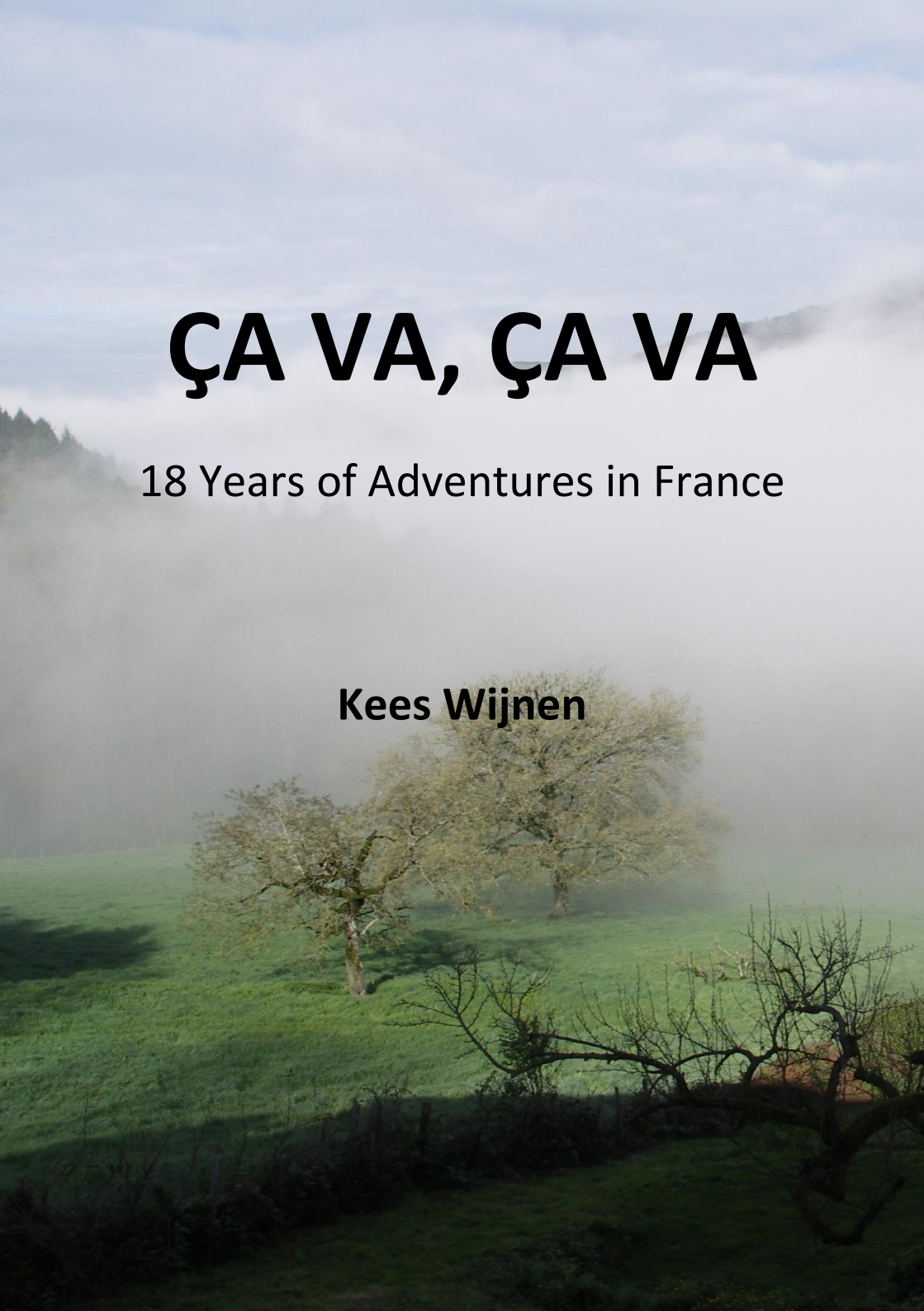


# ÇA VA, ÇA VA

18 Years of Adventures in France

Kees Wijnen







# Ça va, ça va

Third edition

Disclaimer:

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## Foreword

We had been toying with the serious idea of moving to France for some time. Every time we were on vacation in France, this urge came back. Why had we come up with these crazy plans?

In the last year, a number of things had happened that made the choice easier for us:

- Both of my parents had passed away;
- They left us some financial support;
- Both of our children were now living independently;
- My three brothers were already living abroad;
- I had changed jobs and realized how long I wanted to keep fighting against a younger, ambitious generation in the automation field.
- We were starting to get complacent, had no more challenges. You know how it works: get up in the morning, go to work, sit in front of the television in the evening, and go back to bed.

Eventually, we started asking ourselves: "What's keeping us here?" If we wanted to do something different, to turn our lives around completely, then we had to do it NOW!

Anyway, we took a look online and it seemed like half of France was for sale. We went to France several times and, after an extensive online selection, viewed about ten properties in total. The plan was to initially start a naturist campsite. However, this ran into quite a

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few problems: the neighbours were too close, there was no cooperation from the municipality, it wasn't secluded enough, etc.

One day, we were driving through France again, on the hunt for a property...

## The Purchase

On Easter Saturday at the end of March, we found ourselves hurtling down the D999 towards Alban, where we were due to meet an estate agent at ten o'clock in a café on the market square. We were, once again, on the hunt in France, having scoured the internet for a few rather spiffing and promising little abodes. We hadn't yet experienced that essential 'coup de coeur' with any of the houses, which is, of course, an absolute must for the place you're meant to spend the rest of your life. Upon arrival, we found that each house was a more dilapidated, knackered ruin than the last. The grand plan was to start a naturist campsite somewhere in France, preferably south of the Bordeaux-Lyon line. By now, we'd already visited about ten places. That alone was enough material to write a book.

Anyway, we were happily sitting in the sunshine, enjoying a *café allongé* and a croissant, waiting for the estate agent. Naturally, we had no idea what he looked like. It was always a bit of a blind date, wasn't it? Another person would walk over... "Could that be him? No, not him either." This time, a woman strode purposefully towards us and asked if we were *Madame et Monsieur Wijnen* (pronounced 'Vis-nain'). After a quick introduction and signing an exclusivity agreement (declaring that any potential purchase would be handled exclusively through their agency), she asked us to follow her. We quickly inquired if our plans for a naturist campsite would be a problem.

"Non, non, pas de problème," she said resolutely. "The municipality will be more than happy to cooperate."

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Right then. So we followed her. We weren't particularly impressed with the area we were driving through at that moment, but we thought we'd see how it went. But, oh dear, we had a proper job keeping up with her. The woman drove like a kamikaze Grand Prix driver, hurtling down the hill in her little Clio at at least 100 km/h, taking on all sorts of crazy *chicanes*! We did notice that the landscape quickly changed for the better, and once we reached the valley floor, we found ourselves in the stunning Vallée du Tarn. "Bloody hell!" we said to ourselves. "What a view! What scenery!" But we didn't get much chance to appreciate it—I was having enough trouble just keeping the car on the road, as she just kept tearing along!

Eventually, we arrived at **La Libaudié**, our next prospect: a beautiful old farmhouse, still entirely 'en pierre' on the outside. We looked at each other and said almost at the same time: "This could be it!" and "This can't be real! For that price!" We met the Swiss owner, and the agent asked if she could show us around. In the meantime, she informed us that the owner's sister, her husband, and their mother lived in the front part of the complex and would be staying there. We had read something about that in the ad, but had no idea how it worked in practice. During the tour, she told us that we should be well aware that the house had neither an electricity nor a water meter. Currently, there was only one meter for the owner and his sister in the adjacent property. We would need to have everything disconnected and apply for our own meters. That seemed like a mere formality.

"Yes, yes," the agent said. "That's right, no problem at all."



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We also took a walk through the 14-hectare forest that surrounded the house and saw all sorts of possibilities for our campsite. I took the opportunity to explain our plans again, that we wanted to set up a naturist campsite, and that I could imagine the neighbours might not be too charmed by the idea. "Well," she said, "let's go and talk to the neighbours then."

Well, the neighbour was less than charmed!

"You can start whatever you want here, a campsite, a hotel, I don't care, but if you start that naked business here, I will do everything in my power to prevent it!!!"



Right, that was clear language. So no **La Libaudié** then. After a few more attempts, we said our goodbyes to the agent and drove away, deeply disappointed. In a fit of dejection, we turned left instead of right and came to a stop a little further down the road. A dead end! But we had a magnificent view of the Tarn. Good heavens, it was beautiful here. We sat there talking at this lovely viewpoint for at

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least an hour. "Well," we said, "this really feels like the place of our lives, and at a price we can afford. Is that naturist stuff really all that important? Can't we just start a regular campsite or a B&B?" After much deliberation, we decided to turn back.

The estate agent had, of course, already left. We asked the owner if we could have another look around, which was fine by him. We were then able to calmly inspect and consider the whole domain. When we walked hand-in-hand through the forest again and realized that all of this could be ours, Marjo suddenly burst into tears. "But darling," I said, concerned, "what's wrong?"

"This is just our place," she answered, her lip trembling! At that moment, it was clear: we had found our spot! We walked back up the hill.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a decapitated, still-twitching, bloody mouse dropped right at our feet! We were scared out of our wits! "Look!" I said, pointing up. "That kestrel up there is offering us a welcome gift!" It was quite symbolic, really.

We immediately called the agent and told her we wanted to make an offer and that she had better come back. That very same day, we offered a price well below the asking price. We had already developed a strong suspicion that both the owner and his wife had a bit of a drinking problem. During the tour, he kept disappearing. His hands were shaking enormously. Once, by chance, I saw him through the kitchen window, taking a swig directly from a bottle of Ricard. Dilute it with water? Don't be silly, gulp it down neat! That same evening, as we were eating in our hotel, our mobile phone rang. The agent congratulated us; our offer had been accepted! We

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jumped for joy, and at the same time, we fully realized what we had just committed to. What else was in store for us? From now on, it was serious business!

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### **The 50th Birthday**

In the meantime, a cunning plan was brewing in my head. Marjo was turning fifty on April 2nd. What if I organized a surprise party for her on Sunday, April 1st, where we would invite all our friends and immediately announce our emigration plans?

I secretly called my sons to ask if they would organize it. All our friends were asked to dress up as very old people so that Marjo would feel super young. Our boys enthusiastically got to work, inviting everyone and arranging the catering. When Marjo came home, the whole house would be full!

Anyway, after our offer was accepted, we returned home on April 1st, the day before Marjo's birthday, full of adrenaline. I had planned it so that we would arrive home around seven in the evening. Definitely not any earlier!

As we drove, it became clear that we would be home far too early. It was Sunday, so the motorways were quiet. Paris was a breeze. If this continued, we'd be home by five o'clock! Way too early! I had to come up with something to delay us.

Mid-journey, I suddenly let go of the accelerator.

"What on earth was that?!" Marjo exclaimed, startled.

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"Shit!" I said. "The car's playing up," and I pulled over onto the hard shoulder. I pretended to try and restart the car.

"As dead as a dodo," I declared. After a few more feigned attempts, I got out and opened the bonnet.

"No idea what this could be! It just won't start. I do see that the engine temperature is very high," I made up. I had to somehow stall for time!

"Shouldn't we call the roadside assistance?" Marjo said.

"Let's just wait a bit and let the engine cool down," I said, hoping she wouldn't press the matter. In the meantime, I tried to start it a few more times. To no avail!

After an hour, I decided we could continue. I got back behind the wheel and started the car.

"Hey, look at that! Hooray, it's working!!" I shouted. "See? It was just a bit hot!"

We drove on very slowly. We were still going to get home too early. When we reached the Dutch border, we were still much too early. I needed at least another hour's delay. We stopped at a roadside restaurant and took our sweet time for a bite to eat. When we got back in the car, I pretended again that it wouldn't start.

"Oh, for goodness sake, here we go again! Bloody hell!!!" I got out angrily and threw open the bonnet. Just then, a roadside assistance van stopped a little further down the road.

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"Kees! Look, the ANWB! (Dutch road service) Call him!" Marjo yelled.

"Oh, leave it, love," I called back, but before I knew it, Marjo was running after the car, and a moment later, the ANWB van pulled up behind our car.

"Good evening," the man said. "What seems to be the problem?"

"The car won't start!" Marjo shouted before I could say a word.

"Marjo, why don't you quickly call the kids to tell them we're delayed," I yelled to distract her.

Meanwhile, crouched under the bonnet, I whispered to the ANWB man that there was nothing wrong and explained the purpose of our little detour.

"Right then," he chuckled. "I'll come up with something!"

A moment later, he said: "A sensor is broken, and I don't have one. I've called headquarters, and a colleague will be here with the part in about an hour. So, just be patient, my colleague will be here shortly." We walked over to his car together, where I thanked him, and he continued on his way.

Relieved, I walked back. After half an hour, I got back behind the wheel and started the car, shouting:

"Hooray, it's working again! Come on, let's go!"

"But the ANWB is coming soon," she sputtered.

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"That's going to take ages, never mind! Come on, let's go! We're almost home!"

Once we arrived home, Marjo opened the living room door and found all our friends there. Everyone was dressed up as old grannies and grandpas, singing "Happy Birthday."

Marjo was stunned and moved to tears.

"Just give me five minutes to freshen up and I'll be right back!" she said.

Meanwhile, I told everyone what had happened with the ANWB man.

"Yes!" someone said. "Knowing you, we were starting to think it was another April Fool's joke!"



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Marjo was handed a large road sign with '<50KM>' on it, and we began our tour of the village, dressed up and singing, with Marjo leading the way.

Later, I asked for everyone's attention and announced that we had bought a farmhouse in France and were emigrating... You could have heard a pin drop.

Everyone was, of course, surprised and also disappointed, but very happy for us.

I handled things differently at work. I was employed at a large computer company. It would still be a while before we could permanently move to France; after all, we first had to sell our house in the Netherlands. If I were to announce our departure now, I would most likely be unceremoniously put out to pasture! So, we kept the whole story to ourselves. I simply mentioned that we'd bought a little holiday home in France.

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## **The Transfer**

In July 2002, the moment had finally arrived: the transfer at the French notary. We had arranged to meet at **La Libaudié** the day before to see if everything had been left clean and empty. Well, that was a bit of a shocker. When we arrived, the owner was still in the middle of moving out. We found one big shambles in the outbuildings. We knew in advance that it's always a bit of a jolt when you see an empty house, but this surpassed our wildest expectations. Let's just say it was an absolute mess! The owner, clearly on his umpteenth drink of the morning, explained that things

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hadn't gone to plan. "I have a few valuable things left here and there," he asked. "Shall I just leave them behind?"

I asked, "What are these 'valuable things' then?"

"Well, in the barn there's a whole load of planks 'en très bon état', and in the attic, there are five brand-new mattresses, still in their packaging," and he went on to list a host of other treasures.

We thought to ourselves: "If we demand that he empties the place, he'll be here for months, especially in his condition." So we just agreed.

The next day at the transfer, we were sitting in the notary's office dressed in our Sunday best, listening to the deeds being read out. We were in our breezy summer suits, the owner in a grubby T-shirt and shorts, and his sister in a floral teenage skirt. At one point, the owner nervously twisted on his chair, checking his phone.

"Just have to answer a phone call," he said, leaving the office. A moment later, he returned with a thick alcoholic haze surrounding him. A dubious character was also present at the transfer. We later learned he was a moneylender who had lent the owner a lot of euros. After the deeds were read, we said our goodbyes outside and watched the company, including the moneylender, immediately dive into the pub. Clearly, some things needed to be sorted out...

The next day, we arrived at **La Libaudié** again, but this time as the new 'landowners.' After saying a quick hello to the neighbours, we stepped into our newly acquired home. It was another moment where we had to take a deep breath. What an indescribable mess



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we found! We decided to make a cup of tea first, but... huh, no water, and oh... no electricity either!

"Let's just ask the neighbours if there's something wrong."

"Yes," they said, "everything's been shut off. You have to apply for water and electricity first."

Now we remembered. We had been told this during the purchase. But with our grasp of French and the agent's rapid tongue, not everything had quite sunk in. Fortunately, the neighbours offered us the use of their water and electricity for the time being (we sensed a certain amount of schadenfreude!). Over the next two weeks, we started cleaning up the worst of the mess. We were also curious to see the 'treasures' the previous owner had left behind. Well, the stock of planks turned out to be completely rotten, wet, moldy, and warped. When we opened the packaging of the 'brand-new' mattresses, mice scattered in every direction! Furthermore, we had become the proud owners of a mountain of rotten, worn-out, discarded, moldy, and stinking junk, drums of used oil, crates full of dubious pesticides, shelves with empty jars, pans, rusty tools, dismantled lawnmowers, and so on.

After cleaning the private part of the house, we started on the big barn. We spent a full week just throwing the rubbish outside. Soon, a respectable three-meter-high mountain of junk had grown. The neighbour came running over in a panic:

"You're not going to throw all that away, are you? What a waste!"

"Well," we said, "if you want it, come and get it."

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When push came to shove, he didn't seem too keen. Utterly disheartened, we finally called a waste disposal company to pick up the stuff. A few days later, a lorry arrived to place the skip. Yes, a skip it was! A container at least 1.5 metres high! If we had to throw everything into that, we'd be there for another week! The driver saw the mountain of rubbish and our desperate faces and suggested:

"Shall I just load it up for you?"

"Load it up?" we said. "You can do that?"

"Well, yes, I've got this hydraulic arm; I can just scoop the whole lot up!" Within an hour, he drove away with a fully loaded truck.



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Back in the Netherlands, we focused on selling our house in the Betuwe. According to the estate agent, the sale would be a doddle. He had sold a similar house in our neighbourhood in just three weeks recently.

Well, that turned out to be a bit optimistic! After six months, we still hadn't had a serious offer! There was a bit of a dip in the housing market due to the high-interest rates at the time. We had already had to take out a bridging loan to pay for our house in France! We were in a cold sweat! We were the proud owners of two houses and two mortgages! That was becoming a bit too expensive.

We even started to consider putting our dream in France back on the market out of necessity! To cover the high mortgage costs, we eventually decided to rent out our farmhouse in France as a holiday home. I cobbled together a website, and in no time, our house was rented out until the end of October! That took a huge financial burden off our shoulders.

In early May 2003, we finally sold our house in the Netherlands. The new owners wanted to move in immediately! Oops, we had rented out our house in France until the end of October! Now what? We didn't want to stand in the way of the sale, so we agreed. The handover would be in June.

Because we couldn't go to France yet, we rented a chalet in a holiday park in the Betuwe. In December, we would finally leave for France.

When I resigned from my job, a farewell drink was, as usual, organized. In my farewell speech, I mentioned, among other things, that I was one of the few people to leave this company without the

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help of a lawyer... A moment later, I was standing outside, without a company car, company mobile, company laptop, or a hefty salary, and Marjo came to pick me up in her canary yellow Fiat Cinquecento.

In December, in the pouring rain, we were waved off by our two boys and finally headed south.

## The Electrician

One of the first things we had to sort out after buying our farmhouse was our own water and electricity supply. We were still running off the neighbours' supply, and they were starting to grumble that this couldn't go on! The water company assigned a local contractor to dig a 500-metre trench to create a new water connection from the main pipeline. The cost: 900 euros. Not too bad at all. We now had our own water.

With the electricity company, the EDF, things were a little more complicated. A new meter was no problem. We would first get a so-called '*réseau chantier*', a temporary building site connection with a provisional meter. We would have to pay a very high electricity tariff until our own installation was approved, only then would we be entitled to a permanent meter. "Approved? What do you mean?" we asked, a knot of dread forming in our stomachs.

"Well, your installation must comply with the 2002 standards!"

Aha, so that was the catch! Still, a respected electrician by the name of Monsieur Pierre, who had been recommended to us, showed up to install the '*coffre de chantier*'. This turned out to be a rickety box, which was hung on a lamppost with a piece of metal wire. Inside the box were a few fuses and an old-fashioned electricity meter with a spinning disc. So, we had our own, albeit a ridiculously expensive, power supply.

Monsieur Pierre, meanwhile, was inspecting our existing installation. Of course, it was a complete mess. Just outdated wiring everywhere and old fuse boxes and junction boxes. We asked him what it would cost to bring the whole installation up to code.

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"Oh la la," he said, "that would certainly be an expensive operation."

"Pfff, *chambres d'hôtes*, campsite, 380 volts, three phases."

He couldn't give us a price right away. An '*étude*' had to be done first. "An *étude*? What does that involve?"

"Well, first an engineering firm must come. They will do a survey and create a plan with all the drawings and connection diagrams." It all sounded terribly expensive!

As you can imagine, we were becoming more and more desperate.

"Well," we said, "then this engineering firm will have to come."

"OK," said Monsieur Pierre, "I'll send them over. They'll first have a look at what's needed and then give you a quote."

A few weeks later, someone from an engineering firm did indeed show up, and later still, we received a letter with a quote. Reading the quote made the blood drain from our faces. The design of an electrical plan would cost us 5,000 euros! And that was just for a piece of paper!

So we called Monsieur Pierre again and asked him to come by. We wanted to know if this was all really necessary and told him we were very shocked. Was it not possible without that report?

"Oh no," he said resolutely. "Only with that report will I know what I need to do, and only then can I make a quote."

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I asked if he couldn't at least give us an estimate just to get an idea. "What are we talking about here? The main fuse box, for example? What should we expect? What will that cost us?" Finally, after much prodding, he gave us a rough estimate.

"Well, the fuse box, 3 phases, 380 volts, automatic circuit breakers, etc. You should count on at least 10,000 euros, and for the rest of the installation and replacing the wiring, certainly another 30,000 euros."

You can imagine, our jaws dropped, and we stared at him in disbelief! The following days were filled with all sorts of 'doom scenarios' and we didn't sleep a wink. What on earth had we gotten ourselves into?

