



## LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

August 2012

Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

Some months ago President Bob asked me to send regular despatches to the members of RC Edinburgh from our place in France. His wish was that I might be able to impart a flavour of the continent to the life of our club. Of course I was delighted to accept the invitation (challenge).

One of my long-time heroes is Alistair Cooke, with his admirable '*Letters from America*'. So, I have chosen a comparable title for this series of despatches, and can only hope that I manage to emulate something of his accessible and elegant style. My intention is to write about once a month, with lots of photos, and no more than two pages.

Many of you will know that we began our annual migration south on August 4<sup>th</sup>, and this map gives the route we took. The snaps below show Douglas and our dog Maddy waiting for the overnight ferry from Newcastle to IJmuiden. We deliberately limit our driving to no more than six hours a day – partly to maximise our enjoyment of the journey, and partly to minimise the amount of time our cat Magnus spends in his cage (albeit a roomy one). The route we take has been honed over several years, and includes stops at agreeable hostelries. It was such a pleasure to be back on the generally uncrowded and unstressful French *autoroutes*.



Our stop in Aumale at the *Villa des Houx* (Holly Villa) was memorable because of the wonderful meal we had – one of the main reasons we love to live in France! I had a first course of succulent thick slices of lightly smoked salmon followed by de-boned quail cooked in a salt crust. Wow! The light red wine from the Loire was also very much appreciated. The price for the *menu* (two courses plus cheese plus dessert) was 27 euros (about £21). Maddy enjoyed being with us in the restaurant, which is perfectly normal in France, and is another plus from our point of view.



As always the final approach toward our village of Gerde takes our



breath away! The mountains rise abruptly from relatively gentle foothills, and the *Pic du Midi* (in the centre of the photo left) with its observatory on top towers to a height of 2800 metres. The Pic website ([www. picdumidi.com](http://www.picdumidi.com)) is well worth a visit for its live webcams and panoramic views. The *Col du Tourmalet* which often provides a particular challenge during the *Tour de France* is near to the summit of the Pic, and is only about 15 km from our house. The photo on the right was taken through the windscreen as we were about to descend to the town of *Bagnères-de-Bigorre* in the valley of the River *Adour*. The pointed mountain is *Montaigu*.



Now we are back at our house called *La Cordée* in the village of *Gerde*. The house name refers to the rope that is used to join a group of mountain climbers together, because the couple from whom we bought the house were enthusiastic alpinists in the post-WWII era, at a time when it was not very usual for a woman to do mountain climbing. We found some fascinating old photos in the attic – now reunited with their family.

It is so peaceful here, although we do have neighbours on two sides of us. There is no through traffic, only the cars of those who live here, and the occasional van or truck making deliveries. On the east side of our house is a wooded hillside with open fields beyond. There are many cattle in the fields at this time of the year, and the sound of their bells tonk-tonking is soothing and pleasant. The village of *Gerde* itself is just to the south of us at the foot of the hill on which our house in the neighbourhood of *Castet* is located. We hear the village church bell chiming the hours and half hours. In fact, this is not quite true because the custom in certain parts of France (including ours) is to chime the hours twice, with an interval of about two minutes between. Apparently this is to allow folk to count the number of chimes correctly the second time around, whereas it is easy to miss a chime the first time! Very practical.



Not much more to add, other than the fact that it has been HOT here the past week! Up to over 40 °C on our terrace in the afternoons. But this is fairly exceptional, and today it is back to the mid 20's.

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda

Together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus...