of les Fontanettes. One of the major attractions on the way was a quite impressive waterfall which we viewed from nearly all possible angles. The stream which feeds it is, like nearly every watercourse in France, largely under the control of the EDF (the French Electricity authority). Hydro-electric projects on the Australian mainland are typically on a grand scale whereas the EDF seems to be happy to extract small energy contributions from wherever it can find them.

This means that maps of the alps are liberally sprinkled with indicators of EDF activities and that the alps themselves are not in as virgin a state as one might wish. However the EDF works are generally quite subtle and do not spoil the walker's appreciation of the environment. The most intrusive of the EDF facilities are undoubtedly dams such as the Plan d'Amont and the Plan d'Aval but even these are deep rather than large.

We stopped at a cafe in Barrio on our way back from les Fontanettes and treated ourselves to a banana split. Barrio is one of the group of hamlets which make up Pralognan. In the café we met a party of English walkers, one of whom was suffering from a sprained ankle. We were amused to find that it had happened when she fell down the steps of the toilet at one of the refuges rather than in some more dramatic mountaineering incident. Thank heaven it wasn't the toilet at the Refuge de la Valette!

The proprietor of our hotel in Pralognan gave us a souvenir gift of two miniature bottles of a local liqueur, *génépi des alpes*, as we departed for Termignon on the other side of the Vanoise. The distance between Pralognan and Termignon is less than 14 km as the crow flies but unfortunately there were no scheduled crow services that day and we were obliged to cover 138 km in our Citroën. The drive was an interesting experience in itself which somewhat compensated for the feeling that we were travelling ten times further than we needed to. There was a great deal of mountain scenery to appreciate including fine views of Mont Pourri from near Bourg St Maurice.

We also passed through the lunarscape of Val d'Isère, one of the most famous European ski resorts. It seemed too commercialized, too artificial and too exposed, and lacked any appeal it might have when covered with snow. After Val d'Isère we crossed one of the highest alpine passes, the Col de l'Iseran (2,762m.). After the effort we had expended attaining this altitude on the Pointe de l'Observatoire, we felt that we were cheating by driving so high.

The road over the pass is very narrow and has many hairpin bends. During the descent from the col into the valley of the Arc, we felt very exposed as the road has no safety railing of any kind. We also pitied the bus drivers who must ply this route. We were totally unable to imagine what would happen when two buses met. The descent from the Col de l'Iseran took us into the valley of the Arc, a major topographical feature which delineates the southern extremity of the Vanoise.

Bonneval-sur-Arc is a pleasant little town at the foot of the col whose houses are roofed with enormous flat stones. We told the lady who served us with petrol how much we liked the town and she said that it was nice enough in summer but the snow in winter, which could be up to 12m deep³, was not entirely to her liking.

Termignon is downstream of Bonneval at an altitude of only 1,300m. It is hemmed in on both sides of the valley by impressive ranges of peaks. To the north-west is the Vanoise, topped by the towering summit of the Dent Parrachée at 3,697m and a line of domes and glaciers exceeding 3,500m in several places. To the south and east is the Italian border only a few kilometres away and another major group of peaks including the Pointe de Charbonnel at 3,752m.

We had come to Termignon in order to walk up to the Refuge de l'Arpont where Gordon had based himself during his summers of suffering on geological field work. Unfortunately, the weather was initially unfavourable and we took time out to buy Kathy a pair of superbly comfortable walking boots in nearby Lanslebourg.

³This depth of snow seems inconceivable. Perhaps I was having trouble with the Savoyard accent or perhaps she was pulling my leg in the way geologist Gordon used to do when he told gullible Europeans that Australian kangaroos leaped into the air in order to catch birds!

5.7 Narrow Escapes From Molten Ice

Vanoise - Walk 4: Glacier de l'Arpont (1,347m - 2,700m)

The temporary bout of bad weather over and the dusting of fresh snow on the high peaks glinting in the bright sunshine, we drove a little way out of Termignon along a creek arrogantly named "le Doron" (The torrent) and parked at the bridge at le Châtelard. The first part of the walk was along a well made path which rose quite steeply through a forest of conifers. We were interested to see that a farmer tending his flock of 30 or so sheep had a late model Volvo at his gate. We wondered whether European subsidies to farmers could be so generous that they were able to earn enough from 30 sheep to pay for a Volvo.

Later we saw two young farmers mustering sheep on a very steep slope covered with wiry bushes and loose rocks. We were finding the track rather steep but it wasn't hard to tell who had drawn the short straws! At about 2,100m our path ended in a T-junction with the Sentier de la Grande Randonnée GR5.



1985: The Holiday Inn doesn't look too good! Arpont, France.

Our map labelled two parts of the GR5 "sentier balcon" (balcony path): one to the south of us and one north of the Refuge de l'Arpont. In both sections it follows a contour across steep rocky slopes high above the valley below, and would no doubt offer spectacular and possibly risky walking. I imagine that it was from a sentier balcon that Gordon had to be rescued by helicopter after landslides wiped out the path both in front and behind him.

The section of GR5 which we walked was neither difficult nor dangerous but it was spectacularly beautiful. The cliffs along both sides of the valley of le Doron far below us were rugged and impressive. Up the valley beyond the tiny settlement of Entre Deux Eaux (Between Two Waters) we could see the rocky slope of the Grande Casse which, according to our map, drops 1,650m in just over 2km.

As we continued toward the refuge, we came upon a tiny chapel and an oratory, typical of the many religious monuments dotted throughout the European alps. I don't know if they are there



1985: So Dave looks for a route to the Hilton. Arpont, France.

in an attempt to stave off the dangers of the mountains or to celebrate the incredible beauty of the surroundings. Whatever the reason for their existence, their extreme isolation surprised us. Marmots appeared to be the only parishioners.

Beyond the chapel we caught our first glimpse of the refuge de l'Arpont which is made of stone and wood and, intentionally or not, is quite well camouflaged. Between us and the refuge were an astonishing number of small torrents and waterfalls, each a feature of considerable beauty.

The main part of the refuge was, as we knew, closed for the off-season but we inspected the facilities of the building which remained in service as the *réfuge d'hiver* (winter refuge). The room was clean and mattresses were provided on the many bunks. There was a pile of envelopes in which walkers staying overnight were asked to place the fee for staying overnight. A locked collection box was the repository for these contributions to the upkeep of the life-saving refuges. Walkers were also encouraged to mark the envelopes with details which could assist in locating them should they fail to reach their destination.

The winter refuge with its massive walls and small windows was quite dimly lit even with the shutters open so we returned outside to eat our lunch. We sat on a bench next to the sign saying REFUGE D'HIVER and sweltered under the two-pronged attack of the direct sun and the re-radiated heat from the refuge's massive rock wall.



1985: The refuge d'hiver. Arpont, France.

The path from the refuge to the mass of glaciers above led up the grass-covered ridge of an old moraine. As we climbed we saw a number of marmots rushing about and shrieking loudly at our approach. The desperation of the shrieks made us wonder what grisly crimes of cruelty to animals had been committed by people looking like us. Marmots seemed to be much less timid and much more playful in the early summer than they were at this time of the year. Or perhaps Swiss marmots are more playful than French ones. Still no marmot photo for Kathy! Still no ibex seen!

Having no suitable equipment, we had no intention of venturing on to the ice but we wanted to see the Lac de l'Arpont at the foot of the glacier. This involved climbing over a ridge of gouged and

tessellated rock and then descending a few metres to the lake.

The lake is a freezing pond of aqua-coloured milk of magnesia at the foot of a sloping, fissured mass of dirty ice. Icebergs excreted from this unprepossessing part of the glacier float about in the lake until they are washed clean and bright. Eventually, they melt enough to pass through the narrow channel at the outlet and tumble down the waterfalls beyond.

The rushing torrent of water in this channel seemed narrow enough to jump, a theory I successfully tested, much to Kathy's consternation. Much to each other's consternation we searched for lumps of ice small enough to throw or to put down the other's back. Some of the icebergs were much larger than a car. We didn't throw those. The brilliant white icebergs floating in the aqua water of the lake offered many opportunities for photographs with the peak of the Dent Parrachée or the glaciers in the background. Water from the lake was of course responsible for the many torrents and waterfalls we had seen on the way up to the refuge.

On the way back down we caught a glimpse of an ermine scurrying across the rocks. We also gained a major prize: a photo of a marmot who stayed within telephoto distance for the necessary fraction of a second.



1985: The Dent Parrachée behind glacier melt water. Arpont, France.

5.8 A Graceful Arc Viewed From The High Screes

Vanoise • Walk 5: Col de la Masse (1930m – 2923m)

For this, our last walk in the Alps we moved base to a very nice hotel in Aussois. Aussois is a farming village relatively unspoiled by invasions of tourists like us. Please don't ruin it, gentle reader!

Aussois is nearly three hundred metres above the level of the Arc. Between it and the river is a line of forts, some in ruins. We didn't actually visit them nor did we find out their history or purpose but they looked intriguing from a distance. Each of them has a hyphenated name: Fort Marie-Christine, Fort Charles-Albert, Fort Charles-Félix, and Fort Victor-Emmanuel. We found ourselves constantly regretting not being able to visit interesting things we passed in France because of lack of time. Seven weeks is definitely not long enough.

Our hotel in Aussois had enormous windows, particularly in the dining room on the first floor. Unfortunately, the local electricity authority has seen fit to drape electricity supply lines, stacked vertically for maximum visual impact, at eye-level outside the dining room.

Opposite the hotel was a paddock of five or six hectares in which hay-making operations were in full swing. We marvelled at the labour-intensive nature of the exercise and were entertained by it for an hour or more. Mowing and baling were performed by separate tractor-drawn machines and the pickup involved large numbers of people and several small vehicles. With the aid of every catalogued Laurel and Hardy antic, two young boys managed to stretch the time for each short journey with a single-bale hand cart to half an hour or more.

We started the walk by driving to the parking area between the Plan d'Amont and the Plan d'Aval, two hydro-electric dams we had seen from the Pointe de l'Observatoire some days before. The drive was along a narrow, winding but well-surfaced road providing construction access to the dams and also access to some recently built ski-lifts.

This was intended to be an easy walk as neither of us was feeling 100% well. We almost called it a day while walking along GR5 on the gentler slopes above the Plan d'Amont but pride, curiosity or purposeless determination made us go on to our destination. Neither of us had been aware that we had a destination, but perhaps destinations are allocated by powers beyond the contemplation of mere walkers.

Steeper and steeper rose the path until just before the col we encountered a steep, wet, loose slope whose condition brings disgrace to the Department of Alpine Screes. It would surely cause the downfall of the responsible Minister, were he to visit it. Although the col de la Masse provided inspiring views of the Dent Parrachée, the Italian alps and Modane on the Arc more than 1,800m below, I was exhausted and seized the opportunity to lie down on the ruptured rocks and rest. I wondered if I was suffering from a camembert overdose but then decided that it was more likely that I wasn't eating enough of it! Kathy communed with the rocks and took plenty of photographs in case I was unable to appreciate the views while I was there.

On this our fifth walk to the alpine heights, I mused about why we found them so appealing. What, after all, is so desirable about an enormous pile of treeless rock, desperately trying to resist the constant onslaught of strong winds, ultra-violet radiation, lightning strikes and cycles of freezing and melting?

For me, the high places of the earth are where I feel more free, more relaxed and more at peace than anywhere else. From a mountain-top I can relate to more of the earth and more of the sky than from anywhere else. No trees protect me and no walls constrain me. No obstructions limit my view and no fences hem me in. No vehicles threaten me and no noises assault my ears. No complexity entangles me and no obligations entrap my mind. The air is sweet and the wind and the weather are naked and undecieving; it is a pleasure to be carressed by them.



(a) Kathy



(b) Dave

1985: One of us arrived at the Col de la Masse in better shape than the other. Vanoise National Park, France.

5.9 Ignoble Grenoble And The War In Vercors

From the Vanoise we travelled to the alpine foothills known as the Vercors over the spectacular high-altitude crossing of the Col du Galibier and past the Barrage de Chambon, an artificial lake whose waters are of a striking blue colour. We were enthusiastically heading for the city of Grenoble with the intention of evaluating it as a potential evacuation sites should control of Canberra's development pass into the hands of real estate agents.

It seemed that Grenoble might be one of the few practical and pleasant places to live and work within easy reach of the best outdoor attractions of Europe. It is not far from the Mediterranean, in a scenic setting on the Isère and close to the Vanoise and the other alps. Though Grenoble's population is not excessive, it is large enough to support a university, concert halls, specialist shops and cinemas.

A further incentive to visit Grenoble was that a hotel described in very appealing terms in Eperon's French Selection was located just on its outskirts.

The first serpents we encountered in this garden of Eden were its traffic and its parking problems. It required too much concentration to simultaneously negotiate the traffic and navigate but there was nowhere to stop! Alas, the rapid distension of the body of the town in the inflexible corsets of its narrow valley has already started to choke its arteries and stifle its breathing. The crags of the Vercors towering above were very impressive but their pleasantness to the eye was grossly marred by a very thick pollution haze. We read in an issue of *Science et Vie* (Science and Life, a very interesting magazine along the lines of *Scientific American* and *New Scientist*) that Grenoble was a fast growing headquarters of the chemical industry and boasted a plant for the manufacture of dangerous PCBs (Poly-Chlorinated Biphenyls). To top it off, the Eperon hotel was booked out.

We decided to carry on up into the Vercors and leave Grenoble to its chemical cauldron.⁴ The Vercors is a densely-wooded high plateau whose vertical edges have been slashed by dramatic narrow ravines. Daylight in the ravines is heavily attenuated by masses of every sort of vegetation from lichen to tall trees.

Civil engineers in the Vercors have created roads like no others we have encountered. They are narrow, sharply winding and very steep. They insinuate themselves between huge lumps of rock, huddle under overhanging cliffs, and ride on stone walls built painstakingly along the bed of the torrent. They make heart-breaking climbs and nerve-shattering descents which are very popular with the route planners of the Tour de France, but not quite so popular with the riders.

The roads are so narrow that it is difficult to appreciate the beauty of ravines. One dare not stand for long on the road because a fast moving car, no matter how well intentioned, would have to choose between knocking you into the torrent or crushing you against the rock. A deaf pedestrian's life expectancy would probably not be enough to complete a journey from top to bottom.

We explored two ravines (Combe Laval and the Grands Goulets) by Citroën.

After the Vercors we decided to go through Sisteron and Die. Our destination that night was Moustiers-Ste-Marie, and on the way we passed some remarkable land forms, including the dramatic ravine at Sisteron and the formation known as "Le Claps", a word unknown to either of my dictionaries. Perhaps it has been distorted from an English word – I refer of course to "the collapse" – in the same way that Londoners have managed to convert "Eleanor of Castille" into "Elephant and Castle". It was a disordered array of tumbled boulders where a river had cut through a ridge of rock. I don't really know what caused it but I suspect cosmic terrorism.

5.10 Gorgeous But Not A Wonder

The scenic charms of Moustiers-Ste-Marie have already been mentioned. One of the reasons we stayed there was to visit the Grand Cañon du Verdon, claimed by some guide books to be THE scenic wonder of Europe and the rival of the Grand Canyon. Don't believe them; it's neither! If it were in

⁴Two new friends who have lived in Grenoble liked it sufficiently well to return there. They tell us that the pollution we experienced is not a permanent fixture and that new roads have dramatically reduced the traffic problems. On the basis of this evidence, we're prepared to give it another try.

Australia, we'd blow it up and quarry the limestone as we've done with the equally impressive Bungonia Gorge near Goulburn, NSW!

The derogatory words in the preceding paragraph should ensure that you leave your unrealistic expectations behind when you visit the Grand Cañon. Without such expectations, you will find it very impressive, whether you drive around the unbelievable tourist road which balances on the rim most of the way along both sides of the gorge, or whether you walk down into the gorge and along the bottom as we did. There is a standard walking itinerary which takes you down into the gorge, along the bottom for several kilometres and up to another resort. If you haven't organized transport, you've then got a long walk back to your car. We chose to go half-way and then retrace our steps. Who could blame us? It was, after all, very hot!



1985: Maybe the drop off the edge of Grand Cañon du Verdon, France is further than we initially thought.

On the bottom, we found a car which had been pushed over the edge. It was squashed totally flat, providing convincing evidence of the depth of the gorge.

Despite the considerable heat, autumn had already taken control of the beech and other deciduous trees in the gorge and they glowed russet and gold among the green needles of the conifers. Autumn was well established in the Pyrenees too when we arrived there to continue our indulgence in France's scenic pleasures. En route, we found an amusing battle between two political graffitiists.

On some rock barriers around a mountain comer in Provence, a supporter of the ultra-right wing politician Jacques Le Pen had sprayed, "Le Pen, Le Pen, Le Pen". An opponent had altered this to: "Le Pen, Le Pénis (no translation required), Le Pénible (painful)". Thoughts of Le Pen and his racist policies were far away when we arrived in the Pyrennees at the beautiful resort of Cauterets near Lourdes. It was no miracle that we had bypassed Lourdes which, though only a small town, has 185 hotels. If all of them were occupied by sick people in search of a miraculous cure, the place could be downright unhealthy, not to mention crowded!

5.11 Rubbing Cheeks With Friendlier Alps

Cauterets (population 1,100) is located as far up into the valley of the Gave (torrent) de Cauterets as permitted by the geography. Although the road continues a few kilometres beyond it, enormous carparks on the lower side of the town give the impression that most vehicular traffic stops there. The cable of some sort of skier-transporter heads West over the town to the ski field of Cauterets Lys. Above the carparks the town rises steeply. From its hotels, entertainments and casino, we deduced that tourism has been Cauteret's principal reason for existence for a very long time. Many famous French people have stayed there including the author René de Chateaubriand who is reported to have said that his visit to Cauterets was his life's only moment of complete happiness. Considering the beauty of his birthplace St Malo, this is tribute indeed.

Our hotel was opposite the National Park and tourist information office in the lowest part of the town next to the carparks. In order to stroll in the beautiful country above the town, we had no choice but to run the guantlet of commercial temptations ranging from skiing and outdoor equipment to souvenirs and pastries as we toiled our way uphill. We were almost totally ignorant of the Pyrenees, with only the setting of Mary Stewart's novel *Thunder on the Right* to guide us. We therefore went straight to the National Park office and purchased another magnificent IGN map (Bigorre, 1:50,000) and a set of leaflets entitled *Promenades en Montagne* which describe 15 different walking itineraries.



1985: A rock climber on one of the walls of the Grand Cañon du Verdon, France.

5.12 A Ride Cameth Before The Falls

Pyrenees - Walk 1: Lac de Gaube (1,184m - 1,725m)

Our first walk was up a tributary valley to the Lac de Gaube which, I have since read, has been the destination of all those moderately energetic visitors “doing” the Pyrenees for over a century and a half. It is now accessible to even the only very slightly energetic by means of the sealed road to Pont d’Espagne (Spanish Bridge) and a ski-lift up the steepest part of the climb to the lake. The overwhelming impression of the country in the val de Jéret up to Pont d’Espagne and the Vallée de Gaube beyond is of hospitality and gentleness, beauty and lushness. It is far harder to imagine deadly blizzards among the forests in this area than in the more rugged Vanoise.

Early in our walk, we came upon a tree whose root system lay exposed and criss-crossed over a large bare patch of rock. To our fascination the rock itself was criss-crossed by a network of rocky veins in an almost identical pattern. So similar were the two that we wondered whether tree roots had somehow become fossilised into the rock. Not so, according to authoritative geological sources. Apparently the rock veins are later intrusions of igneous material into a rock mass of identical composition. The new rock, having insinuated itself later, cooled faster, formed smaller crystals and became harder, resisting the eroding forces of nature better than its surrounds.



1985: A small lake in the Pyrenees. France.

The Lac de Gaube has an appeal which is better experienced than described. It is a very pleasant spot for a picnic, the sort of place where you can sit in your choice of sun and shade, look out over the water, study the distant glacial peaks, idly contemplate the wildlife and wonder if it would really be worth the effort of seeking something more spectacular higher up. You certainly don’t waste time and mental energy contemplating how you will describe the place if you ever get around to writing a book about your travels when you get home!

One of the peaks visible from the lake is Vignemale, the highest summit in the French Pyrenees. We didn’t have our picnic at the lake but instead returned to Pont d’Espagne. There is a small bridge near the chalet in this area but whether it is Spanish or not we couldn’t tell. It is built across a dramatic

waterfall in which the water from two torrents entering at right angles combines with a lot of froth and boil. “A fantastic... for a picnic... weren’t for the ...”, I yelled, but Kathy didn’t hear me.

We followed another well-marked footpath back to Cauterets from Pont d’Espagne. It was not a Sentier de la Grande Randonnée, although it linked up with the GR network, but was in fact an “Itinéraire du Parc National”. Following the bank of the gave de Jéret on the opposite side to the road, it took us past a long series of spectacularly beautiful cascades. The name of one of them is loosely translated as “cat-killer”! Each had its own individual character ranging from noisesome fury to fearful silent suction; from cheerful gurgling to sunlit, watery lace.

An island in mid-stream is named after the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt (born in Paris in 1844) who liked the spot so much that she camped there. At the time, this was considered a remarkable exploit.

The Michelin green guide lists five of the Jéret waterfalls as two-star sites but there are several more which are, in our view, at least as worthy. We speculated that the guidebook might alternate its favoured falls from edition to edition in order to evenly spread the wear and tear caused by tourists. If you walk along the footpath instead of driving along the road, you will see them all and be able to judge for yourself.



1985: The rock seems to have the same root structure as the tree. Pyrenees, France.



1985: One of the many small waterfalls near Pont D'Espagne. Pyrenees, France.

5.13 Open Your Eyes But Make Sure You Block Your Nose

Pyrenees - Walk 2: Pic du Midi de Bigorre (2,115m - 2,872m)

The next day we visited an astronomical observatory I had read about as a child. It is balanced on the summit of the Pic du Midi de Bigorre, a respectable mountain of 2,872m. On (rare) clear days views from the observatory platform extend over an amazing area because the peak stands clear to the north of the rest of the range. The hemisphere of sky above the telescopes is completely free of obstructions. It is claimed that one can see the Atlantic to the West, the Mediterranean to the East and even the Puy de Dôme (160 km to the North).



1985: The observatory atop the Pic du Midi. Pyrenees, France.

We reached the observatory by driving to the Col du Tourmalet at 2,115m and walking along the access road. We walked rather than drove, not to avoid paying the vehicular access fee, but to better appreciate the rather unusual landscape which blended spectacularly contorted rock formations and rocky screes with brownish alpine grasses. The blue of the sky was reflected in a natural lake below us and the sun glinted on its still waters.

The road ended somewhat short of the peak at the foot of a cable railway used to transport supplies to the observatory. There was a steep walking track beside the line and it caused minor suffering to some of the car-bound visitors who had driven as far as they could, but who were now forced to indulge in quite vigorous exertion.

Although the track is quite short, it is not obvious to walkers exactly how far they are from the summit. One friendly person returning from the top called out reassuringly, "Courage, children. Only two more hours!"

The observatory and radio transmitter installations on the Pic du Midi have increased the area of the original summit and there is a concrete terrace whose perimeter fence protects against precipitous drops on most sides. The observatory buildings accommodate thirty people all year round and up to one hundred in the three snow-free months. I gained the impression that high-altitude, cold-weather physiological experiments are conducted there.

One inspired romantic is reported to have said that, on certain days, the view from the peak is so spectacularly beautiful as to make the angels nostalgic for the earth. We were not so lucky with the consistency of the atmosphere and for us the romance of the place was rather spoiled by the fact that the kitchen and other wastes from the observatory were discharged over the edge. Leaning over the rail for a deep breath of mountain air would be an instant cure for angelic nostalgia!

Apart from the very wide field of view, the Pic du Midi offers a number of advantages as an observatory site. It is high enough to ensure that most of the atmospheric contamination passes below it. Thanks to the absence of dust in its air, Lyot was able to observe solar corona whose light is only a few millionths as strong as the light of the sun. Such observations could not have been made from the plains below.

Another fascinating phenomenon is sometimes visible from the Pic du Midi. It is a green sunrise or sunset! When the sun rises or sets, its light must pass through an enormous mass of air. If this air is clear it acts like a prism and splits the light of the sun into the colours of the rainbow. The appearance is that of a set of coloured disks, red at the bottom and violet at the top. Normally, the impurities in our atmosphere selectively absorb the colours toward the blue end of the spectrum, leaving the red sunset colours we expect.



1985: Alpine tarn below the summit of the Pic du Midi. Pyrenees, France.

On a clear day at the Pic du Midi, the atmospheric absorption is significantly reduced. For a period of a second or two just as the sun disappears behind the horizon or appears above it, the reddish images are obscured and the others briefly visible. The result is a green sun and a green sky. On an exceptionally clear day the colour is momentarily tinted more towards blue. Or so the book says; we weren't persuaded to undertake a lengthy vigil atop the kitchen scraps!

5.14 Blind To Izzards And Watched By A Mule

Pyrenees - Walk 3: Lac d'Estom (1,371m • 1,804m)

Our last walk in the Pyrenees was in some ways the most enjoyable despite being taken on the morning of our departure northward. Our route took us far beyond the reach of motor vehicles and other mechanical appliances. We met virtually nobody on the walking track and were free to enjoy the tranquility of the partly forested valley.

We parked our car at the "hostelry" called la Fruitière about 5km from Cauterets. We are still uncertain about what services might be provided by this establishment but were intrigued at the means used to provide it with water. A pump driven by a miniature waterwheel extracted water from the rapidly flowing Gave (creek) de Lutour, a tributary of the Gave de Cauterets. Our trail followed the deep valley of the Lutour. Several peaks on the eastern side exceed 2,900m and those on the west are only a little lower.

The notes on this walk provided by the National Park office (leaflet 14) suggested that if we were to raise our eyes to the gullies on the western side, we would be certain to see some isards (translates to "izzards", are you any the wiser?) as well as marmots. Painted silhouettes of izzards mark the boundary of the Western Pyrenees national park and seem to indicate that an izzard is a type of deer.



1985: The silhouette apparently represents the mythical izzard. Pyrenees, France.

The path followed the boundary of the park and gave us the opportunity to see dozens of painted izzards, but, strain our eyes as we might, no real izzards appeared. No doubt if we had carried large cameras and luggage labelled D. Attenborough or H. Butler, they would have descended upon us in droves accompanied by representatives of even rarer species. Lacking the credentials of fame, we had to content ourselves with the inspiring view of the Pic de Labas (2,946m) at the head of the valley, only about 3km from Vignemale itself (3,289m).

The path climbs very gradually except for occasional steeper pinches where the gave cascaded over the granite outcrops which block the valley. Two other paths joined it en route to the lac d'Estom. One headed east to the Russell refuge which apparently offers superb views and the other climbed steeply west to the lac d'Estibe Aute.

Surmounting the last of the granite barriers, we arrived at the lac d'Estom, a lovely little lake with beaches of enormous rounded pebbles. A refuge, also marked on the map as a hostelry, supplied us



1985: Does a mule compensate for lack of izzards? I don't think so. Pyrenees, France.

with lemonade and a cup of tea which we drank in the sunshine at some outdoor tables overlooking the lake. We were ourselves looked over by a curious mule. The price of the lemonade reflected the difficulty of transporting it from civilization but the tea was excellent value.

There would have been many appealing choices had we the time to venture beyond lac d'Estom. A path led to the lac Glacé (frozen lake) at 2,650m, below the Pic d'Estom Soubiran, and another crossed the Col d'Arraillé (2,583m) to the Refuge des Oulettes de Gaube at the head of the valley of the Gaube and a network of other trails.

I told the gardienne of the refuge that I imagined that the izzards must have retreated to the heights because of the hot and dry season. "Oh, no", she said, "they're just down by the creek. You'd have to be blind not to see them." We peeled our eyes on the way back, walked slowly and quietly and made great excursions from the path, but to no avail. We stopped in Cauterets to buy white canes.

5.15 Brittanic Majesty

The Alps, and the Pyrenees are the areas of greatest potential as far as Australian style bush walks are concerned and we have only scratched the surface of their possibilities. The Massif Central is also reportedly very lightly developed and beloved of those keen on outdoor activities; unfortunately we didn't have time to visit it. Finally, the coast of France seems to offer a lot to interest walkers. We took a coastal walk on the Quiberon peninsula in Brittany and, in stark contrast to our alpine walks, gained and lost only about ten metres in altitude.

From our hotel at Penthievre, we walked along the Western side of the peninsula to its tip, passing a military establishment with a monument to former occupants shot by the Nazis. Beyond this erstwhile fort was a long stretch of rocky coast called the Côte Sauvage (Wild Coast). Its more exposed parts are dotted with life jacket stations and notices informing passers by of the dangers of



1985: Presqu'île de Quiberon, France. Our accommodation was very close to the narrowest part. (Postcard.)

approaching the sea too closely. These notices also record the significant number of souls who have ignored the warnings and perished.