Meanwhile, Frédéric, a bricklayer and tiler, was working for us. He was an enthusiastic young lad who had just started his own business and was therefore highly motivated. We told him the whole story. He laughed and felt sorry for us.

"Why don't you call Monsieur Cadas? He's the local electrician and plumber here in the village."

The next day, Didier Cadas came to have a look, always up for a new job. We told him the whole story as well. He asked who we had spoken to.

"Ahhhh, Monsieur Pierre, you say! Ah oui, *maintenant je le comprends!*" (Ah yes, now I understand!)

Didier got straight to work and first carried out the most essential jobs, including electrical connections for the campsite. We were

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very surprised by his work pace. He would be there at eight in the morning and work until eight or nine in the evening. But at the stroke of noon, he would drop everything to go and eat. A Frenchman's main meal is between twelve and two, and there are very few things that can pull them away from it. And indeed, he was back at two, half-past two, and went at it with full force.

One day, he packed all his things up in the evening. That was strange; he never did that.

"*A demain*," he said and left. But *demain*, no Didier.

No one came the day after either. So we called him.

"Ah, a little problem, another small job came up, but I'll be back tomorrow, *pas de problème*."

And, you guessed it, the next day, no Didier, nor the days after that. We tried calling again. In France, you have to call in the evening because they're working during the day. He didn't pick up. We tried again for days. He simply wasn't answering the phone anymore! Oh, for heaven's sake, he must have seen our number on his caller ID. When I called him with my mobile phone, he answered.

"Hello! Didier, where on earth have you been?!"

Again, a thousand excuses, but he had an urgent job. He would start again tomorrow. But alas, even then, no Didier. Frédéric the bricklayer came to me with the news that he couldn't continue.

"Why not? Why can't you go on?"

"Well, the electrical pipes need to be in before I can pour the floor."



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So I told him the situation with Didier.

"Okay," said Frédéric, "let me give him a call."

I don't know what he said, but the next morning, Didier was back with his big, innocent blue eyes, as if nothing had happened.

By then, it was already March, and we wanted to open in April.

"Well," said Didier, "I'll never get this done on time." He therefore suggested that we just run our season, and he would come back in September to replace the old wiring in the private part of the house and install the new switch box.

I said, "Hold on a minute, we need three phases. We can't run the whole place on one circuit, and besides, I still have to pay for outrageously expensive temporary power!"

"Let's take a look at Monsieur Pierre's *coffre de chantier*," he said.

He walked over to the lamppost, ripped the seal from the box, and tightened a few screws.

"There," he said, "now we have 3 phases, and well, I don't want to say too much, but that electricity meter hardly works!"

I looked, and indeed, the spinning disc was stationary more often than it was turning. Didier closed the box and said, "You just run your season, that expensive temporary power won't turn out to be so expensive after all. I'll just do the last few jobs now, and then I'll come back in September for the rest."

And sure enough, he came back in September and replaced the wiring throughout the entire house. He was everywhere at once: in

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the attic, in the garage, in the cellar, in the loft, on a mezzanine floor, under the kitchen sink. He knew the house better than we did! The job was finally finished with a beautiful new switch cabinet with the latest residual current devices, automatic circuit breakers, and timers.

"There," said Didier. "Now I just need to fill out the forms for the inspection."

Good heavens, the inspection! We had completely forgotten. We just hoped it would go well!

"If all goes well," said Didier, "they'll come to check everything in a couple of weeks."

Two weeks later, Didier called us. "I already have the EDF approval papers, with the stamps and everything!" he announced excitedly.

"But how can that be? They haven't even been here," I replied.

"That's right, I just finished a big inspection for a hotel, and everything was perfectly in order there. So they just stamped your form at the same time!"

In October, Didier suddenly showed up on our doorstep. I thought, what's he doing here? We invited him in for a cup of coffee. He had an envelope with him. I thought, blast it, he's here to bring the bill. He gave us the envelope and calmly started on his second cup of coffee, not making any move to leave. I said to Marjo: "I think he's waiting for his money and we need to pay him now."

"*Oui, comme vous voulez*," Didier said. "That would be very helpful."

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We immediately wrote him a cheque. The invoice for the entire electrical installation was 5,000 euros, which was quite a bit different from Monsieur Pierre's estimates.

## A Culinary Journey

After we had spruced up and adapted all the guest rooms and reached a point where we could welcome visitors, Marjo said to me one day:

"Kees, we really have to talk about the meals we're going to serve. How are we going to do this? I've never in my life cooked for more than four people. I can't see myself preparing a three-course dinner for sixteen people or more! And what on earth should I make? We can't serve our guests something like mashed potato stew or kale, can we?"

"Right," I said cautiously, "you have a point there! I have no idea! We'll have to talk to our friends and exchange experiences."

We had already figured out that officially, as a *BandB*, you weren't allowed to offer an à la carte meal, but rather a "plat du jour" or "what's for dinner." The guests had to eat at one table together with the host and hostess, and the wine couldn't be offered separately; it had to be included in the menu price. This was a government measure to appease protests from the hospitality industry. Fortunately, it wasn't strictly enforced in our area, but we stuck with the concept of "all of us together at one table with Marjo and me." It was much more sociable anyway.

After rummaging around on the internet, we had found some recipes, such as *Boeuf bourguignon* with rice, *confit de canard* with fried potatoes and prune purée. A friend gave us a tip for some easy but delicious dishes like 'Tartiflette,' a baked dish from Haute-Savoie with cheese, fried onions, bacon, and sliced potatoes, served with a salad.

## Ça va, ça va

Our very first meal was, of all things, with the French—eight of them. Marjo was in a complete tizzy. We started with a tuna salad as a starter, then a piece of chicken with fried potatoes and chicory in a honey sauce, followed by a cheese board, and *crème brûlée* for dessert.

Thank God, our French guests were very enthusiastic. They thoroughly enjoyed it.

Fortunately, we gained more and more confidence over time, and the guests were very satisfied.

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We had also, at some point, quizzed Didier, our French electrician who was a regular visitor, about French eating habits. He was curious and asked us what the Dutch usually had on their menu. We told him about kale stew and mash, but also that, due to their colonial past, the Dutch were crazy about Indonesian food, and that Marjo occasionally made a *rijsttafel* (rice table).

A few weeks later, he called us to ask if he and his friends could come and eat with us. He was very curious about this "*Rie-Ta-Fèlle*."

"*Rie-Ta-Fèlle*?? What on earth is he talking about??!!" Marjo thought.

"Oh, wait a minute," she said, laughing. "*Rijsttafel*! He wants *rijsttafel*." Okay, we'll make him a *rijsttafel*. We'll show those Frenchies what's what!

## Ça va, ça va

That same weekend, eight French people sat down to an extensive Indonesian *rijsttafel* and thoroughly enjoyed themselves, eating every last crumble!

---

After a turbulent first season, we were called by some French people in November asking if they could celebrate New Year's Eve with us.

"Okay, why not? How many of you are there?"

"Twenty-two," he said.

"Twenty-two?!! That's impossible, we only have five rooms. At most, we could accommodate twelve, maybe fourteen people."

"Oh, really? But your place looks fantastic! Are you sure it's not possible?"

"No, not really. Tell you what, if you want, come by and see for yourselves."

"That's what we were planning anyway," and that same weekend, a French couple knocked on the door. A little later, we showed them all the rooms.

"Oh, but we can put two mattresses in here, and there's room for another one in that room, too! We'll bring the mattresses ourselves."

"You could also fit three in our guest room," Marjo suggested, "and there's room for two more in our caravan!"

## Ça va, ça va

They thought our barn with the bar was absolutely fantastic.

"We can have an amazing New Year's Eve party here," the couple said enthusiastically. They wanted to organize a costume party with sketches and everything. After going over the party menu, they left, and we had a reservation for twenty-two people, three nights with a party dinner, brunch, and a sinking feeling in our stomachs of "what have we gotten ourselves into?!"

On December 31st, New Year's Eve, the big day arrived, and twenty-two people trickled in from all corners of the country. That same evening, we all sat at the table in the most bizarre costumes.

The menu was:

- *Salade gésiers* (duck gizzard salad)
- *Poule à l'orange* (chicken marinated in orange juice)
- *Trou Normand* (sorbet with alcohol)
- Cheeses
- *Choux glacés au chocolat*

They had asked us beforehand if they could have onion soup after the party. It was a tradition for them and good for hangovers. "We'll make the onion soup ourselves," they quickly added when they saw our frowning expressions.

Well, folks, after dinner, the roof came off! Everyone performed a little sketch, including us. The music was turned up to ten, and everyone danced on chairs and tables.

## Ça va, ça va



The party roared on until six in the morning. The ready-made onion soup from a packet that they had brought themselves was served, and everyone headed to bed. We then spent until half-past seven in the morning clearing up the worst of the mess and finally fell, completely exhausted, into our bed, only to get up again around ten to prepare for brunch.

When the entire party left two days later, we said, completely knackered but satisfied: "This is the first and also the last time we do anything like this!!" What an experience that was, though one we wouldn't have wanted to miss!

### **The Horsemen**

One day, Jean Pierre, a French acquaintance, came by. He told us that their horse-riding club was soon organizing their annual rider's



## Ça va, ça va

day. They would be taking a long ride in the area. Could we provide a lunch for them? Well, not just a lunch, a four-course meal.

"Uh, well," we said hesitantly, "how many people are we talking about, and when is it?"

"There'll be about twenty, twenty-five people max, we're planning it for mid-March," he said.

"Wow, twenty-five people!" I said, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marjo turning white!

"Uh, well, why not? We can manage that," I said cautiously, looking at Marjo.

"What price can we agree on?" Jean Pierre asked curiously.

I named our standard rate at the time, which was €18.50, all-inclusive.

I could see from his face that this wasn't what he had in mind.

"You know," Jean Pierre said, "it doesn't have to be too fancy. You can even use plastic plates or something. Last year, it only cost us €11 per meal."

"€11?" I thought to myself in a flash. "We'd be making a huge loss!"

"Listen, Jean Pierre, €15 for a four-course meal and no plastic plates! We'll serve everything properly with tableware!"

"Okay," he said. "I'll come by again this week to arrange everything."

## Ça va, ça va

A week later, Jean Pierre was back.

"*Bonjour Kès, Marjo, ça va?*"

"*Oui, ça va, ça va et toi?*"

"*Ça va, ça va.*"

"Listen, Kès, another horse-riding club was so enthusiastic that they're joining us, so there will be a few more people. Is that a problem?"

"Oh?!" I said, with a sinking feeling. "How many will there be then?"

"Around fifty," Jean Pierre said bluntly.

"Fifty??" I cried in a panic. "Where are we going to put them all? They'll never all fit in our barn! We'll have to sit outside and hope the weather is nice! It's only March!"

"Oh, it'll be fine. We're used to a bit of everything."

"And what about your horses? Will there be fifty horses as well?"

"Yes, of course, we'll string some ropes in your woods and tie them to them. We just need to have a couple of large buckets of water, but I'll bring those beforehand."

I looked at Marjo, and she was in a total state. I saw her doing her best to hold back a furious outburst.

Jean Pierre hadn't even left when the bomb exploded!

## Ça va, ça va

"How can I cook for fifty people, you idiot!! Where are we going to put them? How are we going to serve everything?? That's impossible!! And what on earth should I make for fifty people and where are we going to get the tableware from?!"

"Calm down, calm down now. We'll just do our best. I'll ask Peter and Yvonne if they want to help us, and we'll come up with a clever menu. It'll be fine, darling!!"

Peter and Yvonne were happy to help us with serving, and after a while, we had put together a convenient menu that we could easily prepare in large quantities and well in advance:

- A hearty soup
- *Boeuf bourguignon* with rice
- Cheese board, including Roquefort cheese
- Apricot tart with whipped cream
- Coffee or tea

A week beforehand, Jean Pierre came by to bring some water barrels and bales of hay for the horses.

"Oh, by the way..." he said. "A few family members thought it would be nice to join us for lunch. Is that okay?"

"What? But how many more are coming??"

"Uh, sixty-five," he said, without blinking.

## Ça va, ça va

Sixty-five, Marjo thought. What's the difference if we go down with fifty or sixty-five?!

"What time are you arriving?" I asked Jean Pierre.

"Around twelve, and we really have to leave again around two!"



That infamous Sunday in March, thank goodness, the weather was beautiful. The sun was shining, and it was actually pleasant outside. The entire riding team arrived, and some guests came by car. The steaming horses were hosed down with garden hoses and tied up in the woods. Thanks to the help of Peter and Yvonne, we were able to serve everything quickly, and around four o'clock, everyone was still happily enjoying a drink afterwards.

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## Dietary Demands

Over the years, we also became acquainted with the most peculiar eating habits, which became more and more bizarre. Vegetarians, vegans, the strangest allergies, all the way down to "I don't like or don't know that."

For the Dutch, *foie gras* was a no-go, and oysters were often not preferred either. Offal was completely out of the question. We would also often hear:

"I don't like tomatoes, but I like them when they're cooked."

"I'm a vegan, but my husband only eats meat. I hope that's not too difficult for you?"

"I'm a vegan, so no animal products, no eggs, butter, cheese, no fish, so no fish oil either, and I'm allergic to nuts and I don't like peppers!"

What on earth are you supposed to make for these people?

Children were also problematic. If there were no fries at the top of the menu, you were in trouble.

We once had guests for a week, and the husband was a vegetarian. Of course, we couldn't serve all our guests vegetarian food for a whole week, so Marjo twisted herself into knots for days, cooking double to keep the gentleman happy.

At one point, we had steak on the menu. Marjo had cooked a piece of salmon for our vegetarian. When we served it, I heard him say to his table companion:

## Ça va, ça va

"Well... seeing a juicy steak like that, I really feel like having one myself!"

I thought I was going to explode!

We also occasionally had guests with the most wonderful dietary requests.

"My dietitian says I can't have gluten."

"Oh, how annoying, that's a very difficult diet, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a real puzzle!"

"What's the problem?"

"Very bad abdominal cramps. The dietitian told me to try a gluten-free diet for six months."

So Marjo twisted herself into knots to cook gluten-free, which is truly difficult! A few days later, I saw them eating a few croissants at breakfast!

"Hey, you're not forgetting about your diet, are you?!" I said, concerned.

"Well... croissants are part of the holiday experience in France, aren't they?"

Sometimes I would respond a little sarcastically by mentioning that I had once been on a 'pineapple diet' myself and that I had been very pleased with the results.

"A pineapple diet?? What's that then?"

## Ça va, ça va

"You can eat anything you want, except pineapple..." I would answer stoically.

---

### English Eaters

The English were difficult eaters. They always wanted to know exactly what was being served and every single ingredient in detail. If there was any doubt at all, they would rather eat at a restaurant. As if they would know what exactly they were getting there.

At breakfast, I would always ask who was eating with us that evening.

"Oh, lovely, great, yes, please!"

Then later in the day, around five o'clock, "Oh, um, Kees, we're just going to eat in town tonight!" *Grrrrrr!!!* I didn't bother to mention that everything was already prepared.

Or, when I asked again who was eating with us:

"What's on the menu, Kees?"

"Chicken in a spicy sauce with potato rounds and a salad."

"Oh, delicious, wonderful, count us in!"

"Oh, um, Michael?" she would then ask her six-year-old son. "Do you like chicken?"

"No! I don't like it!!" the little boy said resolutely!

## Ça va, ça va

"Oh, um, no Kees, we'll just skip it then!!"

In the beginning, Marjo cooked six times a week. After a few years, we adjusted that to four times a week, then three times a week, and we started going out to eat more often with everyone, which was also greatly appreciated by our guests. I sometimes had a deal with the chef that the two of us would eat for free when we came with a group of ten or more. We were the '*accompagnants*' (chaperones).

I often sent guests to restaurants in the area. That created a lot of goodwill. I preferred to book with François, a very nice guy. His wife, who worked in the kitchen, was, however, a complete horror who absolutely couldn't deal with guests. When I called François, our guests could always get a table.

But sometimes I would get her on the phone:

"*Bonjour Fabienne*," I would say as cheerfully as possible.

"*Oui*, what do you want?" she would ask bluntly in a grumpy voice.

"Can I send four people to you tonight?"

"Oh no, absolutely impossible!! I already have sixteen people, *désolée!*" and *bam*, she'd hang up, no room for discussion.

I would then wait an hour and call again until I got François on the line:

"*Bonjour François*."

"Ah, *bonjour Kès, comment ça va?*"

"Can I send four people to you tonight?"



## Ça va, ça va

"Yes, of course, no problem at all, I'd love to, thank you!"

"There's going to be a row in that kitchen in a minute!" I immediately thought. But when our guests returned, they had had a wonderful evening and a delicious meal.



## The Neighbours

So, we had neighbours. A small, adjacent part of our house was owned by a French-speaking Swiss couple. She was the sister of the previous owner and lived there with her husband and her mum, a lady we called *Mémé*, who was well into her nineties and as deaf as a post.

Naturally, we had already asked if they would be willing to sell.

"No way!" said Jean-Claude determinedly.

"No, no," Marianne confirmed, with her hands on her hips, "we're perfectly happy here."

Jean-Claude and Marianne had taken over the two donkeys, Lisette and Quinou, from her brother. They roamed all over our land. To stop them from wandering off, Jean-Claude had strung up electric fencing everywhere, stretching far into the woods. Our entire property was disfigured by orange and white ribbons. There was also a chicken coop with chickens and geese. The chicken coop was ours, but they were Jean-Claude's pet chickens. We had already decided that the donkeys and the chicken coop would have to go at some point. The neighbours weren't going to be happy about that! The donkeys ate everything but the weeds, and the geese made a monumental racket all day long! Whenever it rained, the donkeys would turn the whole area into one big mud pit, and when anyone arrived, the five geese would kick up a massive fuss.

Lisette the donkey had a particular dislike for Marjo. If Marjo walked in the field, Lisette would come trotting over with her ears laid back, clearly intending to take a good bite out of Marjo's backside.

## Ça va, ça va

"Yes," Marianne confirmed, "the previous owner used to hit Lisette, and since then, she doesn't like women! You'd better take a stick with you; that'll scare her off."

One time, when Marjo was outside again, the two of them were staring at her threateningly. She couldn't go anywhere! She grabbed a twig, waved it at them, and the donkeys slunk away with their ears tucked back.

"This really can't go on!" Marjo said. "I'm scared stiff just walking around on my own land!!"

---

We generally got along with the neighbours, but we intentionally kept the relationship at a low-key level. Marianne, in particular, was very nosy and would often lean out the window to give us and our guests well-intentioned "advice."

One day, I knocked on their door.

"*Bonjour Jean-Claude, ça va?*"

"*Oui, ça va, ça va, et toi?*"

"*Ça va.*"

Finally, I brought up the thorny issue and told them that the donkeys and the chickens and geese really had to go. I explained that we would be starting our season in a few months and that donkeys absolutely couldn't be walking all over the property. Jean-Claude looked very sad but more or less understood our problem. He said he would look for a solution.

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We felt terribly sorry for him. The next day, he came over. He had a solution for the donkeys. They could move to a small pasture further down the road, belonging to an acquaintance of theirs. Only the chickens were still a problem. He asked if he could build a small chicken coop on a secluded patch of our land, bordering the neighbours' property a little further on.



We felt so sorry for him. We looked at each other and just agreed. Of the 14 hectares, we could spare 10 square metres.

The next day, we returned to the Netherlands to sort out some more things. In the Netherlands, we received a registered letter from France, from the neighbours further down the road.

"What on earth is this?!!" we immediately thought.

## Ça va, ça va

They informed us that a chicken coop had been built adjacent to their property, and what's more, it was within the minimum designated boundaries. Moreover, no permit had been granted for the construction of this coop. They were summoning us to immediately stop this development on pain of...

Back in France, we saw that Jean-Claude had hammered together a truly hideous and enormous coop with a corrugated iron roof on a concrete foundation, at least 4 by 8 metres, and had also had a concrete staircase and a 10-metre path poured.

"Well, I'll be damned! What has he built here?!!" we thought as we drove up.

So we knocked on the neighbours' door. This time, we skipped the '*Ça va, ça va*' part.

"Jean-Claude! What on earth have you built? And that concrete staircase!!" I said to him. "Was all that really necessary?!!"

"Yes, I thought I'd just build it so I don't have to walk across your land when I go to the chicken coop."

He had also received the letter of objection from the neighbours.

"Damn, that's annoying. I'll have to find another solution for the chickens after all."

During our introductory meeting with the neighbours further on, where we had already made a bad impression, we told them that we fully understood their objections and that there would be no chickens or geese, but asked if the coop, now that it was built, could remain standing.

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"*Pas de problème*," they said, "that coop doesn't bother us, as long as no chickens or geese go into it. That'll just attract rats, not to mention the filthy smell and the noise." After a couple of coffees, we left "on speaking terms." Jean-Claude ended up turning it into a tool shed. Fortunately, we were rid of the animals, at least in part!

---

A farm down in the valley rented out donkeys. The French have a thing for donkeys; I don't know what it is! Regularly, a group of walkers with donkeys would pass by our house. When they walked past, Marianne would invariably rush outside, of course, just dying for a chat and a little distraction. She would then always tell the walkers the whole story of her own donkeys in great detail. In the meantime, she would hand out a few carrots to the donkeys every time. After a delay of at least half an hour, the walkers could finally continue their journey, relieved. But woe betide if Marianne wasn't home...

One day, another group came by, and the donkeys stopped at Marianne's front door, who just wasn't home at the moment. They wouldn't take another step, no matter what the walkers tried; they just wouldn't budge. Once a donkey decides it's not going anywhere, you're done for, and you couldn't get them to move even with a whip. I came out with a carrot, but unfortunately, it didn't work. They really had to get that carrot from Marianne herself. Everyone pulled on the reins with all their might, but alas, no movement. In desperation, we called the farm down the road.

