



LETTER FROM FRANCE / COURRIER DE FRANCE

February 2015

Hello Everyone / *Bonjour à tous !*

It's holiday time! *Les vacances*. 'What **again?**', I can't help but thinking. It seems that we have only just finished the Christmas and New Year festivities. This has encouraged me to look a bit deeper into the differences and similarities between Scotland and France concerning holidays, especially the timing of holidays and how they are observed.

There are three main reasons why this topic is at the front of my mind. For one thing, the local newspapers are full of the joyous news that the ski stations in the *Pyrénées* now have a splendid mantle of snow just in time for *les vacances*, which started February 7th. Another is that at our last choral group rehearsal it was decided that we would not have any rehearsals for the next two weeks because of *les vacances*. And the third reason is that we have realised that we should book a festive meal for Valentine's Day.



Grand Tourmalet ski area with the Pic du Midi in the background

So, what are these *vacances* starting the second week of February, and why do they affect so many people? In effect, they are school holidays (*vacances scolaires*), and I have just done some checking to see if my impression that France is particularly generous with school holidays is actually true. It is! There are five periods in a calendar year when French schools are closed, which add up to a princely 127 days of holiday, which could be compared with Scotland's 96 days or Germany's 89. Of course it should be remembered that the number of hours per school week are also quite different, so the amount of teaching time may be rather similar.

At my age, I am no longer used to having my life revolve around school holidays because my children have long since finished school. But I have come to appreciate that here in France many if not most parents with school-age children work, and they expect that their children will be at school from about 8-9 am until 5 or even 6 pm, Monday to Friday. Of course part of this time is for meals (sometimes including breakfast) and for extracurricular activities. Another part of this equation is that during *les vacances scolaires* most employment does not cease, and it is therefore necessary to find someone to look after the children. You guessed it! This is where people my age come in. Almost everyone we know expects to have their grandchildren for a large proportion of the school holidays. Hence our choral group with an average age of perhaps 60 is heavily committed to welcoming grandchildren for significant periods. The same thing applies to our village association. I can readily see that this system has a great many advantages, except perhaps for those like me who never retire! It also means that scheduling events to avoid school holidays can be difficult.

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One point of similarity between Scotland and France is that some of the school holidays are staggered, so that not everyone heads for the slopes or for the beaches at the same moment. The map to the left shows the three French school zones, and for example, our yellow zone started its two-week winter holiday on February 7th. The red zone follows a week later, and the blue zone a week after that. There will be another staggered holiday period in April/May, but the summer holidays (all of July AND August), and those for *Toussaint* in October/November and Christmas/New

French school zones

Year are not staggered. All of this may be relevant for you if you are thinking of visiting France, and are not constrained to observing school holidays. In our part of the world September is particularly agreeable from the weather point of view, and attractive places are not very crowded.

Now a little bit about the naming of holidays in French: for example, St Valentine's Day is *la Saint Valentin*. The first time I saw this, I thought 'why is a male saint referred to as 'la' which is the feminine article?' I then observed that the same thing occurs for *la Saint Sylvestre* (Hogmanay), *la Toussaint* (All Saints' Day) and so on. In effect the answer is easy because *la Saint Valentin* is just shorthand for the phrase *la Fête de Saint Valentin* or the feast of Saint Valentine. Hence '**Joyeuse**' *Saint Valentin*. An exception is Christmas. It is usually '**le Noël**' or '**joyeux Noël**'. Perhaps French has as many exceptions as English!



And how do French people in general celebrate holidays? My impression is that the immediate thought is how to gather the family together. In fact, every week has a holiday in that it is customary for several generations of a family to enjoy Sunday lunch together, an event which may last most of the day. A recent survey I saw in a local paper showed that the vast majority of French people love to cook, and this is true for women AND men almost irrespective of age. And we are talking of slow food here! So – once the arrangements for gathering a family, or indeed friends together are in place, the thoughts then turn to the fun of planning and preparing a special meal. A popular alternative is to go to a favourite restaurant for a fine meal.



magret with foie gras

La Saint Valentin is somewhat of an exception because it is usually an event for couples, with fine cuisine as the centre piece. Douglas and I have booked at *Le Jardin des Brouches* (<http://www.lejardindesbrouches.fr/>), one of our favourite restaurants in *Bagnères*, which to our delight has just been rewarded with a *Bib Gourmand* in the *Guide Michelin*. The *Saint Valentin* feast will be a set meal of four courses for 60 euros (£44), with an *apéritif* included, but not the wine. Speaking of food, I find that the translation of French cuisine can be decidedly tricky. Those restaurants which attempt

English versions of their menus often let themselves in for a certain amount of hilarity. I have put a splendid example from a hotel near Toulouse in a dropbox folder for you to look at:

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/sdq1kzm8vzvkipd/menu.jpg?dl=0>)!

It shows what can happen if someone just relies on a dictionary without knowing a language.

But it is not always easy to achieve a faithful translation, and to illustrate, here is my attempt at a translation of the feast at *Le Jardin des Brouches*. In fact, let's start with a translation for the name of the restaurant. 'The Garden of the what??.' You probably won't find '*brouche*' in most dictionaries because it is rather specific to this *Gascon* part of France. It is often translated as 'witch', but this simple translation generates a heated discussion. It seems that a *brouche* combines the attributes of sorceress with healer and fairy godmother, so not wicked at all. Our meal will start with an *apéritif maison* and *mises en bouche* (pre-dinner drink, speciality of the restaurant, with 'something placed in the mouth', perhaps 'tasty mouthful' would be better). Then, '*club sandwich de foie gras mariné et magret*' (my guess is 'marinated foie gras between two pieces of duck breast', perhaps something like the photo above). Then '*choux fleur, langoustines, tourteau, cumbawa*' ('cauliflower, Norway lobster, crab, Kaffir lime' – easy to translate literally, but of course no idea about how they will be presented!). The main course will be '*spirale de boeuf, gâteau de pommes de terre parfumé à l'huile de truffe, crème pesto d'ail des Ours*' (spiral of beef [whatever that may be], potato cake flavoured with truffle oil, pesto cream with [literally bears' garlic!] wild garlic) – we will have to wait and see how this arrives. And the final treat will be '*framboises, chocolat, litchi*' (raspberries, chocolate, lychee – possibly it will look like the photo below). It all sounds wonderful - yummy or *miam – miam* as a French person would say.

Greetings to all / *Amitiés à tous!*

Linda

Together with Douglas, Maddy and Magnus ...



lychee with chocolate & raspberries