As we returned from the town of Quiberon, near the tip of the peninsula, along a road which more or less follows the leeward coast, we were struck by the immaculate condition of the numerous and very substantial holiday houses. The solid construction, fresh paint and general air of being well maintained was quite surprising as most were presumably owned by Parisians and occupied only for short periods each year. We didn't see any tumbled-down shacks, decaying villas or partly completed testimonials to the imagination of amateur builders.

Numerous standing stones erected by some ancient race are a prominent, and seemingly eternal, feature of the peninsula. They are rather unheralded and seem to be closely integrated into later residential and rural developments. In St Pierre-Quiberon a Stonehenge-like circle of stones provided what must be a totally unique boundary for a private tennis court and we found ancient monuments in small vacant lots between houses.

These stone relics were impressive enough but, as we drove away from the peninsula, our minds were totally boggled by the scale of the "alignment" at nearby Carnac. It consists of several parallel lines of erect stones, over a thousand in all, arranged in approximate order of height and extending for over two kilometres. Some damage has occurred over the centuries and someone has even had the temerity to interrupt the columns of stones to build a house, but what is left is as astonishing as it is mysterious. As far as I am aware, no-one knows why they were erected nor even who erected them. Contrary to popular belief they pre-date the druids.



1985: Part of the prehistoric stone alignment at Carnac, France. There are thousands of stones.

5.16 Scandinavia: A Fir Coat Trimmed With Snow

Norwegian fjords are spectacularly different from all Australian scenery. A little side trip off the Bergen-Oslo main line organized by the Norwegian Railways and called “Norway in a Nutshell” was a magnificent way to see one of the most beautiful of them.

We took the Oslo train from Bergen as far as Myrhdahl and then transferred to a little train which wound its way down the icy slopes to the village of Flåm on the Sognefjord. It negotiated the many hairpin bends by going forward as far as possible, waiting for the points to be changed and then reversing to the next bend. It stopped beside several of the waterfalls to enable us to see and photograph them. A brochure reassured nervous passengers that there were three independent sets of brakes, each capable of stopping the train.

The Sognefjord at Flåm and beyond was spectacularly beautiful, with snowy peaks, northern skies and waterfalls reflecting in its deep, calm waters. We travelled down it by ferry as far as Gudvangen, past farms dependent on boats for communication with the outside world, the fjord sides being too steep for the construction of roads. From time to time as we cruised, our ferry crew hurled bundles of newspapers to news-starved farmers waiting on their jetties. From Gudvangen a bus took us up a winding road to Stalheim which has a breathtaking view over the ice-gouged landscape and the fjord. The trip ended at Voss, where we resumed our journey to Oslo.

A hydrofoil operating between Flåm and Bergen would no doubt offer a delightful journey but the scenery could hardly be better than experienced on Norway in a Nutshell. The hydrofoil operated only in the summer and we found that mid-May was definitely not regarded as summer. An immigration official at Bergen airport asked us the reason for our visit to Norway and when we replied, “Tourism”, snorted “Hah! Green winter!” We later discovered what he meant when we encountered snowdrifts more than one and a half metres deep in the town of Finse on the main railway line.

Regrettably, for us, the cold beauty of Scandinavia is very largely unexplored, though we have sampled some of its many pleasures. We are tempted to return to many areas we passed through on



1982: View of the very beautiful Sognefjord. Norway.

our various lengthy train journeys. Also appealing is the fact that, even in the cities, the countryside is never far away.

In Oslo, we walked with Bernt along beautiful lamplit trails used in winter for nocturnal skiing. In Voss we enjoyed a very invigorating stroll around the lake and into the nearby forests, redolent of spruce and fir.

Stockholm's extensive archipelago is a remarkable scenic asset. We took a lengthy ferry ride and picnicked on the tree-covered island of Sandhamn with its unusual wooden religious monument, looking very much like a fore-runner of a yet-to-get-off-the-ground Swedish space program. However, the scenic highlight of the Stockholm area was our sailing boat cruise to the island of the Vikings described in an earlier chapter.



1982: The road used during construction of the Myrhdahl-Flam line. Norway.



1982: Flam station. Norway.



1982: Delivering newspapers from the ferry on the Sognefjord. Norway.



1982: Looking back on Gudvangen from Stalheim after a hair-raising bus ride from the Sognefjord. Norway.



1982: Picnic on Sandhamn with Coco and Bo. Stockholm, Sweden.



1982: A polar bear cooling off. Skansen, Stockholm.

5.17 Scaling Down The Peaks In A Green And Pleasant Land

During each of our trips to Europe we have spent time exploring the many aesthetic and historical features of the British countryside. Although it seemed rather tame in comparison with the grandeur of the Alps, we did not make the mistake of underestimating its dangers in bad weather. Even passengers in cars and trains have died of exposure during snowstorms in Britain.

In Britain, even more than on the European continent, nature and human development are inextricably intertwined and many of the appealing features of the landscape are of human origin or have been modified by humans. Of necessity, this section will deal with "countryside" rather than pure, unadulterated "nature".

5.18 All Mine And Moor

Cornwall is a fascinating place for those with romantic or historical imagination. In the Cornish countryside such a person can easily conjure up fantasies of past centuries involving fisherpeople, miners, smugglers and wreckers. A wrecker is someone who, by lighting false beacons in stormy weather, deliberately causes ships to be wrecked on rocks or reefs, of which there are many off the Cornish coast. The wrecker and others then descend upon the flotsam and jetsam of the unfortunate ship's cargo. That Cornish people ever deliberately caused shipwrecks is disputed by many people, most of them Cornish. That Cornish villagers were exuberant, sometimes excessively so, in their looting of wrecked vessels is a matter of historical record.

Such activities would be frowned upon today, unless viewed through the far end of a hundred years, but they apparently received at least passive encouragement from certain contemporary moral authorities. A vicar in St Just in the seventeenth century is said to have offered the following prayer: "Lord, we pray there be no shipwrecks, but, if there be, let them be at St Just for the benefit of the local inhabitants."

I doubt that the present-day importers of heroin and cocaine into Australia will ever win the same romantic hero status as Cornish brandy smugglers of earlier centuries despite their battles of wits with Customs. In today's climate of tax evasion as an art form and the widespread acceptance of alcohol it is easier to retrospectively condone the illegal importing of cognac and other goods in those far-off impoverished times in Cornwall.

Walking along the coastal path around the Land's End peninsula we found it easy to imagine nefarious characters and their illegal but exciting deeds. The steep, rock-strewn cliffs which delimit the peninsula conceal an abundance of hiding places and are wrinkled into countless discreet anchorages. Each salty breeze off the Dr Jekyll Atlantic subtly hints at how frighteningly violent its other personality might be. We could see some of the almost-submerged rocks and off-shore lighthouses which are the props for its more dramatic role.

Less exciting than smugglers but perhaps even more interesting were the Cornish miners. Tin, copper and now china clay have supported the Cornish economy since long before Roman times and Cornwall abounds with evidence of former mining activity. Large tracts of land are pock-marked with mine shafts and dotted with the ruins of once great engine houses and chimneys. Farmers and other inhabitants have also indelibly marked the Cornish landscape. As a result we can no longer talk of wilderness but, along the extensive coastline and on the moors, there is definitely a wildness and an isolation normally associated with less altered places. Small Cornish fishing villages (off-season!) are, like huts in the Australian alps, worthy destinations for the walker and their charm is considerable.

5.19 Pottering Around Penzance

In February 1979 we tramped a few kilometres in mist and drizzle from Penzance around Mount Bay to Marazion from where one can walk at low tide to St Michael's Mount. Conditions would, on paper, seem to have been distinctively unfavourable but in fact we enjoyed ourselves greatly. Our coats kept us dry, the exercise kept us warm and our company kept us happy. All the while, our

inspiration was the beautiful but indistinct silhouette of St Michael's Mount, looming out of a sea of mist.



1979: St Michael's Mount, looming out of the mist. Marazion, Cornwall.

Unfortunately, we arrived in Marazion at high tide. We were probably the only tourists wanting a boat to the island in the whole month but even so, demand exceeded supply! Never mind, the return journey to Penzance was just as pleasant and we were well pleased with the tiny painted vase we purchased when we detoured via a rural pottery.

A week later, I returned to Penzance and spent a delightful sunny winter's day in the vicinity of St Just and Cape Cornwall. One of the attractions of the area was Lanyon Quoit, a giant stone table erected about 4,000 years ago which was high enough to be ridden under on horseback until it fell over in 1815. I walked past dozens of old engine houses, and visited the remains of Kenidjack Castle, the Pendeen Watch lighthouse, and Bottallack Head. In the distance I could discern Carn Kenidjack and Land's End. The people in the area were very friendly and no-one who passed failed to offer a greeting. One elderly man who I asked for directions walked a kilometre or so out of his way because the answer was too difficult to explain!

5.20 The Joy Of Fowey

In 1982, we traversed the so-called Hall Walk from Fowey ⁵ and found that, in England, the change of season from winter to spring is unbelievably dramatic. The path was almost overgrown with a luxuriating profusion of flowering roses, honeysuckles and other plants. The scent was overpoweringly cloying and an orchestra of birds accompanied by a drone chorus of bees assaulted our ears. The track was well established and equipped with the necessary infrastructure (styles over fences and wooden seats at all the best vantage points) for Sunday strolls by less agile or energetic walkers.

⁵Pronounced "Foy".

We weren't quite sure why the track we took was called the Hall Walk and wondered if it would take us past Toad or some other Hall. We didn't encounter any such stately dwelling but later read that the Hall Walk had been established for over 350 years, plenty of time for the origin of the name to have vanished.

There are many beautiful views of Fowey's charming harbour from the Hall Walk and one of the best is from above Boddinick. After giving it due appreciation, we descended the very steep main street of this tiny town, and took the car ferry across the estuary to the Fowey side.

Fowey is a very beautiful town, and, unlike many other picturesque Cornish villages, is not completely over-run by tourists. It is linked to Polruan, the village on the other side of the estuary, by a motor dinghy service which putters back and forth every ten minutes between 5.00am and 11.00pm or later.

While sitting on the jetty at Polruan waiting for the water taxi to Fowey, an older couple saw my name on my back pack and introduced themselves. Their name was Hawkins and they'd never encountered a Hawking before. (I can't help it if my/their ancestors couldn't write!). Their daughter was currently on holiday in Australia. How would we like to go sailing with them?

Unfortunately, a combination of circumstances prevented the fulfillment of the mutual desire for nautical adventure. A few years later, the Hawkins visited Australia and attempted to write to me using an address from the Canberra telephone directory. They weren't to know that my name didn't feature in its endless list of credits. Consequently, another Hawking received their letter and searched the electoral rolls with more success. As a result of her kind efforts, contact was re-established and Kathy and I spent a pleasant few hours over dinner with our Cornish friends.

The Safe Harbour Hotel in Fowey is appropriately named as the estuary of the Fowey river makes a very good anchorage. The harbour has a narrow entrance and is wider inland. Just opposite the town of Fowey, an arm of the estuary branches parallel to the coast behind Polruan. The river is navigable as far as the town of Lostwithiel, some 8 km inland.

Lostwithiel is one of the most appealing place names I have ever encountered. Cornwall boasts lots of other unfamiliar and attractive names such as Dr Syntax's Head, Tywardreath, Goonhilly Downs, The Lizard, Mousehole, Restormel, Tintagel, Lamorna, Woon Gumpus Common and St Erth but it also has a few such as Black Head, Maudlin, Bude and St Veep which are at the other end of the spectrum!

Our next excursion from Fowey took us along the coastal path to Polperro, a fishing village which was rather spoiled by an over-abundance of tourist shops. Nonetheless, it is in the classic fishing village mould complete with large gulls wheeling above ancient granite houses and coating them and the passers-by with liberal coatings of guano.

On our way to Polperro, we encountered something unexpected on the path: an adder. We feel quite honoured by the supposedly rare snakes of Europe because we also saw an adder near Najac in central France in 1985. Neither of these occasions were at all frightening;⁶ we were more likely to be bitten by the tourist operators in Polperro.

After stopping for lemon squashes in a cosy pub in Polperro, we wandered the streets for a while but soon tired of fighting crowds and set off for the comparative solitude of Fowey. Keen to explore more of the area, we returned by inland country lanes. This was not an overwhelming success because the combination of narrow winding lanes and tall hedgerows caused us to walk in constant fear of death by motor vehicle accident.

The pungent smell of silage and fertilizer together with vast amounts of manure on the road reminded us of the great intensity of British agriculture. We noticed that some adjacent small fields (paddocks) had been combined to make areas large enough to cultivate and harvest efficiently with modern machinery. Despite this aggregation, the farms were small and the villages very close together. We were seldom out of sight of a church spire or two.

⁶Kathy disputes this, and as it was she who nearly stepped on the snake in Najac, I should at least record her dissent!

5.21 Of Lizards And Other Serpentine Creations

We continued our 1982 exploration of Cornwall by travelling to Helston via public transport. We stopped briefly in Mevagissey, touted as the most beautiful fishing village in Cornwall. Unfortunately for us, the tide was out when we arrived and all the boats in the harbour were sitting in mud.

Helston is an inland town famous for its Floral Dance, sung about decades ago by Australia's own Peter Dawson. We chose it for its importance to the bus network rather than for its own debatable scenic charms. From Helston, we walked to a tourist tin mine once called Wheal something-or-other but at the time renamed "Poldark Mine" in an endeavour to attract tourists whose only sources of information about Cornwall were television series and bestselling novels.

Again departing from Helston, we travelled to England's southernmost point on the Lizard peninsula. I have sometimes wondered why achievement-oriented people desirous of walking from one end of Britain to the other start from John-o-Groats (close to the northernmost point) but head for Lands End (the westernmost point) rather than for the Lizard.

We stopped for refreshments at the Lizard hotel in which drinkers lie in puddles of beer and absorb it through their skin, no doubt becoming legless in the process. We then walked to Kynance Cove and were fascinated by the vast outcrops of serpentine rock. This beautiful, multi-coloured stone supports a significant workforce which turns tourist items such as candlesticks and lamp bases from it. Back at the Lizard, we bought a beautiful serpentine egg which we intend to return for refund at the first opportunity as it has shown no sign of hatching out a snake!

Close to the Lizard is Poldhu where Marconi first transmitted and received radio signals from America. In the same tradition nearby is the Goonhilly Downs satellite earth station. Noisy, low-flying RAF jets were a far less welcome technological intrusion into the countryside.

Finally leaving our base in Helston, we travelled by bus to Marazion for what we knew would be a successful trip to St Michael's Mount. We knew it would be more successful than our previous attempt because this time we had obtained tide tables for the region before we left Australia and carefully arranged to arrive at low tide!

5.22 Ventures From A Mousehole

Our next base was Mousehole, which I believe is named after an indentation of the coastline. It, like so many others in Cornwall, is a delightful little village. My enjoyment of it was rather spoiled by a gastric upset which I blame on some scallops which I ate in the local pub. Our landlady, on the other hand, blamed our "stupidity" in walking the 20 km back from Lands End. Myself, I cannot believe that something so wholesome, healthy and pleasurable could cause such suffering.

We had been driven to Lands End by some fellow lodgers from our bed and breakfast establishment. Once out of the car, we were able to admire the sea cliffs, birdlife and offshore light-house complete with roof-top heli-pad. While revelling in the noises and smell of the sea and the feel of the sea air, we overheard a conversation between two daytrippers who poked their heads briefly out of their car before roaring back down the A30 in the direction of London. "What a have! There's nothing here." Had they expected to find the main branch of Harrods, the lost city of Atlantis, or a tribe of mountain gorillas, we wondered.

We returned to Mousehole along the coastal footpath (the South-West Way) and experienced delights not even hinted at from the road. After a time we came upon the Minack open-air Shakespearian theatre, out of sight of all civilisation on the cliffs near Porthcurno.

Nestled among the granite outcrops very close to the water, the Minack is constructed largely from concrete and features a raised circular stage, tiered seating in the style of a Roman amphitheatre and all the stairways and balconies needed for the staging of Hamlet, Macbeth or Romeo And Juliet.

Incongruously, a teenager perching on nearby rocks just out of the reach of the waves surrounded himself with a protective acoustic shield powered by rap music from the largest "ghetto-blaster" we had ever seen. It fascinated us that the Minack theatre had been constructed single-handedly by a determined local woman (Rowena Cade). We stood and marvelled not only at her perseverance in completing such an ambitious construction project but also at her bold vision in contemplating such



1982: Dave at Land's End. Cornwall, England.

a juxtaposition of the best elements from nature with the best from human culture. Whether the setting would actually enhance the drama I cannot say with certainty.

A little further on we came upon the Logan Rock at Penberth Cove. Such balancing rocks are to be found in many places including my childhood home of Beechworth. Their reputation is that, although they may be rocked back and forth by a child, they cannot be completely dislodged even by a veritable army of strong people with crowbars. Where an "army" would be doomed to failure in Penberth Cove, the Royal Navy succeeded! The 65 tonne Cornish Logan Rock was knocked from its perch to the beach below by a detachment headed by a high-spirited young officer. Such pressure was brought to bear on the Admiralty by the local residents that the same officer was compelled to perform the even more remarkable feat of raising the enormous boulder to its original station!

The South-West Way would have taken us back to Mousehole but we turned inland at Lamorna Cove in order to examine some relics from the era of Stonehenge: a barrow or burial chamber, two enormous monoliths and a circle of stones called the Merry Maidens of Lamoma. Our car had passed within five metres of the barrow and none of us had seen it.

About this point in our 1982 rambles, Kathy's boots had, for some reason best known to themselves, taken umbrage at her walking such distances in them and inflicted terrible revenge. Her feet were an impressive collection of blisters, black toenails and sticking plaster. An in-grown toenail was a legacy of this contretemps and it troubled her for years afterward. Kathy's frame of mind was not aided by my alleged inability to appropriately express the sympathy I naturally felt.



1982: The Minack Theatre, near Porthcurno. Cornwall, England.



1982: The prehistoric barrow near Lamorna. Cornwall, England.



1982: The Merry Maidens of Lamorna. Cornwall, England.



1982: Kathy's impressive array of blisters. Cornwall, England.

5.23 As We Were Going To St Ives ...

Soon we moved on to St Ives, another delightful town despite severe tourist infestation. We revisited St Nicholas's chapel which defies the elements in splendid isolation on the sands between St Ives and the sea. Perhaps this St Nicholas preferred boats to reindeer-drawn sleighs. It seemed less dramatic in spring sunshine than it had in winter mist. We also returned to St Just and walked around the coast to Lands End. On the way we found a white sand beach which could have been imported from Australia. We looked down on it in bright sunshine under a cloudless sky and watched jewels glittering in the waves.

We enjoyed looking at the relics of long abandoned mining activities and managed to avoid falling down the numerous mineshafts. There is harmlessness and even beauty in the weatherworn mining monuments. They pose no threat and offer no impediment to walking where you will. If rare and beautiful things were destroyed when they were erected over a century ago, walkers are unaware of it and consequently unable to mourn the loss.



1982: At the St Ives station carpark. Cornwall, England.

5.24 We'll Visit Conniston Old Man But Forsake The Old Goat

So much has been written about the beauty of the Lakes District by better writers than I that I dare not say too much. Not for me to wander lonely as a cloud or to pull Peter Rabbit out of a hat! The descriptions of Lakeland beauty are not exaggerated; pay a visit and you too will see the light.

Light in Britain has a soft gentle character which contrasts with its sharpness, even harshness in Australia. The Lakes District is the epitome of soft light and reveals infinitely graded shades of delicate pastel colours. The subtle fading hues and the sweet evening air bring ecstasy to a twilight walk.

On both our visits we arrived in Windermere by train from Oxenholme. In 1982 we walked around Lake Windermere to Ambleside before seeking accommodation. We spent the next day walking in the vicinity of Loughrigg Fell and Stockghyll Force. It was very pleasant; you should go and do likewise.

Like various regions of France, the Lakes District forces you to learn a new vocabulary. Meres, tarns and waters are lakes, fells are mountains, forces are waterfalls and I think that ghylls are streams.

In 1985, we flew to Manchester after our extended sojourn in France in order to return to the pastel lakes. Our reason for not staying in Windermere (the town) in 1982 had been to avoid the postulated crowded metropolis at the railhead. It was a fruitless precaution and we enjoyed ourselves more the next time when we stayed in Windermere. On the evening of our second coming, we trotted up Orrest Head (200 m above the lake) in failing light just to see what could be seen. Like Cornwall, there is something about the Lakes District that makes you want to walk.

The next day we walked through the extended town of Windermere/Bowness and crossed the lake by ferry to "scale the heights" on the western side. We visited such delightful places as Mitchell Knotts, Harrow Slack, Scale Ivy Intakes, High and Low Pate Craggs, Black Stone Mires, High Blind How and returned to the lake via the Belle Grange Beck and back along the shore of the lake to the ferry.

Like Cornwall, the Lakes District is rife with the signs of past and present agricultural and other human exploitation. Like the engine houses and bronze-age barrows of Cornwall, the styles, the drystone walls and the distinctive dwellings do not seem to intrude in the landscape and even commonplace constructions like these are of interest to Australian visitors because they are so unfamiliar.

The next day we had only the morning to spend near the lakes and chose a more traditional tourist mode of transport: a mini bus operated by Mountain Goat Tours. We visited the home of Mrs Tiggywink and Jemima Puddleduck and William Wordsworth's school. Finally, and most enjoyably, we were permitted to stroll around the small lake of Tarn Hows, a very beautiful spot indeed and one which captures the essential ambience of the Lakes District. Or rather, it did when we were there; Hunter Davies reports that it may receive up to three quarters of a million visitors per year and that it becomes totally unbearable during school holidays.

Our enjoyment of this morning in pleasant surroundings was rather spoilt by the Old Goat driver who seemed bored by all the places we visited and who was afflicted with a complaint common to a hopefully very small group of the English population. He was one of those people who persist with stupid rituals and procedures because "that's the way we do things".

We had encountered a similar failing the day before among the English drivers patiently waiting two hours for a 500m ferry ride across Windermere. Can you imagine how long you'd have to wait on a busy day in mid-summer? You'd have to sleep in your car! The people waiting seemed to feel a misplaced pride in how everybody pulled together to make the system work smoothly. Wasn't the ferry driver clever fitting those extra cars on? I wondered why no-one had thought of building a bridge or a tunnel.

But did the apparent patience of those waiting for the ferry conceal a seething frustration? Behaviour at the nearby kiosk seemed to suggest so. Despite their world-wide reputation for obsessive queueing behaviour, the English patrons exhibited the rudest pushing and shoving I have seen outside of the do-it-yourself sandwich bar at the Australian National University Union.

5.25 Hole And Hill And Hollowed Axe

Our friends Chris and Meg were living on the campus of York University when we visited them in 1982. Before they left Canberra for York, we had given them a copy of James Herriot's Yorkshire featuring the incomparable countryside photographs of Derry Brabbs. Despite Yorkshire's "Hull and Hell and Halifax" reputation, Brabbs's book is one of the most beautiful coffee table picture books I have seen. Had the camera lied?

By the time we visited them, Chris and Meg had been living in the vicinity of Herriot country for a couple of years and were now in a position to tell us how reality compared with the beautiful frozen landscapes in the book. They had been to some of the vantage points where the artist had taken his photographs. Their verdict was that the photos are genuine but that they are the result of lying in wait for years to catch optimum compositions of light and colour.

Our own initial impression was that the Yorkshire countryside was a harsh environment, like an alpine area at ultra-low altitude. Yorkshire is drier, colder and more windswept than the Lakes District only a short distance to its west. Its considerable open spaces are compartmentalized by endless dry-stone walls, some of which are probably centuries old. It was hard to be sure as I had the feeling that even something built only a short time ago would very soon acquire the weatherbeaten mark of a constant struggler against winter.

As was our wont when visiting friends while travelling, we planned our itinerary so that we could spend the weekend with Chris and Meg rather than subjecting them to the temptation of taking leave from work. On the Saturday we drove on minor roads through Northallerton, Catterick, Richmond and into Swaledale. The first pheasant I had ever seen crossed the road in front of us near Richmond and disappeared into forest. I failed to shoot it, speaking photographically of course, because of the noise of two girls clip-clopping past in a horse and gig, so I shot them instead.

Swaledale, Wensleydale (from whence cometh the cheese) and Wharfedale (Speakers Corner?) are all part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. It is a park which would be considered quite strange in Australia because its boundaries take in not only active grazing land but inhabited villages as well. The aim is obviously to preserve the works of humankind as well as those of more powerful forces.

Near a place with the suggestive name of Crackpot, we walked along a creek bed to a rocky waterfall. Back in Australia, we'd enjoyed many a day walk with Chris and Meg and it was a pleasure to walk with them again. Our overall impression of the countryside in the Dales area did not amount to love at first sight but you would not have to be a crackpot to find beauty in its ruggedness and isolation.

Next day we went to the North York Moors National Park which extends as far as the East coast between Scarborough and Middlesbrough. We ate lunch at a pleasant pub in the village of Kilburn where fine, carved oak furniture is made, featuring a carved mouse as a trademark.

The furniture workshops in the town were not open but we saw many fine examples through the windows. What fascinated me as an amateur woodworker were the incredibly large stacks of timber slowly seasoning near the workshops. Large oak trunks were sliced into one inch (remember inches? 1 inch = 2.54 cm) thick slabs. Spacers were then inserted between the slices of timber to allow free air circulation and the whole lot left to dry for twenty years. Imagine the difficulties of planning the cutting of timber! "I foresee a considerably greater demand for our furniture in about 2020 so we'd better increase the harvest this year. I want my daughter to have sufficient supplies when she takes over the business after my retirement." Perhaps the social environment in Yorkshire in 2020 will permit the fulfilment of this fanciful prophecy of a female role in factory management.

Nearby is the Kilburn White Horse, a large stylized two-dimensional representation of a horse marked with chalk on a hillside and visible for many kilometres. There are a number of similar outdoor artworks in different parts of England but I'm not sure who to thank (or blame).

In the afternoon we walked around Rievaulx Abbey, a beautiful gothic building wrecked on the orders of Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII during the dissolution of the monasteries prior to 1540. An elegant skeleton of flying buttresses and three-level gothic arches testifies eloquently to the magnificence of what has been destroyed. On the heights overlooking this stately ruin is Rievaulx Terrace, a folly in the best tradition of English eccentricity.

Here, a very rich gentleman chose to impress his guests by turning the top of the ridge into a



1982: Air seasoning stacks of furniture timber in Kilburn. Yorkshire, England.

kilometre long, landscaped lawn with regular vantage points from which to view the abbey below. The perspectives from these swathes through the forest are certainly exquisite, but the terrace as a whole conjures up images of over-dressed, snuff-sniffing aristocrats peering through monocles and being waited on by bebies of butlers. The presence of two Greek temples, one at either end of the promenade does little to alleviate the impression of eccentric excess. Rieveaulx and its overlooking folly are both in the North York Moors National Park.

The splendours of the Yorkshire moors and dales would not by themselves entice us to the other side of the globe but, once transplanted there, we found many sources of interest and pleasure.



1982: The ruins of Rievaulx Abbey from the terrace above. Yorkshire, England.



1979: Kathy in Balloch, Scotland kept warm by Jacquie's fur hat. (The author thinks she's hot.)

5.26 Big Skye Country

We spent precious little time in Scotland but have it firmly in our sights for future walking holidays. Gordon can't understand why we haven't been walking on the island of Uist. We may go there, one day, but we fear that his recommendation may just mean that it's made out of interesting rock!

In 1979, we examined the countryside on the West coast from the windows of the train between Glasgow and Fort William and found its colours surprisingly reminiscent of home. On our way back we stayed at a pub at Balloch (beware how you pronounce the "och") on the southern shore of Loch Lomond. We walked around the lake, ignored the zoo on one side and marvelled at the fake looking castle on the other. "Icebergs" floating in the water reminded us that we might have chosen a better time to visit.

5.27 The Big Picture

Our very cursory survey of the European countryside has shown us a landscape of great variety dotted with highlights of exceptional beauty. To a greater extent than is so far the case in Australia, even the wildest places have been "tamed" and altered by humans but, on the other hand, many of the alterations have been there long enough to have acquired historical significance.

Australians are far better placed in still having areas of essentially untouched wilderness. Let us hope we can still boast of this in centuries to come.

Chapter 6

Of Plans And Spans

Visiting the most famous European buildings, such as the Tower of London, is not difficult. You just find the general area, attach yourself to the largest moving crowd and allow yourself to be carried along.

But there is very little kudos to be gained by visiting these five-star sites. Your friends will be far less impressed by your visit to the colosseum than they would be if you went to Rome for a week or a month and didn't bother to see it. Furthermore, the innumerable noteworthy buildings not listed in the tourists' top forty may be viewed in a great deal more comfort and with all the more pleasure for not having expected anything of them.