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"I'm on my way," sighed Catherine. Fifteen minutes later, she led the donkeys away from the "carrot zone," after which everyone could resume their trek.

---

Over time, a sort of love-hate relationship had developed between us and Jean-Claude and Marianne. When we went to the Netherlands, they watched over our belongings, and when they went to Switzerland, we did the same for them. But the meddling and nosiness of Marianne, in particular, became increasingly irritating. On the other hand, they were regularly annoyed by our guests' car traffic. Our driveway ran right past their front door.

"Your guests drive way too fast!!" Marianne would bellow and would sometimes even stand outside furiously with clenched fists, yelling when another Formula 1 driver sped past.

"Besides," she would yell angrily, "they're going to run *Mémé* over any day now!!"

*Mémé* was regularly parked outside in her wheelchair in the sun. Since Jean-Claude and Marianne didn't have a square metre of their own land, she was often posted in the middle of the path with a large sun hat. We regularly asked our guests to please drive slowly. At one point, I even placed two milk cans in the middle of the driveway that people had to slalom around. That gave our neighbours a little more peace.

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## Ça va, ça va

The deed of sale also stated that our neighbours could continue to park their car on our parking lot. After some time, however, a car for Marianne appeared. A little later, a quad bike. At one point, Jean-Claude bought another car, a brand-new Citroën C5, if you please!

"Are you trading one in?" I asked Jean-Claude, curious.

"Uh, no, I'm keeping the old one for here, but when we go to Switzerland, we'll take the C5, of course!" he said with a smile. Our large parking lot was now completely taken over by the neighbours' fleet of cars.

"Hold on, Jean-Claude," I cried, "I won't have any parking space left this way!! This really won't do!!"

He delicately reminded me of the agreement in the deed of sale.

"Yeah, that's fine," I said angrily, "that agreement was for one car, not an entire fleet!"

He shrugged indifferently and said he would park his cars a bit more economically.

---

Marianne was an incorrigible gossip. Once she got hold of you with one of her tentacles, she wouldn't let go and would pour out a huge amount of venom on you. Our guests, especially the French speakers, also had to put up with it now and then. She had less of a hold on the Dutch. I regularly saw them just bluntly walk past to escape her torment. She would often walk after them, still chattering away.



## Ça va, ça va

From time to time, I would walk over to Jean-Claude and tactically encourage him to do something about the situation. He would nod understandingly and joke that he would put his "pitbull" on a tighter leash. Later, when our guests drove too fast again, Jean-Claude would come to me and say that he couldn't control his pitbull anymore!

At one point, we decided to throw a party for our guests and our friends. We had even managed to hire a band, and Marjo was in charge of the snacks. Of course, we had invited the neighbours. However, they let us know that it wasn't a good time.

"Jean-Claude wants to watch football, and Mémé isn't feeling well," Marianne said.

Around eight o'clock, the band started playing. An hour later, Marianne was already outside, screaming, asking if they could turn it down.

I walked over to them.

"Sorry, Marianne, but you'll just have to deal with it. You should have come, for goodness sake! We're having a party just this once; it's not like we do this every week!"

"*Mémé* is going crazy from this," she whined. "She absolutely can't stand this!! She's going to die!!"

Marianne was completely losing it!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that *Mémé* was happily swaying in her wheelchair to the rhythm of the music and having the time of her life. Despite her deafness and thanks to the loud music, she was

## **Ça va, ça va**

finally able to hear recognizable and melodic sounds. She was visibly enjoying herself.

Furious, I walked back to our party and asked the band to turn the volume down a bit.

But you understand that not much came of that, and an hour later, it happened again, and Marianne was once again yelling hysterically, this time with both hands clapped over her ears.

Around midnight, we decided to thank the band, and the party gradually died down.

Jean-Claude and Marianne are still living there, and I believe the relationship with the new owners is better, probably because we already moved the goalposts for them.



## Ça va, ça va

### Ça va, ça va

Life in France is a laugh a minute, mostly because of the cultural clashes between the French and us Dutch. There are some French habits that are tough for us to get used to, and of course, some Dutch quirks that make the French raise an eyebrow.

Take the French greeting ritual, for instance. Say François wants to borrow his neighbour Maurice's hedge trimmer. This is how it goes down:

'Bonjour Maurice, *comment ça va*?'

'Ah, *bonjour* François, *oui ça va*, and you, *ça va*?'

'Oui, oui, *ça va, ça va*.'

Then follows a chat about absolutely nothing, with all the latest village gossip thrown in. A little while later, François casually asks, '*Ah Maurice, puis-j'utiliser votre taille-haie un jour?*' (Ah, Maurice, could I use your hedge trimmer one day?)

'Yes, of course, no problem. I'll come and bring it over sometime this week, okay?'

In the Netherlands, this would have gone like this:

'Hey Jan, can I borrow your hedge trimmer for a bit?'

'Sure, Frans, here you go. Just bring it back tomorrow, eh.'

When a Dutch person approaches their French neighbour like that, it's considered incredibly rude. The Frenchman will never show it, though. The "**ça va, ça va**" **protocol** is essential for them and is a

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standard part of their greeting ritual. There's even a saying: "One says *ça va* to avoid the 'why'."



It's also funny that you have to greet everyone present in a room. Say you're picking up your car from the local mechanic, and there are three other people waiting in the workshop. You have to shake everyone's hand and say "*bonjour*." If you don't, everyone thinks you're a weirdo. They already think that anyway because they can tell from your face you're not French.

I personally find it quite annoying when a shop assistant or waiter speaks to me in English, especially the younger ones. They've already seen from your face that you're not French. In the beginning, I'd just speak English back, but after a few sentences, I'd switch to French because their English was impossible to understand. Now I just stubbornly reply in French.

Saying goodbye also has its own protocol. In the Netherlands, a simple "bye" or "see ya" is enough. Here in France, they take their sweet time. The *bises* (kisses) are part of it, or a firm handshake. Then you say "*au revoir*" and definitely follow it up with a "*bonne journée!*" (Have a good day!)

## Ça va, ça va

It also took me a while to figure out how the French talk about time. If you ask a Frenchman what time he's coming, he'll never, ever give you a time. At most, he'll say something like "*j'arrive fin de l'après midi*" (I'll arrive at the end of the afternoon) or something similar.

For example:

- ***J'arrive le matin*** means sometime in the morning
- ***fin de la matinée*** is sometime between 11 and 12
- ***à midi*** is sometime between 1 and 2
- ***l'après midi*** is around 3 or 4
- ***fin de l'après midi*** is around 6

When they say:

- ***A bientôt*** means see you later (like, in a while)
- ***A tout à l'heure*** means see you soon (like, in a little bit)
- ***A tout de suite*** means I'm coming now (like, immediately)

The Dutch are known for being direct—too direct for the French. We like to make quick, firm appointments and get really mad when they're not kept. The French are much more relaxed about this, always keeping their options open. The term "*demain*" (tomorrow) certainly doesn't always mean tomorrow! That's something we find very hard to get used to. If you make an appointment with a tradesman for a job and he says he'll come tomorrow, it doesn't necessarily mean he'll actually show up. Often, after not hearing anything for a few weeks, you have to call him a few more times to

## Ça va, ça va

ask when he's really coming. He'll give you a thousand excuses and say he has an urgent job, but he'll come tomorrow...

I have to say, here in Lot-et-Garonne, close to the city, it's not so bad, and you can make pretty good appointments in this part of France. But when we lived in the countryside in Aveyron, it was a different story! They would only show up if you threatened to cancel the job, but then they'd work like crazy. However, if he goes home at the end of the day, takes all his tools with him, and then says "*A demain*," you can be pretty sure he won't be there tomorrow, but will be on a more important job somewhere else. You just have to wait and see when he'll come back to finish your job.

Another thing that's tough for the Dutch to get their heads around is kissing during greetings. Men also kiss each other. How many times depends on the region and varies from two to four. Here, they kiss twice. Women kiss each other very quickly. Men stick to a firm handshake for a bit longer. As a rule, men kiss when they're good friends. The only question is, when exactly are you good friends? It's always a tricky moment, wondering when to start kissing. For the number of kisses, check <https://www.combiendebises.com/>



The same goes for using the informal '*tu*' instead of the formal '*vous*'. Always a dilemma. The problem for us Dutch is that as soon as you switch to *tu*, you also have to change the entire grammar.

## Ça va, ça va

You have to conjugate the verbs differently. You had just gotten a decent handle on *vous*, and with *tu*, you have to switch gears and start thinking again.

A while back, I had another one of these classic moments. I was in the supermarket looking everywhere for the eggs. So I stopped a stocker and said, "*Pouvez-vous me dire où je trouve les oeufs, s'il vous plait?*" (Could you tell me where I can find the eggs, please?)

The woman looked at me, annoyed and angry at the same time, and said demonstratively, "BONJOUR MONSIEUR! *Comment puis-je vous aider????!!*" (HELLO SIR! How can I help you???)

In other words: "Wouldn't you like to say good day first, you oaf!"

I immediately said, "Oh, sorry, BONJOUR," and I repeated my question, after which she kindly pointed me in the right direction.

It's also hilarious how all French people, in addition to not being able to pronounce the "H," always, and I mean *always*, put the emphasis on the last syllable of every word. They just can't do it any other way. Even when they speak English, they put the emphasis on the last syllable. This is how you get that typical "allo, allo" accent.





## So, How's your French?

We were around fifty when we emigrated to France in 2004. Luckily, with five years of high school French under our belts, we got a bit further than just "Bonjour" and "deux bières s'il vous plait." Once we settled in France, we found that small talk with the baker or the neighbour went pretty well, but a conversation with an accountant or at the tax office was a different story. We'd always go to those important meetings together, hoping that two mediocre listeners were better than one. Once home, we'd put the puzzle pieces together, thinking we'd understood everything pretty well, which wasn't always the case.

As time went on, it turned out that our old-fashioned, "learn-by-heart" French education came in quite handy. The present tense, the imperfect, and the past tense all unconsciously started bubbling up from the depths of our memory.

When we still lived in the Netherlands, we'd always go camping in France. And foolishly, we'd always play it safe by staying at campsites with Dutch owners.



Once we were living in France for good, we realized that our limited French skills were a barrier to true integration. We could hold a

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decent conversation, but a more in-depth discussion about, say, the political situation in France, European climate goals, or immigration issues was tough. The fact that we'd installed a satellite dish and faithfully watched Dutch channels instead of French ones certainly didn't help either. Yeah, I know... dumb.

We also noticed that French social life mainly revolves around family circles. An evening out with friends for a bite to eat or a beer is much less common here, especially in the countryside, than it is in the Netherlands.

Now, I have an older brother who's married to a French woman and has lived in Paris since he was twenty. Of course, he has a fantastically impressive mastery of the French language. Although, even after almost 20 years in France myself, I can still detect a slight accent in his speech.

He once joked to me, "So, Kees, how long have you two been in France now?"

"20 years," I said.

"Do you ever read a French book or watch French TV?" he asked.

"Uh, no," I answered. "I know what you're thinking—yeah, dumb, dumb, dumb!!"

"So, you guys basically came to France to be on a permanent vacation, is that it?"

"You're absolutely right, Geerd," I said, a bit embarrassed.

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That conversation stuck with me for a while. How and why did things turn out the way they did?

I came to the following conclusions:

The secret to a good command of French is having an extensive vocabulary! If you don't have enough words in your repertoire, any French conversation is doomed to fail after just a few sentences. When you have to search for words for too long, the conversation starts to stutter, and a French person quickly loses interest.

Yes, reading books and watching a lot of French TV helps immensely in building your vocabulary. But to truly expand it, one thing is essential: a good memory! And that, my friends, is where the problem lies!

When you're young, like my brother who moved to France at twenty, you remember everything. You learn a new French word, and you remember it for the rest of your life. We, who didn't move to France until we were fifty, forget a new French word the very next day, no matter how hard we try. It's like trying to learn to ski or skate in your old age. It's never going to happen and will probably end in a few broken bones. At fifty, your memory just isn't what it used to be, and there's nothing you can do about it!

Midas Dekker, a famous Dutch biologist, once said, "The time you need to learn a new language is your age in months." So, if you're 5, you need 5 months to learn a new language. If you're fifty, you need fifty months. We had our age against us!

Looking back, we can confirm that the following things would have helped us master the French language better:

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- Reading French books and magazines.
- Watching French TV with subtitles on.
- Showing interest in French social life.
- Seeking out French contacts.
- Joining a local association.

A good tip for reading, by the way, is to start with books that have been translated into French, from non-French authors. They're easier to get through than books by French authors, which often have some pretty complicated sentence structures.

For instance, a friend of ours subscribed to a French children's newspaper and read comic books. That's an idea, too!

As for French TV, the news and current affairs programs are recommended. The rest are mostly terribly boring game shows.

A much less important aspect of mastering the French language is pronunciation. Of course, it helps if you speak French fluently with the right accent. But no matter how hard you try or how long you've been in France, a French person will always know you're not French. Your Germanic appearance won't help either. So it's better to speak with "broken, peasant French" than to avoid a conversation altogether.

Translating bits of text was also something else. When I wanted to update our French website, this was my procedure: I'd write the text in Dutch and then run it through Google Translate. I have to say, that app is getting smarter and now delivers pretty decent and

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well-flowing sentences. Then I'd correct the sentence structure and a few words here and there to make it a good, coherent story. Then I'd send the translated text to a good French friend, a true language artist. He'd usually respond, "Well, Kees, I understand what you mean, but it's all wrong! I'll make it nice for you." A few days later, he'd always send me back a fantastic piece of prose.

I can give one piece of advice: follow this procedure and always have your texts corrected by a **native Frenchman**, never by a Dutch (or English) person who has a good command of the French language—or thinks they do—even if they've lived in France for years. You'll most likely get back a piece of text that's been translated word for word from Dutch to French. Don't do it! A Frenchman will take the essence of your story, put it into the French spirit, and translate it in his own words.

Despite all this, we're having an amazing time here with our nice French neighbours, and "*on se débrouille plutôt bien!*" (we manage pretty well!).

So, how are your French skills? Here's a little test: The French word for a hubcap is "*un enjoliveur*." If you remember what a hubcap is in French tomorrow, you'll be just fine...

## Angel, the Sheep Farmer

Angel is our neighbour, a sheep farmer who lives a little further down the road. He has 200 *brebis* (ewes) for milk production, which is used for the famous Roquefort cheese. Angel is big and incredibly strong. With his torso, he exudes authority. His arms look like bundles of steel cable, while his chest seems to be cast from solid concrete. When Angel puts up a fence, he can easily swing a 40 kg sledgehammer over his head and, with three well-aimed blows, drive a fence post a metre deep into the ground. Angel is a bachelor and lives at La Martinié, an old farmhouse surrounded by 68 hectares of forest and pasture. The farm is perched on top of a hill, offering a spectacular view. From his vantage point, Angel can see and, more importantly, hear exactly what's happening in the surrounding area. Despite not often leaving his eyrie, he knows exactly what's going on around him. Angel doesn't have a driver's license, so his range is limited to his moped's five-litre fuel tank. Yet, he hears and sees everything. The postman, of course, keeps him informed, and during hunting season, when his farm is used as a base, the hunters update him. Angel doesn't hunt himself; he facilitates. The farm is also frequently visited by family and fellow farmers who come to exchange the latest gossip.

Marjo and I, along with our dachshund Pico, would often walk through the forest towards his place. It was a beautiful half-hour walk. Angel would usually be waiting for us outside. He had already heard us coming, as sound travels far in the hills. We would always have a cup of coffee with him in his kitchen.

When Angel was 14, his father committed suicide. As a young boy, he had to take over his father's farm. His brothers and sisters

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weren't interested. He left school and became a farmer. Angel now lives on the farm with his brother Joël and his wife Brigitte. At 54, Angel was already able to retire. After all, he had forty years of service under his belt.

When we drank coffee with him, a cup of water with coffee extract would always go into the microwave, and a tin of biscuits would appear on the table. Brigitte would stay in the kitchen, always busy preparing lunch; in the afternoons, she would tend to the sheep. Her husband Joël worked at the garage in the nearby village.

We always reminisced with Angel about the time we first started here, when our French was still shaky.

When we were unloading the moving truck, we were lucky to have his help. I remember well that three of us were wrestling with a huge refrigerator. The thing was heavy as lead because we had crammed it full of stuff. Angel stepped into the moving truck, pushed us aside, wrapped his arms around the fridge, and single-handedly lifted the monster out of the truck with one mighty swing. We couldn't believe our eyes! Pure primal strength!

Another time, I was driving my 4x4 Mitsubishi pickup (a long-cherished boyhood dream they call a '*kat katre*' here, which I'll spell out phonetically). After all the rain, it was really too wet in the woods, but come on, guys, I had just put on some big, chunky mud tires. When I swerved to avoid a puddle, my truck slid toward a ravine. Oops, quick, reverse! Get away from the danger! But the pickup slid even further down and started to tilt at a dangerous angle. The spirit level on the dashboard was already in the red danger zone! I turned the wheel and went forward, but it just slid further toward the abyss. I thought, "Stop now, this isn't going



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well," and I scrambled out of the passenger side. I walked back home, defeated, and called Angel.

*"Bonjour Angel, ça va?"*

*"Oui, ça va, ça va et toi?"*

I asked if he could help me with my '*kat katre*,' "it's halfway down the slope!" I told him.

"Ah, you must be in your woods by the stream. You shouldn't go there now with all this rain, it's way too wet!!" he said in a scolding tone. Despite living 2 km away, he already knew what had happened!



I hadn't even hung up yet when I heard him arriving on one of his tractors!

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"*Oh la la, putain!*" (Oh my god, damn it!) was one of his favourite expressions. "*C'est pas mal, ça hè!*" he said, looking at the mess.

He hooked a steel cable to my truck and tried to pull it out. Because he couldn't get his huge tractor into the right position on the narrow path, the 4x4 slid even further down.

"I'm going to get the tractor with the winch," Angel said. "This isn't working." A moment later, he returned with Joël, and with two tractors, my boyhood dream was rescued from the muck.

I'll also never forget the time I was going to cut down my first tree. I enthusiastically and determinedly went into the woods with my new chainsaw, looking for my first victim. I found a tree that had already fallen halfway and was hanging at a 45-degree angle in the fork of a tree next to it. This seemed perfect. The tree couldn't fall the wrong way, at least. When I had practically sawed through it, and I jumped back at the first crack, I was astonished to see the tree fly up into the air like a seesaw, balancing high in the fork of the other tree!

At that moment, Angel drove by on his tractor. He looked up and said with a laugh, "That wood will dry just fine like that!!" and drove off chuckling.

Another time, a lightning bolt split an enormous pine tree right behind our house in two with a deafening bang. The tree was hanging precariously between the other pine trees!

I called Angel and asked if he could help me safely get the pine tree down when he had some time (considering my track record). Five

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minutes later, he arrived on his moped, his chainsaw in hand. Together, we stood looking at the mess.

"*Putain!*" Angel said.

"Ah yes, *putain!*" I replied.

I walked to the workshop to get my chainsaw too. On the way, I heard him start his. When I had my chainsaw ready to go in the workshop, I heard a big crash. Back at the tree, Angel had already cut it down and was busy sawing it into bite-sized pieces. An hour later, everything was cleared away, and we were back to drinking coffee.



## From Here to there

Once we were a bit settled, had our affairs in order, and had welcomed a few guests, we started looking around to see what was happening in our neck of the woods. You can't help but notice what other Dutch expats have set up shop nearby.

Right next door, for instance, was a farm campsite. The incredibly warm Dutch owners had been there for 30 years and, with absolutely nothing, had transformed a collection of ruins into a magnificent farmhouse with about five buildings on some 18 hectares of land.

It turned out there were several other Dutch folks in the area. One of them, for example, gave tango workshops in the high season and had built a bunch of chalets in a beautiful valley. They, too, had been there for over 30 years and had also built their little paradise from and with nothing. We eventually got to know about half a dozen Dutch pioneers with roots, or so it seemed, in the hippie era, who had all been there for decades and had transformed hopeless heaps of rubble into fairytale-like settlements.

At one point, one of them mentioned that years ago, they had set up a walking tour. Hikers would walk from one house to the next. The walkers brought their own bedding and were offered a place to sleep and a meal at each house. All of this was, as we understood it, quite "basic."

They asked if we were interested in stepping in as a reserve house in case one of the other houses couldn't. This request surprised us a bit.

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"Yeah, it wouldn't happen too often. We have about 10 couples of hikers per season. To be honest, the initiative has kind of fizzled out and could use a boost," they added.

We were a bit conflicted about it; a reserve address? Well, you're the fifth wheel, you don't really belong. There was a website of sorts, and walking maps were available. Ultimately, we said we'd be happy to participate, even eager to, but only as a full member, not as a reserve address.

Oops! This announcement threw them into a tizzy!

"Okay," they said, "we'll really have to have a meeting about this! All members have to agree, of course. We'll get back to you after the next hiking committee meeting."

Weeks later, we heard they had agreed to our proposal. We could join as full members. We later heard that some pretty heated words had been exchanged at that particular meeting.

"Well, now what? They're already making demands!"

"They're walking into a made bed, that's not right! We have to share the profits right away!"

"Well," another one had said, "that 'made bed' doesn't amount to much, we barely have any hikers!"

"A little new blood in the club wouldn't be a bad thing," another one suggested.

But we were allowed to join, by a narrow majority!

## The First Wave of Walkers



One day, the time had come. We welcomed our first hikers. After greeting them, we asked what they wanted to drink.

"Would you like a soda, a beer, or a glass of wine? Just say the word."

"Ohhh! We can get a beer here?!" the hikers asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course!" we said, surprised.

"At the other places, we only got herbal tea or apple juice."

"Okay, well, we'll pour you a nice beer here, no problem."

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After dinner, we poured a digestif in the form of a whiskey or a cognac. This, however, was paid for separately.

When the hikers went to bed, they said, astonished, "Oh, look! The bed is already made up!"

"Yes, of course," we said, again surprised. "That's standard, isn't it?"

"Not at the other places. We have to make our own beds and crawl into a sleeping bag liner."

"Clearly, a few things need to be better coordinated here!" we thought to ourselves immediately.

The maps the hikers had were, to put it mildly, pathetic. A copy of a copy, black and white, thumb-worn, barely legible, and already soaked through from a rain shower.

The next day, we got a phone call from one of the other houses:

"Do I understand correctly that you're serving alcohol and even selling it separately?! I just heard that from one of the hikers!"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Is that not allowed?"

"And they have to pay for it separately?"

"Yes! What did you think? Except for the welcome drink, of course."

"Well, I think that's incredibly commercial!"

"Excuse me? We have to earn a living, don't we?" I said with rising astonishment. "The sun doesn't shine for free!"

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"One of the hikers here said to me, 'Two whiskeys, please!' I felt like a damn waiter!"

"Gee, well, sorry, but we're really not going to change that here! I can't offer our own guests a nice digestif and tell the hikers, 'No, sorry guys, not for you!' can I?"

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### The Great Bed-Making & Booze Debate

At the next hiking committee meeting, which we were now allowed to attend, a few things were thoroughly aired out.

"So you make the beds?!"

"Yes, of course! What did you think? We are a **Chambre d'Hôtes!** That's what guests expect!"

"And then you wash all the bedding afterward?"

"Of course, that's part of it," I said, again with rising disbelief.

"Do you have any idea how much that pollutes the environment?!" a few of them reacted. "All those phosphates!"

"Yes, that's true," I said, thinking my own thoughts, "but you can do what you want. We offer made beds, no discussion about it!"

"And then there's the alcohol. How does that work with you?"

"Well, if guests want a beer or a glass of wine, I give it to them," I said.



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"And they have to pay for that separately?"

"Yes, except for the wine at the table and the welcome drink, which is included in the package."

"And what do you charge for it?"

"A euro fifty for a beer or wine and three-fifty for a liquor."

"But that's so commercial?!"

"Hello," I said getting more and more frustrated, "we have to earn our bread, don't we?!!"

"Well, to be honest..." another one said hesitantly, "my guests also pay for extra drinks."

"What???!!!" and all eyes turned to him, looking at him with indignation. "You too?? I don't believe it!" they all shouted. They had a dissident in their midst! I saw him fall from his pedestal on the spot!

"And do you also serve alcohol??"

"Yeah, if they want it. It should be allowed, an extra glass of wine by the fireplace?"

It became increasingly clear to me that there was a generation gap between us, despite the fact that we were the same age.

We were, in their eyes, apparently the "second wave" who had moved to France with "a lot of money," bought a "ready-made" place, and were now just continuing their vacation there.

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They were clearly the ones who had turned their backs on the bourgeoisie and had left for France with more philosophical and idealistic ideas, to create their own world with their bare hands, without their own resources, and with the environment and nature held in high regard, staying far away from what they had left behind in the Netherlands.

And yes, they also had to earn some money to pay social security. Selling their own organic products at the market, doing some odd jobs here and there. It quickly became clear that this wasn't enough, so most of them had just started a mini-campsite or guest rooms with workshops.

Anyway, over time, all the wrinkles were ironed out, fortunately. More understanding for each other and each other's life philosophies grew, which formed the basis for a good friendship and



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a fruitful collaboration from which a very successful and commercially sound hiking initiative has emerged, where guests at all the houses can expect a wonderful, made-up bed and can order a delicious beer or a glass of wine.

## The "GSM Bench"

Back when I was "making a career" in the Netherlands and had climbed the ladder from computer engineer to head of technical services, I was one of the first people at my company to get a mobile phone! Well, "mobile" is a bit of a stretch. It was a clunky handset connected by a coiled cord to a heavy battery pack with a massive antenna! The whole neighborhood came out to witness this marvel of technology. Much later, these were replaced by more manageable handsets with a pull-out antenna, then the much handier Nokias, and later still, the pinnacle of technology: the Blackberry with a full QWERTY keyboard!

When we emigrated to France in 2003, I had to hand in all these gadgets, like my company Audi, company laptop, Blackberry, and Palm III notepad. Once in France, it felt like we'd taken a few steps back in time! We had no reception there, and we had to make do with a landline with a coiled cord. How were we going to sell this to our future guests? No reception, no Wi-Fi, nothing at all! We decided to tackle it commercially and put all sorts of fancy slogans on our website.

"Here you will find absolute peace and can de-stress!!"

"Wonderful! No Wi-Fi, no internet, no reception—escape the performance-driven society and hectic lifestyle!!"

"Your boss can't reach you here. How cool is that!!"

And it worked! It flipped a switch for some people, and they more easily accepted the inconvenience.

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But when guests arrived and checked their phones as they got out of the car, I would sometimes see them turn pale and panic, exclaiming, "NO RECEPTION??!!! Oh my god, what now!! You must have Wi-Fi, I hope?!"

I would just shake my head pitifully.

"Unfortunately, the only thing we have here is a pathetic 64 Kb modem line. Yeah, you're in France now, you know!"

We sometimes had to go to great lengths to calm down our new guests.

"Hey, it's vacation! Isn't this great?! Enjoy it, a break from everything!!"

"Yeah, but my boss needs me to be reachable, this isn't possible!" to which his girlfriend would say:

"And my mother is ill, she needs to be able to call me!!"

"Just give your boss and family our phone number and email address. No problem, right? Come on, have a seat and I'll pour you something nice."

After a glass of wine, you could see the stress melt away, and the next day they'd say, "You're right, Kees. We're on vacation. Let them stew in their own juices back in the Netherlands!!"

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## **The Arrival of a GSM Signal (and the End of Peace)**

## Ça va, ça va

A few years later, a cell tower appeared far across the hill. We were going to get 3G. This gave us a mixed feeling. We had gotten used to our communication-free existence and were fine with it. On the other hand, we could offer our guests a little more comfort. So we bought a mobile phone right away, one of those flip-open Nokias—small and handy. After turning it on, I looked at the screen with great anticipation. No reception!!! What gives??!! I walked outside. No reception, not even when I held it high in the air. Well, damn it, what is this? I walked around the house and to my great disappointment, I had no reception anywhere. To my surprise, the thing suddenly beeped when I was a bit further into the woods. I looked at the screen and saw one bar and the message: "Bienvenue chez ORANGE, s.v.p. activer votre abonnement."

"Hooray!" I yelled, walking back to the house. I logged into my "espace client" on the Orange website to activate my new toy.

"We have sent you an activation code via SMS, please enter the code here."

"Ah, an SMS." I looked at my phone but saw nothing, no reception. Oh, right, back to the woods. My phone beeped there. Great, an SMS with a code! Wow, it works! I ran back to the house, upstairs to my computer, and excitedly entered the code:

"Time expired, click here to try again!"

"Well, damn," I yelled, disappointed. Back to the woods, phone up, wait. Ah, SMS with a new code. I sprinted back to the house like a madman, almost broke my neck on the stairs, and entered the new code.

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"Time expired, click here to try again!"

Steam was now coming out of my ears. I put myself in the starting blocks, pressed ENTER, flew down the stairs, ran into the woods, holding my phone high, waited for it to connect, and as soon as it beeped, I sprinted back again, reading the code along the way, back to the house, upstairs, and breathlessly typed the code in:

"Votre ligne est activée!!" I read with a shout of joy and collapsed exhausted in my chair.

After this memorable act, we made our comeback into the wireless age in France. But as you can imagine, I soon saw our guests, irritated, walking around our house with their arms raised like hungry wolves looking for a glimmer of a signal.

"Do you want to make a call?" I would ask.

"Yes, that's right. I thought you had reception here?"

"If you walk down that path into the woods, you'll get reception," I would say.

After about five minutes, they would often come back.

"Unfortunately, Kees, nothing at all!"

"Did you walk far enough? Past that tree there."

"Oh no, I didn't go that far." And he would turn around again, back into the woods.

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"You know what," I thought, "I'll just hammer a post with a sign into the ground and put a bench next to it. People can make calls at their leisure."



No sooner said than done. The next day, a bench stood in the woods with a sign next to it that said "GSM BENCH." So whenever I saw someone walking around with their phone again, I'd say:

"If you want to make a call, you have to go into the woods over there. You'll get reception at the GSM Bench!"

"GSM Bench??" They would look at me in disbelief, shrug, and walk into the woods. The big advantage was that people on the phone didn't bother the other guests with their chatter, and they had complete privacy in the back of the woods.

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## The Wi-Fi Woes & The Webcam Prank



## Ça va, ça va

A little over a year later, we suddenly had reception everywhere. Apparently, a new tower had been installed somewhere. From that moment on, the peace on our property was over, and a lively conversation was regularly interrupted by an incoming phone call from one of the guests who, in a loud voice, made further conversation impossible. It was especially annoying at the dinner table when a phone would ring, someone would get up and stand a few feet away, talking loudly for half an hour and letting their food get cold! The conversation was usually about absolutely nothing. You have to wonder why people can't just say, "Hey, I'll call you back later, I'm at the dinner table now. Bye!!"

Some time later, there were rumors that we would get ADSL! Our internet speed would skyrocket from 64 Kb to 4 Mb!!! Wow, four million bits per second!! Unbelievable, dizzying!! Could we finally watch a YouTube video? We might even be able to install Wi-Fi for the guests.

And sure enough, at one point we got a message from Orange that we could order a new modem with Wi-Fi! After I had installed everything and got it working, I curiously started a SPEEDTEST. 1 Mbit, hmm, not the promised 4 Mbit, but oh well, better than nothing, and we have Wi-Fi! You could actually play a YouTube video, albeit with hiccups.

Soon we also experienced the downsides of our Wi-Fi system. During our usually lively happy hour, all the guests on our terrace were staring at their laptops or phones, and no one said a peep! I only thought "bah!" This wasn't fun, and it started to annoy me more and more. Sometimes I would quietly sneak inside and turn off the Wi-Fi box.

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"Hey, what's going on?! No internet!! How can that be?"

"Yeah, that's France for you! It goes out regularly here! It usually comes back in a day or so!" I would say with a bit of malicious glee.

An hour later, when we were preparing dinner, I would turn it back on.

We also had a smoke detector on the ceiling of every room. One of those that flashes a little red LED every five minutes.

With all the guests at the table, someone asked me:

"What's that box on the ceiling, Kees? Is that the Wi-Fi router?"

"No," I said, and decided to play a big prank on everyone.

"I don't really dare to say... it's a bit embarrassing... it's actually a webcam..." I said hesitantly.

"A webcam?? What are you talking about?"

"Yes, uh... we have a webcam installed in every room. Look, a bed and breakfast is a fun business, but you understand, it's nowhere near enough to make ends meet. So we've developed a side hustle. A webcam site!!"

"A webcam site?? You'll have to explain that to us!"

"Well, you see, [www.libaudie.com](http://www.libaudie.com) is our bed and breakfast website. In addition, we also have [www.libido.com](http://www.libido.com), and that's our webcam site. Customers log in, can choose a room, and for €2.50 a minute, they can watch what's happening in that room. When the camera's LED is flashing, someone is logged in!"

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Of course, everyone got it immediately and burst out laughing!!

"And Jan, I just looked at the stats. Your room scored exceptionally well last night!!"

## The septic tank

We didn't even know where our septic tank was. It's a bit odd that we never wondered where the... *stuff* went after we flushed the toilet. The previous owner had guaranteed us that everything was in perfect order! One day, we received a letter from the municipality saying our septic tank was due for an inspection.

"Well, here we go," we thought. "We're in trouble now! There's no way it's up to code!" We started searching through all the old papers the previous owner had left behind. We remembered a little sketch. And sure enough, after a long search, we found a hand-drawn diagram on a scrap of paper. It showed a grease trap for the kitchen water, two large tanks, and a settling system. We went looking for it but, for the life of us, couldn't find anything! Finally, after chopping through a massive amount of brambles and nettles, we found two lids at the lowest point of the property. Curious, we removed one of the lids. Underneath was an enormous thick, brown, bubbling sludge, consisting mainly of pink toilet paper.

A few weeks later, a woman showed up at our door. She was there to inspect the septic tank. We offered her a very friendly cup of coffee first and eventually, in a panic, showed her our little diagram. She studied it with many approving nods and finally said it was "tout comme il faut" (all as it should be). She would write a report, and everything would be fine. Then she left. We were, of course, completely dumbfounded that she hadn't wanted to see the septic tank in person. No inspection, no hassle, everything was okay! We had gotten off lightly. Sometime later, we decided to call a cleaning company anyway to have the tanks emptied. It seemed like a good idea. The company said they would send one of their guys.

### **The Neighbor, the Tractor, and the... "Fertilizer"**

A week later, our neighbor, Angel, suddenly showed up with one of his gigantic tractors with a slurry tanker.

"Bonjour," he said. "I've come to empty the septic tank." We looked at him, confused.

"Yes," Angel said, "I'm contracted by the cleaning company, and I've come to empty your septic tank."

Okay, whatever, I thought. Angel drove his tractor right through the brambles to the lid, put a thick hose into the tank, and started busily sucking up the bubbling mass. A little while later, his slurry tanker was full, and our tank was only half empty.

"I'm going to dump this, and then I'll come back for the rest," was the message.

I thought, "Well, we won't be seeing him again for a while. God knows where he has to go to dispose of that stuff properly."

But to our amazement... he was back in half an hour! Surprised, I asked, "But Angel, where did you take all that stuff? You're back so fast!"

"Allez!" he said. "I sprayed it on my fields, of course! What did you think? It's good fertilizer!!"

I was completely dumbfounded. You're forced by the government to invest a lot of money to keep all the mess out of the

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environment, and our neighbor just gratefully sprays the whole lot on his fields!

At one point, when he had started slurping up the second half, I said to him, "But Angel, do you realize you've now sprayed pure Dutch crap on your field?"

He looked at me, puzzled. "Oui," he said. "So?"

"Well," I told him, "do you realize that this coming spring, all your fields will be full of tulips!" He looked at me, not understanding, and imperturbably continued with his work. This kind of humor is lost on the French...!



Later, he told me that the tanks were now empty and needed to be filled with water as soon as possible, otherwise they might implode. A quick calculation told me that would cost at least €100 in tap water. I asked him if it was an idea to use his slurry tanker to pump water from the river?

"Yes, good idea, that works," he said, so he went to get water from the Tarn, and in no time, the tanks were filled again.

## **The French Way**

Later, over coffee, I asked him if they had come to inspect his place.

"Yes," Angel said, "but I don't have a septic tank."

"You don't have a septic tank??" I asked, surprised. "How is that possible? Where does your muck go?"

"Well, I have 68 hectares of land, so it finds its way."

"But you'll get a fine for that, won't you?"

"Yes, that's right. And I just pay it. No problem!"

"How much is the fine?" I asked, curious.

"50 euros," Angel said.

I was beginning to understand how you handle these kinds of things in France!

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### Le gendarmerie

One day, a police van suddenly pulled up. About four heavily armed officers jumped out. Our hearts stopped! We thought, "What's going on now?" One of the officers rang the doorbell and began the standard French greeting ritual:

"Bonjour Monsieur, Madame ça va?"

"Ah oui, ça va, ça va, et vous, ça va?"

"Oui, ça va."

This is one of the things we quickly learned in France. You never get straight to the point in a conversation. First, you have to exchange a series of "ça va, ça va's," and it's absolutely not the intention for you to elaborate on how you're really doing. Then, there's some aimless chit-chat, mainly about the weather and other matters that are completely irrelevant. Only after that can you begin to broach the topic you came for.

So I asked if something was wrong...

"Uh, no, no, nothing's wrong." He didn't say why they had come. Strange!

I asked, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Ahh, comme vous voulez, pourquoi pas," they said, looking at each other.

So four heavily armed gendarmes, neatly in uniform, complete with starched light-blue shirts, highly polished black combat boots, dark blue trousers with a sharp crease, a leather belt with all sorts of



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gadgets, and with crew cuts, stepped inside. A different sight from the average Dutch police officer. After a half-hour of aimless chatter, it still wasn't clear to us what they were actually doing.

I finally asked, when the conversation stalled a bit, "Would you like to see everything?"

"Ah, uh, pourquoi pas; ça vous gêne pas?" We gave them the full tour, after which they apparently felt reassured and left.

They came back about every two months, and the whole ritual repeated itself, but without the tour. At one point, they stopped coming. The officer who led the group had been transferred to La Réunion, one of France's overseas territories. A promotion, then. We never did figure out what they were actually doing... From our neighbors, we understood that they just came to check if we weren't involved in illegal activities and, most importantly, weren't housing any illegal immigrants.

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## **The Roof Tile Fiasco**

Meanwhile, we got to know Erik and Katrien, a Belgian couple who had bought a hostellerie in the village. A contractor had renovated the entire roof of the living quarters. All the old tiles off, new ones on. At one point, I asked Erik what he had done with the old tiles.

"Well," Erik said, "they're stored somewhere along the side of the road."

I immediately thought of one of our own outbuildings whose roof wasn't in great shape anymore.

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"Wow," I said, "wouldn't you want to sell them? I'd be interested."

Eventually, after I had looked at the tiles on the spot, we agreed on a price, and a little later, I started loading the roof tiles onto my trailer. "That'll be about twenty trips," I estimated. I was halfway through when a van suddenly screeched to a halt, and a man jumped out. The man, white with rage, immediately started yelling at me about what I was doing there!

"This is private property, and what are you doing with my tiles?" he ranted.

I explained to him, completely bewildered, that I had bought these tiles from Erik.

"Eric, le Belge? Ah mais non, hé! Les lauzes (French tiles) sont à moi!"

The man completely lost his mind.

"This is theft! I'm going to the gendarmerie immediately to file a report!"

Phew, I went completely pale. I'd been in France for barely a minute and was already in trouble with the police. Arrests, interrogations, a lawsuit, lawyers, fines, deportation. Those were just a few of the nightmarish images that flashed through my mind at that moment! I tried to soothe him by explaining that I was truly acting in good faith and suggested we go talk to Erik together.

We drove back to the village and knocked on Erik's door. Erik also went pale when he saw who I was standing with on his doorstep. A good old shouting match ensued right there, for the whole village to

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enjoy. "Putain, merde, t'es con, voleur," were some of the choice words that flew around. Erik explained to me that it was all a misunderstanding and told me the real story. He had sold half of the tiles to this furious man, who was the contractor who had renovated his roof. Or at least, that's what Erik thought they had agreed on. The other half was definitely his, so I could have those.

"Okay," I said, "but then you have to give me back half of the agreed-upon amount."

"Yes, of course, no problem."

I was quite relieved because after days of lugging them, half of the tiles were already at our place. Then, the contractor, with a red face, started blowing up again, saying he was still going to file a report with the gendarmerie. "And besides," he said, "my part of the tiles has been taken away, and I demand that everything is brought back, and then we'll see who gets which half!" Once home, the whole thing bothered me immensely. I thought:

"He's still going to the police! What now?"

"You know what?... I'll beat him to it! I'll call them myself!"

I called the gendarmerie and told them I had a "petit souci" with a hot-headed person from the village. There was no hurry, but if they were ever in the neighbourhood, would they mind stopping by.

Well... they were at our doorstep within ten minutes!

"Yes, we were called and were in the neighbourhood anyway. What's going on?"

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I explained the situation as best I could; it was all a misunderstanding.

"Yes, but who was the person in question?"

I told them who it was, and I saw on their faces that a lot became clear.

"Yes, we have to deal with him more often! He's not unknown to us! Don't worry; we'll keep you informed. It's very good that you told us!"

Fortunately, we never heard anything more about the whole affair.

## Le Propriété

To make it easier for our hikers, we marked a trail in the forest with yellow paint dots on the trees. The route was mostly on our property but also went through a part of our neighbour's. So I asked Angel, the neighbour who lives two kilometers away, if he had any objections.

"Of course not," he said. "It's a way for me to see someone now and then."

And so it was done. We created a beautiful trail that our guests used for years. Until one day, some hikers came back:

"Sorry, Kees, we couldn't get through. Right after the stream, there were a lot of trees across the path."

"Oh?" I asked. "Did a tree fall over?"

"Well, we don't think so. There were about four of them, and they were definitely sawed down!"

Angel must be sawing wood for his winter supply, I thought. Everything will probably be cleaned up in a few days.

Well, it wasn't. A few weeks later, more hikers:

"Hey Kees, we couldn't get through!"

I decided to go see for myself what was going on. And indeed, past the stream on Angel's property, I found an enormous mess of sawed-down trees and no other activity that suggested they were cutting firewood. So I decided to go ask Angel.

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"Bonjour Angel, ça va?" "Ah oui, ça va, ça va, et vous, ça va?" "Oui, ça va."

After the usual small talk, I finally asked how the woodcutting was going.

"Woodcutting? What do you mean, woodcutting?"

"Well, you're cutting wood by the stream, aren't you?"

"By the stream? No way, that's not even my property!"

"Not your property? Whose is it then?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"It's my neighbour's."

"Your neighbour? You have a neighbour? Who is that?"

"That's Monsieur Vabre. He lives there alone."

"Well, I never knew that! Where exactly does he live?"

"In that little house next to my house, down there."