We adopted a flexible approach, neither completely avoiding the architectural meccas nor spending excessive periods of time swimming in the human currents. We learned much from our leisurely visits to many of the less famous European buildings but found that a visit to the most familiar of Parisian landmarks was an experience of an altogether different kind. We snapped photos in the observation gallery of the Eiffel tower which show our companions squashed together like fruit and nuts in a muesli bar. Those who expected to enjoy themselves were nuts. We were all crowded together so tightly that when I made room to get my camera out of my pocket I was afraid that the walls might burst and someone pop out the other side! This fear was not lessened by the knowledge that the French pronounce "Eiffel" as "'e fell"! Such was the press of people that I had to take the photos with the camera held above my head.

I rather think that the over-enthusiastic lift attendants responsible for the crush were actually champion sardine packers seeking even greater challenges. "Poussez! Poussez! (Push! Push!)", they had cried, jamming an equal number more of us into a lift we had considered already full. I would not like to ascend the tower in tourist season!

To add to our woes, we had chosen a day when the pollution in Paris was so bad that it was difficult to discern the Champs de Mars immediately below. Looking at the tower had been far more rewarding than looking from it. Indeed I would go so far as to describe the ascent of this stately landmark as a resounding disappointment, despite its proud history.

The tower was built by Gustav Eiffel for the Paris Expo of 1889, the centenary of the French Revolution, and has girded the lawns of the left bank of the Seine ever since. It seems unlikely that the Expo '88 site in Brisbane has produced anything of such lasting significance. Eiffel, a native of Dijon, built the tower to demonstrate what could be achieved with steel construction. It was originally 300 m tall but has gained 20 m in the course of the last century. It was the tallest construction on earth when it was built and probably retained that title until the Empire State building (originally 382 m) was completed in 1931.

The days surrounding our ascent of the Eiffel tower were the low point of my hot-and-cold, love-hate feelings toward Paris. My opinion of the city was temporarily so negative that, in seeking to take photographs capturing the essential atmosphere of Paris, I focussed on the all-pervasive dog droppings and human urine stains on the footpaths! My mood improved considerably when we became aware of busloads of tourists peering intently, trying to make out what elegant Parisian treasures I was photographing!

I hasten to add that I have made several visits to Paris in better weather and in more agreeable



1982: View from the observation gallery of the Eiffel Tower. Paris.



1982: Paris, centre of artistic sensibility and culture.

circumstances and, on these occasions, have been inspired by its many architectural, atmospheric and cultural charms.

6.1 The Reality Of Royalty And Their Realty

Only a short RER train ride from the Eiffel tower is an equally famous construction. I refer to the palace at Versailles. Versailles is also over-endowed with tourists, resulting in long queues for tickets and a necessity to tour the royal apartments in guided groups. Tour-groups are so frequent that they must maintain a constant pre-determined pace to avoid catching up with the group in front or being harried by the one behind.

The Château of Versailles represents a pinnacle of grandeur and opulence but did not make the impression on me that I hoped it would. The fame of Versailles raises expectations beyond the possibility of their fulfilment and takes away the element of surprise. Perhaps, if I had, in the absence of thousands of fellow travellers, happened upon such a building unexpectedly after a camel trek across the desert, I would dream of its riches for the rest of my life.

Versailles includes luxurious royal apartments, a large chapel and an opera house. It provided accommodation for a thousand nobles and four thousand servants. Beneath its lofty ceilings resplendent with magnificent frescoes and enormous chandeliers, lie gilt statues, fascinatingly ornate clocks, delicately shaped marble, and a treasure-trove of woven fabrics, often incorporating gold thread. The property description in a real-estate auction sheet for the Château would surely run to several volumes! With gold leaf used as freely as a British Bed & Breakfast might use wallpaper, Versailles looks and feels like the creation of an architect with an infinite budget. Such a theory is consistent with the history of the conversion of this former hunting lodge into the palace it is today.

Versailles' major upgrade was occasioned after Louis XIV (The Sun King) attended what could have been the most lavish party of all time, hosted by Fouquet, then Superintendent of Finances, in his newly completed château, Vaux-le-Vicomte. Fouquet's 6,000 guests were wine, dined and entertained in ultimate luxury and presented with little trinkets, such as diamond tiaras, as mementoes of their visit.

Vaux-le-Vicomte was designed, decorated and landscaped by a famous trio, Le Vau, Le Brun and Le Notre. Fouquet had sufficient good judgement to choose the best architects and designers for his renovations but not enough to predict the consequences of upstaging the king!

Notwithstanding Fouquet's patronage of artists and writers and his stunning generosity to party guests, twenty-three year-old Louis XIV, who had only recently begun to rule in his own right, ordered an inquiry into how his Minister for Finance had managed to acquire such vast wealth. Left in little doubt as to which verdict was expected of it, this inquiry concluded its investigations with alacrity. Only nineteen days after the party, Fouquet was assigned more humble accommodation in the jail in which he remained until his death.

Louis XIV was so offended by Fouquet's audacity that he not only imprisoned him but also commandeered his architectural and landscaping team, ordering them to create something even grander at Versailles. Despite the evident expertise of these people, the Sun King was very closely involved personally in the project and conferred with his team each day.

I regret that we have not seen Vaux-le-Vicomte, close to Fontainebleau, as I would like to confirm or deny for myself the rumour that it showed better taste than the King's creation on the other side of Paris.

At the time we visited it in 1985, it was intended that the town of Versailles would become a twin city to Canberra, our home town. This has subsequently become reality, a fact which has been kept almost secret from the people of Canberra, presumably because of the tensions between Australian and French governments over matters in the Pacific. One particularly memorable event marked the relationship in Australia's bicentenary year, however.

The City of Versailles and its surrounding region, the Department of Yvelines, sent a troupe of performers and technicians to present a son et lumière performance, repeated twice, on Aspen Island in Lake Burley Griffin. The items presented were derived from festivities called *The Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle* which were first performed at Versailles in 1664, and ended with the most spectacular and beautifully co-ordinated fireworks display I have ever seen.

The performance was particularly special for me because Kathy and I enjoyed it in the company of both my late father and our son Jack, then aged 11 months. Jack slept soundly through the dramatic and operatic part of the show, but, notwithstanding our fears that he might be frightened by them,

woke up and appeared fascinated to the point of mesmerization by the fireworks. Two wide-open eyes peered out of the blanket we'd used as a hood around his head and gazed fearlessly at cascade upon cascade of coloured lights, dazzling magnesium flares and multi-hued, dancing fountains.

He seemed unconcerned when bright red fireballs arced into the sky and, still burning, dropped among the black silhouettes of trees onto the island already bathed in red light. He didn't even blink when cartridges fired in the air exploded in a series of sharp, deafening reports just above the height of the spectators on the sloping bank beside the lake. We wondered what sort of a world Jack thought he lived in!

By contrast, Jack's six year old cousin Scott watched the early part of the show but successfully resisted all efforts to wake him during the fireworks! His sister Amanda was sufficiently older than Jack to be frightened and provided piercing vocal accompaniments to the visual displays. The rest of us were as spellbound as Jack but much more volubly appreciative. The standard of the Canberra son et lumière was so high as to make me regretful that we had not taken the time to attend one at Versailles or at any of the other French châteaux.

Not surprisingly, Versailles was the setting for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War, in which harsh reparations were exacted from defeated Germany. Versailles was also the home of the French Kings from 1662 to 1789 when Louis XVI and his family were forced by the Revolutionaries to move to the palace of the Tuileries in central Paris.

The name of this latter royal abode sounds musical and delicate until a killjoy like me lets it be known that it means Palace of the Tile Factories. The name originates from the tiles (tuiles) made from clay extracted from the area. The Palace of the Tuileries was commissioned by Catherine de Mèdecis in 1563 and was occupied by Napoleon I. Unfortunately, it is not possible to visit it today. It was burned down during the Commune riots in 1871 along with the galleries linking it with the Palace of the Louvre. The Louvre and the galleries, but not the Tuileries, were restored to their present form during the Third Republic (1870-1940).

One can still visit the Jardin des (Garden of the) Tuileries, which stretches beyond the line of the similarly named Palace which once closed off the now open end of the U-shaped plan of the Louvre. At the far end of the Gardens are two small art galleries, the Jeu-de-Paume (Hand-ball) and l'Orangerie.¹ Just beyond them is the Place de la Concorde where Marie-Antoinette and many others were guillotined. Despite the obvious commercial possibilities of the site, there do not appear to be any commemorative cake shops on the Place de la Concorde!

The size of the combined Louvre-Tuileries must have been overwhelming; what remains is still claimed to be the largest palace in the world. Having walked the Louvre's 500 metre long galleries in the name of art appreciation, I can testify that it is very large indeed. To properly view every art work in it would take a lifetime. I know this to be true because I have seen visitors who have been there so long that they have turned to stone and lost most of their clothes!

France has an enormous collection of châteaux. Most of them, like Versailles, the Tuileries and the Louvre, were constructed to house the nobles rather than as protection against aggressors. It was partly through visiting the châteaux that I started delving into French history, which I have discovered is a great deal more interesting than some of my school history lessons.

The period after the middle ages, very roughly corresponding to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is known as a Golden Age, the age of the Renaissance. The start and end of the period are not sharply delineated but it can be said to have originated in Italy and slowly spread to other parts of Europe. On our next visit to Britain, we'll be keeping our eyes open for perfect proportion in naked male statues and architectural facades, in case the Renaissance has arrived since we last visited.

The "Renaissance" is so-named because it saw a rebirth of art, culture and knowledge. In fact, the rebirth was a return to the classical values of the ancient Greeks and Romans rather than a discovery of something fundamentally new. For those prepared to take off their rose-coloured glasses, it was also a period of religious persecution, political intrigue, sectarian violence and a decline in hygiene.

I have read that, although thousands of people lived at Versailles, the first toilet was not installed until the time of Louis XVI. It was reserved for royal use! Furthermore, religious abhorrence of the flesh is said to have been responsible for a dramatic decline in frequency of bathing with the advent

¹I have heard that these galleries have been relocated since our last visit.

of the Renaissance.

My high-school lessons do not qualify me as an expert historian but I am struck by three features in the chronicle of the period. The first is the complex intertwining of the histories of all of the countries of Europe. The second is the use of royal marriages as religious and strategic weapons. The third is the tenuousness of Europe's claim to being civilized!

The history of the many châteaux in the region close to Paris and extending west along the Loire valley is very much entwined with the history of the French Royal Family. Rather than describe our brief 1985 tour of these châteaux, I have decided to trace the royal history in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and draw attention to its connections with châteaux such as Fontainebleau, Chinon, Amboise, Chambord, Chenonceau, Azay-le-Rideau and Blois. Please set the controls of your tardus for 1415 AD ...

In 1415, France was split by violent dissension between the Burgundy and Orléans factions of the royal family and was governed by King Charles VI, a person who suffered frequent periods of madness. Henry V of England took this opportunity to revive a claim to the throne of France. He argued his case by invading Normandy. He only commanded a small army but one equipped with the finest long-range weaponry of the age, the Welsh longbow. Ten thousand French soldiers were killed in the ensuing English victory at the battle of Azincourt.

In those times, excessive violence was not restricted to disputes between countries. In 1418, while King Charles' son, called by the same name as his father to avoid confusion, was passing through the town of Azay, near the site of the current château of Azay-le-Rideau, he was insulted by a Burgundian soldier. In keeping with the contemporary code of freedom of speech, an entire garrison of 350 was executed and the town was burnt. For over a century afterward, the town was known as Azay-le-brulé (Azay-the-burnt).

In 1420 Queen Isabeau persuaded her demented husband Charles VI to sign the Treaty of Troyes. Under its terms, Henry V of England married their daughter Catherine and gained the right to rule France as Regent until Catherine was of age. As it happened, Charles VI of France and Henry V of England died within months of each other in 1422 and Henry VI, only ten months old, was proclaimed King of France and of England.

In those days, the title of King by no means guaranteed the allegiance and obedience of all the country's provinces. At this time, the English controlled Paris and the north of France and moved to extend their sphere of domination by laying siege to Orléans. Meanwhile, the future Charles VII was ensconced in Chinon, one of the châteaux of the Loire. In 1429, a young woman, Joan of Arc arrived at Chinon and asked to see the Dauphin (the traditional title of the French prince first in line of succession). The young Charles hid among his courtiers and had one of them impersonate him by dressing up in his clothes. Despite this dissimulation, Joan instantly identified the real Charles and set about attempting to restore his faith in himself and his birthright. She persuaded him that he actually was Charles VI's son, something he had doubted because of "scandalous" sexual freedoms practised by his mother. Hypocrisy ruled then as it does now and such scandalous behaviour was accepted without question when practised by almost all the French Kings.

Considering the treachery of military leaders on her own side, Joan of Arc's achievements are quite astonishing. Inspiring a totally dispirited people and a Charles stricken with self doubt, she liberated Orléans, retook the Loire bridge at Beaugency, captured Troyes and organized the consecration of King Charles VII at Reims. Unfortunately, she was later captured at Compiègne, sold to the English, tried by seventy-five English and French judges and burnt at the stake in Rouen, aged only 19.

In 1436, Charles VII gained control of Paris and by 1453, at the end of the Hundred Years War, only Calais remained English. In 1461, Charles VII died and was succeeded by Louis XI who, through a series of fortunate deaths and the contrived betrothal (later broken off) of his son (later Charles VIII) to Margeurite of Austria, presided over the return to the crown of France of the provinces of Burgundy, Picardy, Franche-Comté, Artois, Maine and Anjou.

In those days, age was no barrier to engagement. Marguerite of Austria was two when she became betrothed to the Dauphin Charles, then aged twelve. He had been only seven when his father had tried to arrange his marriage to Marie of Burgundy, Margeurite of Austria's mother!

However marriage in that era gave the partners plenty of elbow room. Louis XI installed his own wife Charlotte of Savoy in some luxury at Amboise, in the Loire valley, but he himself lived 20km away in a smaller château at Plessis-les-Tours!

Brought up at Amboise, Charles VIII succeeded to the throne in 1483, aged 13, under the direction of his elder sister Anne de Beaujeu. For political reasons, Anne offered Charles's hand in marriage to the Duchess of Brittany, also called Anne. The offer was conveyed by 40,000 armed soldiers and was obviously one which could not be refused!

Charles VIII accompanied his wife to a sporting entertainment at Amboise in 1498 and, on the way, banged his head on a door lintel. During the match he laughed and talked but a few hours later he was dead, presumably of a brain haemorrhage. He was succeeded by his cousin Louis XII, who soon paid Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI (!), to have his marriage to Louis XI's daughter Jeanne annulled on the grounds that it had been forced by her father. He thereupon married Charles VIII's widow, Anne of Brittany!

Louis XII and Anne rather liked the Château of Blois and had it extended and extensively landscaped. Further major works at Blois were carried out by François I, a patron of the arts, after his succession in 1515. The remarkable octagonal staircase there is named after him. François I was also responsible for extensions at Amboise and the rebuilding of Fontainebleau and the Louvre. He should perhaps be known as François I because he replaced Latin with French in various official matters!

The Château of Fontainebleau lies a short distance to the South-East of Paris. Its buildings were closed when we visited in 1985 but we were able to admire its external appearance, large gardens and enormous (20,000 hectare) forests of oak, beech and conifers. From the time of François I onward, the French court seemed to timeshare between Fontainebleau, Versailles, the Loire châteaux and the Parisian palaces. Several of the French Kings, including Francis II and Henri III were born at Fontainebleau and Napoleon I, who preferred it to Versailles, abdicated there in 1814.

It was François I who commissioned the rebuilding of Fontainebleau's mediaeval predecessor and it was there that François I established his centre of patronage of the arts, letters and sciences. He attracted a considerable school of Italian artists and designers to Fontainebleau who profoundly influenced that period of French art. For some reason, he brought Leonardo da Vinci to Amboise rather than Fontainebleau and it was at Amboise that the great artist and inventor spent his last years.

François I's reign was marked by continual wars with Italy and with Spain and attempted alliances with Henry VIII of England and even with the Ottoman empire! France did not fare well in these squabbles and in the battle of Pavia (1525) François I himself was captured by the forces of the Spanish Emperor. After extricating himself from this and other difficulties, he resumed warring with Spain and allied himself with Clement VII, the pope who created the Church of England by refusing to agree to Henry VIII of England's divorce. François I kept many mistresses, the most famous of them being the Duchess of Étampes who held great power in the court.

François was succeeded by his son Henri II in 1547. In 1533, at the age of fourteen, Henri had married Catherine de Médicis, a Florentine who was a relative of the Pope. Three years later he fell passionately in love with Diane de Poitiers, then a widow aged 35, and they commenced a relationship which lasted until his death. Although Diane always wore black and white in public in mourning for her husband, she accompanied Henri on all his travels and received from him as presents the Château of Chenonceau and various crown jewels. A letter from Henri, written the year before his death, declared that Diane was the only person he had ever loved or would ever love.

During this long relationship Catherine de Médicis showed outward tolerance for what she could not change but, the instant her husband returned mortally wounded from a joust, she determinedly began the process of exacting twenty-three years worth of revenge. Before Henri was dead, she ordered Diane to "withdraw to her town mansion, return the crown jewels at once and give back a thousand gifts of which the Queen has kept careful record". Even though she believed it her own, Diane was forced to exchange her beloved Chenonceau for the less beautiful château at Chaumont. It is easy to understand why this caused her considerable distress.

Chenonceau spans the river Cher, a tributary of the Loire, in a series of graceful arches. The

château is “small” and owes its beauty to style and elegance more than to ornament or ostentation. The building proper consists of a suite of large squarish rooms, a chapel and a library in a tower near one bank of the river and two lovely gallery rooms, one on each floor of the long narrow wing extending over the river. Each of these striking galleries, with its chessboard marble floor, is 60 metres long and 20 metres wide, seven or eight times as large as a typical Canberra house.

An attic above the galleries was used as a convent and is said to be fitted with a trapdoor to protect slumbering nuns. It is closed to tourists.

The kitchens at Chenonceau have to be seen to be believed. They are located in the caisson at the foot of the first arch, below the level of the water. Any excesses of temperature would eventually be moderated by the great flow of water past the walls. “In case of fire, break the glass!”

The construction of Chenonceau started in 1513 with the demolition of all but the keep of an older château. The latter remains as a souvenir shop. The eight years of construction of the first stage was directed by Catherine Briçonnet who was the first of several famous women to feature prominently in the history of this magnificent building. It is interesting that the construction of the similarly elegant Azay-le-Rideau was commenced not much later (in 1518) and directed by another woman, Philippa Lesbahy.

After executing a complicated and ultimately unsuccessful legal manoeuvre with the aim of ensuring she could not be dispossessed of Chenonceau, Diane de Poitiers commenced construction of a bridge over the river in 1556 and also created extensive gardens and orchards. The bridge was hardly finished when her royal lover died and by 1560 the château was firmly under the control of Catherine de Médicis who proceeded to realize Diane’s dream by adding the two galleries above the bridge.

Religious persecution was rife in the sixteenth century. In 1543, the Sorbonne University requested that all its members declare their allegiance to the true (Roman) church and burned those who did not! In 1545, whole villages were found guilty of heresy and, in rooting out the evil, it was necessary to burn nine hundred houses and kill three thousand people!

In 1560, protestants formed a plan to enter the royal court at Amboise in small groups and to ask royal permission to practise their religion. Unfortunately, the scheme, now known as the Amboise conspiracy, was discovered and the participants were murdered in various barbaric ways. The fifteen or sixteen year old King François II, his wife Mary Stuart and his mother Catherine de Médicis are reputed to have taken a stroll around Amboise after dinner to see the last of the plotters being beheaded and the dying grimaces of those hanging from the battlements. A golden age indeed!

François II died of an illness in the very same year and was succeeded by his ten-year old brother Charles IX. Catherine de Médicis, as Regent, was forced to play a deadly balancing game between different branches of the royal family, each vying for the upper hand should the Valois line, represented by Charles IX, die out. One side of the family, the Bourbons, tolerated the protestants where another, the Guises, ruthlessly persecuted them. Finding a middle course between these extremes was virtually impossible and, despite her best endeavours, civil war raged until the temporary Peace of Saint-Germain in 1570. After this, Catherine de Médicis organized the wedding of Charles’s sister Marguerite to the protestant Henri of Navarre in an attempt to bring protestants and catholics together. Charles IX himself became friendly with a protestant leader Admiral Coligny.

Unfortunately, love of power outweighed love of friends and love of principle. Catherine attempted to have Coligny assassinated to end what she considered his excessive influence on her son, then aged 22. Coligny was only wounded but the protestants gathering in Paris for the previously-mentioned wedding were outraged and brewing violence. Catherine admitted her role in the attempted assassination to her son but begged him to squash the threat of protestant violence using catholic force. This force did its work with considerable vigour and Coligny and six thousand fellow protestants were killed in the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572.

The Pope had a *te deum* sung in celebration!

Soon after this evil day, Charles IX fell ill and never recovered. He was succeeded by his younger brother Henri III who had already been made King of Poland by his mother. The new king initially tolerated protestantism and then, subject to great pressure from the catholic League led by the Guise family, repressed it. The pressure was increased when Henri’s only surviving brother died, leaving Henri of Navarre, a protestant and related to the King only in the 22nd degree, as the next heir to the

throne. The King himself was widely believed to be a homosexual and most unlikely to produce an heir himself. The catholic League attempted to press the claims of one of their own to the inheritance.

In 1588, Henri III was forced, by popular sentiment in favour of Henri de Guise, to leave Paris. In desperation, he had Henri de Guise assassinated in the château at Blois and Guise's brother the Cardinal of Lorraine murdered the next day. He proudly announced the deeds to his mother, Catherine de Médicis, saying that now he was the only King, to which she replied that he might have become King of nothing at all. Catherine thereupon announced that she was at the end of her tether, retired to bed and died three weeks later.

After these events, the catholics abandoned Henri III who retired to Tours and formed an alliance with Henri de Navarre. Together they successfully recaptured Paris but Henri III was stabbed in 1589 by a catholic monk who had received theological advice that he might hope for eternal salvation despite murdering a King, as long as it was all done in the name of the Catholic Religion!

Henri of Navarre thus became Henri IV and very skilfully set about establishing, first supremacy over his kingdom, then internal and external peace. Henri IV became a catholic in 1593, later confiding, "Surely Paris is worth a mass". In 1598, he signed the Edict of Nantes guaranteeing religious freedom in France. His was a very successful and popular reign, bringing prosperity and great developments in what would now be called "infrastructure". He publicly wished that there should be a chicken in every French pot each Sunday, a pronouncement which increased his popularity with peasants if not with chickens.

Avid researchers have managed to find the names of fifty-six of Henri IV's mistresses, of whom Gabrielle d'Estrées was the one who led him most astray. It is believed that he wished to marry her, but Henri's wife Marguerite, from whom he had been separated for a considerable time, would not agree to any annulment which would result in Gabrielle's coronation. Eventually Gabrielle died suddenly and Henri IV arranged to marry another Médicis, in order to wipe out a large debt to her uncle, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Marguerite carried the bridal train at the wedding, remained close to the royal couple and was affectionate to all Henri's children, including those he had by various of his mistresses.

Marie de Médicis was immortalized by Rubens in a series of twenty-one enormous paintings which now take up a large gallery in the Louvre. She was the mother of Louis XIII and ruled as Regent until he came of age after the assassination of his father in 1610. While contemplating the role of women in these two centuries of French royal history, it is interesting that mothers, sisters and mistresses of kings often wielded considerable power. My impression is that the wives of kings were not as obviously powerful.

At this point, it is time to leave the tardus and return to twentieth-century Britain for an inspection of some of the British royal residences.

On the whole, British royal and noble residences show far less architectural flair than their counterparts in continental Europe. "Solidity in the face of adversity" could well be their motto and I could almost see it fluttering in the breeze above the reassuring bulk of Windsor Castle. Photographs of the interior revealed a much more decorative character but even this attempt at exuberance felt restrained after Versailles. For some reason we did not venture in. Perhaps our arrival was out of phase with the departure of tour groups. On the other hand, we had just returned from seven weeks in France and our architectural tastes and expectations had been profoundly changed by the experience.

The exterior of Buckingham Palace seemed most unremarkable to me and, unlike another famous visitor, I felt no desire to scale the walls in order to sit on the Queen's Bed.

Holyrood house in Edinburgh is another unprepossessing royal residence. We visited it in 1982 and took a guided tour of its interior. It would be unbecoming of me to supply a detailed critique of another family's domestic furniture, but I will say that I would prefer to watch Coronation Street in the comfort of my beanbag than on the splendour of Windsor chairs.



1985: Tug-o-war and painting in the grounds of the Palace of Versailles. France.



1985: Château de Chambord. Loire Valley, France.



1985: Flamingoes in the botanical gardens in Orléans. Loire Valley, France.



1985: Orléans cathedral. Loire Valley, France.



1985: Château de Chenonceau. Loire Valley, France.



1985: 1200 square metre gallery, Château de Chenonceau. Loire Valley, France. (Postcard.)



1985: Waiting for the Queen, Windsor Castle. Windsor, England



1985: Fancy brickwork at Eton College. Windsor, England.

6.2 Ordinary People And The Terrors Of The Terrace

The miracle of modern communication has succeeded in homogenizing cultures to an unprecedented extent. Fortunately, significant differences remain, otherwise international tourism would lack purpose. Indeed, distinct national and regional architectural styles are not restricted to palaces and public buildings but are also to be found in buildings constructed for the accommodation of the masses.

As far from royal palaces as we could get, we were appalled at the desperate drabness of the terraces by the railway in Plymouth. We marvelled too at rows of identical houses in London and Manchester, leaning against each other in mutual support. We could well believe the stories we had heard of people returning to the wrong house during the great smogs of the fifties.

Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of terraced housing. We found Huw and Debbie's terrace house in Cambridge quite charming with its 3.4 metre frontage, wolf doorknocker, narrow staircase in a cupboard and long, thin back yard.

In other European cities, too, residential buildings stand shoulder to shoulder and, between them, exhibit the full range of architectural interest, including none at all. In Amsterdam, the gables of multi-storey houses seemed to be oriented the wrong way until someone pointed out the stout beams protruding from above the attic to enable the raising of goods, by means of block and tackle, from barges in the canal below.

In parts of central Paris, rows of several-storied apartment buildings, not identical but sharing a consistent style, created a delightfully elegant streetscape. For me the style was marked by sandstock facades, wrought iron lace balconies, shutters and steeply sloping slate roofs with Marie Curie style garrets underneath.

It was perhaps in rural areas where the greatest architectural diversity was to be found. Farm and village buildings were generally constructed of local materials using local techniques developed to withstand the climate of the region and to serve the purposes of the time and place. Over the centuries, walls have been constructed of timber, of wattle and daub, of brick, of rough masonry, of rough-hewn stone and of combinations of these materials. Roofs have been made of thatch, of slate, of brick, of tiles or even, in alpine areas, of overlapping flat stones. In parts of the Dordogne region of France, houses were built against limestone cliffs, saving the cost of at least one wall and providing the house with enormous thermal mass.

In the villages and farms of Europe, nearly every imaginable combination of external architectural features seemed to have been used: hipped roofs and gabled, steep roofs and flat, balconies, ornamental flowerboxes, wall paintings, attics, shutters, French windows, bow windows, no windows at all, massive masonry walls, and light timber gables. Some farms boast a small house and several separate sheds or barns while others keep everything under one mighty roof as seemed common in the Black Forest region of Germany.

The combination of long history and diverse geography has produced in Europe such a magnificently varied collection of dwellings that a stroll in the streets or along country lanes nearly always afforded considerable pleasure to a stickybeak with a not particularly educated interest in architecture.



1985: Cliff house in the Dordogne region. France.

6.3 Getting To The Heart Of Naves

There are many magnificent Gothic cathedrals in France: Those in Reims, Chartres, Bourges, Laon, Beauvais and Rouen are among the finest we failed to visit.

In each of those we did visit, we found the same characteristic and very special atmosphere, produced by the soaring vaulting far above, the delicate play of soft coloured light on foot-worn flagstones and by the resonant murmur of sound. The stained glass, sculpted marble and carved wood speak of a pinnacle of art and artisanship seldom attained today; Just ask a plumber to fit a gargoyle to your gutter and you'll see what I mean!

Never mind that some of the temples of the Lord have been turned into dens of postcard sellers. Never mind that religious people huddle into corners for their masses, while other masses roam at will, their tour guides speaking in tongues. Never mind that parents loudly threaten their children with suffering if they fail to come unto them. The breathtaking grandeur of the vaulting and stained glass and the immensity of the interior space swamp all of these insignificant distractions and leave the visitor's spirit free to meditate and contemplate, floating free above the clerestory.

Never mind that today's architects might slate these structures for lacking amenity, being energy inefficient, labour-intensive and not well adapted to modern fast-track methods of construction. Never mind that they have no basement parking, no fire sprinklers and no air-conditioning. Just shut your eyes and pray if you are religious or meditate if you are not.

If you only visit one French gothic cathedral, it will probably be the Cathedral of Notre Dame on the *lie de la Cité* in central Paris. The multi-hued magnificence of its rose windows will thrill you, no matter how often you visit. Don't make the mistake of thinking that this is the only Notre Dame (Our Lady) ; There are many others of the same name throughout France. Next time we are on the *Île de la Cité*, we will rectify one of our omissions and visit the smaller Sainte Chapelle, inside the Palais de Justice. Photographs attest to the magnificence of its vast expanses of stained glass and to the slender elegance of the supporting stonework. Reports from spies abroad suggests that its beauty surpasses that of its larger and more famous neighbour. Unfortunately, my pre-tour research let us down and we didn't learn about it in time.