Angel pointed to the left. I started to get a bad feeling. We had marked a trail across Monsieur Vabre's property, and I had never asked for his permission! For three years, he had apparently silently accepted it, but now he decided the time had come to block the path! That would be a real pain. We would have to reroute the path significantly. Of course, I could go to Monsieur Vabre and ask for his permission now. I decided to go with this option. I thought, if I put on my best humble face and offer a thousand apologies, maybe he'll still give his permission.

## The Negotiation

So I went to Monsieur Vabre's house. It was indeed a tiny house with rotted windows, shutters barely hanging on their hinges, and not a lick of paint. The roof was half-collapsed. I knocked on the door, as



there was no bell, of course. I got no response. I knocked again, a bit louder this time, no response. I peered through the window, past the cobwebs, and knocked on the glass. Finally, I heard some shuffling. With a lot of creaking, the front door opened, and an old, bent-over man in his late seventies appeared, wearing a beret, a ten-day stubble, and a chewed-up cigar butt between the two black teeth he had left.

I said, "Bonjour Monsieur Vabre, je suis le voisin qui habite à La Libaudié, comment allez-vous?"

"Ah oui, ça va, ça va, et vous, ça va?" "Oui, ça va."

After the usual intro that went nowhere, I started to explain that I had marked a trail, had assumed the property belonged to Angel, and had now discovered that this was not the case at all. How could I have been so stupid!

"Ah, oui," he said indignantly. "It's mine, eh? Je suis le propriétaire!"

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I then offered a thousand apologies and told him that I found this to be a particularly unpleasant misunderstanding and that I had undoubtedly violated his privacy. Monsieur Vabre confirmed, in a barely intelligible mixture of half-French and half-Occitan, my grave violations of his property lines and immediately began to elaborate on what the consequences could have been. It was, after all, his property—3.5 hectares, no less—and he was liable. Just imagine if a tree fell on a passerby's head. Well, then all hell would break loose, and he'd be liable! I immediately confirmed his concerns and, with deep bows, served up the next dose of apologies. To my relief, he asked me to come inside, as it was easier to talk. This was going well.

I then stepped through the kitchen into his living room, which had not seen a cleaning rag or a vacuum cleaner since Napoleon. The nicotine dripped from the walls, and you could cut the rancid, sour air with a knife. A musty carpet was full of stains and holes, and there was an truly indescribable mess! As I passed, I glanced into the bedroom, whose cracked door was barely hanging on its hinges. In the middle was a large bed, with the blankets on the floor and an old, worn-out, saggy kapok mattress with an enormous dark-brown stain in the middle. Dirty clothes were strewn everywhere. In the living room, there was only a table with two wooden benches, and a large, blackened fireplace adorned the wall. On the walls hung yellowed reproductions of religious images, and a large statue of the Virgin Mary stood on the chest of drawers, flanked by two half-melted candles that had warped from the summer heat. The dilapidated kitchen was still in its original state from 1840, with a rickety stove with a gas bottle and a geyser. In the corner, the dishes from a few weeks were piled up.



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Monsieur Vabre began to elaborate again on all the risks and liability. How do I get past this? I thought desperately. He was already so difficult to understand. At one point, I said to him, "Alors, Monsieur Vabre, I would like to officially ask you for a 'droit de passage,' a right of way, only for our guests, over your property." I immediately added that at most, one or two hikers a week would pass through, and only during the season. After a long silence, I finally saw him brighten up, and suddenly he said, "d'Accord!" Of course, I was completely surprised and relieved by this sudden turn. I finally understood that his sore point was more about the fact that some rogue had been dabbing yellow paint on his trees and that, after three years, he had suddenly decided that enough was enough. He had then blocked the path by sawing down a couple of big trees.

But hey, we could go through again, so I offered to help him clear the trees. No, that was absolutely not necessary. He would do it himself later that week. I thanked him profusely and returned the next day with a bottle of Pastis, which he gratefully accepted. The cleanup of the mess took another two months to happen.

Monsieur Vabre has since passed away.

## Le Chemin rural

The **chemin rural** (rural path) is another one of those typical French things—a country lane traditionally used by farmers and villagers. They originally ran from one farm to another and were mainly used to provide access to various agricultural plots. These lanes are owned by the municipality and therefore cannot be sold, closed off, or plowed over. Sometimes, such a chemin rural can cause quite a few problems. A path that is sometimes no longer recognizable as a path can run over your property without you realizing it. It could also happen that your own driveway, which gives access to your sanctuary, turns out to be a chemin rural accessible to everyone! Suppose you want to build a barn or something one day and you apply for a permit, your plans might be rejected because a chemin rural runs there. For example, the banks of a stream are usually owned by the municipality.

How do you know if a chemin rural runs across your property? You can easily see it on the cadastral maps. All plots with a number have an owner. All areas without a number are chemins ruraux and are the property of the municipality. Everyone, therefore, has the right to walk here.

At the time, my Dutch neighbour, who lived a few kilometers away, had a hobby of finding all these paths that had long since grown over and disappeared and making them passable again so that everyone could hike there again. He had informed the mayor of his project, and the mayor had no choice but to support it. Of course, he already knew this would cause trouble.

And indeed, one day Jan was busy in the middle of the woods with his own "mini pelle" (mini excavator) trying to open up a path again.

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This was often a massive job that would take him weeks. He had to remove fallen trees, fight through dozens of meters of brambles, or tilt away enormous boulders.

And sure enough, a curious farmer came ambling over and asked what on earth he was doing on his land.

"Well," Jan said, "I'm clearing this chemin rural so we can get through again."

"Chemin rural?" the farmer said indignantly. "Where do you get that idea! No chemin rural for crying out loud! This is my land!! Get lost!!! Beat it!!!"

"Well, look," Jan said. He was, of course, prepared and pulled out the cadastral map. "This path runs here, and it doesn't belong to you, I'm sorry." Jan imperturbably continued with his chainsaw. The farmer walked away fuming. "You'll hear from me!!" he yelled.

A day later, the mayor called to say that an enraged Monsieur Vigroux had been at his door.

"I was able to calm things down," he said. Months later, during a village festival in the local salle de fêtes (party hall), Jan ran into Mr. Vigroux.

"Well, damn it," Vigroux said with a roguish smile, "couldn't you have made that path a little wider? Then I could have gotten my tractor through!"

After that, Jan unearthed many more public paths, to the general delight of the locals and the displeasure of most of the farmers.

## The Farmer and the Gyrobroyeur

We were once busy marking out a walking route for our guests along a chemin rural. We had already gone a long way when the path suddenly came to a dead end against a wall of brambles and nettles! The path was completely overgrown for a distance of at least 100 meters. What now? Another route was practically impossible. Clearing this path by hand was not an option. A little further away was a farm. Of course, I could ask the farmer if he could use his machines to make the path passable again. I rang his doorbell:

"Bonjour Monsieur, comment ça va?" "Ça va, ça va, et vous?" "Oui, ça va."

After introducing myself and some small talk, I told him we were busy marking a walking route and unfortunately, the path behind his farm had become overgrown.

"Is there possibly a way that you could use your **gyrobroyeur** (that's a kind of flail mower that every farmer has) to open up the path again?" I asked as tactfully as possible.

"Oh, absolutely not!" he said resolutely. "I don't mind hikers passing by, but if I clear the path, my neighbour will use it again! And that's not going to happen! He can just drive around! Le salaud (the scumbag)!"

Ouch, I had stirred up a long-standing neighbourly feud, ripe for a TV court show. While I considered whether to try again, he had already closed the door in my face. Studying the map once more, we decided to choose a different route after all.



## La pipistrelle

"Wow," Marjo said with a dustpan and brush in her hand, "look at this! There are mouse droppings everywhere!"

And indeed, in several spots along the outer wall of our house, there were huge piles of little droppings.

"That's weird," I said, looking up. "It looks like they're coming from behind the shutters." There definitely seemed to be something back there. I carefully opened a shutter a little and saw dozens of small bats packed tightly together. I took a few pictures. This was pretty special! I put a few photos on our website for the nature lovers, you know. At one point, there were an awful lot of droppings under the shutter. I took another look, and it turned out there was an entire colony behind it.

"Well, I'll be!" I said to Marjo, amazed. "Look, there must be a hundred of them back there!"

I watched for a while. The whole colony was constantly in motion. The ones at the bottom would do their business and then climb to the top, so their friends could take their turn. This way, you didn't get your neighbour's crap on your head. Because of this overpopulation, our shutters on the back were completely bleached white from bat pee.

In the evening, around dusk, they would fly out. We once counted them, and for half an hour, we counted 60 bats that emerged one by one from behind a single shutter. Unbelievable!

These little creatures catch enormous numbers of mosquitoes and especially moths. No flies, they made sure they were out of there in

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time. We always had a lot of trouble with flies, but by dusk, they would all suddenly disappear, apparently seeking refuge from the bats. In the morning, before sunrise, our little friends would skillfully fly back behind the shutters for their afternoon nap. Sometimes a few would flutter into our opened bedroom. In the beginning, I tried to catch them to take them outside. Later, we just let them fly around and went back to sleep with fluttering bats over our heads. After a few minutes, they would find the window again and fly out on their own.

One afternoon, I suddenly saw a huge cloud of bats flying around in a panic in our courtyard. I thought, "What's going on here?!"

And sure enough, our French guests in one of the guest rooms had closed the shutters, rudely disturbing the "daytime rest" of our colony. Dozens of bats suddenly had to look for a new place to stay. French people always close the shutters!

Every now and then, we would hear piercing screams coming from one of the guest rooms. The next morning at breakfast, they would tell us, shaken, that a bat was flying around their room.

"Oh, come on," I would say. "Just let it flutter around, those little guys don't do anything."

"Yes, but they fly into your hair?!"

"Just put your head under the covers and go back to sleep. They'll fly out in a few minutes."

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## **The Bat Enthusiasts**



## Ça va, ça va

One day in June, I got a phone call from a Frenchman. He said, "Bonjour, je suis le président de l'association de la protection environnementale de chauves-souris de l'Aveyron, le APECA."

He started a whole story in rapid-fire French. After a while, and after I had asked him several times to speak more slowly because the phone connection was "bad," I understood that he was the president of a bat association. He had seen the photos of our bat colony on our website and that it was something very special. It was "la Pipistrelle." Of course, that meant nothing to me.

"Yes," he said passionately, "it's the smallest mammal in the world! Very special!"

I had already noticed that they were very small. Especially the young, who would sometimes fall out of the nest, you almost had to pick up with tweezers.

"He asked if he and a few members could come by to study everything more closely."

"Yes, of course," I said. "You're very welcome." After an "au revoir" and "à bientôt," I hung up and thought, "We'll never hear from them again."

But to our great amazement, one day a group of naturalists showed up at our doorstep. A group of about eight men and women, all hung with cameras and other unclear gadgets. We offered them a cup of coffee, but no, they preferred to admire our natural treasures as quickly as possible. Proudly, I carefully let them peek at one of our colonies behind a shutter. The whole association immediately went into a state of utter ecstasy.



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"Feel free to look around, no problem," I said to them, and they ran almost hysterically through the hallway from one shutter to the next, busily taking photos and discussing.

One of the ladies, a younger member of our bat association, was suddenly completely hyperventilating at a shutter. Pale as a ghost and gasping for air, she roughly pulled the president by his sleeve.

Catching her breath a bit, she screamed and pointed at the shutter: "La Barbastelle!!" she shrieked, "j'ai trouvé la Barbastelle!!" and



enthusiastically jumping up and down, she grabbed her camera. The whole group rushed over to admire the natural phenomenon.

I asked, "What's going on, and what is a Barbastelle?"

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"The Barbastelle is a very rare bat," he said in ecstasy, "a little bigger and with spikier, larger ears."

Okay..., I thought.

Carefully, they opened the shutter a little further to better study the little creature, at which point the tuft of fluff promptly fluttered away and calmly settled against a tree trunk outside.

Immediately, the entire company flew down the stairs outside, where our Barbastelle was still captured on film and, to everyone's great disappointment, eventually flew away.

Subsequently, a "bat detector" was used to determine that there were no less than five different species of bats living with us. A bat detector is a device that makes the ultrasonic sounds of a bat audible. Very interesting! After an hour, we were cordially thanked, and the illustrious company left our bat domain.

## The Path to the River

A friend of ours, a Dutch campsite owner, told us he was taking French lessons. Well, over time, it became more of a course on "How to deal with the French."

"It was quite interesting and very educational," he told us. One day, he presented a case study to the teacher:

"I wanted to buy a piece of land from my neighbour," he told the class. "My neighbour had at least 80 hectares, so I should be able to buy one hectare from him, right?"

"How did you go about it?" the teacher asked curiously.

"Well, one day I walked up to my neighbour and said, 'Bonjour, je suis le voisin à côté, voulez-vous me vendre une petite pièce de votre terrain?'" (Hello, I'm your next-door neighbour, would you be willing to sell me a small piece of your land?)

"Oh, la la!" the teacher exclaimed in dismay. "That was the stupidest thing you could do!"

"I know, because I thought he was going to explode and get his rifle! So how should I have handled it?"

"First of all," the teacher said, "you should never approach the owner directly about this. You first go to him to get acquainted. You know what we discussed earlier:

'Bonjour, ça va' and 'oui, ça va, ça va et vous?'

Then you make small talk and ask if he'd like to come over for an **apéro**, which he will never do, by the way!"

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"Okay, I get it. And how long do I have to do that?"

"Well," she said, "a few months, a year or so, and in the meantime, you go to the village pub and casually drop that you'd like to expand your property and if anyone had some land for sale. Eventually, you might dare to take the next step. Go to him, and while enjoying a Pastis, you could mention that you'd like to have more land and if he happened to know anyone who would be willing to sell you a piece of land. He will certainly not agree, but the seed has been planted, and hopefully, he will make you an offer one day."

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### The Dinner Invitation

Unfortunately, our property didn't extend all the way to the river. We thought that was a real shame. Our guests couldn't get to the water. On the cadastral map, we saw that two strips of land from two different neighbours lay in between. A strip from Mr. Pousthomy, a farmer who lives 20 kilometers away, and a strip from Mr. Rouquet of Le Planet, who lived below us but had since moved away. We saw that a path was drawn on the cadastral map between our property and Le Planet—yes, the notorious chemin rural. We had, of course, already looked, but there was no trace of a path here, just one big jungle of brambles, fallen trees, chestnut trees, oaks, boxwood, and holly, sunken ground, and more brambles. It would be great if we could make that path passable again. In fact, we had a right of way. On the other hand, with the story above in mind, we decided to let things rest for now.

Pousthomy was often in the area to mow the meadow below us with his tractor. We would chat with him, and on walks, we would

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always stop by the other farmer, Mr. Rouquet. They were nice people. We, of course, asked if they would like to come over sometime. One day, we actually got a call from Mr. Pousthomy. He asked if he could come to dinner with his family. "You have **table d'hôtes**, don't you?" he asked interestedly.

"My brothers, sisters, my mother, and I would love to see the house again. There will be eleven of us." It turned out that Mr. Pousthomy was born in our house! We felt very honored and, of course, told them they were more than welcome. When we hung up, we broke into a cold sweat. Oh my gosh, eleven of them are coming for dinner, and what on earth are we going to cook for them? The favorite dishes of the Paysan Aveyronnais (Aveyron farmer) are pig's feet, stuffed goose neck, andouillette (sausage stuffed with tripe), or pig's snout. We had no idea how to make any of that! Marjo then put together an extensive "farmer's" meal consisting of a hearty soup, then a salade cruditée, for the main course Cassoulet de Castelnaudary, then a cheese board with Roquefort, of course, and crème brûlée for dessert. Well, they thoroughly enjoyed it. They said the cassoulet was made "comme il faut," just as it should be. Afterward, we gave them a tour of the house, and they reminisced about times gone by. For example, there was a blue painted wooden sign above our camping's sanitary building that said "MARQUISE" that we had once found among the junk.

"Oh, look!" one of the sisters exclaimed enthusiastically. "I made that sign! That was for our cow, 'Marquise'!"

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## The "Path for Non-Wimps"

## Ça va, ça va

A few months later, we took the plunge and, with the cadastral map under our arm, paid a visit to M. Pousthomy. After an hour or so, we told him that it was a shame we couldn't get to the river, and we asked if he had any objections to us clearing the chemin rural again. He had no objections at all; on the contrary, then he could also walk to the water again. We drove home in high spirits. On the way, Marjo said, "Well, then we'll go to Mr. Rouquet sometime this week."

Dumbfounded, I said, "This week?! No way, we're going now! Before the news reaches Rouquet." So we drove straight to Mr. Rouquet. The same ritual ensued. Fortunately, he also had no objections. That winter, Marjo and I began, little by little, to clear the path. We really had to find our way through an impenetrable wall of brambles and fallen trees. Pruning shears, chainsaws, pickaxes—everything was used. At one point, we came to a truly gigantic mountain of brambles. There was no getting through. We tried to go around it, but that turned out to be an even more disastrous plan. So we had to remove the whole mountain of brambles after all. It turned out there was a huge fallen chestnut tree underneath, which, due to a bend in the trunk, lay like a bridge over the path. We left that there and cleared everything else. You can just walk under it, and it gives our path a nice touch, and it also prevents dirt bikers from using our path. Guests can now reach the river in a fifteen-minute walk to swim and fish.

Now, the path was quite steep going down. So when people came back to the top, the complaining was constant.

"Wow, what a path! If we had known that!!" "Jeez, that was steep. Couldn't you have warned us?"

## Ça va, ça va

We then named the path to the river "the path for non-wimps." The complaining stopped immediately. Now guests would proudly say, "YES... we walked the path for non-wimps!!"



## Our Slate Roof

Our 1839 house, like most old houses in the Aveyron region, had a slate roof. The roof was covered with heavy, 1 cm thick, handmade slates called 'lauzes', not to be confused with 'ardoises', which are black, industrially made slates about two millimeters thick. Lauzes are nailed down, while ardoises are fastened with a hook. Lauzes are much more beautiful than ardoises because of their gorgeous variegated colours, ranging from golden brown, gray, dark blue, anthracite, and black, whereas ardoises are only black. Over the years, however, a lauze roof is plagued by problems. The biggest problem is moss, although it does give your house a romantic look. The roots of the moss grow into the hairline cracks of the slate, allowing water to penetrate. In winter, when it freezes, small pieces chip off, which eventually compromises the strength of the roof tile. A second problem is that the nails rust through, and your tiles can start to shift, leading to leaks.

We quickly understood why there were buckets and empty paint cans scattered around our attic. We learned to live with the saying: "A day without a leak is a day not lived" (or something like that). One day, we decided to clean the roof with a high-pressure washer. This turned out to be a perilous and life-threatening undertaking, with one lauze after another breaking in half under our feet! After I had hammered together a special ladder with hooks that you lay over the ridge of the roof, I could do this job a little more safely, and the chance of me falling to the ground with a crushing thud became a bit smaller. After this wash, I pushed every slate back into place and replaced the broken ones. This eventually resulted in a leak-free house. But after every storm, I often had to go back up on the roof for a thorough rearrangement of the little tiles.



## The Art of Building

Laying such a slate roof is skilled craftsmanship and far from easy. At the bottom of the roof, large slates were laid, and as you went up, they became smaller and smaller. This creates a beautiful visual effect. There was another reason they did this. Large slates are much harder to split and very heavy. Making small slates, on the other hand, was not a problem. If a 'tailleur' (cutter) broke a roof tile, it would become two small slates. The large slates were placed at the bottom because that's where the roof can bear the most weight and handles the most water (water, after all, flows from top to bottom...).



## Ça va, ça va

Before a roofer started, he first carefully sorted his lauzes by width. A very precise job. He would then start at the bottom of the roof with the large slabs and work his way up, arranging, measuring, and cutting, with the tiles getting a little smaller as he went. These kinds of building techniques of these beautiful old houses fascinated me. It's incredibly clever how they used to put up such colossal buildings with 80 cm thick, loosely stacked walls held together only by some clay and their immense weight. How they hoisted heavy rocks and enormous wooden beams meters high with the help of oxen. A construction lift? No, pure brute force of man and beast!

After many conversations with old farmers, I gained more and more insight into the how and why. Everything seemed carefully thought out, and nothing was "just because"!

Farms were preferably built halfway up a slope. Not on top of the hill, it was too windy and too sunny there. Not at the bottom of the valley either, too little sun and too wet. So, a piece of forest was usually cut halfway up the mountain for wood to saw beams and planks. Preferably sweet chestnut, which was strong and didn't rot so quickly. To create a flat building site, a huge chunk was dug out of the mountain, mainly to obtain building materials like stones and clay. A farmer at that time—and I'm talking about the early 1800s—had about ten farmhands, who helped build his farmhouse. Every farmhand had his specialty, a 'menuisier' (woodworker), a 'tailleur de lauzes' (roof tile maker), and a lot of "dumb muscle." After the farmhouse and stables were finished, they would get married, and after a son was born, and because the farmer had a foresight, they would start building a house for his son. Families of 8 to 12 children were quite normal back then, so they kept on building vigorously. Often, one of the children would go to the seminary to become a

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priest. A family gained enormous status if one of the children joined the Catholic church community and became a priest or nun. You could, of course, expect the farmer to soon get a request from one of his enlightened children to build a church or chapel. This is how a small hamlet, called a "hameau", came into being, especially when the farmer later rented one of his houses to others, and families from outside came to live there. So, if you find a little church with a few houses in the middle of nowhere, this could very well be its origin.

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## The Colors of France

One of the things that makes France so special is the fact that the landscape is so diverse and every region has its own character. This has everything to do with the local soil type. Is it an area with limestone, granite, sandy soil, or slate? In the past, houses were built from the material found on-site. You couldn't just call a hardware store and say, "deliver me 10 pallets of gypsum blocks!" This is what makes France so unique; the landscape and the atmosphere of a region sometimes change after only 50 km. In the Aveyron, houses were thus built of slate with slate roofs. In the adjacent Tarn department, which is much flatter and has hardly any rock, houses were built with red bricks made from river clay from the Tarn. The color of the raw material also determines the atmosphere of a region. In a granite area, for example, houses were made of black-gray granite blocks, while in the Dordogne, houses were built of white-yellow limestone. Unfortunately, that's over today, and houses are built of boring orange 'aglos' (concrete

## Ça va, ça va

blocks) or gray concrete blocks that are then smeared with cement, creating uniform, dull, and characterless residential boxes.

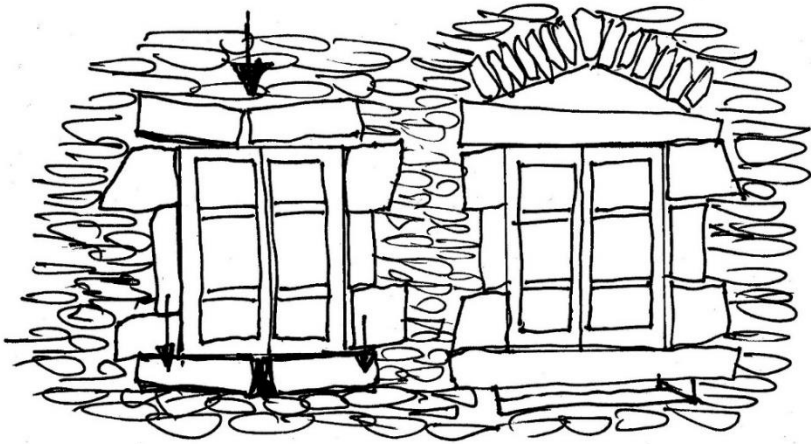
Near us, two small rivers, the Dourdou and the Rance, flow into the Tarn. These streams flow right through the "Rougier de Camarès," an orange-red bauxite area. During heavy rainfall, huge amounts of red mud flow into these rivers, which in turn colour the Tarn a bright orange-red. With this settled orange-red river clay, the city of Albi was built, which is why it is called the red city. Toulouse, on the other hand, is called the pink city because the red river silt had by then mixed with gray water from another region, yielding pink bricks there.



As I wrote earlier, I was fascinated by the old traditional building techniques and often wondered why things were made the way they were. Take a window frame, for example. A window frame was always made of sandstone blocks. From sandstone quarries, it was quite easy to saw long sandstone beams. The disadvantage was that these beams were strong but could easily break. You see many old window frames with a broken top or bottom lintel. This is due to the

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enormous weight of the wall above. The sketch shows how they solved that at the time. A kind of roof was stacked on top of the upper lintel to absorb the weight of the wall above and thus relieve the sandstone lintel. At the bottom, the lintel often broke due to the pressure on both ends of the stone bottom beam. For this purpose, a piece was left free at the bottom. So, if you see a window with a little roof above it, it's not for looks but to prevent the sandstone beam underneath from breaking. What is not region-specific, however, is the hardware for windows, doors, and shutters. That is virtually the same all over France. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule.



## The Swimming Pool Inspection

Our Bed and breakfast had a simple swimming pool, an above-ground pool with a diameter of five and a half meters. After some initial issues, I had the whole water balance pretty much under control. Free chlorine, total chlorine, pH Plus, pH minus, algae, cloudy water—there's a lot involved in providing your guests with optimal swimming pleasure. We had already read a lot about safety. To prevent children from falling in, a solid fence had to be placed around the pool. Fortunately, we didn't have to do that because it was an above-ground pool, which, by the way, offers only a false sense of security. Parents dozing in their lounge chairs couldn't see what their children were up to in that big barrel. So we took on that role...

One day in July, a van pulled up, and a young man got out, dressed completely in white, with shiny sunglasses, white designer sneakers, and a briefcase. You could see from a mile away: "this doesn't bode well!"

"Good afternoon," he said kindly. "I've come to check the quality of the swimming water."

"Oh!?" I said, surprised. "I didn't know anything about that!"

"That's right, we do these checks without prior notice."

Logical, I thought.

"But explain," I said, "why have we never seen you before?"

"Well," he explained, "it's a new law imposed by the 'Ministère de Sport.' We randomly check the swimming pools of chambres

## Ça va, ça va

d'hôtes, hotels, and campsites, take water samples for bacteria analysis, and test pH and chlorine."

"Okay, well, we're happy about that!" I said. "And what will that cost?" I had already figured out that we would have to open our wallets again.

"80 Euros, sir, and 68 Euros if the water isn't good and we have to do a re-inspection."

Well, that's fantastic news!

"I assume that's your pool over there?" he said, pointing to our tub.

"That's right," I said. "Come with me."

"Can I see your logbook first?" he asked.

"My logbook? What do you mean, logbook?"

"You must measure and record your chlorine and pH values in a logbook every day."

"Oh! I didn't know that!"

"You should know that, but it's not a problem in itself," he said, "as long as you start doing it as from today."

We could handle that too.

He then purposefully strode toward our pool and opened his briefcase, from which a whole assortment of jars, bottles, and testing devices appeared.

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After half an hour, he left again. "Chlorine and pH are good, and next week you'll get a report with the bacteria analysis."

And indeed, a week later, we received a test report with an invoice for 80 euros! Fortunately, the water was approved.

In the meantime, I contacted our competitors. Yes, he had also been to one of them. After expressing our displeasure about this, we agreed that we would warn each other when there was another check.

He came again in August!

"Are you back already?" I said, irritated.

"Yes, sir, we come 2 or 3 times a season."

"Wow! Well, that's going to be an expensive joke that way!"

This time the water was not good. The pH was too low. He would come back next week for a re-inspection. Great!

Anyway, the following year the whole ritual repeated itself. There was already a lot of commotion about these ridiculous checks on the internet. All the chambres d'hôtes owners were up in arms. We just had to put up with it.

The following year, I convinced the inspector that our tub was private and not for guests. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and said, "Okay, I'll make a note of it."

He turned around and left again. We never saw him after that.



## **Ça va, ça va**

### **The New Pool and a New Kind of Inspection**

When we moved to Villeneuve sur Lot, we had a real pool, 11 x 5 meters, with a fence around it, "comme il faut."

And wouldn't you know it, one day the doorbell rang. A man in a suit and with a briefcase was at the front door. He didn't radiate much good either.

"Good afternoon, I represent the 'Ministère du Sport,' and I've come to check the safety of your pool."

Oh no! I thought, here we go again.

On the way to the pool, I told him that I had just brought the chlorine and pH up to level.

"No," he said, "I'm only here for the safety features."

"Okay," I said, somewhat relieved, because that was in perfect order with us, or so I thought.

He looked around and nodded approvingly.

"Excellent," he said. "Good fencing, safety gates, excellent, that's how I like to see it!"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "You still need to put a public information board on the gate."

"A public information board?" I asked.

## Ça va, ça va

"Yes, a board that lists the pool's opening hours, a cross-section drawing of the pool with the depths, an 'at your own risk' notice, and the telephone numbers of the emergency services."

"Doesn't sound like a problem," I said. "I'll take care of it. Can I just attach a laminated A4 sheet to the gate?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Then," he continued, "there needs to be an emergency stop button to turn off the water pump in case of an emergency."

"Huh?? You'll have to explain that to me! What kind of emergencies?"



"Suppose," he began, "a child gets sucked to the drain grille at the bottom of the pool, there must be an emergency stop button to turn off the pump immediately."

"Yes, but listen for a minute," I protested. "We're not talking about a big wave pool with a 150 Kilowatt, 20 bar pump system, are we?!"

"Yes, but it can still be dangerous!" he retorted.

"And besides, our water pump runs on a timer and only runs at night!" I protested again.

"That may be," he said unyieldingly, "but that button has to be there! Besides," he continued, "it could save you a lot of legal trouble with the government and the insurance company in the event of an accident."

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He had a point there, I thought.

"Okay," I said submissively, "I'll take care of it then. Can I install it myself?"

"Yes, no problem. Just send me photos of the signs and the emergency stop button by email. Here's my card."

The man left, and our conversation stayed with me for a while.

"What nonsense!" I thought. "You know what? I'm going to test that story."

I turned on the pool pump, dived into the pool, and descended to the drain at the bottom. I first felt with my hand, but I barely noticed any suction.

"See, what I thought, it's all nonsense!" I then laid my big belly over the drain and, to my great surprise, was immediately sucked on!

Startled, I pushed myself up, but I couldn't get loose! I was scared half to death.

"Well, damn it!!" a thought ran through my head. "I'm stuck!! Help!!"

With a strong pull, the plastic grille under me broke, and my belly popped free. I could go back up. Once out of the pool, I looked at my belly in shock. There was a neat imprint of the drain on it! Not only an imprint, but I was half-skinned!

I really hadn't expected this; I was dumbfounded! A few days later, I installed that emergency stop button. Not that it has any use; by the

## **Ça va, ça va**

time someone realizes a child is stuck to the bottom of the pool, it's already too late. The next day, when I was at the pool store to buy a new grille, I told the whole story to the pool guy. He was not aware that an emergency stop button had to be installed, and he reacted very surprised to my story. As proof, I lifted my T-shirt and showed him the imprint of the drain on my belly.

"Ça m'étonne... c'est bizarre!!" he exclaimed and looked in disbelief at my damaged belly. It was strange that he was completely unaware of this.

In any case, I now make sure that the pump only runs at night, as is also prescribed.

I still go through life with an imprint of a pool drain on my belly!



## The Reservation

On a wonderfully lazy Monday afternoon, lounging in the hammock under the oak tree:

**3:40 PM** Ring, ring, the phone:

"Hello?" I always answer like that. Let the caller identify themselves, with all the spam these days!

" Hello, I would like to know the rates for your gîtes, please"

" It depends, ma'am, when do you want to come??"

We probably don't even have any space.

" You have a pool, huh, and there's a separate bedroom?"

" Yes, ma'am, but tell me, when do you want to come?? Maybe we don't have any availability! Did you find our website? "

" What's your website?)"

" It's labakenia.com, ma'am."

" Yes, yes, that's why I'm calling. Okay, I'll get the information and call you back."

Well, I thought as she hung up, we won't be hearing from her again.

**3:51 PM** Ring, ring, the phone:

" Hello, it's me again. Can you tell me if you have double or single beds, because there are four of us.

"But ma'am, please tell me first when you want to come?"

"Ah, yes, okay, it's from the 15th to the 20th of September. What's the price and can I book by phone? "

" Yes, you can, but I'd prefer that you fill out our reservation form on our website! That way we won't make any mistakes."

"Oh, okay, but I prefer to book by phone! "

## Ça va, ça va

"In that case, send me a text message with all your details and your email address."

It was quiet for a moment. I could sense her hesitating about giving out her confidential details this way.

"I'll call you right away!" and she hung up again.

A little later, I received a text message with her name, phone number, and email address: patriciamondalo@gmail.com.

**4:24 PM** Ring, ring. The phone:

"Hello, did you get my text message?"

"Yes, but I don't have your address and the dates?"

"It's the 15th to the 20th of September, as I already said, you understand. What's the price?"

"I'll send you a quote by email right away. Okay?"

Another silence. This person clearly didn't want to do anything online.

"Okay, I'll wait for your quote."

**4:45 PM** Ring, ring. The phone:

"Hello, I haven't received your quote by email!"

"Did you check your spam folder?"

Meanwhile, I had seen a bounce notification for her email address. After a long discussion, she finally made a thousand excuses. She had made a mistake with her email address... It was supposed to be: patriciamondalo901@gmail.com.

**4:59 PM** Ring, ring. The phone:

"Hello, I've received your email. How can I pay your deposit?"

## Ça va, ça va

Then followed an endless discussion about how she could pay, and I had to explain the cancellation conditions to her.

" You can find all the booking conditions on our website, ma'am."

That didn't help much, as she just kept going. Eventually, she said she would go to the post office the next day to write out a bank transfer order.

" You can't transfer directly using your banking app?" I asked.

" No, tomorrow I'm going to the post office and I'll call you back as soon as the transfer is made "

The next morning.

**8:45 AM** Ring, ring. The phone:

" Hello, this is Mrs. Mondalo. I'm at the post office now and I'm going to write a transfer.Can you call me as soon as you have received it?"

" Yes, ma'am, no problem, as soon as I receive your deposit I will confirm by email."

She hung up again.

**9:12 AM** Ring, ring, the phone:

" Hello, it's me. The transfer is done. It should be in your bank account within 4 days. Can you confirm it for me?"

"Yes, ma'am, no problem. See you soon."

An hour later, I received an email with proof that the transfer had been made.

**12:32 PM** Ring, ring:

"(Hello. I sent you a receipt by email that the transfer is done. Did you receive it?"



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"Yes, ma'am, I received it and thank you."

"But why didn't you send me a confirmation by email?"

"Excuse me, ma'am, I will confirm as soon as the money is in my account, not before! It can take a few days!"

A moment of silence...

"Okay, alright, I understand, but you'll confirm to me as soon as the money is in your account, huh?!"

"Yes, ma'am, I will!)"

An hour later, I received the deposit in our bank account, so I sent her a confirmation right away. She still called back immediately:

"Excuse me, sir, but you didn't mention my first name on the confirmation. Would you please resend it with my first name?"

"No problem, I'll do it right away!"

Grrr! I wonder who will arrive here on September 15th!

## The motor gang

One of the things you worry about as a bed and breakfast owner is what kind of guests you're going to get. A reservation rolls in from a Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so living in Who-knows-where. What kind of people are they, and do they have the right perception of what a bed and breakfast actually is? Sometimes you get guests who have no idea what it is and think it's like a hotel. Once in their room, they'll call you for "room service," for example.

Sometimes you hear stories from fellow owners about guests who left without paying. Fortunately, that never happened to us yet. We also gradually learned to distinguish real reservations from fake ones. Because, believe me, a lot of garbage came in via the internet. In the beginning, mostly from the Ivory Coast or surrounding countries. Later, the reservation requests became more and more sophisticated, and they tried to plunder your bank account in all sorts of sneaky ways.

Anyway, one day we received a request for all our rooms for a week. Now those were the kind of reservations that helped you get ahead in life. They asked if there was parking for eight Harley Davidson motorcycles! It turned out to be a motorcycle club from Normandy! Oh great, we thought right away, now we're screwed! We could hardly refuse them! Besides, you don't pass up a reservation like that easily!

We were already having visions of a mob of Hells Angels descending on us, taking over our domain, and trashing everything. At one point, the deposit came in, neatly and on time.

## Ça va, ça va

The day came. They were supposed to arrive today. Let's just hope for the best! At one point, we heard an enormous noise swelling in the distance. Unmistakably the characteristic Harley rumble.

There they are, and we went to stand on the lookout.

With a lot of rumbling, smoking, and sputtering, eight gleaming motorcycles arrived, neatly in formation one after the other. They parked their bikes, and 12 terrifying bikers in leather jackets with emblems, covered in tattoos and piercings, with shiny motorcycle goggles under their black helmets, strode purposefully toward us.



Now we were sure! We were doomed. These could only be Hells Angels! With trembling knees, we invited them for a drink at the bar. They were up for it; they were dying of thirst after 800 km on their bikes. The leader of the group, a very fearsome-looking

## **Ça va, ça va**

individual with a bald head and a braid in his goatee, covered in tattoos and earrings, led his crew to the bar. The ladies didn't look any less intimidating. Also tattoos, piercings, and five rings on each finger. The men ordered a large pitcher of beer, the ladies a white wine. Of course, they had booked a table d'hôtes, and at 8 p.m., we sat down to eat. The mood was good, and they thoroughly enjoyed the meal.

"Maybe it's not so bad after all," we said to each other, relieved.

"This is probably going to be a late night."

After the meal, their route maps came out, and they plotted various tours for the coming days. They would leave around 10 a.m. and be back around five, because they were really looking forward to another pitcher of beer and a delicious meal. Around eleven, the whole club went to bed. They were exhausted.

---

## **The Two Mildreds**

The next morning they were up early again. I was just setting the breakfast table when I saw some of them busy with their bikes. I decided to go take a look. They were busy with polishing cloths, trying to get their proud rides even shinier. They were actually very nice people with a sense of humor. When you saw them doing that, they were just "big softies"!

I asked curiously, "How much does a thing like this cost?"

"This one is €44,000, but," he added immediately, "there are another €25,000 worth of accessories on it!"

## Ça va, ça va

"Holy cow, that's not a small amount!" I thought.

After breakfast, they went on their way and took a 200 km tour through the Tarn Valley.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we heard them rumbling from a distance again. They set themselves up at the bar, and huge amounts of drinks were consumed.

"Yes," they said, "when we ride, not a drop of alcohol, right! No, no, you really can't. You can't concentrate anymore! So you understand, now that we're home, we'd like a few!"

That day, an English couple was supposed to arrive, George and Milley. We already called them George and Mildred! They would also be eating with us. At one point, it started to pour. It was raining cats and dogs. The English couple should have been there already, but there was no sign of them. We had their mobile number, so I called them. The connection was very bad because there was a lot of background noise, they were barely audible.

"Yes, sorry, we're almost there! According to the GPS, ten more minutes. The weather is a bit of a challenge, sorry." After half an hour, still no George and Mildred. Strange, they should have been there for ages! We finally decided to go ahead and eat.

Just as we were having the soup, the door swung open, and two completely drenched figures with umbrellas, in long black rubber jackets, sou'westers, and motorcycle goggles, stepped inside. They looked like two members of a decontamination team!

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"Here we are! We finally made it!" and they shook a liter of water off themselves.

"Hello, how are you?" we welcomed our English guests. "How did you get so wet?"

"Well, you see, we have an open car, a BRA." BRA? That meant nothing to us at that moment.

"Can't you close it?"



"No, you can't. It's a kind of convertible. We just put on these clothes, and with these umbrellas, it's still somewhat manageable. We just can't go faster than 40 km per hour. That's why we're so late!"

Curious, the whole club went to take a look. It turned out to be a little car with three wheels. It was in fact a converted deux chevaux (2CV)!

## Ça va, ça va

"And you came all the way from England in that thing??"

"Yes, we did. It takes a while, but it's doable."

"Come to the table, everyone, you must be hungry!"

A little later, we had another one of those cozy evenings with a golden touch. The mood was great. The bikers got along famously with George and Mildred, despite the language barrier.

Our Hells Angels phobia had now completely melted away!

The next day, the motorcycle club was leaving again. We said goodbye with three big kisses.

"We had a great time with you, and we will definitely come back, but with the whole club!!"

"No problem, bring it on!!" we said in chorus.

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## The Lomax Kit Cars

The following year, a group of 8 Lomax kit cars descended upon us. A racing car based on the 2CV, but with four wheels. You buy a kit, you strip your old **deux chevaux**, you mount a brand new body, and you get a flashy little race car! They were busy all day, with the help of a team mechanic, to keep the material rolling. They took many

## Ça va, ça va

tours in our area and attracted a lot of attention. We had a similarly great time with them.





## Le marché nocturne

We always went to the night market with all our guests. Every Monday evening in the high season, we would drive in a convoy to the village. We often sat at a long table with about 20 to 30 people and enjoyed the French regional products. The greengrocer made salads and sold strawberries with whipped cream. The duck farmer stood there with his BBQ grilling 'magret de canard', or duck breast. The baker sold delicious pastries, the butcher grilled huge slabs of côtes de boeuf, and the music was always provided by two ladies, one playing an organ and the other having a blast on the bongos. The cafe owner provided fries. He had one quaint little fryer, which resulted in a long line at his stall, and he was usually sold out by nine o'clock! I had once suggested to him to get a few more fryers and to stock up on more fries.

"Yes, good idea," he said. But unfortunately, nothing changed. Later, I spoke to him again about how long we had to wait for his fries! "Oh," he would say, "it's going well like this, people find it cozy here." There was no arguing with that.

One day, the weather forecast was not so good. I called to see if the night market was still on.

"Yes, it is!" was the answer. "We'll put up party tents, so everyone will stay dry, no problem."

Okay, so we went to the market with the whole group. When we arrived, there were no tents, and an inky black sky hung over the packed market square. And sure enough, at one point, it started pouring, so everyone huddled under the awnings of the market vendors. The rest hid under the tables and ate their food there. The

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party tents were set up in a hurry, but it was already too late; everyone was soaking wet! At one point, the rain was even blowing horizontally under the tents. Then we decided to just go home.



## **Shared Music, Shared Laughter**

The following week, the mood was great again, and the ladies of the orchestra played "Salut les amoureux" by Joe Dassin. In the Netherlands, it's well-known as "Het is weer voorbij die mooie zomer" by Gerard Cox. Our table of thirty people sang along loudly, but with the Dutch lyrics, of course, "that summer that started almost in May." All the French people looked on, surprised, and also started to sing the French lyrics with all their might. It was wonderful! A while later, "La montagne" by Jean Ferrat blared across the square, better known to us as "Het dorp" by Wim Sonneveld. We sang along loudly to "along my father's garden path," to the great hilarity of all the French people.

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At one point, the ladies played "Una Paloma Blanca" by George Baker, a perfect song for a conga line. So our whole table of 30 people wound their way across the square in a big conga line. The French people looked very surprised, apparently unfamiliar with this. The French children soon joined in. Here they call it 'la chenille', the caterpillar.

French people love to dance. Usually, the old folks start with a polka or a paso doble or a tango, and soon they are dancing the 'Madison', a line dance, and the 'brise pied', a kind of bird dance.