We also missed the thirteenth century stained glass in Chartres cathedral, 80 km south-west of Paris. I have read that all 3,000 square metres of it, nearly enough to cover three Olympic swimming pools, was taken down during the war and stored to prevent damage.

The Matisse chapel in Vence (France), just north of Nice, is similarly renowned for its stained glass. However, in contrast to the massively complex panoramas of the Gothic cathedrals, its designs consist of simple abstract shapes rendered entirely in yellow and blue glass set in plain white-washed walls. The Chapel was decorated by the French master of Fauvism, Henri Matisse (1869-1954).

Of the many other French churches we visited, the *Église de Brou* in the town of Bourg-en-Bresse provided the greatest and the least expected reward. Never having heard of it, we visited it only because it coincided with the need for a break from driving! It was commissioned by Marguerite of Austria in 1504, in honour of her husband, Philibert le Beau, Duke of Savoy, who was born only a few kilometres away. You may remember from my earlier historical ramblings that Marguerite of Austria had been betrothed when two years old to the future King Charles VIII of France. She became a very influential person and was Governor of the Low Countries for over twenty years. She negotiated two important treaties, the League of Cambrai (1508) and the Ladies' Peace (1529) and obtained the election of her nephew Charles Quint as Emperor of Spain.

The church at Brou is a fine, if unspectacular church. What gives it special distinction is the magnificence of the marble carving around its three principal tombs. Marguerite of Austria is buried here along with Philibert le Beau and his mother, Marguerite de Bourbon. On the tomb of the latter Marguerite we were shown something by a guide which we'd have never noticed by ourselves.

The tomb is surrounded by the most delicately carved marble I have seen. Cherubs alternate with mourners in niches decorated with the most elaborate of curlicues. The clothing of the mourners is as fine as fabric though carved from stone. Using a mirror, the guide allowed us to look at the expressions on the shrouded faces of the mourners. What a horrible surprise! They showed scowls and laughter! Apparently, in those days, the nobility did not attend the funerals of their loved ones but were represented by paid mourners who cared nothing for the deceased.



1985: Carved mourners at the tomb of Marguerite of Austria. Brou, France.

Finally, the church in Albi is quite unusual, because, like most of the buildings and bridges in the town, it is constructed nearly entirely of red brick. Unfortunately the limitations of brick preclude the achievement of the fine lines, sharp angles and graceful curves which typify Gothic cathedrals wrought from stone. However, the bricklayers of Albi were clearly at the pinnacle of their trade and the church is a remarkable monument to their skill.

6.4 Pommie Granite

The typical English church is more solid and less romantic than its French counterpart. However, there are some very fine English examples of what is called Tudor or Late Perpendicular Gothic architecture. King's College Chapel in Cambridge is one of them. The stonework of the chapel was not completed until 1515. It stands out in my mind for its remarkable fan vaulting, stained glass and masses of intricate wooden carving. I have since read that the vault, twenty-four metres above the floor and eighty-eight metres long by twelve metres wide is the largest fan vault on earth. It is said to weigh 1,875 tonnes!

Henry VI, you may remember, became King of England and of France in 1422 at the age of ten months. He founded King's College in 1441 but only the foundations of the chapel and part of its walls were in place at the time of his death and his plans for the college were never fully implemented.

During our first visit to Cambridge, Huw and Debbie drove us to the nearby village of Ely for afternoon tea. The tea-shop just happened to be next to a magnificent cathedral which entered service in 1106 and whose central octagonal tower completely dominates the surrounding reclaimed fen country in which Ely stands. Though it lacks royal connections and hordes of tourists, Ely cathedral is to my naive eyes more architecturally impressive than the much more famous Westminster Abbey. Ely has a very interesting history. It was originally an island amongst the fens which was given in

dowry to Etheldreda, daughter of a King of the Angles. She fled there from a Northumbrian convent in 673, seeking refuge from an unwanted husband. She founded a “co-ed” monastery at Ely and became its abbess. She “preserved the glory of perfect virginity” despite her two marriages. It is not recorded whether the chasteness of life in the monastery changed when she was succeeded as abbess by her sister Sexburga.

The razing of the monastery buildings and the murder of most of their inhabitants by a Danish army in 870 failed to stamp out the religious presence on the island. By the time of the Norman conquest substantial church buildings had been re-established. The then Abbot of Ely resisted being replaced by a Norman nominee and defended the island for five years.

When the Normans eventually gained control, they replaced the earlier buildings with a great new church which survives, albeit in considerably altered form, to the present. Planning of the building began in 1081 and work commenced soon after. The “new” Ely cathedral originally had a modest, square central tower but this collapsed in 1322. It was replaced with the current spectacular octagonal tower and lantern, the result of a magnificent engineering feat which was completed by 1346. The frame of the current lantern includes a number of 20 m long wooden beams, each weighing several tonnes. Raising them 30 m above the floor was achieved by means of a specially constructed crane. Other fascinating historical and architectural details are to be found in the official booklet on “The Building of Ely Cathedral” which, appropriately, includes drawings by Donald Buttress.

York Minster was another English cathedral which, for a while, kept us off the streets. Well, off the city wall actually; we had been walking around the ramparts to avoid the shambles in central York.² York Minster, which was completed in 1472, is the largest Gothic cathedral in England and boasts more medieval stained glass than just about anywhere else. However, what distinguished it most in our eyes, were the renovations which had been carried out to save the building from collapsing into the swamp. Despite a construction phase lasting longer than the history of European settlement in Australia, no-one seemed to notice that the saintly Minster had feet of clay, and very wet clay at that! No-one had arranged proper drainage or ensured that the foundations were adequate.

Recent renovations have added masses of concrete to the foundations. The new concrete sits beside the old masonry and is pinned to it with large numbers of huge stainless steel bolts. The drainage has been improved by returning to service the sophisticated systems created by the Romans when they used the site as headquarters for one of their legions nearly two thousand years ago!

Since we visited the Minster, it has been struck by lightning. Some say the bolt was so targeted because the Bishop of Durham used the Minster’s pulpit to question the existence of God. My comments on this matter naturally should not be taken *ex cathedra* but it does strike me as a rather drastic punishment for what may have been a simple clerical error. Of course it is very likely that the atmosphere would be highly charged when a service was conducted in such a fashion. If the building were insured, I have no doubt that there would have been interesting legal argument relating to the applicability of the “Acts of God” exclusion.

York Minster is by no means the only English church to have been struck by lightning. Perhaps the Bishop of Durham is merely the most recent in a long line of ecclesiastical doubters. St Paul’s Cathedral in London stands on a site formerly occupied by an even larger church whose spire (at 149 m high, the tallest ever built) was twice destroyed by lightning-induced fires. In fact, the five churches which have occupied the St Paul’s site since 604 have been an underwriter’s nightmare. Between them, they were damaged or destroyed by fire on six separate occasions! Furthermore, two bombs landed in St Paul’s during the Nazi bombing raids in World War II, destroying the high altar and some organ pipes stored in the crypt.

The immediate predecessor of the present St Paul’s was damaged beyond repair in the Great Fire of London in 1666 and Christopher Wren was invited by King Charles II to design the new building. Wren showed considerable independence of mind in creating a building which was smaller than the one it replaced. It abandoned to a large extent the Gothic style which had been used in virtually all new English cathedrals for several centuries. One of the great challenges of the rebuilding was the demolition of the 60 m high masonry pillars which supported the original spire. An excessive charge

²The Shambles is a narrow, higgledy-piggledy lane in York which is the origin of the widely used expression for untidiness.

of gunpowder created an explosive situation with the neighbours and the demolition was forced to continue with the aid of a hastily improvised battering ram.

St Paul's cathedral uses Greek columns and pediments, displays Roman arches instead of pointed Gothic ones, features a Byzantine dome and is decorated in a Baroque style. Nonetheless, despite all these departures from the traditional Gothic formula, it creates an atmosphere of inspiration and reverence at least as well as the best Gothic examples. To stand under the dome and look up is to be transported to a different world. The vastness of the space which surrounds you and the immense height of the canopy above stimulate unaccustomed sensations, both visual and auditory. The psychological effect is to isolate you from earthly concerns and from the hundreds of other visitors. It is also a memorable experience to climb the many steps to the whispering gallery in the dome and to look down.

I hope that you experience the same sort of feeling in buildings such as St Paul's even if you, like me, are not a religious person. St Paul's Cathedral serves as a war memorial as well as a church and houses monuments commemorating many bygone wars. Further monuments and graves of the great and famous are to be found in a huge crypt beneath the church. One of the least ostentatious is that of Christopher Wren. Its well-known inscription reads: "If you seek his monument, look around you."

In Windsor in 1985, I was delighted to come upon Christopher Wren's Guild Hall which I had read about when I was a child. Nervous officials had ordered Wren to add an extra row of pillars to support his construction. He was certain that the columns were unnecessary and thumbed his nose at the bureaucrats by building them slightly shorter than would be required to touch the beams they were meant to support! Renovations were in progress when we visited and the building was wrapped in plastic but I managed to poke my head and camera through a hole and verified that the gaps above the pillars were still there after two and a half centuries.

Westminster Abbey is a far more traditional and ancient structure than St Paul's. Its great fame stems mostly from its connection with the weddings, coronations and funerals of British royalty. Although it is claimed to have the highest nave in England and hence must be quite large, it did not give the impression of spaciousness I found in other cathedrals. This may have been partly due to the presence of such a large number of visitors that traffic control measures were required. The Abbey was founded by Edward the Confessor prior to the Norman conquest in 1066. It has since been re-modelled at different times by a series of architects including Christopher Wren and, as a result, contains a mixture of many different architectural styles. The fan vaulting in Henry VII's chapel (completed in 1519) at the east end of the main Abbey is even more ornate than that in King's College, Cambridge.

The ornamentation in Henry VII's chapel, King's College and St Paul's is only a pointer to the dizzy heights of decoration reached in the late Baroque and Rococo periods in Europe.



1985: Christopher Wren's house. Windsor, England.



1985: Wren thumbing his nose at authority. See the gap above the column on the right. Windsor, England.

6.5 After The Church Went Baroque ...

The complex Baroque decoration of the interior of the little church in St Peter in the Black Forest near Freiburg-im-Breisgau (Germany) uses a profusion of gold leaf on white stucco to blind onlookers. Arriving there in mid-winter, I was stunned by its brightness and the extravagance of its detail. On the other hand, the Abbey Library in St Gallen, Switzerland, with its ornate parquetry and curved and carved bookcases, achieves a similar flamboyance despite being dominated by natural wooden colours.

The Abbey Library was completed in 1767 and is still an active lending library and study centre despite the fact that the Abbey itself ceased to exist in 1805. The room housing the collection is 28m long, 10m wide and over 7m high. Its magnificent woodwork, stucco and ceiling frescoes support its claim to being the most beautiful Rococo interior in Switzerland. The elaborate designs of the wooden inlay floor are so valued that visitors are required to don fluffy slippers before walking on it.

6.6 Of Academic interest

With our university associations, we found great interest in exploring the campuses of Europe. We visited universities in Cambridge, Oxford, York, Salford, Essex, London, Paris, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Amiens, Leiden, Utrecht, Geneva and Freiburg. Of this extensive list, there is no doubt in my mind that Cambridge is the most attractive physical embodiment of a seat of learning.

In the academic year 1208/1209, an Oxford woman was killed by the arrow of a scholar from the local university. As the culprit could not be identified, the Mayor and Townsmen, acting with the approval of King John, arbitrarily chose three of his fellows and hanged them. Alarmed at this violation of academic freedom, a number of Oxford scholars decamped and founded a university in Cambridge.

Today Cambridge University is organised as a loose collection of nearly thirty colleges, some of which are enormously wealthy. The oldest, Peterhouse, was established in 1284 but others have appeared as recently as the 1960s. Cambridge remains steeped in tradition, which may explain why women were not granted full academic status there until 1948! We ourselves were directly affected by tradition, because, not being dons,³⁴ we were denied the right to walk on the lush green lawns of the colleges.

Many great people have studied or worked at Cambridge. Sir Isaac Newton, whose contributions to Physics, Mathematics and Astronomy are arguably greater than those of any other person, was closely associated with Cambridge University, although his greatest year of achievement coincided with the closure of the University due to plague! It was also at Cambridge that Rutherford discovered fundamental properties of the atom and that Crick, Watson and others unravelled the internal structure of DNA. It was not hard to evoke the intellectual triumphs of the past while strolling around Cambridge. The grounds and colleges seemed to epitomise the perfect model of a University, if only because Cambridge, along with Oxford, defined the stereotype. We knew that the buildings and bridges, the halls and libraries were created by people with a love of learning and we could feel that the people who lived and worked at Cambridge shared a respect for the achievements of the mind.

Cambridge University is not overwhelmed by Cambridge proper. The central part of the town has a mediaeval character which is in perfect harmony with the buildings of the University. Trumpington street, in the centre of town, was dominated by heavy old bicycles and its coffee shops were filled with students and academic conversation. Students and academics alike were also to be found in Heffer's bookshop which supplies a range of reference books and literature equalled only by Blackwell's in Oxford.

³According to the Oxford Australian Reference Dictionary the foundation of Oxford University occurred "soon after 1167". There is less uncertainty about the founding of the Sorbonne in Paris by Robert de Sorbon, chaplain to Louis IX, in 1275 and Paris University was created in 1215. The other universities we visited are centuries younger.

⁴A don is an academic staffmember of a college.

6.7 Safer Than Houses — Offshore Securities

I have been fascinated since childhood by fortifications, ramparts, battlements and the like. Australia was founded after the decline in effectiveness of such sillinesses and so those, like me, who wish to visit examples and imagine themselves in heroic rôles in bygone stirring times have little option but to travel to Europe.

Edinburgh Castle and the Tower of London are obvious derring-do destinations. We visited both.

When I visited the Tower I found the collection of suits of armour and ancient weaponry quite interesting but unfortunately the Crown Jewels were on holiday. At the time there was a real danger of IRA bombings and my daypack was minutely searched before I entered. It seemed a little strange that an institution so focussed on weaponry would not allow me to bring my own!

I don't know much of the history of Edinburgh castle but one day I will ask Kathy's mother who has, despite her excellent memory, forgotten more British history than we ever learned. When we visited, the castle was under the control of a small unit of the British Army whose jungle camouflage made them more visible against the city background than they would have been had they dyed their hair bright red.

Defensive as these British strongholds may be, for excellence in strategic siting one cannot do much better than the Citadel at Sisteron (France) or the two monastic part-time islands in the Channel.

The Citadel is located on a cliff above the River Durance where it has broken a steep-sided passage through a narrow but relatively high rock ridge. In text-book style it features multiple defensive levels, an observation gallery with complete field of view, a central fortified chapel, a secret escape route and sentry posts built in a style reminiscent of Islam.

St Michael's Mount, off the coast of Cornwall, is remarkably similar to its former monastic head office across the Channel. Each is a rocky outcrop very close to the coast and connected to it only at low tide by a causeway. Both have similar shapes and both are surmounted by former monasteries. Mont St Michel probably rates more tourist stars because of the undisputed magnificence of its architecture.

The causeway to Mont St Michel is subject to amazingly rapid tidal variations due to the great tidal range and the shallowness of the bay. It used to be flanked by quicksand. The rising tide is supposed to advance faster than a galloping horse, but perhaps this is because a galloping horse makes little headway in quicksand!

Unfortunately, Mont St Michel is heavily infested with [other] tourists. As a result, modern day pilgrims, intent upon crawling along the steep winding path to the summit on their knees, must run the gauntlet of a never-ending series of Devil's temptations in the form of take-away food and souvenirs. We didn't see any pilgrims during our visit, but perhaps they were ensconced in the boutiques and emporia along the way, scoffing croques-monsieurs, guzzling Orangina and dreaming of the Mont St Michel paperweights they would take back to the seminary.

St Michael's Mount offered none of these dubious commercial attractions, though the staid National Trust admission office seemed to be doing a reasonable trade in teatowels, greeting cards and printed histories. Having been prevented by the tide from visiting the Mount in 1979, I had gone so far as to obtain relevant Cornish tide tables while still in Australia to ensure a successful excursion to the Mount in 1982. I was amply rewarded for my diligence. The peace and isolation of this remarkable landmark permitted a degree of appreciation not possible in its bustling cousin.



1985: Mont St Michel. Normandy, France.

6.8 Age Has Not Wearied Them

The Rococo period ended soon after Governor Phillip sailed into Botany Bay. Ignoring modern imitations, Australian building includes no representation of any of the earlier styles. Consequently, the Australian student of architecture will find their timelines dramatically extended in Europe. Even the Nieuwe Kirk (New Church) in Delft (Holland) is over 500 years old, as are the old stone cottages in some of the Cornish fishing villages.

In Orange, south of Lyon (France), we encountered Roman buildings for the first time. They are in a remarkably good state of repair despite nearly 2,000 years of existence and constitute a surprisingly substantial reminder of a very sophisticated ancient civilisation. The triumphal arch in Orange testifies to the Roman preoccupation with building and with things military, while the Théâtre Antique (ancient amphitheatre) is a very effective catalyst to the historical imagination.

The Théâtre Antique in Orange is a large amphitheatre with steeply raked seating arranged in a semicircle about the stage. The tall rough-masonry wall at the back of the stage incorporates decorative arched niches. In the largest of them, a marble statue of Augustus Caesar, looking stereotypically Roman, is flanked by two now-broken columns. We absorbed the echoes of two millenia and wondered what sort of functions might have been held here in those far off times.

While we were testing the comfort of the stone seating, some German tourists who we presume were drama students, mounted the stage and captivated our interest with an extemporaneous production involving exaggerated “Ave”s and caricatured ancient Roman gait.

Electronic amplifiers were not among the many creations of the inventive Romans. Consequently their amphitheatres were designed to maximise the projection of unaided voices. As a measure of their success, the acoustics of the Théâtre Antique are considered good enough for modern performances.



1985: The Théâtre Antique in Orange, France with statue of Augustus Caesar.

6.9 But Has Time Run Out For Big Clocks?

In Australia, economic stringencies and the trend toward miniaturization have lead us to replace the traditional town clock with a neighbourhood watch. In Britain and Europe, however, there are still some large time pieces to be seen.

The Westminster clock known popularly, though incorrectly, as Big Ben is housed in a 102 metre tall structure called the Parliament tower. The clock is 7 m in diameter and although it is by no means the world's largest, it may well be the most famous as its chimes are heard regularly around the globe, courtesy of BBC world service. It is also arguably the most recognisable visual symbol of London. Both the sound and the appearance of Big Ben were totally familiar to me when I first heard and saw them.

Strictly speaking, the name Big Ben applies only to the bell, which was named after Benjamin Hall, the Commissioner of Works at the time it was cast in 1856. As far as I know there never was a Little Ben.

At the other end of the spectrum in many ways is the Défenseur du Temps, a modern clock which we unexpectedly encountered while strolling in the vicinity of the Forum des Halles (central Paris)⁵ late one night. This clock chimes the hour, half hour and quarter hour in the most fascinating way. Bizarre metal statues spring into life, gyrate in alarming fashion and strike a large gong. The pattern of motion is different each time the clock chimes and visitors feel a strong temptation to remain in front of it for at least forty-five minutes, just to watch the action.

⁵It's at 8, rue Bernard de Clairvaux, and was created by Jacques Monestier.

6.10 In Any Case A Lot Of Water Has Flowed Under This Bridge

In my view the most impressive bridge in Europe is the Pont du Gard not far from Orange in the south of France. It was originally built as an aqueduct by the Romans in about 19 BC and the present road crossing was only added in 1747. At 275m long and 49 m high, the Pont du Gard is the largest aqueduct (water-carrying bridge)⁶ built by the Romans. We found ourselves captivated by the beauty of the three tiers of stone arches and by the history of this survivor of two thousand years. Our visit was a very pleasant and highly educational experience.

The water supply system of which the bridge is a part gives testimony to the great importance the Romans attached to a plentiful supply of pure water. At the time of the bridge's construction, Nîmes had become a major Roman centre and had outgrown its traditional water supply. A decision was taken to bring water from the springs at Eure, 20 km away. Assuming that the Romans followed their normal practice, they would have taken this decision only after subjecting the Eure water to stringent tests including examination of the livers of animals found drinking it.

Although covering only a straight-line distance of 20 km, the length of the aqueduct (not the bridge!) is actually 50 km due to the serpentine path dictated by local topography. This greater distance reduced the average fall of the aqueduct to about 34 cm per kilometre. The slope of the canal upstream of the bridge was cleverly increased to twice the average, allowing a reduction of about 5 m in the height of the bridge. In order to achieve the desired grades, the channel sometimes takes the form of tunnels up to 300 metres long, sometimes exists as a deep, covered trench and is sometimes supported above ground on solid walls or on bridges. The most significant of these bridges, the Pont du Gard, spans the deep valley of the River Gardon, a river prone to raging flood.

The tourist booklet on sale near the bridge contains a wealth of information about this superlative engineering feat, carried out without the aid of explosives or of engines. One of its fascinating inclusions is the recipe for the compound used to waterproof the inside of the aqueduct. It is based on pork fat and figs!

We crossed the bridge inside the aqueduct itself and observed the prodigious chalk encrustation resulting from the flow of hard water during its nine centuries of service. As we walked we marvelled at the aqueduct's cross-sectional area, sufficient to allow each of the inhabitants of Nîmes 500 litres of water per day. Carefully avoiding the gaps, I walked back on top of the flagstones which formed a cover over the aqueduct. From there I was treated to a fine view of the surrounding countryside and came to a realization of how high 49 m really is. The top-level crossing is not recommended for those prone to vertigo.

I would be interested to know if other people can resist the temptation to take clichéd photographs of the bridge reflected in the water; I confess that we couldn't.

The Pont du Gard is rightly regarded as one of the wonders of the ancient world, but in 1979 we were taken to an even older bridge near Wycoller, north of Manchester. It is an enormous, roughly split stone slab, lying across the two banks of a creek. The stone is approximately 13 m long and is supported in the middle by two unequally spaced rough stone blocks. It has supposedly been there since about 600 BC and should be still there today if you would like to examine it. Like me, you might be tempted to speculate on the means employed to position it across the creek.

Over the centuries, technological and aesthetic factors have lead to an amazing variety of solutions to equivalent spanning problems. The span of the Wycoller slab bridge is much the same as that of the Mathematical Bridge in Cambridge but the two structures could not be more different.

One end of the Mathematical Bridge coincides with a doorway in the masonry wall of Queens' College and the other is supported on a stone abutment on the other side of the Cam. The bridge itself is a complex wooden structure with a somewhat oriental appearance. It transpires that the bridge was designed in 1749 by a Cambridge undergraduate who had visited China during the course of his studies.

As further illustration of the diversity of possible solutions to a given engineering problem, the old London Bridge and Tower Bridge both spanned similar parts of the Thames river but the former

⁶According to the Macquarie Dictionary the word aqueduct can refer either to a channel carrying water or to a bridge supporting one. I use it in both senses but make it clear which meaning I intend.



1985: The flagstones covering the water channel on top of the Pont du Gard. Nîmes, France.

was a relatively hum-drum multi-arched structure while the latter is remarkable enough to grace a thousand postcards. The central section of Tower bridge consists of two five-storey ornamented towers, joined to each other by a footbridge 50 m above the water and by an enormous traffic-carrying double draw-bridge. Each tower is topped with a forest of spires and linked to the bank by means of an asymmetrical suspension bridge.

There is a story, most likely apocryphal, that the rich person who purchased London Bridge and re-erected it in Arizona believed he was buying Tower Bridge! Considering the excess baggage cost of taking a 300 m long bridge to Arizona, it may be that, after all, London Bridge was being built up with silver and gold, silver and gold,...

The bascule or drawbridge is only one possible approach to permitting the passage of tall ships. We saw a remarkable alternative in Manchester, when Ken took us to see a bridge filled with water. It was a section of canal which could pivot around a supporting tower in the middle of a lower-level canal. When a tall vessel required passage along the lower canal, the bridge could be drained and rotated so as to lie along the direction of the current rather than across it.

While travelling by rail, we passed over many grand bridges in ignorance of their finer points. Among them were the extremely long structures over the firths of Forth and Tay in Scotland, the connecting links between Danish islands, a huge bridge near Rotterdam and the prodigious fruits of the labours of the famous railway engineers of the Victorian age, such as Telford and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Near Plymouth, we were able to appreciate the very unusual tubular bridge built by the latter over the river Tamar. In fact it is a wonder that we were able to observe anything as we passed over it in 1982, stunned as we were by a fellow passenger's loudly expressed regrets that her son had missed out on the action in the Falklands because his term of service in the navy had just ended!

At Breisach, between Freiburg in Germany and Colmar in France, is an unusual pontoon bridge across the wide expanse of the Rhine. It consists of a roadway and footpath supported just above the



1985: The classic view of the Pont du Gard.

water on a series of floats. I understand that a section can be moved aside to permit the passage of barges. I drove across it with David when he took me to see a blockhouse of the Maginot line, the mediaeval village of Riquewihr and the little community of Algolsheim.⁷

The French end of this strategic bridge was guarded by friendly Alsatians. On our way back into Germany, however, we were questioned quite closely by border guards concerned that I might be an illegal immigrant abetted by my friend, an Australian who had been working in Germany for several years. Despite my desperate mien and impoverished appearance, they let me in.

⁷A much appreciated destination for computer programmers because Algol is a historically significant computer language. Algolsheim means “the home of Algol”.



1979: Kathy and Ken on the ancient stone bridge at Wycoller. Lancashire, England.



1979: The canal overpass, rotated so that boats on the main canal can pass on either side. Manchester, England.

6.11 Current From Current

The Rhine falls quite sharply in the Freiburg area and there are seven hydro-electric power stations on it between Basle (Switzerland) and Strasbourg (France) which is consistent with Électricité de France's determination to extract energy contributions from every possible water flow. Don't be surprised to hear the whirr of small turbines next time you use one of the self-cleaning public toilets in Paris!

Switzerland has an ideal terrain for the generation of hydro-electricity. It extracts a massive energy contribution, not only from the headwaters of the Rhine but also from the many other alpine streams. One of the most remarkable Swiss hydro-electric schemes is based around the artificial water storage known as the Grande Dixence.

While staying in Sion in the Rhodane valley I attempted to view the Grande Dixence whose 284 m high dam wall is the tallest in the world. Unfortunately, because of its 2,365 m altitude, the access road was still closed by snow, even in June. Water is collected in the Grande Dixence from the Matterhorn glacier through 96 km of tunnels. From the dam, the water falls over 1,750 m to the power stations below.

While in France in 1985 I visited what I believe to be the largest tidal power station in the world. The power station is located on the estuary of the river Rance just next to St Malo in an area with a very high tidal range. The mouth of the estuary has been dammed but there is a lock at one side to permit the passage of shipping. The base of the dam wall is perforated by nineteen large diameter tubes each with a valve to close off the flow of water and a suspended turbine connected to a generator. Peak power output is 750 megawatts.



1985: The tidal power station on the Rance estuary. Normandy, France.

A technical advance featured in this installation is that the turbines are designed to spin no matter which way the water moves through the pipe. This permits power to be generated twice per tidal cycle instead of only once. The station operator also has some freedom to generate electricity at times of peak demand. Power can be generated whenever there is a difference in water levels between the

two sides of the dam wall. When the tide turns, the valves on the pipes are closed and the difference in levels will grow until the tide turns again or until the operator opens the valves in order to generate electricity.

In the exhibition inside the dam wall, it was claimed that France's electricity was derived in equal proportions from hydro, nuclear and conventional thermal generators. I believe that those proportions are somewhat out of date and the nuclear stations now supply half of the total demand. While in the Loire valley we came upon what appeared to be the most modern of the châteaux, but which turned out to be the nuclear reactor complex of St Laurent des Eaux with large and elegant cooling towers.



1985: The most modern of the châteaux of the Loire. St Laurent des Eaux. France.

6.12 Hollow Victories Over Mountains, Rivers And Seas

Some of Europe's tunnels represent major engineering achievements, particularly considering that many of them were built before 1915. Most people think of tunnel construction as a long boring period culminating in an emotional meeting but for those involved there are many hazards and technical problems to be faced along the way.

At the turn of the century, ten thousand workers took eight years to dig the 19 km Simplon tunnel between Switzerland and Italy. They were forced to contend with roof collapses and scalding hot water issuing from the rock at up to one million litres per hour. Today, there is little in the train journey from Domodossola (Italy) and Brig (Switzerland) via the Simplon to remind passengers of all this toil and tribulation.

There are many other long tunnels in the Alps and it is rumoured that the Swiss entrances to some are still mined as a defence against land-based invasion. The first I experienced was the 14 km long Lötschberg and it came upon me unexpectedly. The electric train in which I was travelling did not seem to slow down at all, though the windows moved perceptibly with the increase in air pressure,

the outside world suddenly became dark and the noise level rose. Even at considerable speed, many minutes elapsed before we emerged at the far end.