One evening, I walked up to the ladies of the orchestra—we knew them very well by now—to request Joe Dassin's song again. We started talking, and at one point, with my direct Dutch approach, I blurted it out and asked:

## Ça va, ça va

"Wow, are you two actually a couple?" The two of them looked at each other in dismay, and a painful silence fell. I immediately thought, "Oh no, what have I done!!" But at one point, the oldest one shouted passionately:

"Yes, and we don't care anymore! '**Je m'en fou!!**'" she yelled passionately. "Yes, we belong together, we're a couple, we love each other, and everyone should know it!!" They both burst into tears, and the three of us embraced! Since then, we have been very close friends!

Where we live now, night markets are also a common thing. Every self-respecting village organizes one. Once a week from July to September, it's a party, and people from the village and the surrounding areas gather on the market square. You can compare it a bit to a food truck festival. Still, it remains a typical Southern French affair. In this area, the markets of Pujols, Monflanquin, and Fongrave are absolute hits. Crowds of people come for the many artisan-prepared delicacies, the music, and the atmosphere. One of the musicians here really makes it a party. Pascal, a very skinny singer with a backing track, jumps on top of his speaker cabinets at the end of the evening and sends the crowd into a complete frenzy!

So, if you're on holiday in France, you absolutely must not miss the marché nocturne, also known as the marché gourmand. Tip: bring plates and cutlery if you go, it's better than eating from plastic plates.



## Pens and Pencils

We often asked ourselves: "What's so great about running a chambres d'hôtes and mini campsite?" It's not easy to put into words. It's a matter of feeling. I'll try to explain.

First of all, there's the variety. In the high season, you work, let's say, "your butt off," but outside of that, you take it easy and have plenty of time for yourself. It's like summer and winter. If it were always summer, it wouldn't be nearly as appealing as when it's interspersed with a solid winter. The opposite is also true, of course.

Why do we find strawberries or asparagus such a treat? Because they are only available in the spring. It's the same with running a chambres d'hôtes. In the spring, you think: "Oh, wonderful, another season is starting, meeting people, fun, looking forward to it!" And by the end of the season, you're a little fed up with the guests.

You have to be a "people person." If you are shy or dread meeting new people, if you don't show interest in your guests, then you'll have a difficult time as a chambres d'hôtes owner. You also need to have a sense of humor and be able to handle conflicts well.

Finally, there's always the excitement of "what kind of people will arrive today? What are we going to experience this time?"

We always had a set welcome ritual. We would offer new guests a welcome drink and have a chat with them on the terrace. First, we would answer their standard questions:

- "How on earth did you find this place?"
- "Isn't it lonely here in the winter?"

## Ça va, ça va

- "How did you come to do this?"

Then it was our turn, and we would, of course, ask what they did. The vast majority worked in healthcare, education, or social work. We had to get used to the modern job titles and terminologies.

"I'm a human resources manager" or "I'm a hygienic interior caretaker, or a traffic service simulator, an outbound call center employee." We often had to ask what exactly they did! After that, I would give them a short tour of the property and try to figure out what kind of people we were dealing with. I'd see if they were extroverted or introverted and test their sense of humor a bit. For example, I would tell them that they were allowed to do anything they want, as long as we didn't notice...

Most of our guests came from the Netherlands and Belgium, although we also had guests from virtually every corner of the world.

With Dutch guests, it was interesting to know exactly where they were from. With people from the Randstad and Brabant, for example, it was immediately a lot of fun, while the Frisians or Zeelanders were a bit reserved at first and needed about three days to thaw out. Once that happened, you would be in stitches over their dry humor.

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## A Matter of Responsibility

## Ça va, ça va

During the tour, we paid extra attention to the swimming pool. "It is not the intention for children who cannot swim to swim without parental supervision!" I would say emphatically.

You just couldn't imagine finding a dead child in your pool one day.

"No problem, yes, of course, we understand!" was the standard answer.

But at one point, it happened again, and we saw a little girl of about four splashing in the pool all by herself with armbands on. I walked over to her:

"You, get out of the water!"

"Why?"

"You can't swim!"

"Yes, I can, look!"

"Just get out and go get your parents!"

"My mommy and daddy are shopping."

"What did you say?! And who's looking after you then?"

"Oh, they'll be right back!"

An hour later, the parents came back, and I, of course, confronted them about this incident. "Elza can swim just fine. It's really not a problem!" "Yes, but what if something happens now?? What then? We don't think it's okay at all that you leave the property and leave your child here!!"

I was flabbergasted. How could they do this? I wasn't that old-fashioned, was I?

## **Ça va, ça va**

"Don't worry, if something happens, we are responsible!" "Yes, I get that," I said, not too friendly. "But if Elza is floating dead in the water, we've got a huge problem. The first thing they'll do is close the place and start a thorough investigation. We can then kiss our French dream goodbye, not to mention all the grief!!"

They hadn't looked at it that way.

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## **The Siesta**

Marjo and I each had our own rhythm. In the morning, around seven, we would get up. Marjo would get fresh bread from the baker in the village, then water the plants and start with the preparations for dinner. She preferred to do that in the morning when she was least disturbed. Casseroles were very popular with us. I always prepared breakfast. After that, I helped the guests with suggestions for excursions for the day. After our own lunch, we had a siesta. From 1 p.m. to about 3 p.m., I could usually be found in the hammock, somewhere in a secluded corner of the garden. Marjo also took a nap and read a lot. On the website and in the reservation confirmation, we explicitly asked not to arrive between 1 and 3 p.m. because of our siesta. Unfortunately, some guests didn't care about that.

"Oh, sorry, we thought we'd just try," was often their reaction.

Around four or five o'clock, most guests would return from their excursion, and it was happy hour. We would then be busy on the terrace until about six. Always a fun part of the day.



## Ça va, ça va

Around eight, we'd sit down for dinner, and after the meal, we'd settle down in the Grange for a digestif. That could sometimes get out of hand, and then very cozy parties would start, sometimes until the early hours. I would do the dishes in between.

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### The "Pencils and Pens" of the World

Still, it wasn't always easy to make everyone happy. "You've got pencils and pens!" they say, right?

For example, we once had a somewhat older and withdrawn couple in a camper van whom we didn't see much. We always thought that was a shame. I always had the impression that people weren't enjoying themselves. But hey, to each their own. It later turned out that they had taken the text on our website—"quiet campsite," "enjoy the peace," "tranquility and space"—very literally. When we were all sitting at the dinner table, I saw her nervously walking around below and looking irritated in our direction. I walked over to her and asked if she was looking for something.

"What on earth are you doing up there??" she asked angrily. "What are we doing? We're at the table, we're having dinner!" I said, surprised. "Does it have to be with so much noise?! This was a quiet campsite, wasn't it? All that noise, we can't stand it!!"

"Oh dear, we have a problem here," I concluded.

"Why don't you come and join us," I suggested. "No way," she said resolutely, turned around, and walked back to her camper with great indignation.

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The next day I went to them and knocked on the door of their camper. "Good morning," I said kindly. "Here's the invoice for your stay."

He took the invoice, surprised. I had made a bill for €1.75. "That's for the bread you ordered," I added.

He didn't understand. I said, "Unfortunately, we can't please everyone. We haven't succeeded with you, and we're sorry about that. You don't have to pay for your stay then."

Still surprised, he paid me €1.75 and closed the door again. An hour later, they left. My hint to leave had come across. This would only lead to trouble.

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## From Japan to New Zealand

As I mentioned earlier, we mainly had Dutch guests. However, every year we had a very special couple from a distant country.

I will never forget our Japanese guests. Right in our first season, we got a reservation from Tokyo! It turned out to be a young couple, no older than 20.

Besides their native language, they spoke broken English.



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When they drank a glass of wine, they did it with exaggerated slurping, we could barely hold back our laughter! At the table, we noticed that his girlfriend never said anything. At one point, she was nervously squirming in her chair and would regularly look at him intently. Then he would look at her and nod approvingly, giving her permission to say something too. We were truly speechless. We knew that the man/woman relationship was viewed differently in Japan, but with such a young couple and from the big city, no less! Very special! The next evening, only he was at the table. He excused his girlfriend, she wasn't feeling well, she was nauseous. We talked a bit about Japan and his work. They had 10 days of vacation a year. Of the 10 days, they were with us for 4 days, 2 days in Paris, and the remaining days were for the flight.

At one point, he asked if he could sing a song. "Of course," we said, surprised. "Go ahead!" He stood up and, with his hand on his heart, sang an emotional song, as we understood it, about his homeland, at one point with tears rolling down his cheeks. We were deeply moved.

Less than a year later, we received a letter from them. In the envelope were all kinds of origami figures. In the accompanying letter, it said that they were actually a party of three when they were with us. They had a baby! Now we understood why she hadn't been feeling well that day.

We also once had a French captain of a nuclear submarine! Very special. He was an imposing, stately figure, a military man through and through, who radiated nothing but calm. However, he was not allowed to say anything about his profession.

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We will never forget the sheep farmer from New Zealand, a Maori. An impressive figure. He had 1200 hectares of land, 2000 sheep, and 24 dogs. Every day he would slaughter a sheep for his dogs. This man had wonderful stories.

Another time, we got a reservation from 4 ladies from Shanghai. We had a hard time getting the deposit. We were already having our doubts about this reservation.

But at one point, we heard a lot of cackling, and sure enough, 4 Chinese ladies with high heels came clacking in.

The first thing they asked, with their phones ready: "What is the wifi password? Zank you very mug!!"



We had a lot of fun with them. Sometimes they would cook their own meal in our summer kitchen, and we had to come and taste it. One of the four was a young girl of about twenty. She was very pretty and super slim. She said she was a model. That was

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noticeable, because she was on her phone all day, taking a thousand selfies in sexy poses. I once went for a walk with them, and with their smartphones in hand, they walked along with me, cackling.

The ladies were on a tour of Europe. They had landed in Madrid, from there to Barcelona, Nice, then to us, then to Geneva, and finally to Paris, and then back to Shanghai, and all in a tight 14 days.

The habits of guests were also occasionally slightly bizarre. For example, one of our guests had a baby with her. When we were sitting at the table with fourteen people and the child was quietly sucking on her pacifier in her maxi-cosi, she suddenly stood up, grabbed the child, walked to the end of the table, and calmly began to change the little one's diaper! Imagine, everyone is enjoying their Boeuf Bourguignon while at the end of the table, one of our guests is changing a poopy diaper! Everyone looked at each other. I stood up in shock and called out:

"I'm sorry, but this is really going too far for me!! Can't you do that in your room or something??"

She looked at me without understanding, looked at the poopy diaper, at us and our Boeuf Bourguignon, back at the poopy diaper, picked up the child and put her on a small table further away and continued her work there. A little later, she sat down again as if nothing had happened. The next day she said to me: "You were right, Kees, I hadn't thought about it, sorry."

Another time, I was busy in the workshop. All the pipes run through there, like water pipes and drains. I heard water running.

Someone must be showering, I thought.

## **Ça va, ça va**

An hour later, I still heard water running!

"That's weird, they can't still be showering. I don't have a leak, do I?!"

After some searching, the sound turned out to be coming from one of the guest rooms. The French guests were out for the day. So, I went into the room and, to my surprise, saw a champagne bottle lying in the sink with the cold water tap wide open to cool the champagne!!

"How is this possible, I can't believe it!!" I thought, aghast.

This could have gone completely wrong. If the label had come off, it could have easily clogged the drain hole.

You can't help but think, "Would people do this at home too?"

I turned off the tap and didn't say anything about it. Nevertheless, we have had the pleasure of welcoming a very wide range of guests in our chambres d'hôtes, and we look back on this turbulent and wonderful time with great satisfaction.





## The Kestrels

"Hooray!" Marjo exclaimed. "They're back! They survived the winter! I can't wait to see what kind of shenanigans they get up to this year."

Every March, we'd be thrilled to hear their distinctive cry—a sound we'd recognize out of a thousand. Here in France, they're called "faucons crécerelles." The male is a proper gentleman with a distinguished grey head, while the female has a more rustic brown one.



Our kestrels returned every year to nest in a wall of our farmhouse. Well, "nest" is a generous term. They just plopped their eggs directly on the stones. No twigs, no moss, no fluff! The west wall was their favorite, giving them a prime view of the lower meadow,



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which was basically a five-star, all-you-can-eat mouse buffet. Our wall had several square holes—we assumed they were for old scaffolding poles. They'd pick one each year and lay four to six eggs. But first, came the... *romance*. They'd loudly screech and awkwardly balance on a dangerously thin twig at the top of a tree. She'd lay an egg, and then the whole clumsy affair would repeat itself. They usually chose the top hole, right next to a guest room window.

For a few months, I became a professional bird paparazzi. I'd mount my camera on a stick, perch precariously on the windowsill (at great risk to my life and dignity), and dangle myself halfway out the window just to get the shot.

Kestrels are master mouse-catchers. They do this thing called "hovering," or as I like to call it, "avian espionage." They just hang there in the air, flapping their wings like crazy while their heads stay perfectly still. This lets them spot the slightest movement from way down below. Once they've got their target locked, they dive-bomb, snatch the mouse with their talons, and use their "thumb" (which has a razor-sharp nail) to give the mouse a good ol' squeeze. They then bite the head off and eat the rest. For the young ones, the mouse gets a brutal deconstruction, and the chicks are fed tiny, bite-sized morsels. Once the kids are a bit older, the parents just drop a headless mouse in the nest and say, "figure it out, kid."

Every year was an adventure with our feathery friends. One time, they chose a new hole directly above the rain barrel. A guest came up to me, clearly distressed:

"Kees, there's a baby bird drowning in the rain barrel! It's so sad!"

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Sure enough, I just saw a little head go under. I fished the soggy chick out and laid him on a towel. We then proceeded to give him a full-on spa treatment with a hairdryer to prevent him from checking out early. Now, to get him back home. The nest was a good five meters up. So, I set the ladder against the wall and, under the rapt attention of the other five chicks, I returned the soggy survivor to his siblings. He made it!

Another year, around June, I heard the kestrels shrieking and circling above their nest in a full-blown panic. A guest pointed to the roof. "Look, there's a chick up there!"

Perched on the roof ridge was a clumsy, half-grown chick, still covered in fluffy down. He'd obviously flapped his way out of the nest way too early and couldn't fly for his life. And what do I see circling high above? A squadron of about ten kites, already eyeing this feathery snack. So, up the ladder I went again, armed with a butterfly net. After a death-defying balancing act, I finally managed to grab him. In return, he gave my fingers a good squeeze with his nasty claws. The parents were still in a state of kamikaze panic above me. I started my slow, careful descent with the chick when he suddenly started screeching like a banshee. I thought, "Shut your beak, kid! I don't need your dad or mom coming after me!"

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I saw one of the parents coming in for a kamikaze dive straight at my head. Thankfully, they were just feints. I kept climbing, deposited the chick back in the nest, and quickly scrambled back down. That chick also survived and later flew the coop successfully.

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The young ones usually fly out by mid-July, but they stick around until September, perching in trees and getting a free meal delivery service from their parents. We often had to step in, like the time one got tangled in some brambles. I made sure to put on my gardening gloves before playing wildlife rescue.



They also got flight lessons. A parent would fly by with a mouse in its beak, loudly trying to coax the youngster into following. They'd do a lap together, and the young one would get its well-deserved snack. It was always a spectacular show. By the end of September, they would leave one by one, and we'd just hope the parents made it through the winter to return and cause more chaos the following year. Look at this video:

Ça va, ça va

<https://vimeo.com/113085837>



## Angry French

Every nation has its quirks, habits, and peculiarities, and the French are no exception. They are known for their love of life and for taking things as they come. At the same time, it's undeniable that the French are fiercely proud of their own culture and have a very short fuse when their hard-won rights are threatened. It's no wonder France is so often plagued by intense strikes. While in the Netherlands, people will talk and protest first, using a strike as a last resort, in France it's often the other way around. If their rights are messed with, everything comes to a grinding halt immediately. They are not shy about going all in. For example, during one strike at EDF, the French electricity company, several entire *départements* were left without power for 24 hours! That would be completely unthinkable in the Netherlands. So, in France, they strike first and negotiate later.

The French are also proud of their own products, such as their Renaults, Citroëns, and Peugeots. They prefer to buy a French car. In the supermarket, the French will often choose "produit de France" and are willing to pay a little more for it. They prefer to vacation within their own country or in their overseas territories like Réunion or Martinique, or other French-speaking countries.

The French also have their own habits in traffic. For example, if you don't yield or are a little late in doing so, you will immediately get a long honk or a finger pointing to the forehead.

I sometimes notice that the French love to lecture you when you do something wrong. On the other hand, they have no problem breaking the rules themselves. Tax evasion, for example, is a

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national sport, and illegal dumping is considered completely normal. But heaven help you if someone else does it!

You sometimes hear Dutch people say, "France is a beautiful country; it just shouldn't have any French people living there." I don't agree with that sentiment at all, but I understand it just a little bit. During the holidays, popular regions like the Ardèche, Dordogne, or Provence are overrun with tourists. The normally quiet and sleepy French village of 1,000 residents suddenly turns into a giant, bustling city with traffic jams, long lines at the checkout, loud tourists, and other fun stuff. It's no wonder that the French can sometimes react a bit aggressively or have a short fuse.

Once, some of our guests were on a day trip. They came back at the end of the day, completely distraught and in tears! We thought, "Good heavens, what in the world happened?!"

After a cup of coffee and once they had caught their breath, the story came out:

"We were driving at a relaxed pace along the river, enjoying the view. We came to a one-lane bridge. We had the right-of-way sign on our side. On the other side, we saw a car speeding toward the bridge. We met each other well past the halfway mark. The Frenchman didn't budge and just stood his ground. So, we had to reverse all the way back."

"And then?" we asked, curious.

"Well," Marianne said with a trembling lip, "as he drove past, I gave him the finger, the absolute jerk!"

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"Uh oh!" we thought instantly. "And then?"

"We drove on, and in the rearview mirror, we saw him turn around. He was right behind us on the other side of the river, honking and flashing his lights. It was terrifying. He sped past us, slammed on his brakes, and got out. Cursing and yelling, he stormed toward us. I rolled down my window to try and calm him down. But he grabbed me by the throat and shook me, shouting a torrent of insults that I, of course, didn't understand at all.

My husband got involved, and the man walked to the other side of the car, kicking and stomping on it along the way. He walked back to his car and came back again, this time wildly swinging a baseball bat. We were scared to death. Oh, my God! Luckily, he only made intimidating gestures because another car had pulled up behind us. At one point, he backed down, got back in his car, and sped off with squealing tires."

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That's a heavy story. We told them that the middle finger wasn't the smartest move and that they should just forget the incident and try to enjoy their holiday. "Come on! Don't let it get to you!"

Later, we told the whole story to our French neighbors, and they said, "Well, here, the middle finger is the worst possible insult, especially when a woman gives it." They did, however, agree that the man's behavior was completely unacceptable.



## The Hunting Party

Strolling through our forest, we heard the distant baying of a pack of dogs. They were hunting again. This time, right in our 14-hectare woods. The French are passionate hunters. What the "Second Amendment" is to America, the right to hunt is to France. If you don't want hunting on your land, you have to put up signs yourself that say "Chasse Interdit!" Of course, this won't exactly win you any popularity contests with the locals. My neighbour, a fierce opponent of hunting, once stomped over to the mayor to complain, only to find out the mayor was also the president of the hunting club. We, being no fans of hunting ourselves, just let it slide.

Just then, two wild boars came tearing past us, with a furious pack of hounds hot on their heels. A little later, we found ourselves chatting with a group of hunters.

"You guys do realize that our dachshund, Pico, is not a rabbit, right?"

"Don't you worry, sir, we've got it under control."

I then asked them, "I've heard that every year, residents get a piece of meat as a thank you for using their land. We've lived here for 10 years, and while the bullets have been flying past our ears, we've never seen a single person from the hunting club."

"Ah bon! C'est vrai? We'll let the club know." I had my doubts about that.

The type of hunting practiced here is a group drive, a method I don't have much respect for. If hunting must happen, I have more admiration for the lone hunter who, at one with nature, stalks their

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prey and decides at the last moment whether or not to kill. But here, a group of beaters goes into the woods with a pack of hounds or wire-haired dachshunds. The hunters then laze around on the guardrail by the road or a field, waiting for the game to cross so they can shoot them down mercilessly. The use of wire-haired dachshunds, which we also have, surprised me. It turns out that boars often hide under blackberry bushes. Wire-haired dachshunds can perfectly "dachs-slide" underneath and their bristly coats barely get caught on the thorns. Plus, a boar isn't scared of such a tiny dog. It looks back and then takes off. If they used large dogs, the boar would get scared and attack, and the dog would likely end up with its stomach ripped open. They often put leather aprons and leg protection on the hounds. To give them more biting power, their canines are even fitted with steel pins. These dogs look pretty terrifying.

The hunters here are mainly farmers. They have roughly four categories of dogs:

- **Farm dogs:** These are dangerous, loose, barking dogs, like Dobermans, Rottweilers, or Bouviers. They make a lot of noise but won't leave the yard under any circumstances. If you're walking on a farm, it's best to keep your distance. Make sure you have a stick—not to hit them, but simply having one is often enough.
- **Chain dogs:** These are also very dangerous, aggressive animals, like Pitbulls. They are kept on a chain and are truly meant to rip apart anyone with bad intentions.

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- **Hunting dogs:** These are Beagles and Bloodhounds. As the name suggests, they are used for hunting. They are always kept in cages because otherwise they'd run away. You have little to fear from hunting dogs. They are big, lovable oafs. However, once they get a whiff of game, a switch flips, and they suddenly turn, especially the Bloodhounds, into violent killing machines ready to tear apart any wild boar or deer!
- **Herding dogs:** Usually Border Collies. They are used to herd livestock. They don't bark much, but you should keep an eye on them and look behind you! They have a habit of sneaking up on you and unexpectedly biting you in the calves, just like they do to the cattle.