The European alps are pierced by impressive road tunnels too. In the worst of them, a narrow unsealed road passes between jagged rock walls lit only by car headlights. In some sections, water streams down the walls and drips from the ceiling. Driving in these burrows is quite an experience and the dramatic changes in light from bright sunshine to pitch black and back again are hazards for the unwary driver.

Tunnels seem more appealing when the only alternatives are narrow winding roads over high alpine passes which are closed by snow for significant periods each year. We have no direct experience of driving in Switzerland but the roads over the high passes in France were very narrow, very steep and very winding. Unlike Australian mountain roads, they were not protected by safety rails! Quite lengthy tunnels are to be found even in cities, such as London and Paris, as part of underground rail networks. For example, the continuous tunnel between East Finchley and Morden via Bank on the London Underground is nearly 28 km long, though punctuated by stations and junctions. I was interested to learn that the first tunnel under the Thames was completed in 1843 by Isambard Kingdom Brunel's father.

The linking of Britain and France by tunnel is a project which has been a long time on the drawing board. In fact, the first channel tunnel was begun in 1882 and 1.6 km of tunnel was excavated before parliamentary approval was withdrawn. During the lengthy process of writing this book I read that the tunnels being dug from both sides have finally met in the middle. I look forward to the day when I can ride from London to Paris in a TGV.

6.13 Other Underground Movements

My Cornish ancestors are suspected of having indulged in burrowing activities. They would have been looking for tin or copper rather than trying to travel anywhere.

If there was indeed a Hawking mining tradition in Cornwall,⁸ it is not surprising that my great-grandparents settled in the gold-mining district of Rutherglen, Victoria. I believe that my great-grandfather sold supplies on the gold-fields and was known as Water-barrel Tommy for his temperate habits. As a child, my grandfather learnt to swim when an irate mine owner threw him into a 25 metre-deep shaft to punish him for a minor (miner) infraction of discipline. My father was employed for a while on the Great Southern mine during the period when the enormous tailing dumps from previous underground workings were re-processed with sodium cyanide. I seem to have broken the tradition as my only interest in mining is [so far] purely theoretical.

Over the centuries many Cornish miners emigrated to other countries, spreading their techniques and traditions, as mines in those lands waxed and local fortunes waned. John Deason, an expatriate from St Just in Cornwall was generously compensated for his homesickness when he found the Welcome Stranger at Dunolly, Victoria in 1869. It is believed to be the largest gold nugget ever found and weighed almost 100 kg.

⁸My cousin Gordon had traced the genealogy of the Hawkings as far as the records in St Catherine's House, London would allow. He told me that records prior to about 1855 are still held in parish churches and asked me to further the research on our trip in 1982. He had a copy of the birth certificate of our great-grandfather Thaddeus who was born in 1856. Could I find the marriage certificate of Thaddeus's parents George John Hawking and Elizabeth Roberts in the parish church at Stoke Damerel (part of Plymouth, just on the Devon side of the Cornish border)? Hopes of success faded when we discovered that the parish church in Stoke had been destroyed in the bombing raids of World War II. However, surviving records from all parishes in Devon and Cornwall prior to the mid-nineteenth century have been consolidated in a regional records office in Plymouth. We found an entry in a register there which confirmed details of the marriage, but were unable to follow the threads any further back.

From the marriage entry we could work out when George and Elizabeth were born but were unable to find birth or baptism entries. This presumably means that they were born in a different parish to the one in which they were married. We didn't have time (or energy) to have the records office staff retrieve for us the relevant registers for every parish in Devon and Cornwall. Furthermore, the admittedly incomplete index of entries listed very, very few Hawkings. There were, however, many entries under Hawkins, a fact which may be relevant as great-great-grandfather George signed his name with an X. Despite this failure, my genealogical curiosity remains alive. I would like to know whether subsequent family association with gold and tin mining in Rutherglen (Victoria) had ancestral roots in the Cornish mining industry which has left such interesting relics in the Cornish landscape.

The Cornish mining industry bred inventors, scientists and engineers. A statue in Penzance commemorates the achievements of Humphry Davy who invented the Miners safety lamp in about 1812. Prior to Davy's invention, naked flames had caused explosions and consequent loss of life in mines infiltrated by "fire damp".⁹ Richard Trevithick was another Cornish inventor. His steam-powered vehicle carried passengers in 1801 and was the first in the world to do so. It was created long before Stephenson's Rocket but lost out to it in the first motorized race in history.

Steam engines were crucial to deep mining in Cornwall. Cornish mine operators developed a type of engine which was much more efficient than that of James Watt which in turn was three times as efficient as the Newcomen engine it had replaced. Cornish beam engines pumped water, raised loads and transported miners. A big engine might consist of a large vertical cylinder, sometimes 2.25 m in diameter, fixed to bedrock and acting on a piston attached to a very heavy wooden or cast-iron beam above it. Some such beams, called bobs, weighed more than 40 tonnes. The beam was pivoted on a fulcrum and attached to a massive wooden column dipping into the main shaft of the mine. This column consisted of large timbers (rods) up to 20 m long joined together to reach the bottom of the shaft which could be as far as 700 m below the surface.

The engine houses accommodating these panting behemoths needed to be massive constructions to withstand the stresses and vibration involved in pumping. A typical large engine house near Redruth comprised 2,400 tonnes of stone. One of the joys of strolling in Cornwall today is the picturesque sight of the many abandoned granite engine houses and their associated chimneys. Of course, they will only be judged beautiful while they remain lifeless and silent!

When a beam engine was used for pumping, water would be raised in a series of lifts up a pipe, one for each stroke of the piston. The actual pumping action was produced by the fall of the rod under the influence of gravity, the engine merely raising it to permit the next downward stroke. The diameter of the pipe depended upon the quantity of water in the mine but could be as great as 380 mm. The stroke rate of the engine was often as little as four to six strokes per minute but this rate would have been increased to ten or twelve per minute in very wet conditions. To reduce the pumping effort, water was often discharged into an adit rather than being raised all the way to the surface. Adits were downward sloping tunnels, connecting a mine shaft to the nearest valley.

A man engine was the preferred solution to the problem of transporting miners to and from the depths of the mine. It used similar technology to the pump described above but the vertical compound rod dipping into the mine shaft was fitted with foot pegs. Miners could return to the surface by the following means: When the oak column dropped to its lowest level, they would step onto the bottom pegs. At this point, the steam in the massive cylinder would be condensed using cold water, sucking the piston down and raising the oak column by as much as three or four metres. When the column reached its highest point, the miners would step off onto a ledge on the side of the shaft. The column would then fall and the miners would step onto another set of pegs which would take them to the next ledge. Repeating this process up to 200 times in darkness and with a yawning abyss below them, they would eventually reach the surface. I doubt that today's Occupational Health and Safety Officers would be impressed!

It is mind-boggling enough to imagine the life of miners spending very long shifts so far underground and riding the incredible man engine up and down. Even more incredible is the fact that tunnels from some mines in the vicinity of Lands End followed the lode under the bed of the sea. The Levant mine near St Just extended over three kilometres under the ocean. The roofs of some of the tunnels were so close to the water that during storms miners could hear boulders bumping around on the sea bed. If this seems dangerous to you, history has proven you right; most if not all of the submarine tunnels have now been breached by the sea and are flooded.

A large mine would have several shafts from the surface to its lower levels. There would be separate shafts for the man engine, pumping engines and the rotary whim¹⁰ used to raise ore and deads¹¹ to the surface. Ventilation shafts would be needed at intervals.

There were often several mines in close proximity, each casting its tentacular adits and stopes¹²

⁹Methane.

¹⁰A type of windlass.

¹¹Worthless dirt or rock.

¹²Excavations for the extraction of ore.

far and wide. It would not be unusual for side tunnels of adjacent mines to pass very close to each other, while following the same lode. If one of the mines lost the constant battle against flooding, a head of water hundreds of metres high could build up, ready to rush in and flood the next door mine should the barrier between the tentacles be breached.



1982: A beam engine at the Poldark mine. Cornwall, England.

Chapter 7

Cultural Cringe Or Vultural Binge?

Clouds of circling culture vultures are an unexpected hazard for tourists in Europe. They are drawn to countless studios, museums, opera houses, galleries, theatres, cinemas, festivals, concerts, exhibitions and performances. Their presence in small to moderate numbers is no cause for alarm but their excessive appetite for tickets may cause difficulties!

7.1 Canvassing Views

As far as I can tell, the gigantic Musée du Louvre in Paris is the embodiment of the greatest possible concentration of art works with the greatest possible concentration of art appreciators. It may be an exaggeration, but I'm sure I remember a vast gallery within the building devoted to paintings by French artists from a particular "school" during a particular decade of the eighteenth century. I was horrified to think how many paintings there must be if every country, every school of painting and every ten-year period were represented equally magnificently.

To think of appreciating all the works in the Louvre or other large gallery in one day is clearly a folly. It is obviously better to devote each visit to a major gallery to a particular section of the gallery or to the works of a particular artist or school. The last time I was at the Louvre I paid little attention to anything but the enormous expanses (and expenses?) of canvas covered by Rembrandt in his set of 21 portraits of Marie de Médicis. (Remember her?) I thus managed to avoid brain overload and blisters.

In publicity for certain organized tours, you get the impression that art works, like hotels and waterfalls, are the subject of a system of star rating in which the Mona Lisa has one more star than anything else. "Spend a whole day in Paris, the world's most elegant city. Ascend the Eiffel Tower, shop at leisure in the Rue du Faubourg St Honoré. Visit the Louvre and see the fabulous Mona Lisa..." The works of Michelangelo, Goya, Rubens and Rembrandt in the same gallery are definitely one rung down the ladder.

It is quite apparent that many visitors to the Louvre go only to be able to say that they have seen the Mona Lisa. For our part, we were a little disappointed by the actuality of it. In fact, Kathy insists that she preferred the work hanging immediately to its right!

If the sculpture of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, transfixed for countless years in the Louvre, were secretly imbued with human intellect and senses, I wonder if she would allocate rating stars to the millions of visitors as they passed. "Ah, this one has heard of me and the Venus de Milo! We'll give him two stars. ... Wait a minute, he's really only interested in how much we're worth! He's no better than that ignorant art insurance agent before him! One star!"

We wouldn't dare to be so judgmental because there is no single right way to appreciate art and no universal law which says that knowledgeable appreciations of art works are better than gut feelings. Seldom are works adored by both the masses and the arterati. An artist must choose which adoration, if any, to aim for.

Art may be taken or left by whoever beholds it. The person who buys a shoulder bag decorated with a Miro because it matches their shoes and the person who pays 60 million dollars for a painting

of irises to hang in his yacht may derive every bit as much pleasure from art as a Gallery Director or a Sotheby's auctioneer.

In Europe even the most philistine of people will surely find some artwork to inspire them. If you are repelled by the stuffiness of the Louvre, you have countless alternatives. The British National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, London and the Rijksmuseum (Royal Museum) in Amsterdam are not quite as overwhelming and have some first-rate works. In Paris itself, other Galleries such as the Centre Pompidou are operated in a much less traditional style.

Displays in the Centre Pompidou change quite frequently. When we last visited there was an exhibition of Asian art. When at the Centre Pompidou you will find no temptation to look out the window rather than at the works on display. This is the result of a ploy by the architects who put the escalators and the plumbing outside the windows in order to save you from the distractions of the wider world. The tactic is necessary because the open space of the Beaubourg outside is frequently the scene for highly diverting performances of fire-eating, juggling and escapology.

7.2 Seeking Intimacy Behind The Louvre

If the Centre Pompidou is too large for you, you may find yourself at home in one of the smaller collections. On our visits, the Jeu-de-Paume gallery behind the Louvre was a powerful magnet. It housed a small but magnificent collection of Impressionist paintings. I loved the Monet painting of London's houses of parliament and the Van Goghs which were hung there. I have recently heard that the collection has now moved to the Quai d'Orsay but I haven't seen it there.

We have seen and loved the pastel shades of Monet in several European galleries and I would like to visit his house in Giverny, between Paris and Rouen. Its garden was the inspiration for many of his works including the famous *Waterlilies*.

When the Courtauld collection of impressionist works came to Canberra some years ago, I was greatly attracted to two famous Renoir paintings: the *Bar at the Folies Bergère*¹ and the *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Unfortunately, if I wish to see them again I must return to Britain.

There is a museum in Amsterdam devoted to the art of Vincent Van Gogh and we enjoyed it particularly because it expanded our knowledge of the media he used and the type of work he did. We had only been familiar with his paintings of haystacks, flowers and slightly unreal people, all branded with his trademarks of exaggerated brush strokes and bright colours. The Amsterdam collection includes many charcoal sketches which lack the hallmarks of his paintings but are just as striking.

It is well known that Vincent Van Gogh had psychological and social problems. So too did Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. His famous posters of Gay Paris and the Moulin Rouge along with many other beautiful works are collected in a gallery in Albi, not far from Condom in the south of France. The magnificence of the collection there is attributed to the unpopularity of his work during his lifetime. His mother collected his unsold paintings and posters and these now constitute the core of the current collection.

On our travels we came across the works of two artists who seem to have captured the essential character of their native country in the same way that Albert Namatjira and Pro Hart have done for the Australian bush. One was Anton Piek, whose highly-detailed, multi-figured scenes seem to be distilled from everything which is traditionally and characteristically Dutch.

The other was a French painter called Delacroix (not to be confused with the Eugene Delacroix better known to art historians) who painted detailed scenes incorporating an unnatural juxtaposition of shop fronts and multi-storey apartment buildings. Parts of his work have been extracted and mass printed on posters, biscuit tins and the like. In fact it is possible that he only ever did one large painting and that all the different examples I have seen have been extracted from it.

In Amsterdam countless tourists go to the Rijksmuseum only to see the Night Watch by Rembrandt. The Rijksmuseum authorities try to encourage such people to look at a much wider range of art by planting a trail of signs to the Night Watch, starting at the main entrance and leading visitors past nearly every artwork in the gallery before finally arriving at the drawcard!

¹Oops! I subsequently found out that this one is by Édouard Manet!



1985: Bridges in Albi, France. Note the use of brick and the two styles of arch.

It is often the small, unknown (to uncultured people like me) galleries which afford the most memorable visits. The Panorama Mesdag in den Haag, Holland is not a gallery but a fascinating piece of art. A century or more ago Hendrik Willem Mesdag set up a large glass cylinder at about eye level on the beach near the fishing village of Scheveningen and drew on the inside surface of the glass what he could see throughout the 360° panorama. He then transferred and enlarged this sketch to a painting on a 7 metre high canvas hung around the inside of a cylindrical tower many metres in diameter. To view the painting, one climbs up a flight of stairs to a landing in the centre of the tower and slightly above the level of the bottom of the painting. The landing is surmounted by a rotunda which prevents one seeing above the top of the painting. Sand and beach debris cover the surrounding floor which slopes away to the bottom of the painting. The effect is very evocative; one experiences a strong feeling of having been transported to the last century and to the beach.

In more recent times, another Dutchman has created a similar panorama in Alice Springs, but for me its effect is less convincing because it represents neither a real scene nor a historical record. It is rather a juxtaposition of tourist images.

The Panorama Mesdag has a rustic simplicity which is in total contrast to the scenes portrayed by L.S. Lowry. A museum in Manchester whose name I forget, or never knew, houses a collection of his paintings which communicate the effects of an Industrial Revolution landscape on an insignificant human individual. A similarly delightful collection of working penny-in-the-slot music machines in the same museum gives another perspective on the mechanical age.

Lowry's human subjects seem to preserve their independence and their spirits despite the gloomy oppression of their surroundings. In Plymouth we stumbled across an enormous wall-painting, more than two storeys high, which was in the process of being touched up by its creator, an artist fascinated by death. Over a period of months he had persuaded many dying people to sit for him and their sad, haunted and obsessed faces have been matched to bodies in mediaeval attire and incorporated into a sea of striving humanity under a rich blue renaissance sky.

We found the Fondation Maeght gallery near the perched village of St Paul de Vence inland from Nice, France worth visiting for its paintings, for its indoor and outdoor sculpture and for its exquisitely beautiful surroundings. It displayed works by Picasso, Miró and Dubuffet.

Although a little over-commercialized, the fortified, narrow-streeted village of St Paul is worth strolling around. It also has a lot of souvenirs crafted from olive wood, one of the most beautiful of Nature's art works. We enjoyed watching the locals of St Paul playing boules as we sat on the terrace of a refreshment establishment just outside its ramparts.



1985: Floral moat around the brick château at Albi. France.



1985: Portrait of Toulouse-Lautrec, born in Albi, France. (Postcard.)



1982: The beach at Noordwijk, Netherlands, with people sheltering from the wind.



1979: L.S. Lowry's homage to the significance of workers in Manchester, England. (Postcard.)



1979: L.S. Lowry self portrait. (Postcard.)



1985: The perched village of St Paul de Vence. Provence, France.



1982: The death painting in Plymouth, England.



1982: The artist at work on the death painting.



1985: A game of Boules in St Paul de Vence.

7.3 Music — The Highs And The Lows

There are many music festivals held in Europe and many, many concerts. I regret that I didn't take the chance to listen to more live music while we were there. However, while staying with Gordon and Pam in Utrecht, we attended a wonderful concert given by the Utrecht symphony orchestra. It was the last of a series featuring all the Beethoven symphonies and the performance of the Ninth after interval is something I doubt that I will ever forget.

Like the proprietor of the Bateau Ivre, I can be profoundly moved by music. In everyday life I have difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions but the right music at the right time can release them like turning on a tap. This performance was such a combination and it took me up every hill, down every dale and round every curve on the emotional roller coaster which threads through the four movements of the Ninth. I felt such sadness that tears came to my eyes, I quivered in anticipation, I felt uplifted in triumph, I seethed in quiet anger and I bubbled over with joy. My resonance with the music was such that for much of the concert I was covered in goose pimples! The experience was heightened by sharing it with Kathy and my two best friends even though I don't think they were affected to quite the same degree.

I have good recordings of two first-rate performances of Beethoven's Ninth but neither can create the feeling evoked by that live performance. I hadn't previously heard or heard of the orchestra, the choir or the soloists, but they were magnificent.

Outside the concert halls we found that there was considerable talent among the buskers in the large cities of Europe. The sad drunkard in London who Les Pattersoned his way through a few tuneless bars of some unrecognizable favourite on a harmonica before begging for "20p for a cup of coffee, guv'nor" was fortunately an exception.

Often it is music of a very high standard which floats through the tunnels and stairways of the London Underground. You can locate performances by following the sound or, failing that, by looking for the signs saying, "BUSKERS PROSECUTED", under which someone was invariably performing. I was so impressed with one performance that I ran down a level from the platform on which I was waiting, dropped some money in the guitar case of the surprised performer and ran back so as not to miss my train.

I am happy to reward what I consider to be talent but Kathy has her reservations because she knows that I am uncoordinated, tone deaf and lack a sense of rhythm. However, because of my great enjoyment of music, I know that if I could overcome the small handicaps just mentioned, I would be a virtoso musician myself.

One of my most haunting memories of the London underground is that of the sound of beautiful violin music accompanying me all the way through the very long pedestrian subway from South Kensington station. It seemed to float past and return in eddies around me. The violinist was very, very good (she was really, Kathy!) and she played as though the tunnels of the subway were part of her instrument.

But even the music of the Fiddler of South Ken. lacked the special magic of a small group we found playing in the arcades of Bern. Their music seemed imbued with the power to make cripples rise from their wheelchairs and dance. Surely one of them was the Pied Piper of Hamelin!

If that be so, then another must have been Scrooge McDuck and a third his accountant! We listened enraptured with a rapidly growing throng but the musicians packed up and passed around the hat soon after we arrived. Like everyone else we contributed but unlike the others we did not hurry off. It was thus that we discovered the secret of wealth through music.

Once nearly everyone had left, the band started up again and gathered a new audience, but again played only for a short time before collecting money and pretending to go home. Obviously they wanted fortune ahead of fame. The last thing they wanted was crowds of appreciative fans who'd already given what they had to give and who would stand between new listeners and the group's coffer!

An invisible organist in the church inside the walled town of Carcassonne near the Spanish border seemed to crave neither fame nor fortune. He or she was very skillfully producing avant garde music on the church's pipe organ, producing a sound both beautiful and totally incongruous with the setting. Of course, the music may not have been as avant garde as it seemed, because, in a

traditional church in a mediaeval town, anything more recent than Bach has a tendency to sound revolutionary.

7.4 Screening For Cancer

French cinemas are, from our experience, as small and plain as their Gothic cathedrals are grand and rich. However, again generalizing from limited experience, cinema going is a well established activity in France, seemingly more popular than going to church. Cinemas had frequent screenings and charged admission prices which seemed quite low by Australian standards. Of course you have to select English/American/Australian films marked “v.o” (version originale) in such guides as *Pariscope* unless your French is very good.

In London in 1979 some cinemas operated continuous screenings and you could enter at any time and leave when you chose, usually when you started seeing things for the third time. Some people used these cinemas as a warm escape from the bitter weather outside, but for us they were unacceptable shelters for a reason which shocked us to the core. People smoked in British cinemas! In our Australian experience, smoking at the pictures was as uncommon as urinating in church.

We couldn’t believe it when we sat in a British cinema for the first time and, coughing and spluttering, looked up at the shafts of coloured light from the projectors scattering off billowing clouds of blue smoke and eventually casting a fitful and wavering image on the screen. All our notions of Britain as a civilised society evaporated in a puff.

Fortunately, people didn’t seem to smoke in British theatres. Unfortunately, as far as we could tell in the absence of a centralized booking system, most entertainments in the West End were booked out for months ahead. We eventually managed to get tickets to two performances and were thus able to enjoy a Tom Stoppard play in smoke-free comfort.

A Barry Humphries show near Picadilly Circus was similarly smoke-free but patrons in the front rows were assaulted by the alcoholic exhalations and expectorations of Australia’s greatest, er, diplomat. Sir Les Patterson. Many British notions of Australia as a civilised society vanished in a wisp of brandy mist.

You may think it strange that we went to London to watch Barry Humphries, but perhaps not as strange as going to Paris to eat at McDonalds for the first time!

7.5 A Better Booking System

The greatest concentration of entertainment in Britain is certainly in the London West End near Picadilly and Leicester Square. There is a similar concentration of bookshops in nearby Charing Cross Road. The most famous of these is the one featured in the book *84 Charing Cross Road*, which is a collection of correspondence between an impoverished but fanatical American book lover and an extremely helpful and diligent book dealer.

More use to the average reader is the massive Foyles bookshop whose shelves spill out of one four storey building and across the street. When we were last there, they had an amazingly complex system of paying for the books that you inevitably couldn’t resist. You took the books that you had acquired from the floor you were on to a service desk on that floor. They wrapped them in a paper bag and attached a docket and looked after them for you until you returned from the other floors. Having finished your selection phase, you then collected all the parcels and the dockets and took them to the cashier on the ground floor where you and your money were swiftly parted.

However, book shopping in Britain is not only worthwhile because of the range of books in stock but also because the prices of books are traditionally far cheaper than the same editions in Australia. I used to rant and rave about this but, now that I am an author, I can no longer work up quite as much fervour!

On our most recent trip to Europe, we allocated several days to tracking down books in Kathy’s area of specialization. Her interests are so exotic that you can’t expect to find the titles in stock in Australian bookshops. We based ourselves in London and spent one day at Blackwell’s in Oxford, another at Heffer’s in Cambridge and a third in Dixon’s and other nearby shops in London itself.

I was not the motivating force behind these expeditions but I found plenty to look at and returned with lightened wallet and bulging backpack.

My European book purchases on that trip, even those acquired in Britain, were mostly French language works. It may seem odd, but books in the bookshops in Paris were mostly in French! The prices of books in France appears to be more comparable with those in Australia but I did purchase a few there. The bookshop of Gibert Jeune on the Boulevard St Michel was the best we came across and I was thankful to Nicole who had recommended it.

At a second-hand bookstall in Grenoble, I bought a copy of the biography of Madame Curie written by her daughter and found it a very rewarding and inspiring story. I knew much of the story before, but this book added a lot of unfamiliar and very interesting details. One example was the education collective by which the Curie daughters and other children of Sorbonne professors were taught. Quality rather than quantity was the keynote and the children received one or two hours of intense tuition per week from each of the parents in their area of specialization.

It can't have been a totally disastrous teaching system, at least for genetically and environmentally favoured children, because one of the Curie daughters herself won a Nobel prize.

After reading this book and also visiting the very informative museum at Louis Pasteur's birth-place in Dole (near the Swiss border), I wished I could remember a lot more of the biographical details of the other great European scientists and inventors of the past. So many of them, like Archimedes, Curie, Marconi, Newton, Faraday, Babbage, Bohr, Galileo, Da Vinci, Carnot, Diesel, Davy, Röntgen, Lavoisier, Liebnitz, and Leeuwenhoek, made discoveries which underpin vital components of today's technology. Others like Freud, Galton, Jung and Piaget advanced the study of how we think, feel and behave.

The Pasteur museum was one of the highlights of our tour. As a high school student I had read a biography of him and the exhibits caused memories to flood back. Apart from Pasteur's well-known discovery of the process for *pasteurizing* milk, he saved the livelihood of local vigneron by identifying the organism responsible for turning their wine into vinegar. He was the first to identify optical isomers of organic compounds. Pasteur also found a vaccine against rabies and saved the life of a boy after first injecting the untested and potentially dangerous vaccine into himself.

What I didn't know was that Pasteur was an excellent artist. The museum has some examples of portraits he did before devoting himself to science.

I knew but had forgotten of Pasteur's disagreements with the Académie Française and their reluctance to admit him to membership. I also hadn't remembered that his father was a tanner. I found this interesting because mine was too. Obviously years of great achievement are still before me!

The Science Museum in South Kensington (London) is another wonderful place to learn about science and its history. It was weaker in the "hands-on learning" department than the Questacon National Science and Technology Centre in Canberra but was excellent in other ways. To appreciate it to the full, it is best to make a series of visits over several days and cover one section at a time.

While in London in 1982 we also visited the Planetarium and the adjacent waxworks of Madame Tussaud. The wax effigies in the latter are so lifelike that you may have difficulty in restraining yourself from attacking some of them with a blowtorch. The simulated nocturnal skylscapes in the former are far less brilliant than the nightly performances in the Australian countryside, but no doubt they are a thing of wonder to Londoners. To me the projection system was the Planetarium's item of greatest interest.



1985: Louis Pasteur's house in Dole, France.

7.6 The Magical History Tour Is Going To Take You A Day

The city of Oslo (Norway) has a number of small, individual-theme museums which can be fully appreciated in one visit. Conveniently, three of them are grouped close together and all of them have a nautical theme.

The first of them contains three viking long ships which were painstakingly lifted from the under-sea mud after more than a thousand years of immersion. By themselves they no longer strike fear into your heart but you can imagine that they might if they were filled with Horrible horned Hagars brandishing axes.

The second museum contains the wooden ship Fram, especially designed to avoid crushing by ice. It proved itself in this regard on several polar voyages, such as the 1893-1896 Fridtjof Nansen expedition into the North Polar icefield, reaching almost 86° North. He sailed the Fram as far north as he could into pack ice, anchored it to the ice and let it drift. Many, many months later it ended up near Spitzbergen as he had predicted.

Roald Amundsen purchased the Fram and in 1909 used it in an attempt to be first to reach the North Pole. On hearing that Robert Peary had already attained that goal, he turned south to the Antarctic and in 1910 beat Robert Scott to the South Pole by 35 days. Absolutely amazing is the tiny space allocated in the Fram to each crew member. Even the captain's cabin is more like a coffin than a bedroom!

The third of the Oslo museums we visited contains the balsa wood raft in which Thor Heyerdahl sailed from Peru to Polynesia, proving that ancient peoples could have made such epic voyages in their relatively primitive vessels. Heyerdahl specialized in close run things. By the end of the voyage, Kon-tiki was very low in the water and was almost wrecked on a coral reef. Heyerdahl's first papyrus boat Ra actually sank in the Gulf of Mexico after a journey from Morocco. The next year, Ra II made it to Barbados.

Two other small museums we visited are worthy of mention. One was a museum of embroidery and needlecraft in St Gallen (Switzerland), a town we visited in order to see its famous Abbey Library. People with Kathy's knowledge of and interest in such crafts are certain to enjoy it.

The second is the Musée Dauphinois in Grenoble. It illustrated the lives and activities of [ordinary] residents of the region in former times using some spectacular audio-visual and lighting techniques in combination with static displays and re-creations. The combination was particularly effective in bringing history to life.

In both Grenoble and Oslo we visited resistance museums celebrating the courage of resistance fighters and highlighting the darkness of European wars.

Chapter 8

European Survival — A Constant Battle

*But here in this graveyard it's still no-man's land.
The countless white crosses in mute witness stand
To man's blind indifference to his fellow man
And a whole generation who were butchered and damned.
And I can't help but wonder now Willie MacBride,
Do all those who lie here know why they died?
Did you really believe them when they told you the cause?
Did you really believe that this war would end wars?
The suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame,
The killing, the dying they were all done in vain,
For Willie MacBride, it's all happened again
And again and again and again and again.*

Eric Bogle

The words of the Eric Bogle song *No Man's Land* came to mind when we found ourselves, unexpectedly, in the Australian World War I cemetery in northern France just to the west of the village of Villers-Bretonneux on the main road from Amiens.

Our sadness at the discovery of the Adelaide cemetery and its 250 headstones grew to horror when we found over 1,000 Australian graves at the Australian National Memorial a few kilometres away along with a list of the names of a further 11,000 dead Australians whose bodies couldn't be found to bury.

Australia's involvement in European conflicts has been enormous considering our small population and great distance. Over sixty thousand Australians were killed in Europe in the first World War. Several of our relatives were among them. In the second World War, thirty-seven thousand Australian airmen served with the RAF and thousands were killed.

In April 1918, a German advance captured Villers-Bretonneux, only a few kilometres from the strategic transport hub of Amiens. In a stunning night-time counter-attack Australian forces managed to re-capture the town, an operation of great significance to the course of the war.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, financed by the governments of the Commonwealth nations who fought in the World Wars, maintains the WWI cemeteries in immaculate condition, faithfully honouring those who were killed more than seventy years ago. Perhaps it also harbours the futile hope that the pristine, peaceful beauty of the cemeteries might erase from the historical record the tragedies from which they grew.

We walked through a gateway into a tiny world, seventy years out of step with its surroundings and twenty thousand kilometres out of place. Alone amongst the flowers with the birds and the insects, we were able to contemplate the industry and peace of a world without people. Even the sound of a tractor in the adjacent fields seemed thousands of kilometres away. The no-man's land label was as apt as ever.

A wistful, regretful sadness was about us. "How could they ...?" Then, gradually, we became aware of something that lightened the tragic atmosphere. Slowly we perceived the irony that, above



1985: The Australian Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France.

the victims of yesterday's battles, now reigned a profound and lasting peace. How could we feel nothing and learn nothing, standing in such a place?

Many of the Australian headstones near Villers-Bretonneux were marked, "He died that his country might be free." From a modern perspective, it seems surprising that these Australians of long ago believed that they were defending their country, though the fighting was 20,000 km from home.

Of course, there are many other military cemeteries in this area besides the Australian ones. We visited a German cemetery near Proyart and found that the head stones were of black metal, all in the form of a cross except for those marking the graves of Jewish soldiers who had fought and died for Germany. There were several names on every marker.

We found real "Remembrance Day" poppies growing beside the road to this cemetery and it was the first time we had seen them.



1985: Cemetery at the Australian Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux.



1985: German cemetery near Proyart, France. White headstones for Jewish soldiers fighting for Germany.

8.1 Somme diversion!

I have no desire to glorify war; if I had, visits to these old battlefields and to other even sadder places would certainly have cured me of it. I doubt that many soldiers who have experienced the realities of battle have any interest in glorifying war either. A few experiences of frontline action on the Western Front was usually sufficient to replace enlistment enthusiasm with deep dread. It is significant that, when a referendum was held to determine whether Australia should introduce conscription, the majority of troops on the western front voted against the proposal.

We had been largely ignorant of Australia's connection with the battles of the Somme and consequently we learned a great deal from our visit to the area in 1985. We had not been aware of the key role that Australian troops had played in the area around Villers-Bretonneux. That the significance of their role was still recognized with gratitude by the local inhabitants is quite remarkable.

In 1915 and 1916 most of the action along the Western Front, stretching south-east to north-west from the Lorraine to south-western Belgium, was concentrated at Verdun. On July 1st, 1916, Haig, the British supreme commander, launched the first battle of the Somme as a diversionary tactic to take the pressure off the French at Verdun. The value of the diversion may be debated but no ground was gained and the cost exceeded 400,000 Allied casualties.

Early in 1918, in what has been described as the largest offensive ever launched in warfare to that date, the Germans pushed West in the Somme area, attempting to crush the British Army and to take the strategic communications centre of Amiens. They fell just short. After the impetus of this assault had dissipated and while both armies were attempting to rebuild their strength, an Australian counter-attack on April 24th succeeded in recapturing the town of Villers-Bretonneux, a few kilometres to the east of Amiens.

The Allies were expecting another massive assault at any moment because they knew that the German strength had been increased with reinforcements from the Russian front. They reasoned that the German commander Ludendorff would want to make his move before the numerical superiority of his forces was nullified by the steady stream of troops arriving from the United States. In the meantime a period of relative calm ensued.

The Australians used this quiet period to perfect the technique of "peaceful penetration", a constant harassment of the enemy by small scale night raids. The quiet ended on July 4th with an Australian assault on the village of Hamel, a few kilometres from Villers-Bretonneux. Their action resulted in a morale-inspiring victory which caused the French President and War Minister Georges Clemenceau, "The Tiger" to make a visit to the headquarters of the fourth Australian division near Corbie. The words of his address to them are quoted by Bean in Volume 5 of the Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918:

"... When the Australians came to France, the French people expected a great deal of you.... We knew that you would fight a real fight, but we did not know that from the very beginning you would astonish the whole continent.....I shall go back tomorrow and say to my countrymen: 'I have seen the Australians. I have looked in their faces. I know that these men ... will fight alongside of us again until the cause for which we are all fighting is safe for us and for our children.'"

On August 8th, an advance of several kilometres was made by Australian and Canadian troops, the whole operation planned by the Australian commander Monash. The Australian troops were delighted that, this time, the advance continued far beyond the forward enemy positions and enabled them to silence the German heavy guns which would otherwise have shelled them mercilessly as they settled into their newly gained positions. Unbelievably, given the presence of enemy artillery, machine guns and tanks, Australian cavalry were used in this action.

At the height of the folly in the Somme, 50,000 artillery pieces on each side faced each other from trenches no more than a few hundred metres apart. The noise of the bombardments was so loud that is claimed it could sometimes be heard from London. Stereo photographs we saw in Villers-Bretonneux showed the effect the artillery had on the landscape. It had been reduced to dust and rubble and then destroyed several more times. It was a crater-pocked lunar desert with the shattered

skeletons of a few trees and not a hint of a leaf. Human bones and, wrecked equipment lay mingled with abandoned water bottles and mud.

For the people who fought here between the vicious tangles of barbed wire, life was a mixture of blood, lice and disease, frightful agonies, rotting corpses and, probably worst of all, fear.

Conditions were so bad that seven battalions of Australian troops mutinied late in 1918. An extract from a contemporary newspaper contradicts the suggestion that they might have been motivated by cowardice.

“In recent months the 1st Battalion won acclaim for an action to bring a British regiment into line with their own. The English soldiers had been pinned down by machine gun fire for two days. Seeing this, six Australian soldiers from the 1st Battalion attacked the machine gun posts and silenced them, captured 300 prisoners and 2000 yards of ground, and took over the town of Chipilly. They then returned to their battalion. These men have lost their decorations as a result of the mutiny.”

Near Villers-Bretonneux today, you can still see the white circles in ploughed fields where exploding shells blasted the subsoil chalk to the surface. You can still find human bones and abandoned water bottles. You can still see the lines-of the trenches and even perfectly preserved “funk holes” deep underground. Shell cases and shrapnel lie scattered about.

8.2 Villers-Bretonneux – The Grateful Living

Amazingly, out of this miserable hell came incredible bravery and deeds of exceptional love toward comrades. Out of it came the seemingly ineradicable gratitude of the people of Villers-Bretonneux to the Australians who liberated their town in 1918, even though virtually all its buildings were destroyed.

There are many signs of Australia around the town. The Victoria school is next to the Victoria Hall and I think it is in Victoria Street; there is a Melbourne Street nearby. The gates of the park in the centre of the town are made in the form of the rising sun emblem of the Australian forces. We stayed opposite the park in Hotel Victoria.

In every room in the primary school in modern-day Villers-Bretonneux is a carved wooden sign, decorated with an Australian animal and the words “Let us not forget Australia”; More than seventy years later, the residents of the town have not forgotten.

We were fascinated to learn that the construction of the school was financed by contributions from pupils at Victorian schools immediately after the war.

Villers-Bretonneux was the first town in France to be twinned with a town in Australia (Robinvale, Victoria) and when we were there there was a display of Australiana in the town hall. The sign at the entry to the town features a kangaroo.



1985: Gates in Villers-Bretonneux, France in the form of the AIF emblem.



1985: Victoria Hall, Villers-Bretonneux. There is a small WWI museum upstairs.



1985: Victoria School, Villers-Bretonneux. The English dedication reads,
THIS SCHOOL BUILDING IS THE GIFT OF THE SCHOOL CHILDREN OF VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA TO THE CHILDREN OF VILLERS-BRETONNEUX AS A PROOF OF THEIR LOVE AND GOODWILL TOWARDS FRANCE. TWELVE HUNDRED AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS, THE FATHERS AND BROTHERS OF THESE CHILDREN, GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE HEROIC RECAPTURE OF THIS TOWN FROM THE INVADER ON 24TH APRIL 1918 AND ARE BURIED NEAR THIS SPOT. MAY THE MEMORY OF GREAT SACRIFICES IN A COMMON CAUSE KEEP FRANCE AND AUSTRALIA TOGETHER FOREVER IN BONDS OF FRIENDSHIP AND MUTUAL ESTEEM.



1985: Villers-Bretonneux mairie (town hall).



1985: Entry to Villers-Bretonneux, twinned with Robinvale, Victoria.

8.3 Colonel Padieu and "The Story of the Boche"

Near Villers-Bretonneux we were very lucky to meet a veteran of the terrible First World War battles, though of Verdun rather than of his native Somme. Colonel Padieu was nearly 90 years old – deaf from artillery service in both wars but still a formidable personality. His photograph appeared in the national news magazine *Le Figaro* the year we met him, in connection with his protest to the government at their relocation of war cemeteries near Verdun. He also featured in publicity for the film *Mutiny on the Western Front*.

In the few hours we spent with him we learned that he had been too young to join the French army in 1914 and so had gone to Britain and joined the British army for a year. He then returned to the French artillery and was wounded at Verdun.

We subsequently discovered that in 1939 he volunteered again and was involved in heavy fighting, covering the evacuation at Dunkirk. His unit fought its way to the sea-front at Dunkirk only to see the last boat already on its way to England. They had no choice but to turn around and fight their way back inland! Some time later he was directing French artillery from a bell-tower when he noticed that the Germans had overrun the church below. Calmly transmitting his own co-ordinates, he ordered the guns to fire! His second war wound was presumably incurred because of this bravery.

Despite his amazing military record, his keenness to join up when circumstances demanded and his position as president of *Souvenir Française* (the French equivalent of the RSL), he said he had no time at all for career soldiers! This may explain his affinity for the Australians, who, in the First World War, were said to remain solidly civilian in outlook despite years of military discipline.

With his permission Kathy taped one of his many anecdotes and sent him a copy when we returned home. In fact it was Jean-Pierre who requested her to tape it and to send him a copy.

Colonel Padieu's English was quite heavily accented but nonetheless understandable. The following is a slightly edited transcript of his "Story of the Boche".

"... Ze war was in zis dispositon; zere were trenches parallel — German trench, French trench. And the system of trenches was a light trench, to have a watch; a deeper trench to begin firing on the [enemy] coming out of his trench; and the third line was called 'la ligne de resistance', the resistance line, where were put ze heaviest implements like trench mortars and big machine guns."

"And in 1917 this system of trenches was realized on a very long hill which is between two rivers. And on ze top of zis 'ill zere was a very old royal road which was called 'le Chemin des Dames', the way of the ladies. You see because there was the marshes and the way of the ladies. And so ze Germans were stuck on zer east side of ze hill; ze French were on ze west side. Each one, on both sides, ready to try an attack to jump over the other side."

"And of course, ze watch lines were rather far from the resistance lines; ze resistance lines at ze bottom of ze hill and ze watch lines at ze top of ze hill. And not even a continued line, but bits of line or simply holes. And so zose French and German trenches, watch trenches, were very close sometimes, one over each other. And sometimes, at zese [hidey-holes] the soldier had jump in a shell hole which was in front of ze trench, because ze idea of the thing was to see. Not to fight but to see what zey were doing, to be aware of ze attack. So on both sides without knowing it, ze tactics of ze both armies were the same, to come as close as they could but not fight."

"And I was sent, I was an artilleryman, I was sent what we called infantry liaison, 'un liaison d'infanterie'. We had, we artillerymen to go with the infantry soldiers as far toward ze front as possible, to have the idea of the battlefield where we we should have to fire."

"It was not a good post, you see. We in the artillery, we liked to be back behind! And so it was always asked to the French the youngest non-commissioned officer or officer to go and 'ave a look. And so when it was my turn, I was [made] aware by ze youngest French soldiers that there were a place where we could see a German at the watch with

just the head out of the hole, standing in a very deep hole with just his head [showing] and having a watch, right and left always and not even an 'elmet but a small soft cap."

"And as soon as I was arrived, I talked to the youngest non-commissioned officer ... and said I would like to see the Boche. ... and suddenly I arrived in a big shell hole about three yards wide and there were in this hole one sergeant and two soldiers. One was making a finger ring, in a long aluminium fuse, you see to pass the time. And when I came in dis 'ole they were, as ever, angry to see an artilleryman coming to make somezing wrong in zer infantry place!"

"And I came above ze parapet and I said at first whispering in a very low, low voice, 'Where is he?'. And he said, 'There'. And so I had my head out of ze parapet. I saw nothing but just the land and the valley. I came back. I lowered my head and I said in a very low voice, 'No I don't see anything'."

"Suddenly his head was very,very anxious. 'Nothing! You don't see ze Boche?'. I say, 'No.'

... He was so afraid that he nearly trembled! The — of the Boche was no more here. So he raised his head and suddenly he cried out, 'Yes he is! He is there!' So I had more boldly my head out of the parapet and said no and talked to the sergeant who was lower than I, 'Where is he?' 'Have your head down.' And so I saw ze German which was at three yards from me just laughing because I were looking in the level above his head. And he was laughing."

"I said, in German, I said, 'Guten Tag'. And he said, 'Ja. Ja. Guten Tag'. And it was the first time in my life I had seen a German and a German soldier. So without thinking of anything it was funny to see a German soldier on the battlefield exposed to all the bullets. I said, 'Are you married?' He said, 'Yes.' 'Have you how many kinders?' He said, 'three' and he pulled out a postcard of himself and showed me a photo of his wife with the three boys. I thought it was enough. I said, 'Good, good.'"

"And we understood the thing after. Because he was there to have a watch and as long as he was watching the French sergeant was quite [sure] the attack was not to start, because, before starting the attack, the troops 'ave to go away."

"This is the story of the Boche."

Colonel Padiou then went on to explain that the senior officers failed to understand what seemed so simple to the ordinary soldiers at the front. When the officers heard about the German lookout, they ordered him killed. The Germans retaliated for his execution with a very savage barrage of grenades and shells.

We are struck by the fact that Colonel Padiou had never met a German before the war. No doubt there were hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides (including most of the Australians) who had never met one of the enemy, let alone having been harmed by them. Despite this, they all lined up on the battlefield determinedly trying to kill each other.

8.4 Grandad Jack – Writing Between the Lines

Kathy and I had come to Villers-Bretonneux not knowing of its special significance to Australians. We stayed there because it had a hotel listed in the Michelin guide and it was close to some small places listed in her grandfather's diary made during his war service as a machine gunner and sniper in 1918.

I regret that I never met Kathy's Grandad Jack. I am told that he was a gentle, easy-going person who gained great pleasure from reading. Kathy assures me that there was no violence whatever in his make up but despite this, many stories of his exploits relate to the use of firearms.

The son of a farmer, he had proved himself an expert shot prior to enlisting in 1917 and won many trophies in clay pigeon shooting. He had a habit of sitting in the shade of the verandah of their farmhouse near Longwood and passing the time shooting rabbits.

One day, while engaged in a more active pursuit, he raised a bucket out of a well and, with quick reflexes, grabbed the snake which reared suddenly out of it. He then persuaded Kathy's brother, aged seven to shoot the snake, draped on a stick, with the shotgun!

On another occasion, he leaned in through the window with a rifle and shot a snake which just happened to be in Kathy's bedroom!

It wasn't until very late in the war that eighteen to twenty-one year-old males could enlist without their parents consent. Grandad Jack was born in 1896 and was unable to persuade his parents to give their permission. He turned twenty-one on April 1st, 1917, got engaged and enlisted in the AIF on April 25th, 1917 in Seymour. Although his father had a weak heart at the time, he did not believe that the condition represented any cause for alarm.

Grandad Jack trained in camp at Broadmeadows before travelling on the troop transport *Indirra* to Egypt, leaving Australia on November 26th and spending New Year's Day 1918 in Suez. He later learned that *Indirra* was sunk on the return voyage.

Grandad Jack and his companions then entrained for Port Said, before sailing on the *Kashgar* across the Mediterranean, landing at Taranto in Italy and remarking on the pretty girls. He crossed Italy and France by train via Bari, Bologna, Marseille, Lyons, Bourges and Tours before embarking for England on *Mona's Queen* at Cherbourg. He then spent some months in camps in Codford and Grantham before re-crossing the Channel on the 4th of June and marching to Étaples. From then on the diary is a mixture of laconic descriptions of the action, reminders of letters received and written, and apparently care-free comments about leisure activities engaged in while out for a rest.

While writing this book, I had access to copies of letters written by Grandad Jack to his fiancée Alice (Kathy's Grandma). They include more detail than the diary entries but are fairly obviously written with a view to reducing the anxiety of the reader. Life in front-line trenches must have been extremely stressful, but Grandad Jack gives only the faintest hints of the painful feelings he must have experienced.

Despite Grandad Jack's frequent complaints about censorship of his letters to his fiancée, clearly he himself was, consciously or unconsciously, his own strictest censor. Life must have been difficult for Alice, reading, as she must have been, between the lines (so to speak). Communication was extremely difficult and letters took many weeks to arrive.

Despite the controls on what was written, the following extracts from the diaries (D) and letters (L) shed quite a lot of light on front-line conditions and contemporary attitudes.

L5th June: One hears the occasional gun here but of course they hear them in England at times under favourable conditions.

L13th June: One evening a Fritz came fooling around in a plane but the old antis pelted such a lot of shrapnel at him that he decided to leave. It was quite a noisy fireworks display for a while. It's a very rare thing to see a Fritz plane at all but ours are busy all day. As we moved up we saw some of his long range work. We were camped outside a fairly large city and Fritz was heaving heavy H.E. into it.

L17th June, in a dug out: Since writing on the other side of this sheet we've been presented with a green envelope each which is not censored but we are on our honour not to put any war information in it.

L17th June, in a dug out: Well, the other night Fritz had a bit of a raid on our right. Two of our guns spotted him and laid most of them out. Then they went out and untangled a Fritz officer and 7 or 8 men off the barbed wire and fetched them in. We knew nothing of it till next day.

Of course our chaps "souvenired" them all. They always commandeer all Fritz's stuff as souvenirs. He's lucky to get away with his clothes. I'll tell you they're hot stuff.

So Ern can't get away. Good job too. It's no place for chaps under 20 at least. Not that they can't stand it. Although some of it is too hard for most lads. But lads are likely to listen too much to and to be influenced by older men without any brains. A chap's ideas are more settled when he's 23 or 24.

D18th June: Saw our plane drop a Fritz.

D20th June: Saw great aerial battle.

D22nd June: Slight gas attack. Mask on for about 5 minutes.

D24th June: Fired 5 shots at a Fritz plane with a rifle.

D27th June: Dickens of a strafe about midnight or a little later. Gun fired on a small party of Fritzes. Pineapples, Whizzbangs, Grenades galore.

D28th June: Out for a rest. Place named Querrieu.

D29th June: Had a jolly good swim.

D30th June: Held aquatic carnival.

L30th June: Well we are now out of the line for a spell. It's a treat I can tell you to be where we can go for a swim just when we feel like it. Not being able to get a wash and a change is the worst part of being up in the line. Of course they don't all agree on that point. Some chaps will argue that Fritz is the fly in the ointment. Maybe they're right as we had a quiet time there. That is, comparatively quiet.

I now consider myself a dinkum soldier seeing that I've been under fire. A jolly long way under most of it thank goodness. I was up in the front line for a few days but there was very little to get excited about. Fritz slung a few grenades about occasionally but none near me. When one fell in my bay I used to stroll around the corner to see what it sounded like from there. They sound a lot better at a distance. Fritz did paste us a bit one night though with trench mortars and field guns. He made a great show for a while. I was asleep when it started and had to turn out. I was half asleep. Of course we thought Fritz was coming over. This was my first real experience of being really under fire.

Well I got out and heard all the row and my knees knocked but it wasn't fear. Oh no. It was excitement, I always wake up like that. Anyway I dare say you have read somewhere that a man is always frightened first time under fire and that the man who says he isn't is a liar. Well, I'll chance being called a liar and say I wasn't. I've been yarning with some of the old hands on the subject. They say that usually one isn't frightened first time under fire because he doesn't know how dangerous it is. So I'll probably become a dugout king after I've had a few helpings.

The aeroplanes give us some good shows at times to break the monotony. I've seen a few brought down. You'd laugh to see about a dozen Fritzes going for their lives from two or three of ours like I saw them one evening. Some of our pilots must be characters the way they come over the lines and do loop the loop stunts.

One Fritz came right over one day low down. I was anxious to see if my rifle would work so I emptied it at him. I was rather surprised that he didn't stop. Of course after being a trap shot for so many years and used to seeing things drop when I fired at them I was rather indignant at him not dropping. However I've had enough experience of shooting at moving targets to know for certain that I must have hit his plane somewhere. Hitting the pilot is the trouble though. It's a very rare thing for one to be brought down by anything except another plane.

L30th June: The AIF is the place to get a broader view of things. There used to be a time when I didn't swear. I guess it must have been 20 years ago before I had learnt to talk. Our crowd did good work lately. Spoilt a Fritz raid and brought in a light machine gun and some prisoners. Great deeds!

D8th July: Got a big mail. Up tomorrow over a loss of bombs [I don't know what this means].

D12th July: Up to a reserve possey.

D15th July: Just missed a blast. ... dugout. [The story was that he was sleeping outside of the dugout and when he woke in the morning he found that a bomb had landed very close by.]

D19th July: Up a bit closer to another place. Night firing. WS goes up to front team. Plenty of shells through the night.

D25th July: Up to a sniper outpost for 4 nights - Rained like blazes. No Bon.

D27th July: Out of the outpost back near section headquarters.

D29th July: Relieved by 2 Yanks.

D31st July: All the company out.

D1st August: Making bivouacs.

D6th August: Spent the night digging gun positions. [This was the preparation for an attack by five Australian divisions which effectively broke the back of the German Army.]

D8th August: Up to position and fired barrage for big attack. Plenty of Fritz prisoners. Also dead ones in his lines. Moved to Warfusee.

D10th August: Moved up on a stunt to Proyart. Bombed by enemy planes. Narrow escape from shell. G. O'Connell killed.

D11th August: Spent in trench by main road.

D12th August: Moved up in full view of Fritz to our outpost. Sniped at and fired on by our machine guns. Did plenty sniping. Tassies went ahead of us. Relieved that night and out into reserve.

D16th August: 8 letters

L17th Aug: I suppose you'll have read 'ere this of the great go the Australians put up in advancing on the Villers-Bretonneux/Corbie sector. Our section fired the barrage or rather took part in firing it for our front and then later moved up in support.

On the night of the 10th the 10th Brigade took part in a very cheeky adventure. We moved up a road right into Fritz's country and dug in. It was to be a quiet affair but our tanks gave it away and there were machine guns practically all around us. Fritz retired a bit before daybreak but his snipers and M.G.s were very busy.

On the last day before we were relieved I had a great afternoon's sport sniping at Fritzes on the skyline. 1000 yards away. I kept him hopping I can tell you. I did enjoy myself. Whether I got any or not at the distance I couldn't tell. The stunt took place at Proyart. You'll no doubt read all about it. Our team had no casualties luckily. One chap had a bit of shell through the lip and broke off a tooth but he never said anything and I didn't know until the next day. Of course it was a very tiny piece.

L17th August: You want to know how someone 4 months older than I am must feel with the advance of time. Rats. You're only a girl but I guess this life will put me a year or two ahead of you. I've seen boys of 19 here grey-headed. I'm not grey yet because I don't let worry worry me. I was thinking that when I heard that boys of 18 were allowed to enlist what would my story have been if that measure had been in force at the beginning of the war. It's pretty certain I wouldn't be engaged and writing to a certain dear girl back in Aussie. Perhaps things are for the best.

D20th August: 3 letters. Last up to 23rd June. Packet from Alice (Kathy's Grandma)

D21st August: Up and fired barrage.

D22nd August: Out for 24 hours. Back behind village.

D23rd August: Up and fired another barrage. Devil of a job shifting ammo up cliff.

D25th August: Settled in Bray.

D1st September: Moved up past Roisel.

D10th September: Came out.

L18th Sept: We had a great show last night. I don't know if I told you in last letter that we're out for a rest. Well Fritz comes over o' nights in his bombing plane. He has never laid any eggs near us. We're in a quiet spot. Well they had about 20 searchlights onto one Bosch. They do look beautiful at night in the light. I don't know how many Lewis guns and antis were spitting at him. The Lewis were firing tracer bullets and made a great show. We can always tell Fritz's bombing plane by the sound of his engine. Anyhow out of 5 that came over they brought down two and talk about cheering. There was a row. It's not often they're fetched down at night.

L18th Sept: If Frank Tubb ever wants to know how I am tell him I'd like to be going shooting with him. [Frank Tubb was a Lieutenant, later a Captain, awarded the Military Cross, and whose older brother Fred won a Victoria Cross at Lone Pine. He was wounded twice but returned to the fighting before being sent home to inspire recruiting. Very late in the war, he returned to the Western Front and was killed.] Also that I went to his old Battalion and saw some of the boys. The Wignells are out of the transport tell him. Had a row with the transport officer and in the Hamel stunt the younger one got wounded.

I believe a lot of the originals are being sent home for a holiday. Good luck to them. I'm writing this in a dugout we built or rather dug when we first came out for this spell and the candle has just come a cropper as you'll see by the first sheet. Give us a pick and a shovel and we soon make a home for ourselves.

L18th Sept: Fancy me having my name on the monument.

L18th Sept: Do you know our troops can hold a front with one unit and when other troops come in to relieve us they put three on the same front. Fritz never puts up the same resistance against our troops as he does against the Tommies. As soon as he finds out he's up against the Aussies he's either off or up with his hands. That's been the tale in this stunt anyhow. Whether it was before I don't know.

L18th Sept: Old Fritz has been over today and sent two of our observation balloons up in smoke. But we have plenty more. The observers got down alright in their parachutes. I wouldn't like their job.

L18th Sept: We've just had a cut out of the Comforts Fund. Tobacco, cigarettes and lollies for the boys.... We also got a little tinned stuff. Fruit etc.

L21st Sept: Yes young Morrie is in the 23rd M.G.s. He was holding some horses the other night and a shell burst and killed the horses and left Morrie without a job.

L21st Sept: It would take me too long to explain "Black Jack" simple as it is. I haven't played it since leaving Grantham. If I told you you might [start] robbing people. Ask the veteran (her father) how "Pontoon" is played. It's similar to that. Pontoon, Kangaroo poker and last, but not least, two-up are the games the troops play. Two-up is called the Aussey's national game here. One Benalla chap in the 1st Divvy won 9,800 francs one night or at least he and his mate did. He then cleared off and had 8 weeks in Paris. They fined him about £50 for that little trip. He's a character all right.

I was telling you in one letter about one of our chaps being recommended for the M.M. Well he got it. It was read out today. Pte Casson, for conspicuous gallantry east of P and a lot more rigmarole awarded the M.M. Our officer should have got something too. We were all glad to get out of that place. Jim Webb is away, gassed in that same stunt. I had some gas too but it didn't come strong enough to harm me. It bowls some over very quickly. Our masks will stop

any of it anyhow but they're such wretched things to wear that the boys don't put them on till things get really warm.

L21st Sept: I wish I were spending a wet weekend in Longwood now. The weather is turning a bit cold here now. I hope we have old Fritz pushed back nearer his Fatherland before winter sets in. I reckon we must be turning into the straight now for the sprint home. Let's hope the straight isn't too long. Next spring ought to fix him up in style. And this year isn't done with yet either. I suppose you have been reading with delight of all the recent doings. This is said to be only a prelim, with all our reserves as yet untouched.

L21st Sept: Hooray! I'm sure we must be winning. Our corporal has just been around with another green stripe envelope. That's two more I have saved to write to you my dear. I don't like the idea of my letters to you being censored.

D27th Sept: Moved up. Rolfie wounded. Only back that morning.

D28th Sept: Fooled around.

D29th Sept: Moved up. Fooling around all day. Attack hung up. Up to Doleful Post. Bedchambers, Jack Sherry, Tommo wounded. Narrow escape ... shell.

D5th Oct: Entrained for a long spell. Bulgaria out. Bet 20 Francs war not over by Xmas.

D6th Oct: Arrived at billets Quesnoy.

L7th Oct, On Active Service With The American Expeditionary Forces: ... I found a few up the line last time. Envelopes I mean. Also a few little souvenirs. Some of the chaps went right out after souvenirs and got field glasses and revolvers and all sorts of things. I think it's foolish to chance stray shells though in search of souvenirs. Some of the lads have a haversack full of them. I enclose a few small souvenirs before I lose them. A one mark and a five mark note. A few photographs and an Iron Cross ribbon.

I was strongly tempted to go out searching but I thought of the people at home and the little girl in Longwood and stayed in my bit of trench and dug a deep funk hole instead in case he started a strafe. I only went strolling when things were quiet. I thought to myself that a chap would be dead unlucky if he took a chance and got killed with the end of the war in sight. It may be over when you get this. I hope so anyhow.

L7th Oct, On Active Service With The American Expeditionary Forces: Well to begin at the beginning. We moved out of our cosy little bivouacs near Buira [?] where we had spent nearly a fortnight. Two divisions of Yanks hopped over to get his Hindenburg line and our divvy was to go through and get the next line. Our job was to a certain position and to protect the flank with our guns. The Yanks rushed things too much and went too fast and left machine gun nests behind them. They got cut about and our chaps were held up as we couldn't put down a barrage because of the Yanks. They managed to mop up though in time.

Of course our job was messed up because of the bungle and we couldn't get our stuff up to the appointed place. So we had to hang back fooling around till evening of the 29th. Then we moved up before it was dark enough and a Fritz gun spotted us just as we got to our trench. A whizzbang gun. He got amongst us once. There was two sections of us just getting in the trench and one shell caused 13 casualties. Mostly nice wounds. My team mate who joined the team with me (Thompson) was hit in the arm and leg. Another of the team was slightly wounded. We got a stretcher and after dark carried Thompson out to an ambulance wagon. It was no bon. Fritz was doing too much machine gun fire.

I think it was a miracle I escaped those whizzbangs. Thank God I did. I think someone was praying hard for me. If it was you keep on saying a few words for me. By the way before I forget, Rolfie came back to the company from hospital on the 27th just in time to move up to the rear of the line with the rest of us where we were to wait until the day of the stunt. When

we went (our section) to where we were to camp he sent over a couple of heavies after some batteries and Bob got a lump in the back of the head. Only a day with the company and off to hospital again. He was lucky. We moved further up next day and in a day or two were relieved and came out.

We entrained at Peronne and are now out 20 miles from Abbeville for a long spell. At a little French village. We got out of the train and marched 16 kilos to our present village. Talk about fun some of the ... [chaps ?] got on the vin blanc and beer last night and talk about a circus. I hurt myself laughing at some of them. We are said to be out for 2 months at least. Optimists are betting that we never see the line again. I can see me getting back to Aussie yet. I've seen all the fight I require. I reckon those killed in the last stunt were unlucky considering things look so well for us.

Who do you think turned up yesterday? Murphy! He's in the 24th Company. And what do you think. He has the M.M. Must have found it in a bully tin. Also one stripe up. Got his M.M. on August 8th in the Hamel stunt.

L10th Oct: Some of the lads went farming yesterday. Some of the French farmers wanted help so some volunteered. Jim went cockying. Two other chaps went threshing for an old madame. They found they had to thresh the seed out with sticks French style. She got tired of them. She said "Australian no bon". So they took their hook and found some mademoiselles digging spuds and helped them for the rest of the day.

L20th Oct: We came through some rather nice country on the way but none as nice as around parts of Longwood in Spring. I often think of Lovers Lane and different spots and walks around Longwood we know so well.

L12th Nov: I'm in the 3rd A.G.H. with influenza. I've been in bed here a week. I'm alright now except that I'm a bit weak. Which is to be expected after coming in at 103° temperature. Well, girlie, we just heard yesterday that the armistice was signed and the hostilities had ceased. Great isn't it. It seems too good to be true. So I'll get home yet to little old Longwood and the people in it which is much more important isn't it.

L12th Nov: So you've all had the flu too. It's no good is it. But it's not so bad when one's at home and can look after oneself properly. It's no good in the military where one has to leave his unit and go to hospital. There's a lot of flu amongst the troops now. I don't know how many flu' wards there are here. There's 38 beds in this ward, nearly all full.

L19th Nov: A chap here is only broke until he meets a cobbler and if he's broke too it's terrible bad luck isn't it. However there should be a draft from the bank waiting for me when I get back so I'll be able to draw some of that to go on with. Dad sent me a pretty big draft so that I'd be right if we happened to get to Blighty now the war is over or if I fluked Paris leave. I'd very much like to see Paris before any place in the UK. One could at least say then that he'd seen Paris.

L10th Dec: We hiked it yesterday from H... to R... This is a miserable specimen of a village and the billets are rotten, but I don't think we'll be here long. I hope not. I'm heartily sick of this country.... The billets we were in at Hornoyu were grand. The people who owned them treated us splendidly and Monsieur came to light with wine all round for No 2 section every Sunday and on the day we left too. So we gave the old boy three cheers. They'd do anything for us. Marie (the girl of the house) saw one of the boys heating shaving water over a candle. She kicked it over and said, "Pourquoi no parlez Marie pour dileau." And she made them come and get hot water at the house. How do you like my French. I'm afraid it's not classical.

L10th Dec: But when I say I have no objection to dances I must also say I have a great objection to CFs. [CF = Cold Foot, an able-bodied man who didn't enlist] I wish I were writing to a man and I'd be able to give their pedigree. No for my part you may dance with men but where are they? Either over here or returned.

L10th Dec: Are there really so many English brides arriving out there. Well it's a pity for our girls but the boys can't be blamed. A lot left at 18 or 19, too young to form an attachment in Aussy, and now are men of 21 or 22, just a marriageable age. It's only natural they should marry. Especially after a spell of trench life at its worst. Ugh! It's a wonder more didn't marry.

L10th Dec: These French farm houses are awful. They store all the rubbish in the middle of the yard near the well and Gee it pongs some here today. Guess I'll have to break and become a smoker or a chap will get typhoid or collywobbles or something crook here.

L18th Dec: Well I'll be home for next summer or I'm very unlucky. I reckon the fish will suffer then but you're not interested in that are you. We used to fish along the Somme for them — with bombs. Not a bad way either.

We've since learnt that keeping a diary was strictly illegal, so it is not surprising that Grandad Jack's diary includes little in the way of detail.

Because he was young and single and had seen only a few months active service, he was among the last Australian troops to leave France. After months of battlefield adrenalin, he found it very trying having to spend further months of boredom looking after the cavalry horses in Le Havre.

A shock was in store after the voyage home from Europe; His father had died of his heart condition and was buried the day before he arrived home, leaving Grandad Jack to take on responsibility for the family, including a sister aged only six.

We drove to each of the places mentioned in the diary and the surrounding countryside and, with great difficulty, tried to imagine what it would have been like for Jack and his comrades. Although massive changes have occurred since the diary was written, the geography of the area, the cemeteries and the shrapnel-damaged brickwork gave a great deal more meaning and reality to the previously vague statement, "Granddad fought in the First World War".

It was interesting enough to see and photograph the towns mentioned in the diary but it wasn't until we were shown around Villers-Bretonneux by Jean-Pierre that we saw what we hoped to see and understood what we were seeing.

Jean-Pierre was very knowledgeable about Australia's involvement in the War and was able to show us the layout of trenches and the location of dugouts, hospitals and field headquarters. He and his wife Nicole and their family were so hospitable that they made our visit to Villers-Bretonneux the highlight of our very enjoyable seven weeks in France in 1985.



1985: Near Querrieu on the Somme. France.



1985: The village of Proyart, France with artillery damage still visible.



1985: Near Bray-sur-Somme, France.



1985: Jean-Pierre and Nicole with their daughter (and Kathy). Villers-Bretonneux, France.



1985: WWI barbed-wire holders on the site of Australian HQ, Villers-Bretonneux.



1985: Australian dugout shelter (funk hole), Villers-Bretonneux.

8.5 And Again ...

After the end of World War I the French were determined to prevent a repetition of its destruction of their territory and attempted to perfect their defences against attacks of the 1914-1918 kind. They built an impregnable line of heavily re-inforced blockhouses along their border with Germany. Unfortunately, the Germans changed the rules of the game the next time around. For one thing, they came via Belgium!

In 1979 I visited a blockhouse near Colmar, France which formed part of the ill-fated Maginot line. Unlike most of the fortifications which were merely by-passed and hence rendered useless, this one had actually seen action. Bomb craters inflicted by Stuka dive bombers were close by and an armour-piercing shell had wedged itself in a 200 mm thick iron plate which formed the upper part of the forward viewing slit. Its tip actually penetrated right through the massive lump of iron and must have caused severe sinus headache to anyone looking through the slit.

In the early years of the second world war, the northern part of France, including Paris, was under German rule but the southern part with its capital in Vichy remained nominally French. In fact it was totally under the thumb of Germany. Interestingly, the river Cher formed part of the border between the two regions and the Château de Chenonceau, which spans it, is said to have been used as an escape route from Occupied France to the South. The events of this period were extremely divisive of the French people. Jean-Pierre said he would be surprised if we found any French person from the period willing to talk openly about it.

Many French people who would have continued fighting were persuaded to collaborate with the Germans by the fact that the Vichy government was led by one of the greatest heroes of the First World War, 84 year old Marshal Pétain. A significant number of people believed that he was just buying time to organize a master counter-stroke, but the remaining armed forces were forced to surrender and the once-powerful French navy was scuttled in Toulon.

Fear of invasion forced the collaboration government into repressive measures of the most extreme kind. The French secret police (the Milice) committed atrocities worthy of the Gestapo, as though attempting to establish their bona fides. Trainloads of Jewish people were sent east to extermination camps and other French men and women were deported to Germany as forced labour. The fate of the latter people was sometimes little better than that of the former.

As time drew on, support for collaboration waned. Some French wine growers were said to have become resistance sympathisers because of their outrage at the Germans turning the finest vintages into industrial alcohol!

In 1945, Pétain was sentenced to death but this penalty was commuted to one befitting a French leader who had once maintained the Napoleonic tradition: banishment to an island.

Again without seeking them out, we found frequent reminders of Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance in the Vercors near Grenoble, which was where many Maquisards (resistance fighters) hid out and prepared themselves to overthrow the collaborationists and repel the invader. We stayed in St Nizier, a town completely destroyed by a powerful Nazi force on its way to clear the Resistance from the entire Vercors plateau. A proud cemetery overlooking the valley below contains the graves of those who died fighting them.

A museum in Grenoble is devoted to the history of the Resistance and of the deportation of French citizens. The exhibits document a myriad cases of tragedy, irony and suffering caused by parts of the human psyche which should be suppressed forever. Thoughts of the torture and agonizing death of resistance leaders like Jean Moulin at the hands of the Gestapo, of the people who disappeared, of the others who betrayed their friends and compatriots out of fear, of the extermination of the whole population of Oradour-sur-Glane, of the people who battled disease, starvation and cold in concentration camps only to give up the struggle on the day of liberation are normally blotted out of consciousness in order to preserve our mental balance. Being brought face to face with them as I was in this little museum made me feel anguish, despair, rage and profound sorrow.

Against this emotional backdrop, I came upon a poem found in a cell after liberation. It movingly expressed an overwhelming longing for rescue by comrades and a simple but misplaced faith in escape to a reality beyond the hell of torture and helplessness. The beauty and sorrow of the poem overcame me and I was unable to see the remaining exhibits through my tears.



1985: The Resistance cemetery near St Nizier in the Vercors, France.

The poet and his comrades were unable to defeat the Germans in face-to-face battle but they inflicted casualties and diverted significant resources away from other more strategically important actions such as the D-Day landings on the Normandy coast.

We visited these landing beaches near Arromanches on our way to Villers-Bretonneux. Arromanches has a D-Day museum which documents and explains the action of half a century ago. Out to sea there are still one or two of the so-called Mulberry Harbours, concrete hulks which were towed across the channel and sunk to form an artificial harbour, the natural harbours along the French coast being too heavily defended to be considered as landing points.

The nearby German fortifications at Pointe du Hoc, which were extensively bombed prior to the attempt by Allied troops to land and scale the very steep cliffs have been preserved as they were at the end of the war. Saturation bombing was intended to reduce the incredible disadvantage of the invading troops who had to land in rubber dinghies and scale steep cliffs in the dark facing a heavily-armed enemy in massive protective fortifications.

Some of the bomb craters are still over six metres deep, but the bombs that did not score direct hits on the massive reinforced concrete bunkers had little more than psychological effect. There are craters which have exposed great patches of the concrete bunker walls but left the concrete only superficially damaged. One of the bunkers has a roof which is made of reinforced concrete over a metre thick.

The aim of the initial assault was to overrun these forward defences as quickly as possible to enable the advance inland. In fact, the defenders of the Pointe du Hoc remained in residence for a further fortnight and eventually had to be dislodged by attack, I believe using gas, from the inland side.

Only a few kilometres from Arromanches is Bayeux, home of the nine-hundred year old tapestry which commemorates the invasion of Britain by people from this area. The so-called "tapestry" is more like an embroidery and is about 70 metres long. Its beauty shines clearly through its protective

screen of arrow-proof glass. We found it interesting enough to justify the purchase of a ten-metre long print.

Over the succeeding centuries the inhabitants of Britain returned the Norman compliment by invading and occupying large tracts of what is now France. Curious reminders of the to-and-fro struggles during the Hundred Years' War are to be found in the Dordogne area in the form of fortified towns called bastides. Some, such as Monpazier, were built by the English and some like Villeréal by the French. They featured a fortified church, a defensive central square, and surrounding walls. A pattern of wide streets in one direction and narrow streets in the other had a defensive significance I have yet to fathom.

Some areas of France are still subject to invasion by the British, but now the invaders are armed with cameras and currency. The rows of hotels along the sea front of some channel towns such as Dieppe could almost be English and indeed the cliffs of Dieppe are as white as those of Dover. That most British of institutions, the Bed & Breakfast place is even taking root in Normandy and Brittany.

We also found a large population of British invaders in the old town (called *intra muros*) of St Malo. It was completely destroyed in the attempt to liberate it from the Germans in 1944. After the war the inhabitants chose to rebuild it exactly as it had been and retained the very narrow streets which make driving and parking so difficult. The restored town is all the better for not bowing to the might of the motorcar however. Wandering its cobblestoned alleys is a delight. The old town was originally an island and a stroll around the ramparts at sunset is a particular pleasure.

Counterbalancing the British invaders of France are considerable numbers of French travellers on the other side of la Manche (the English Channel). We encountered hotels full of French school children in London, presumably soaking up English language and culture at its source. Both countries make themselves as desirable as possible to students from the other by making as few cultural and linguistic concessions as possible.

Like St Malo, the city of Amiens was also bombed in the second World War and its residents similarly chose to rebuild their historic buildings as they had once been. Pragmatically, however, they built the main row of them a small distance further back, enabling the widening of the road in front.

Another city to suffer bomb damage was Orléans, famous for its recapture by Joan of Arc in the fifteenth century. We saw its rebuilt cathedral with modern gothic tower there and wondered what it had originally been like.



1985: One of the spectacular Tour de France descents from the Vercors.



1985: The remains of a mulberry harbour of the coast of Normandy, France.



1985: Nazi fortifications and 6m deep craters at Pointe du Hoc, Normandy.



1985: Fragment of the Bayeux tapestry, showing the death of King Harold. Bayeux, France. (Postcard.)



1985: A square in one of the bastides, Monpazier I think. France.

8.6 A Record Of Violence As Long As Your Arm

France is full of testimonials to a war-like past. As in Australia, most towns and villages have monuments to their war dead. Unfortunately, in France, some also commemorate civilians shot by firing squad. On our first visit to Paris we found seats in the metro designated for wounded soldiers and were astonished to find stickers specifying in gory detail what parts of the body needed to have been amputated to entitle a person to priority in their use.

On the more positive side, at least from one point of view, French towns also commemorate great victories. Triumphal arches are to be found in Orange and, of course, in the Place Charles De Gaulle. Many cities, including Paris, retain remnants of their old defensive perimeter walls. In Carcassonne and St Malo the old defences are essentially as they were, although both have been rebuilt from ruins.

Before the days of bombs and rockets, builders often relied on topographical features to strengthen defences. The earliest known European example of this is the amazing cliff-face shelter at Roque Saint-Christophe where the river Vézère has carved five levels of galleries or terraces in the otherwise vertical cliffs. Human habitation at Roque Saint-Christophe is believed to date back 55,000 years. It continued into the Middle Ages. At their peak these terraces were home to as many as a thousand people and stored the provisions and even livestock necessary to withstand a siege. Middle ages inhabitants augmented the defences with drawbridges and boiling oil dispensers.



1985: One of the gallery habitations at Roque Saint-Christophe. Dordogne, France.

We found Roque Saint-Christophe well worth the visit because it records such an incredibly long period of history and prehistory and is so well preserved.

Many villages in Provence, the so-called perched villages, rely on the defensive advantages of hill-tops, augmented of course, by ramparts. We visited only one, St Paul-de-Vence. If only its buildings had not been completely taken over for tourist purposes, it would be a charming spot in which to live.

Mont St Michel and St Michael's Mount have been mentioned before but deserve repeated reference in this context because of their superb defensive situations atop steep-sided part-time islands.



1985: Prehistoric cave paintings from Lascaux in the Dordogne. (Postcard.)

The Citadel at Sisteron is another site where defensive advantage is taken of topographical features. Apart from the summit of the Pic du Midi, it is hard to think of a site which would be more suited to defence against weapons of every bygone century.

The enormous extent of the influence of war on the landscape and history of France has enabled us to better understand some contemporary French attitudes. Because of their long history of being invaded, a large majority of the French were, and presumably still are, in favour of France possessing a nuclear deterrent. They seemed resigned to the necessity for a program of nuclear weapons testing.

Many French, particularly those in the north of the country, regard Australia as an important ally to a degree which would surprise most young Australians who are not aware of the relevant history and the French perception of it. In 1985, the French saw Australia as behaving in a way calculated to weaken this traditional and valued alliance when they showed hostility over the Mururoa Atoll testing, over the question of New Caledonian independence and over the Rainbow Warrior incident.

France is by no means the only European country to exhibit battle scars. In fact wars have raged all over Europe for most of the 2000 years of Christian influence. There are signs of conflict and, particularly, the remains of ancient and not-so-ancient fortifications throughout the continent.

We also saw and heard of military installations in Switzerland and were made a little anxious by the sounds of military exercises being conducted in the mountains near Meiringen. Just as off-putting were jet fighters roaring low overhead in Cornwall and the Lakes District in Britain.

Britain too has its share of fortifications and scars of war although it has not been invaded for over 900 years. The Tower of London, Windsor Castle, Edinburgh Castle and the city walls in such places as York are among the most famous defensive constructions. Vacant building sites in several cities where factories and houses once stood are testimony to the air raids of 1940 and after.

Even in the Norwegian city of Narvik, well inside the Arctic Circle, I found concrete fortifications and other relics of war. The Nazis captured the town in April 1940, and, in an endeavour to prevent them from using the ice-free port at Narvik to load Swedish iron-ore coming by rail from Kiruna, the British recaptured it the next month and held it for all of twelve days.

From the Resistance Museum in Oslo we learned a little of the ease with which a small German paratroop force had managed to conquer the whole country of Norway, profiting from surprise and confusion. The pro-Nazi Vidkun Quisling became Prime Minister of occupied Norway but was executed when the country was liberated.

Perhaps there are lessons in these experiences both for would-be peaceful countries and would-be traitor collaborators.

Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* makes the point that Norway was conquered only in a material sense and not in the minds and souls of its inhabitants. In the case of the Jews, however, the Nazis extended subjugation and persecution to the ultimate extreme. Their atrocities against Jews and other minority groups are both too painful to remember and too dangerous to forget. The house of Anne Frank in Amsterdam has been preserved as a reminder that such things must never be repeated.

In the pre-Gorbachev era of our visits to Europe, the military side of the cold war was strongly evident in West Germany. Near Freiburg-im-Breisgau there were separate French, British, US and West German military bases and the pattern was surely repeated throughout the country. Tanks and other military traffic were quite common on the roads.

Despite this, let us hope that Europe is content forever with the collection of war mementoes it already possesses and that Australia remains as nearly free of them as it is now.

8.7 Sinking of the Entente Cordiale?

Our most recent visit to France lasted for a period of seven weeks soon after the sinking by the French secret service (DGSE) of the Greenpeace anti-nuclear-testing protest ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland harbour. The French and Australian governments were then at loggerheads over this and other matters.

At that time many ordinary inhabitants of each country held hostile feelings towards each other. However, people expressing such sentiments generally had very little knowledge of the other country and its real policies and had no means of recognizing distortions circulated by their government or by the media.

The French government reportedly told its electors that Australia still permitted the US and Britain to test nuclear weapons on the Australian mainland while bitterly protesting at tests conducted thousands of kilometres away on French soil. In actual fact, the last of these tests in Australia took place nearly thirty years earlier!

Australians, for their part, tended to hold all French people morally responsible for the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*. Some informally black-banned French products and refused to visit the country or have contact with its inhabitants. In actual fact, a Figaro survey found that an overwhelming majority of the French people felt that the DGSE action had been wrong.

Despite this atmosphere of mistrust we were still able to have a pleasant holiday and found that even French people who we suspected might hold anti-Australian prejudices were unable or unwilling to apply them to us. We were able to joke about light-hearted matters and to have serious and reasonable discussions about such real differences as we had.

In the Syndicat d'Initiative (Tourist Bureau) in Carcassonne we were in the process of booking a hotel room when the person behind the desk asked our nationality. "Australian", I said, "Why, are there some hotels which do not admit Australians?" "Not so far!", was the reply, with grins all around.

After many unsuccessful attempts to make a telephone connection to Australia for me, the operator in the post office in Orange said, "No answer. Australia is not there." To Kathy's consternation, I replied (in French), "sunk by the DGSE most probably!". We were neither arrested nor lynched. In fact, the operator seemed to find it hilariously funny.

Chapter 9

In Real Life

Tourists generally spend their time viewing and experiencing the parts of a city ignored by the local inhabitants until they have to show visitors around. How many days in each year do you think that the average Parisien spends in the Louvre, up the Eiffel Tower or shopping in the Rue du Faubourg St Honoré? Not many!

Conversely, the tourist sees little of the everyday life of a city or region and even after visiting its sights for a week or two may have no idea of what it would be like for residents. While living it up in Monaco, who thinks about rates, rental, health care, garbage collection, employment opportunities, crime rate, freedom of religion, voting rights or schooling?

Someone who's just broken the bank at Monte Carlo may well take an interest in the local property market but they are hardly typical tourists.

9.1 An Everyday Lesson in Picardy

After a day showing us around the World War I sites near Villers-Bretonneux, Jean-Pierre and Nicole asked us how we had enjoyed our seven weeks in France. I replied that we had enjoyed it very much indeed but that we had seen it only through tourist eyes and had not experienced the "real" France at all. Our guides took this as a challenge and over the next two days we were shown many of the ordinary residents' "must-visit" "sites".

We visited the police station and chatted briefly with the officer in charge. We were shown the *mairie* (town hall) and a local enterprise which specialized in small-scale metal fabrication. Then we visited a farm and watched the harvesting of sugar beet. Judging by the nine or ten modern tractors, extensive collection of implements and the large areas under intensive cultivation, this farm was not entirely typical!

It was more in the tourist line, but we also visited the so-called "Hortillonages" in Amiens in which flowers and vegetables have been grown for centuries. The flow of the Somme has been canalized and controlled to such an extent that gardens flourish in the silt where the river passes through Amiens. Local seekers after choice real estate have built their homes beautiful right beside the river. Their houses and gardens were all you would expect from luxury, large-block, waterside developments in somewhere like Noosa, but, if you became disoriented, you could always tell which of the two places you were in by observing the weather!

There is a certain charm to arriving at your door by footbridge over a canal but I wouldn't build my house anywhere near as close to the Murrumbidgee!

We continued our everyday tour of Villers-Bretonneux with a visit to the high school. There we chatted briefly with some of the teachers during recess and later assisted in giving an English lesson to a year ten class! We found the latter a very stimulating experience. We enjoyed the challenge of answering the teenagers' questions about Australia in a way they could understand. One of the questions was about Australian money and the class seemed fascinated by the bright colours of the notes we passed around. (And yes, we got them all back.)

At the end, the teacher asked if the class had enjoyed the lesson and if they would like us to come back one day. We seemed to get a unanimous approval rating and, to our delight, one boy said that



1985: Sugar beet farm. Near Villers-Bretonneux, France.

he would like us to come to the lessons every day! A future diplomat for sure!

We thought that the pupils were very lucky to have a teacher with such an excellent command of spoken and written English. She too was lucky to have a class which seemed much better behaved than the average Australian year ten class.

One of the teachers invited us to dinner at his house that night and we had a pleasant evening of conversation around an open fire with him and his wife, a nurse.

Next day we went to an educational resource centre in Amiens and to a co-operative school-book depot. We also visited the offices of the Prefect of the Department of the Somme and the President of the Regional Council of Picardy.

The Departments in France are administrative divisions based on the Napoleonic concept that every citizen should be within a day's horse ride of a representative of the government of the Republic. There are roughly 60 departments in present-day metropolitan France. The Prefect of a department is the official government representative and is appointed by the National Assembly.

Amiens is not only the capital of the Department of the Somme but also of a larger administrative unit, the Region. The Region of Picardy comprises three or four Departments and has a Regional Council which I presume is democratically elected.

Jean Pierre arranged for us to meet the official responsible for allocating the large government art and culture budget in the Somme. His job required him to evaluate the standard of theatre groups, film-makers, painters, fire-eaters and sculptors and to decide which would be funded and which not. He seemed a very cultured person and spoke the clearest French we had ever heard. We were very delighted that he made some of his time available to talk to us.

While in Amiens, we went to the University of Picardy and spent some time chatting with one of the teaching staff in the Humanities UER (Unité d'Enseignement et de Recherche = Department). We discussed the possibility of student exchanges between Amiens and Canberra, a dream of Jean-Pierre's, and I took some information back to the Modern European Languages Department at the

Australian National University. I also visited the Computer Science Department and took advantage of their strengths in Communications and Networking to look up Henri's telephone number on the Minitel.

Finally, we concluded our non-tourist tour of the Villers-Bretonneux area and went to the post office to send some of our excess paperwork back to Australia.

9.2 Going Dutch

Staying with expatriate friends also gave us some opportunities to experience aspects of ordinary life. By staying with Gordon and Pam in Leiden (1979) and Utrecht (1982), we were able to spend most of our time in Holland outside the deep ruts left by the marching armies of international tourists.



1982: Every ten years the Dutch government rehabilitates an area of degraded land and holds a Floriade festival. Netherlands.

We went shopping like ordinary Dutch people and found ourselves in shopping centres where no-one admitted speaking English. Fortunately, a mixture of pointing and quickly acquired pseudo-Dutch, made most shopping quite easy. By contrast, in the tourist haunts of Amsterdam, everyone speaks English.

Many Dutch words have common origins with equivalent English ones and it would have been difficult for us not to be able to find frozen peas and ice cream when a big sign read "Diep Vries". Other examples such as "telefoon" on a Superman changing room and "stoptrein" at the railway station didn't require much in the way of deductive powers. Many familiar brands of supermarket items retain their familiar packaging and change only the language of the wording.

The ability to buy your favourite breakfast cereal in darkest Holland is an illustration of the extent of modern transport and communication. The fact that in winter you could buy fresh grapefruit, usually of the red variety, is another. Mid-winter avocados in London were cheaper than they are at any time in Australia, while in Narvik in the same season, fresh dates and oranges were to be had.



1982: Graduating high school students hang out a satchel and the Dutch flag. Netherlands.



1982: Canal-scape in Muiden, Netherlands.



1982: The historic fishing village of Marken, Netherlands.



1982: Gordon on the dike, near Broek in Waterland, Netherlands.

One everyday difference between Australia and mainland Europe, however, is in the water. In Sydney we discharge only slightly treated sewage into the ocean. When we became environmentally conscious, we discharged it further offshore! In Holland and Germany, on the other hand, the level of treatment of sewage is such that residents of Leiden, whose drinking water is drawn from the Old Rhine, are able to say with pride that the water they drink has been through the bodies of eight Germans! Many Dutch people drank mineral water because its taste was less strong, but there appeared to be no ill effects on the health from drinking tap water.

9.3 A Big Snow Job

Everyday life is heavily influenced in European winter by water in its solid state. There are the obvious hazards of driving on slippery roads and of walking on icy footpaths but there is also danger from an unexpected quarter. Before our winter visit to Europe, I had never had to contemplate the awful possibility of being impaled by an “eavesdropper” in the form of a metre-long ice stalactite!

Even under snow, householders do not escape garden chores. In the Austrian resort of Saalbach, I saw someone using a small petrol-driven snow “plough” in much the same way you would use a lawn mower!

By the time I reached Freiburg-im-Breisgau in 1979, the snow had cleared enough to be able to see that the lawn behind my friend’s flat was pock-marked with little mounds of dirt excavated by moles. I have since learned from Martina that moles can be persuaded to leave a lawn alone using a bottle from which the bottom has been removed. The bottle is placed neck down in a mole hole and makes a moaning noise whenever the wind blows. Apparently, the moles dislike the noise and move on to someone else’s lawn.

We were certainly not treated like moles when we visited Manchester later in the same chilly season. Our friend Ken was studying for a PhD in Physics at the University of Salford and one of the staff members from his laboratory invited us to his house for supper. He and his family had never met us and may never do so again, but they organized an enormous feast and welcomed us into their home in a way which completely destroyed our preconceptions of the industrial cities of the English Midlands.

It was warm human contacts like these which made our European holidays more than just “interesting”.

Chapter 10

Is This The End?

“Amid emotional scenes, it was today announced that the Berlin Wall, symbol of oppression and a divided Europe, was to be torn down. Thousands of excited East Germans, too eager to wait for official bulldozers and excavators, descended on the wall with picks and sledge-hammers, watched by the border guards whose orders had been, until recently, to shoot on sight.”

“West Berliners too joined in the celebrations, souveniring pieces of masonry from the wall and linking arms with their former countrymen from the East within sight of Checkpoint Charlie, symbol of a cold war which is no more.”

“Western analysts, bemused by the pace of change within the Warsaw Pact, are unable to agree on the likelihood of a possible German re-unification. No-one is prepared to hazard a guess as to the shape of future European military alliances in the aftermath of a potential unified Germany.”

“Meanwhile, in further news from Europe, it was announced in London that teams tunnelling from the British and French coasts had linked up in mid-Channel, opening the possibility of direct London-Paris rail connections in only a little over two hours.”

News reports along the lines of the above have done nothing to alleviate the itch in my feet which has slowly been getting worse in the years since I last visited our favoured overseas destination. Nor have friends returning from business trips and holidays with tales of wonderful new galleries, new higher-speed TGV services and places we haven't visited.

Having spent a total of six months holidaying in Europe and only a few days in the rest of the non-Australian world you might think that it was time for us to reprogram our autopilot. We'd agree but for two small difficulties.

The first is that, far from having done everything there is to do in Europe, we haven't even visited a representative sample. Of so-called Western Europe, we've never been to Finland, Ireland, Spain, Portugal or Greece. Nor have we peeked behind the rusting remnants of the Iron Curtain. All of the current and former communist countries, such as East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania are totally beyond our ken.

We've done little more than pass through Denmark, Austria, Belgium and Italy and, even in Britain and France where we spent many weeks, there are entire regions we haven't approached.

The second difficulty is that we liked many of the places we visited so much that we want to explore them further or even just to see them again. Nothing stands still and it is hard to suppress an interest in how once-familiar places have developed.

For four years the delights of watching a baby grow into a boy have left us without need (or energy!) to resume our globetrotting. Now however, it is obvious that one day soon Jack will be old enough to appreciate travelling himself. We've adopted a family dream that when he's ten years old, we'll set off on a walking tour from the Eastern-most point of Austria to the Western-most point of Switzerland via the best of the Alpine scenery.

By the time he's ten, we'll all have acquired the necessary strength and fitness and I will have managed to learn German. Jack will be old enough to understand and remember what he sees and young enough to be willing to be seen in public with his parents. It may never happen but it's a lovely dream.

For us then, the last line of this book must be:

To Be Continued.

For others, like Jenny and Michele, we hope this book will be:

The Beginning.

But for those who have hated every word of my self-indulgent narrative and yet somehow made it to the last page, this is:

The End.



1979: What hope is there when the Life Line is closed all day? Manchester, England

Afterword

In coming back to this manuscript more than 40 years after our first overseas trip, I was forcibly struck by how different the world of 1979 was to the world of now. At the time of writing, the world is badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – my comparisons are from the perspective of 2019.

Ease of international travel

APEX (Advance Purchase EXcursion) airfares were introduced just prior to our first trip in 1979. Without them we probably would not have been able to make the trip. From memory, they reduced the cost of a return flight to London by more than 50%, to around A\$950 each (equivalent to around A\$4,500 in 2019). At that time, the cheapest way to fly from Sydney to Perth was to buy a Sydney-London APEX return and pay A\$50 for a stop-over in Perth! APEX fares to Europe were only available on certain airlines and to certain destinations.

For many years after 1979, only Qantas and British Airways were allowed to operate the very profitable “Kangaroo Route” between Australia and Great Britain. Since then, the skies have opened up. Dozens of different carriers will fly you to Europe and economy fares in 2019 dollars have halved again since 1979.

Within Europe a large number of low-cost carriers are in operation, flying you between countries for less than the cost of getting to the airport. Mind you, you may pay more than the airfare in additional charges to take a bag, print a boarding pass, reserve a seat, eat a snack or sip a drink. Michael O’Leary, owner of Ryanair, even announced plans to charge a fee for using onboard toilets. His hope was that passengers would refuse to pay, thereby allowing him to remove toilets and install extra revenue-earning seats. EasyJet was alleged to have paid an internet cafe at an airport to remove their printer, so that passengers could be charged a fee for their boarding pass.

Since debit and credit cards were not available in 1979, arranging access to cash was much more of an issue. I think that we transferred some money in advance to an Australian bank operating near Australia House in central London. We carried the rest of our money as American Express travellers cheques in Pounds Sterling, DeutschMarks, and Swiss Francs. To avoid having to pay a commission when cashing them, we traveled significant distances to American Express offices in various cities. These days we obtain some foreign currency prior to traveling, but rely almost entirely on credit cards, pre-loaded to avoid paying interest.

It was an exciting, watershed moment for me in 1995 when I put my credit card into a cash machine in Glasgow and persuaded it to give me ten pounds.

In 1979, every European country issued it’s own currency. That led to a strategy of trying to estimate and obtain exactly the right number of Guilders, Francs, Marks, or Kronor which I would need while passing through a country. Rather than carry heavy bags of multi-cultural shrapnel, on leaving I used to spend the dregs of a country’s money on bananas and cheese.

In 1979, there were hard borders between European countries and, consequently, frequent stamping of passports and interrogation by customs officers. On the other hand airport security around the world was relatively lax. You had to go through a metal detector to board an international flight, but not for some domestic flights. You most likely got to go through with your shoes and coat on and with your carry-on bag. Your luggage was not X-rayed, you didn’t need to present photo id and there was no full-body screening. There was no need to take out your laptop or your phone – because they hadn’t been invented. You could take liquids on board and also many dangerous items

which are now prohibited. While stranded at a conference in New Orleans by the terrorist attacks in September 2001, I heard from several attendees that they had legally travelled to the conference with sharp knives and large pairs of scissors among their carry-ons.

Increasing ease of travel has led to much more frequent travel. Ten million Australians left the country in 2019, while the average number of tourist arrivals in the UK per month has increased from about 0.85 million in 1980 to 3.4 million in 2019, a four-fold increase. I'm sure that's reflective of a global trend. No wonder tourist spots are crowded! (More than 13 million people visited Notre Dame de Paris each year, before the fire.)

Oh, I almost forgot! There seems to be much less fouling of pavements in France and Britain these days, by both men and beasts! That makes walking urban streets much more pleasant!

Australian attitudes to travel

In the fifties, sixties and seventies well-off, British-descended Australians found many strong reasons to travel to the UK. Many young people completed a rite of passage by spending a year working in London and "seeing Europe" while they were there. Many other Australians went to visit family or to trace their family history or the Australian heritage located in Britain. Still others went to study at Oxford or Cambridge. Huw's brother If won a P&O scholarship to Cambridge which allowed (required?) him to travel to the UK by boat. Because London was considered by many to be the centre of the literary, artistic and dramatic universe, talented Australians like Germaine Greer, Clive James, Robert Hughes, and Barry Humphries moved there and stayed for decades. Let's not mention Rolf Harris.

Four decades of migration later, Australia is less wedded to the idea that Britain is "Home" or "the mother country". Australians pursuing family ties are just as likely to go to Greece, Italy, Lebanon, India, or any of a large number of other countries. Talented Australians seeking global fame and fortune may head to Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Bangalore, Shanghai, or New York.

Cheaper airfares, increased travel convenience (notwithstanding the inconvenience of greater security), globalisation, and widened outlook have led to hordes of Australians flying off every year to all manner of destinations, from Bali to Beijing and Lhasa to Terra del Fuego.

In our early trips we went for at least two months, to amortize the cost of the travel, but a different attitude to international travel has led to some astonishingly short trips.

I once sat next to someone who had flown from Sydney to Paris for a meeting, became annoyed and flew back that night. My friend Steve once spent less than a day in San Francisco attending business meetings, flying back the same day in order to leave immediately for a holiday in Nepal. I think that sort of thing is ridiculous, though I did once fly from Canberra to Las Vegas for a dinner. I spent my free time debugging code in a hotel room rather than enjoying the delights of Las Vegas – like Bikini Bull Riding, rampant prostitution, and getting married on the spur of the moment.

My attitude to travel

My expressed desire to travel more was amply fulfilled. Going through my records recently, I found evidence of 95 overseas trips. It seems that I have passed through Heathrow airport more than 110 times! Although I paid for carbon-offsetting whenever it was available, I now feel guilt at my contribution to global heating and its already severe damage to ecosystems and human populations. In the last few years Kathy and I have installed 78 solar panels and four batteries. A significant motivation has been to offset our flights and try to limit further damage.

The COVID year of 2020 will be the first in the last thirty years in which I do not fly overseas. I think that's a positive, even though we missed out on what would have been a wonderful walk with friends across the north of England.

I wrote that, despite the discomfort of economy flights, I would always choose to pay less in order to be able to fly more often. That resolve weakened as I got older, started developing arthritis in my legs, and no longer felt a thrill when boarding a plane. After an exceptionally uncomfortable British Airways flight from Seattle to London in 2006 I resolved that I would never again take a long haul

flight in economy. And I never have. (For the entire flight I had my knees pressed against the sharp corners of the tray table arms, and couldn't place my feet flat on the floor.) When travelling for work I told the people funding the airfare that I was going to fly Premium Economy – If they wouldn't pay the cost, I would pay the difference. And, with a Premium Economy ticket, upgrades to Business are much more feasible. And, having developed a taste for lie-flat beds in Business, ...

Soon after Qantas began acquiring A-380 aircraft, I found myself with a paid-for Business-class ticket to fly Sydney-London on one. Unfortunately, the aircraft scheduled to take us developed a fault and we had to stay overnight in Sydney, waiting until the replacement plane could arrive from Los Angeles. Back in the lounge after a luxurious night in a five-star hotel at Qantas expense, a nice person came up to me and hoped I could accept an upgrade to First. It would have been rude to refuse! That was a very pleasant trip, and Qantas was determined to look after me. One of the crew accompanied me to the luggage conveyor at Heathrow and waited to confirm that I had received my luggage and that I knew how to get to the luxury hotel room that they had arranged for me, since my connection to Venice was already missed. When I returned home a generous Qantas travel voucher was waiting to compensate me for my "trouble!"

I also wrote that I would learn German and that we might take our son Jack on a European holiday when he was ten. That never happened. (Sorry, Jack.)

The only German I learned to say fluently was, "Ich kann kein Deutsch." (I don't know any German.) Many Germans have been quite nonplussed to hear me say that.

Jack eventually did go travelling though. One day, he came over from our garden flat where he was living ..."

– "Hi Dad. I'm going to the Philippines."

– "Oh yes. When are you going?"

– "In about an hour."

– "Could you hold off for a little while. Mum's shopping in Civic. I'm sure she'd like to say good-bye."

Jack was going for three weeks but ended up staying for five years!

Losing the thrill

You can only do something for the first time once.

It was truly exciting, the first time we flew up the Thames, with Tower Bridge and St Paul's covered in snow. We landed in a world totally different from ours, and the memory of it is clear as a bell after 40 years. None of the more than 50 subsequent landings in Heathrow were anywhere near as memorable. Stuck for an hour in a holding pattern. Waiting our turn to dock at an aerobridge. Waiting for the bus to collect us from the plane. Waiting for hours at the UK border. Being patted down by a security officer with my trousers falling down because your belt was in the scanner. Reporting lost luggage.

The more you fly, the more things go wrong.

I was in Britain during a foot and mouth outbreak, in Toronto when a few Torontonians were dying of SARS, in the USA during the 9/11 attacks, in Washington DC during the anthrax letters panic, and at Heathrow with a Qantas ticket when Allan Joyce decided to shut down his airline. I've spent a total of about ten unplanned nights in Sydney, New Orleans and Los Angeles due to missed connections or cancelled flights. Severe turbulence once caused my seatbelt to slip by 30cm and my camera to fly down the aisle. I've experienced aborted landings, unscheduled landings due to medical emergencies, and mechanical failures. My jacket was ripped in a business class wardrobe

and my suitcases have been battered and torn. My luggage has been delayed so many times (mostly after passing through Heathrow) that I managed to beat everyone else to the Baggage counter at Schiphol even though the announcement was made in Dutch.

I've left clothes and other items in airports. I left my laptop in a seat pocket on a flight to Seattle, and another one at security screening in Charlottesville, Virginia. (Fortunately, I eventually got both of them back.)

I was left to stand for half an hour at Beijing airport while an immigration official took my passport away to confirm that I was allowed to enter China. When checking in at Seattle-Tacoma airport for a flight to Britain, the airline thought I was on a No-Fly list and took a while to decide that I wasn't.

Mechanical failures are not common, but they add up. British Airways wanted me to fly to London from Oslo without a seat belt because the one in my seat didn't work. (In contrast, a faulty seatbelt in a Qantas plane at Melbourne was replaced by an engineer within a few minutes.) Once, 350 of us were sitting in a United Airlines 747 ready to cross the Pacific while ground staff checked whether the growing puddle under the aircraft was due to a leak in the fuel tank. Engines fail to start, control panels need to be replaced, air-conditioning doesn't work – there's always something to keep you on your toes.

One business tour in North America involved five flights, two of which were canceled and two were undertaken in a new plane after the old one failed. Transiting Toronto on my way home from Ottawa, my bag was lost, and I discovered that my American Airlines flight to Los Angeles had been canceled without notice. I managed to persuade unhelpful staff to transfer me to a Canadian Airlines flight, which had a littany of problems:

– “This is your captain speaking. I'm sorry to tell you that we have a control panel failure in the cockpit. Engineers are working on it and should have it replaced within 45 minutes.”

– “I'm sorry folks. We're having a problem starting one of the engines. A recovery cart is here and we should soon be on our way.”

– “Your cabin service manager here. Unfortunately, because a couple of our monitors are out of service, we need to stop the safety video, and do a manual safety demonstration.”

Finally, we were in the air, on our way to Los Angeles, and in time to miss my connection back to Sydney. Why should we worry that the vanity basin in the nearest toilet was totally smashed and taped up with plastic? Apart from a few glitches, this was an inherently sound plane! Half an hour later, ...

– “Ladies and gentlemen, your captain here again. We've had another mechanical failure. This is my worst day at the office in 26 years of flying with Canadian Airlines. This is not an aircraft that I'm prepared to fly to Los Angeles. We're going back.”

– “This is your cabin services manager. Unfortunately, your cabin crew will exceed its service time limit. Another crew will take you on to Los Angeles.”

At about 2am, after two hours of sitting in a departure lounge without any communication at all from Canadian Airlines, a new aircraft appeared, and eventually a cabin crew arrived.

– “This is your captain again. Thankfully we've found you a new aircraft. Unfortunately, they haven't started transferring your bags from the old one yet. Some anonymous person on the ground has told me it will take 50 minutes to do the transfer. If it takes 55 minutes your flight crew will time out and you'll have to wait for a new crew.”

Finally, we took off. To compensate us for all the disruption, inconvenience, lack of information, and missed connection, they went through the cabin distributing tiny bags of complimentary pretzels. And I got to sleep for a couple of hours in an unremarkable Los Angeles airport hotel.

But you always get there in the end.

People

Kathy and I are still happily together, after 47 years. Unfortunately, many of the couples I mentioned have separated: Gordon and Pam, Coco and Bo, Gordon and Anne-Marie, Huw and Debbie, Chris and Meg.

Since 1991, both of Kathy's parents (a large fraction of the intended readership) have died. I never did ask Kathy's mother Pat about Edinburgh Castle.

Europe

In 1979, Britain seemed in a mess. Exacerbated by constant inclement weather, everything looked shabby and run down. These days there's a lot more comfort, glitz and glamour. The London Overground, The Javelin, and some of the underground lines have really lifted the standards in commuter comfort. European cars are everywhere and European produce fills the shelves. Building standards have risen dramatically and, following Europe, modern buildings are now double-glazed and heavily insulated.

In 1987, the massive re-development of London's former dockland commenced, leading to the distinctive skyscrapers at Canary Wharf. Around 2000, the huge Millennium Dome (now the O2 Arena) was built across the river, and in 2001, construction of the distinctive 41-storey 30 St Mary Axe ("the Gherkin") commenced. Having never heard of it, when Kathy and I caught a glimpse we were gob-smacked, and diverted our path through the back streets to inspect it at close range. It was built on the site of buildings destroyed by an IRA bomb in 1992. Many other skyscrapers now pierce the London skyline, most notably the 95-storey Shard above London Bridge railway station. It opened in 2012.

On a number of work visits to London between 2008 and 2013, I used to stay in apartments in Stratford in the docklands, east of the city. Stratford is at the hub of a large number of transport routes and the apartments were much more affordable than less comfortable options closer in. Stratford changed dramatically over those five years. Roads and bridges were re-engineered, a huge Westfield shopping centre with all the luxury brands was built, and the athletes villages and arenas for the 2012 London Olympics popped up from nowhere.

In 1979, most British people were poorly paid and strikes were frequent, very disruptive, and long lasting. Take-away shops didn't have drinks fridges – in hot weather they cooled the drinks by sitting them on blocks of ice. In our budget range, meals with meat were very poor quality and the serves were very small. The system for buying books in Foyles was too quaint for words.

Despite this, Britain seemed a retail paradise. We spent quite a lot of time and money buying books in London, Oxford and Cambridge which weren't available in Australia, and if they had been, would have been much more expensive. Nowadays book prices are not much different between Britain and Australia, and consumer products are released here at the same time as in the UK. In any case, you can buy it online and have it delivered. There are still bookshops in Charing Cross Road, but they're no longer worth crossing the globe for.

In regional England, it is now common that very large supermarkets (Tesco, Sainsburys, etc.) have been built on the outskirts of medium sized towns, and that high street shops are in decline. That doesn't seem like an altogether positive development. Nor does the fact that an increasing proportion of food on supermarket shelves is pre-processed and pre-packaged. You don't choose lettuces with firm hearts, you buy washed and chopped lettuce leaves in a plastic bag.

In 1979, some English people were already bothered by the influx of immigrants. Former neighbours in Canberra had emigrated from London because it was "being taken over by blacks." Since then immigration has proceeded apace in the UK and most European countries and that certainly seems to have increased the vibrancy and diversity of once-homogeneous societies, without destroying the history. However, that's not to the liking of some people whose families have lived there for

many generations. A red-faced taxi driver in Elephant-and-Castle shook his fist and shouted invective at non-white people in the street. A cockney we met on a train told us of an encounter with “multicultural people” in his home town of Arundel, West Sussex. They asked what powerful force had persuaded him to leave his former home in the wonderful city of London. He told them that they were multicultural but that that was fine because they would go home at 5 o’clock. The problem with London was that the multiculturals don’t ever go home!

In 1992, six countries formed the European Union, and the number increased over the years to 28, dropping to 27 with Brexit. In 1995, the Schengen Zone was established, allowing passportless travel across national borders within the zone. Currently 22 EU member states and several other countries are part of the Schengen Zone. The euro currency was introduced in 1999 and is used by 19 of the 27 members.

Huge changes happened in Europe starting in 1989, associated with the demise of the Iron Curtain. First, thousands of East Germans crossed the border between Hungary and Austria when the fences were removed. Then the Berlin wall was removed. The Solidarity movement triumphed in Poland and Germany was re-unified in 1990. Germany spent hundreds of billions of euros upgrading facilities in the former German Democratic Republic and in moving the national capital from Bonn to Berlin. Since then, many Soviet-bloc countries have joined the EU and even NATO.

Despite all the problems associated with the EU and the common currency, the EU seems to be a triumph over the madness of war, including the cold war. The EU has resulted in substantial infrastructure upgrades in poorer countries, and in the rolling out of uniform rules in areas such as the environment, labour practices, and justice. It’s not my place to say it, but it seems that Britain’s withdrawal from EU membership is a backward step for both Britain and the EU.

Running errands

In 1979, we were commissioned by various friends to:

- Order a major upgrade to their dinner service from Marshall & Snelgrove, in Oxford St.;
- Purchase a particular camping stove from a London shop;
- Buy a tortoiseshell head band from the Kensington Hypermarket; and
- Procure a long list of baby clothes from MotherCraft.

It was an unusual but quite interesting way of getting to know the city, but after encountering all sorts of difficulties in fulfilling these commissions, we resolved never again to take on shopping errands, including buying duty free at the airport on the way home.

Booking accommodation

Our three trips deliberately avoided peak season, and we didn’t book accommodation in advance. Instead we armed ourselves with recommendations from travel guides and official accommodation directories and turned up at the door. Often, the chosen hotel, pension or B&B was full, closed, too expensive, or no longer in business. We sometimes walked long distances before finding a bed, and sometimes resorted to accommodation bureaux like the Accueil in Paris, the Syndicat d’Initiative in Moustiers-Ste-Marie, or the bureau at Victoria Station in London.

If we had wanted pre-booked accommodation, we could have paid for a package tour, or gone to a travel agent who would have used their telex or fax machine to make the bookings. Remember those?

Looking back, I realise how amazingly convenient it is to be able to use accommodation apps like Wotif or Booking.Com. Would I carry with me a copy of the “British Tourist Board 2020 Guide to Hotels and B&Bs”? Not likely! It probably no longer exists.

Navigation

In each of the three trips, navigation was by means of maps or, failing that, by asking directions. “Haupt Bahnhof in dieser Richtung, ja?”. In London, navigation was using the *London A-Z* which in 1979 was a tiny paperback, printed in black and white, and with very tiny print. As the years went by, *London A-Z* increased in size and was printed in colour, compensating for declining visual acuity.

You looked up ‘Station St’ in the index, found that there were hundreds of them, narrowed down to the one in East Finchley, then went to Map 276. If you wanted to ride a bike or drive a car from where you were in Clapham, you’d need to find the chain of maps which would take you from there to Map 276. Much easier to use the Tube Map to get to East Finchley and take the Underground.

The advent first of GPS navigation, and later of Maps apps on smart phones, totally revolutionized destination finding and route planning.

Transport

In 1979 and 1982 I bought copies of the relevant BritRail, SBB, and Thomas Cook European timetables and carried them with me. In 1979, I traveled to a bookshop in Haarlem in the Netherlands to obtain my Thomas Cook Continental Timetable. In addition to the timetables, I carried large maps of the passenger rail networks for Britain and Switzerland.

Compared to apps offered by Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Rome2Rio, it’s very clunky and heavy to use timetables and maps. If you want the next, or cheapest way to get from A to B, then the apps are the way to go. But if you have a rail pass and you want to travel on a particular train, through a beautiful valley, or past a spectacular mountain, then maps and printed timetables can be more useful. The same is true if you haven’t yet decided where you want to go next.

I still have my 1979 BritRail map and still find it handy.

During all three of our trips, British Rail was a government instrumentality. It owned and operated all the infrastructure and operated all the services. Privatisation in 1994 initially seemed to make things worse but now the extent, reliability and quality of services seems better than it was, and better than it might be expected to have now been. That doesn’t mean that Britons have stopped complaining about it.

– You say you will arrive at Oxford at 19.15 on the 23rd. It is unlikely that you will arrive on the 23rd and it certainly won’t be at 19.15.

Since our travels, the UK rail network has expanded, mostly around London:

1987 Opening of the Docklands Light Rail (DLR). Seven new lines serving East London.

1988 Opening of ThamesLink, direct North-South connection across London, including Brighton to Bedford.

1994 Commencement of Eurostar services from Waterloo station to Europe via the Channel Tunnel.

1994 Opening of Waterloo and City underground line.

1999 Extension of Jubilee underground line to Stratford.

2007 Opening of the London Overground.

2007 Opening of HS1, the high speed link between the Channel Tunnel to St Pancras station for the Eurostar and for high speed commuter travel – the Javelin.

2021 Projected opening of CrossRail (the Elizabeth Line) connecting the East of London with the West.

2030 Possible opening of the first stage (London Euston to Birmingham) of HS2.

A welcome addition to transport options within London was the Thames Clipper service operating fast catamarans up and down the Thames and now integrated with Transport for London ticketing systems. I used it to attend a seminar at Australia House when I was staying at Canary Wharf in around 2009. On a nice day it's a lovely, stress-free, and rapid way to get about.

In 2010, a bicycle share scheme known informally as "Boris bikes" was launched in London, three years after the Vélib' scheme in Paris. These schemes seemed revolutionary but actually followed on from share schemes in La Rochelle, France in 1974 and the "White Bikes" scheme in Amsterdam in 1975. Now bike share schemes operate in many cities, and have evolved into dockless versions, and to e-bikes.

Since our trips, there has been a revolution in paying for travel. London introduced Oyster cards in 2003 to allow simplified and cheaper access to the Tube and to buses. Since then the validity of Oyster cards has been extended to cover just about all travel in and around the city. Since 2014 it has been possible to use contactless credit and debit cards in the place of the Oyster. These developments have been mirrored in major cities around the world.

In 1982, I rode the TGV train from Paris to Lyon, travelling on Europe's only high-speed rail line. The TGV and the high speed line had been in service for less than a year. In the 38 years since then, France's high speed rail network has massively expanded within France and TGV services now extend to England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Spain. Many European countries have their own high speed networks.

The TGV is a remarkable train. There are nearly 450 TGV train sets in service and more than a billion passengers have been carried without a single fatality. In 2006 a Eurostar version of the TGV, made the longest ever non-stop rail journey, carrying the cast and crew of a film 1421 km from London to Cannes at an average speed of 192 km/hr. In 2007, a TGV set a world speed record for conventional rail of 575 km/hr.

Despite the fact that even Morocco has a 186km high speed rail line, and Al Boraq trains operating at up to 320km/hr, I've given up hope of ever experiencing such a service in Australia in my lifetime.

In my 1991 writing I communicated my amazement at the 14km long Lötschberg tunnel in Switzerland. Since then a lower, and much longer Lötschberg Base Tunnel has been constructed. It is nearly 35km long and allows speeds of up to 250km/hr. Even longer is the Gotthard Base Tunnel which opened in 2016. It is 57km long and also allows similar speeds. These and other base tunnels were built to facilitate freight transfer between north and south Europe via Switzerland. Trucks are loaded onto trains on one side of the alps and offloaded at the other.

Access to information

It now seems strange what lengths I had to go to to obtain information prior to our trips. I've already mentioned tracking down information on accommodation and transport. I also drove around many embassies in Canberra collecting tourist brochures. I received information in the post from the British Consulate in Sydney. I wrote to all sorts of organisations in Britain seeking and obtaining information about walking routes, wood-turning courses, tide tables, and bus timetables. I bought a whole stack of travel guides to Europe and to individual countries. I still have about a dozen Michelin Green Guides. At about the time of our trips, Lonely Planet guides published by Australians Maureen and Tony Wheeler were coming out and covering more and more countries. A differentiating feature was the inclusion of the writer's opinions. Since then, more than 100 million Lonely Planet Guides have been sold.

One guide book, "Europe on 5 dollars a day", was the inspiration for the title of my book. It was followed by one aimed at a more luxury-oriented clientele: "Europe on 500 dollars a day."

But now there's the world wide web, and Google and Bing, and Wikipedia.

Book writing

If I'd written this book in 1979, I would have probably been able to use Kathy's IBM golfball typewriter, although her PhD thesis would have had to take priority. It was so advanced that it had a corrector function where you could type a white letter over the incorrect black one — provided you could perfectly align the paper. Self-discipline was needed to ensure that the erroneous text was exactly the same length as the correction.

Photocopying or offset printing would have been the way to make multiple copies. If I'd wanted to include photographs I could have paid a photography lab to print negatives on to sheets of photographic paper of the right size, one sheet for each copy, to be hand-collated into the pages of text, before binding. I'd labeled the backs of the prints of our photos with the negative number and the page in our negative file, so finding negatives would have been easy enough.

Now we have easy-to-use digital photography, tools for manipulating images, and electronic document preparation systems which can incorporate them. We also have electronic distribution systems which enable us to distribute 5 copies or 5 million and e-readers to consume them. Perhaps that's how you are reading this.