Yes, the life of a French farm dog is not always a walk in the park!

The hunting season runs from September to the end of February. One day in mid-February, our beloved neighbour and sheep farmer, Angel, showed up on our doorstep with a large, bloody plastic bag.

"What in the world is this?" we thought. The bag contained a huge rack of ribs and a shoulder cut that smelled... quite ripe. We invited him in for a coffee, and our kitchen was immediately filled with an overwhelming, gamey scent.

"Here you go, from the hunting club!" he said, showing off his green-stained teeth.

"What on earth are we supposed to do with this?" we thought. We cut it all up and put it in the freezer.

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Later, Marjo made a stew with it. It was delicious! Every year after that, we consistently received a chunk of meat—sometimes a rack of ribs, other times a shoulder cut. The hindquarter, or *gigot*, was always reserved for the "elite troops."

So, the communication at the hunting club had apparently worked after all.

At the end of February, we always went to the hunters' dinner. The hunting club organized its famous feast to close out the season. For just 14€, you could eat yourself into a stupor.



The ritual was the exact same every year. Everyone gathered around 11 AM for the *apéro* in the "cozy ambiance" of the *salle de fêtes*. On a large table were plastic plates of chips and peanuts. They served Ricard, sweet white wine, and apple juice. Around 12:30 PM, everyone sat at long tables, and the gluttony began with a slice of

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pizza. Huge 5-liter carafes of wine were placed on the tables. Next came a slice of wild boar pâté and *fromage de tête*. Then came the *daube de Sanglier*, served with a large baked potato. Large bowls of salad were then put on the tables. Meanwhile, over a large wood fire, the deer steaks were being prepared, grilled to varying degrees from practically raw to well-done. The steaks were placed on a kind of ingeniously welded bedspring contraption, which allowed them to flip the whole lot over at once. After the deer, large chunks of Roquefort and bread were brought out, followed by dessert: a huge slice of apricot, peach, or apple pie. To finish, there was coffee with a shot of illegally distilled *eau de vie*.



Everything was served on a single cardboard plate that you had to be very careful with because you had to use it for the entire meal. We, of course, always brought our own plates and cutlery. Trying to

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cut a deer steak with a plastic knife was a bit useless. The farmers, of course, used their own "Laguiole" knives, and the less well-off used their "Opinel" knives. After the meal, the mayor would come around with an iron cookie tin to collect the 14€.

One thing was for sure: by the end of the afternoon, you could barely speak and were ready for a serious siesta, with your stomach gurgling for hours.

## The French Bank

Back in the day, when we used to vacation in France around 1985-1990, we always carried the so called Eurocheques. You could write a cheque for up to 300 guilders anywhere in Europe! What a convenience that was! Credit cards were already quite common in France. A shopkeeper would put your card on a kind of stamping plate, lay a cheque on top, and rattle a handle back and forth. We weren't used to that. The French also used their own cheques, a payment method still in use today. You'll still see an elderly Frenchman at the checkout, taking his sweet time to write out a cheque. I often saw a smiling, wrinkled old farmer's wife make a small 'X' for her signature after the cashier had filled in the rest of the cheque for her.

When we emigrated to France around 2004, we were well-accustomed to the ease of online banking. It was one of the first things we set up here. You can't get far without a bank account. We immediately asked if we could do online banking.

"Of course," the bank clerk said. "You can transfer money via the internet."

A week later, we received all the paperwork and a login code. Eagerly, we got to work. But for the life of us, we couldn't figure out how to transfer money to anyone. So we called the bank.

"You told us we could do online banking, but how does it work? We don't think it's possible at all!"

"Oh yes, it is. You can transfer money from your checking account to your savings account and vice versa."

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"Yes, we get that, but we want to transfer money to another person."

There was a moment of silence.

"You have to first create a 'beneficiary'."

"And how do we do that?"

Another silence.

"You have to send us the person's bank details by post. We will then check their creditworthiness, and after the check, we will add them to your list of beneficiaries."

"But that's so incredibly cumbersome! That's not how it works!" I protested.

"Sorry, sir, but that is the only way. We find safety very important."

"Safety?! You send chequebooks by post; *that's* safe!" I countered.

I couldn't believe it. We were with a reputable bank, yet this was the only way. For years, we struggled with payments. Creating an international beneficiary was completely out of the question. So, for all our online banking needs, we just used our Dutch bank, which worked flawlessly.

Years later, we went to a few other banks. We finally found one that allowed you to create a beneficiary online. However, the security system was maddening! With SMS codes, passwords, email verifications, and scanners, it would take at least 15 minutes to transfer 100 euros.



## The Saga of the Brand-New Car

Now, it's 2021, and not much has changed, except that old-fashioned French cheques are barely accepted anywhere. We recently bought a brand-new car. After years of driving old beaters, we decided to treat ourselves to a new ride. When the garage told us the car was ready and we needed to transfer 20,000 euros, we went online. We entered the garage's details. Success! Then, after SMS codes, passwords, and email verifications, we set up the payment order for 20,000 euros. It was rejected! We had a transfer limit of 2,000 euros. *Well, damn it!*

We called the bank. It was closed! Oh, right, all banks in all of France are closed on Mondays. You can't get anything financial done in France on a Monday.

"You know what," we thought, "we'll just go to the local branch tomorrow and ask them to make the transfer."

The next day, we were at the bank at 9 AM sharp with our ID, bank cards, and the car invoice in hand. After waiting 15 minutes, we finally got to the front, but they couldn't access our bank details.

"Which bank are you with?" the young woman asked.

"This bank, of course, Crédit Agricole!" we said, surprised, and handed her our card.

"Ah, I see. You are with Crédit Agricole Occitanie. This is Crédit Agricole Aquitaine."

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"Oh, right," we said. "When we opened the account, we lived in the Aveyron."

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you," she said.



"What?!" we exclaimed. "Crédit Agricole is Crédit Agricole, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's correct," she said with a sympathetic look. "But all the branches are divided into regions with their own identities."

"So now what?! How do we get this done?!"

"You have to go to a Crédit Agricole Occitanie branch."

"But that's a three-hour drive for us!" I protested.

She just shrugged. "Sorry," she said, "there's no other way."

Frustrated, we went home. What now?

At home, we called our old branch in the Aveyron to see if they had a solution. We got a very kind young man on the phone. We told him we bought a car and needed to transfer 20,000 euros, but we had a 2,000-euro transfer limit.

"Yes, that's correct," he said. "The limit is there to protect you from fraud."

He could temporarily raise the limit, but first I had to send him a copy of the garage invoice, and then he would ask me three

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questions to verify my identity. My already high level of astonishment rose yet again.

"Can't I just email you the copy?"

"Oh yes, of course, you can do that."

After I emailed him a copy of the bill, he called me back.

"Everything's in order, and now for the three questions:"

Question 1: What is your mother's place of birth? "Breda," I said.

Question 2: What is your passport number? After fishing my passport out of the drawer with my socks and underwear, I gave him the number.

Question 3: What is the name of your dog? "Pico," I said.

"Perfect," he said. "I can now temporarily raise your limit. Please try again at the end of the afternoon, because the payment system is currently down."

Of course!

Finally, at the end of the afternoon, we were able to transfer our 20,000 euros and pick up our car.

That same day, we saw an interview on Dutch TV with Queen Máxima. She works to help people in developing countries like Ghana, Namibia, and Afghanistan gain easier access to financial services. It occurred to me that I should write her a letter asking her to add France to her list.

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### Bizarre Security, French-Style

Here's another notable example of French bank security. I had installed the banking app on Marjo's cell phone. But her personal details still listed my email address and phone number. So, every time Marjo wanted to transfer something, I would get a verification text or email on my phone. Not very practical, so I decided to change it on the bank's website. Sure enough, my number and email were in Marjo's profile. I could change the email address, but when I tried to change the phone number, a message popped up:

"For security reasons, it is not possible to change your phone number online. Please contact your 'conseiller'!"

*Damn it!* I thought. I was afraid of this. I bet we'll have to drive three hours just to change a phone number in person.

So I called the bank again:

"Bonjour, with Wijnen," I said.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Visjnèn, *comment allez-vous?*"

"Très bien, *ça va, et vous?*"

"Oui, *ça va, ça va. Comment puis-je vous aider?*"

"I'd like to change the mobile number in my wife's profile, is that possible?"

I fully expected to be told that I'd have to visit the bank in person—a three-hour drive! But to my utter amazement, he said:

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"Of course, Mr. Visjnèn. I have your wife's account right here. What is her mobile number?"

I heard him typing it in and mumbling to himself, which is also a very French thing to do:

"Okay... *tak... oppe... voila, tak... c'est fait, tak!*"

"It's been updated, Mr. Visjnèn. Can I do anything else for you?"

"No, thank you very much, that was all. *C'est très gentil, merci!*"

He wished me a good day, and I hung up, dumbfounded.

This was the "strict French bank security." Literally, anyone could have called him and effortlessly changed her personal information! Bizarre!

These are just a few of the things we've experienced with French banks. I suppose it's probably not that different in the Netherlands, just in a different way. Banks, after all, remain sluggish and bureaucratic institutions.

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## From QWERTY to AZERTY

It's always bothered me why we're stuck with a QWERTY keyboard. Why don't we just have a simple ABCDEF layout? A quick Google search cleared things up. If you didn't know, it all goes back to the very first typewriters. Fast typists would often find their keys getting jammed. I remember as a kid playing with my dad's typewriter; if you hit too many keys at once, the whole thing would lock up. By



changing the key combinations, they helped out the quick typists and created a layout where letters were less likely to get "cozy" with each other. The **AZERTY** layout was apparently a better fit for the French language.

I, for one, stubbornly cling to my **QWERTY** keyboard here in France. I just can't get used to the French layout. While it's handy to have separate keys for **é**, **è**, and **à**, I find it a disaster that all the numbers

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are in the SHIFT position, as are symbols like the @ and other important punctuation marks.

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### Punctuation, French-Style

Speaking of punctuation, my neighbour once mentioned the dash as "**le tiret du six**." I said, "The *tiret du what?*!"

"Yes," she laughed, "the dash that's under the number 6 on the keyboard!"

"Oh!" I said, surprised. "And what do you call the other one, the underscore?"

"Ah," she said, "that's **le tiret du bas** (the dash from the bottom), but we also call it **le tiret du huit** because it's under the 8!"

"Well, you learn something new every day!" I thought.

We went through some other punctuation marks, too:

- **ellipsis (...)** - *points de suspension*
- **colon (:)** - *deux-points*
- **parentheses ( )** - *parenthèses*
- **comma (,)** - *virgule*
- **period (.)** - *point*
- **semicolon (;)** - *point-virgule*

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- **brackets** [ ] - *crochets*
- **asterisk** (\*) - *astérisque*
- **dash** (–) - *tirets*
- **exclamation point** (!) - *point d'exclamation*
- **question mark** (?) - *point d'interrogation*
- **apostrophe** (') - *accent aigu*
- **backtick** (`) - *accent grave*
- **caret** (^) - *accent circonflexe*
- **cedilla** (ç) - *accent cédille*
- **at sign** (@) - *arobase*
- **hashtag** (#) - *dièse*
- **slash** (/) and **backslash** (\) - *barre oblique, oblique inversée*
- **ampersand** (&) - *esperluette*
- **dieresis** (ë) - *tréma*
- **quotation marks** (") - *guillemets*

The French have a whole variety of quotation marks, each with its own name, such as *guillemets droits*, *anglais*, *français*, and *allemand*.

I also learned that the **accent aigu** (') only appears on the letter **E**. At the start of a word, it often indicates that an S used to follow, as



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in *étable*. If you add an S, you get the English word **stable**. The same goes for *école* and **school**.

The **accent grave** ( ` ) appears on **A, E, or U**. On the A and E, it's used to distinguish between identical words, such as "ou" (or) and "où" (where).

The **accent circonflexe** ( ^ ) is used on **A, E, I, O, and U**. It also indicates that an S used to be in the word, as in *fête* (feast). It's also used to differentiate words, for example, "du" (a combination of *de* + *le*) and "dû" (the past participle of *devoir*).

The **tréma** ( `` ) is used on **E, I, or U** to show that two consecutive vowels must be pronounced separately, as in *naïve*.

The **cédille** ( , ) only appears on the letter **C**. It indicates that the C should be pronounced with a soft S sound, as in *garçon*. However, a **cédille** is never used before an E or I, as the C already has an S sound in that case, as in *centre*.

## Korsakov

Jan shambled and grumbled his way down the path. He and his partner, Rini, were staying at our mini-campsite in their tent. Jan was a regular at our bar, always coming by for a drink. Rini, on the other hand, preferred to stay in the tent. Jan was a jovial, kind-hearted guy, always up for a chat. He also talked to himself a lot. Whenever he walked down the path, he'd let out all sorts of bizarre shouts and would sometimes just stop in the middle of the path, yelling and gesticulating wildly.

"Hey!" someone said, "It looks like he has Tourette's, you know, that disease where you have an uncontrollable urge to swear!"

It certainly looked that way.

One day, he came staggering down the path with two heavy bags clanking with bottles. "Looks like he's throwing a party," we said to each other. His behaviour grew stranger by the day. We often heard quite a ruckus coming from the camping field.

"I think Jan and Rini are fighting again," one of our guests said.

"Again?" I asked, concerned.

"Yeah, they get into it a few times a day."

"Jan likes a drink, and I'd say he gets pretty weird when he does."

From that moment on, I tried to limit Jan to just one drink, which he protested loudly. "Come on, Kees, just one more gin!" he'd complain.

"Jan, you've really had enough," I'd try to reason with him.

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"I'll decide what and when I want to drink!"

I had a tough time trying to manage him and sometimes had to lead him, under loud protest, back to Rini.

At one point, we were talking about Angel, our sheep-farmer neighbour. Angel secretly distilled *Eau de Vie* in large quantities. Jan found this very interesting and listened intently.

The next day, Angel called me.

"Bonjour Kès," (The French always call me Kès or Kies; pronouncing the name Kees seems to be an impossible task for them). "Bonjour Kès, I've got one of your guests sitting at my kitchen table. He asked if he could taste my *Eau de Vie*? He's been here for an hour and is on his tenth glass. He absolutely insisted on buying some from me. He's on his way back to you now. I hope he doesn't drive off the road!"

At that very moment, I saw Jan staggering down the path with a heavy 10-liter jerrycan. It was crystal clear to us now: Jan had a serious alcohol problem. As he stumbled back down the path, muttering and yelling, we agreed it wasn't Tourette's after all, but **Korsakov!**

That same evening, we were having a *tables d'hôtes* dinner. Marjo had cooked a wonderful meal. Suddenly, Rini came up. We hadn't seen her up at the house before. With tears in her eyes, she asked if I could drive her to the airport tomorrow. She wanted to go home as soon as possible. Jan and Rini hadn't known each other very long. This was a "test vacation." If they clicked, they were going to continue their relationship. Well, I thought, that test has failed

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spectacularly! A moment later, she burst into tears and found comfort with all the other guests.

The next morning, I went down to the campsite to talk to Jan. After putting on my "social worker hat," I walked down to his tent. Thankfully, he was reasonably sober and lucid. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that the jerrycan was already half-empty. After an intense conversation, he realized he had a problem and promised to behave.

"I'll make it right with Rini, I promise!" he said apologetically. The next day, they drove home together.

Yes, alcohol is a silent killer! Marjo and I sometimes had a hard time keeping our own alcohol consumption in check during the season. Think about it: it would often start in the afternoon. Guests would arrive, you'd offer them a welcome drink—a rosé, a beer—and, of course, you'd have one yourself. It was social! Marjo would have a glass of wine while cooking, you'd have a couple of glasses with the guests at dinner, and during a fun evening at the bar, you'd have a few more. Before you knew it, you'd had a few too many and would wake up with a pounding headache the next morning. Fortunately, we never got to the point where we were running around the property yelling like Jan.



## Dogs

In the beginning, we allowed dogs at our *chambres d'hôtes*. We were new to the business and every guest counted. We had just started and needed every penny we could get.

One day, a couple arrived with a huge Bernese Mountain Dog. We weren't thrilled about such a giant, hair-producing beast. But oh well, they were only staying for four days. Luckily, our dachshund, Pico, got along with it. We did notice that the dog smelled pretty strongly. The next morning at breakfast, the monster was lying under the table. The other guests were sitting at the far end of the room. "Strange," I thought. "They must be afraid of dogs." At the same time, I caught a whiff of a pungent dog smell and immediately understood why everyone was sitting as far away as possible! Meanwhile, the room was a complete mess. It reeked and was covered in hair. The chaos itself was nothing new; with many guests, it often looked like a bomb had gone off, with clothes, suitcases, and bags scattered all over the place.



One afternoon, our guests took their dog to the river. When they returned, the dog gave a good shake. That evening at dinner, the dog settled under the table, and an unbearable stench spread through the entire room. After swimming in the river, the beast smelled like an open sewer! When I hesitantly said something about

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it, all hell broke loose! They angrily stood up and went back to their room! Ouch, ouch, I had insulted their "child"! Thankfully, it was their last night. The next morning, they were gone without a trace, and a week later, a scathing review appeared online.

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### The Hound of the Hillside



Another adventure was a guest with a Braque, a fearless hunting dog. He had to be kept on a leash at all times, otherwise he would take off. That was a relief to hear. At one point, the owner returned from a walk in a panic,

without his dog. He asked if we had seen "Brakkie."

"No," I said, "sorry, haven't seen him anywhere." At that moment, a massive hunting howl echoed through the valley, unlike anything you'd ever heard before! "Ah, that's him!" and he turned and went looking for him, yelling. After a few hours, still no dog. His hunting cries echoed through the hills. At some point, I even went searching in the car. No luck, but he was still audible everywhere! At the end of the day, with the owner still searching, the dog strolled calmly back onto the property, soaking wet and covered in mud.

The next day, the owner said, "I'm really not letting him off the leash again!"

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"That's an excellent idea!" I said encouragingly.

But in the afternoon, I heard his hunting cry echoing through the valley again! "Ah, he's escaped again!" I thought. And sure enough, the whole ritual repeated itself.

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### A Dog, a Fight, and a Puss-filled Tea Cup



Another time, we had a couple with an old mongrel. An unsightly and mean-looking little beast. It clearly didn't get along with Pico.

Whenever Pico

came near, the animal would growl menacingly and bare its teeth.

"He doesn't bite, does he?" I asked, already concerned. I almost wanted to ask, "Does your *doug* bite?" (in my best Inspector Clouseau voice).

"No, don't you worry, he really won't do anything!"

The next day, Pico walked past the mutt, who was sleeping. The dog jumped up, grabbed Pico's flank, and began shaking its head wildly in an attempt to kill Pico!

"Oh, he never does that!" the owner exclaimed apologetically.



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Pico had a nasty bite wound on his side. A few days later, other guests came up to me.

"You should keep an eye on Pico. He doesn't look so good." There was indeed a significant lump on his side.

"Would you like me to take a look?" one of our guests asked.

"Are you qualified?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, I'd say so. I'm a veterinarian."

"Oh, great! Well, yes, please, go right ahead."

The chest freezer was then converted into an operating table. With a small pair of scissors, he clipped the wound open again, and at least a teacup's worth of yellow pus came out! He cleaned the wound and gave Pico a shot of antibiotics. After that, Pico was treated every day. The wound was opened, flushed, cleaned, and eventually stitched up.

"The problem is," he said, "that wounds in animals close too quickly, and the gunk can't get out."

Pico recovered remarkably, thanks to the good care of our private vet. The owner of the mutt had already left.

Later, we had a dog in heat, which left Pico out of sorts for a week. After a few more incidents like this, we decided we were done. No more dogs.

### **FiFi, The Ultimate Test**

One day, a French couple arrived, who had reserved their room online a while ago. When they showed up, they had a tiny little dog with them!



"We unfortunately don't allow dogs," we said in unison.

"Oh, that's a shame. We didn't know that!"

"Well, it's very clearly stated on our website and in the reservation confirmation."

They probably thought, "We'll just bring him, and we'll see what happens."

"We have a crate, and he has his own bed, and we'll be very careful that he doesn't jump on the chairs or the bed. Besides," he added, "our FiFi always goes with us when we go out."

After they assured us again that they wouldn't leave him alone in the room, we gave in. They were only staying for three nights.

That same evening, I saw them both walk to their car and drive away. Without FiFi!

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"*Well, damn it!*" He was supposed to always go with them?! Not in this case! I went to their room, and sure enough, there was FiFi, lying like a prince on our stark-white, handmade bedspread. I was furious. I exploded! I should have known! This is so incredibly rude! Inconsiderate! I'll show them!

The next morning, still fuming, I told them—I know, it's harsh—that they had to leave our property. They were surprised and asked why. As you can imagine, a heated and unpleasant discussion ensued. In the end, they packed up their bags. I thought, "What is coming out of their ears... STEAM!"

I may have given the impression that we only had problems with our guests. The opposite is true. Fortunately, 99.9% of the people who visited our *chambres d'hôtes* were wonderful guests, and we had a great time with them. We were able to provide them with a fantastic holiday!

## Le plat du jour

One thing is undeniable: the French eat very differently from the Dutch—and I mean, *very* differently. It all starts with breakfast. The Dutch are quite thorough; a slice of bread with cheese or cold cuts, a boiled egg, or a bowl of yogurt with fruit and muesli. A cup of coffee or tea, or a glass of milk, and we're ready to face the day. The French, on the other hand, are much more reserved with a piece of baguette or a croissant, a bit of jam, coffee, or hot chocolate. And that's it.

The French don't understand cold cuts or sliced cheese on bread, and as for chocolate sprinkles (*hagelslag*), they're completely baffled. "Sprinkles? You use that to decorate cakes!" Once at work, the Dutch are always heading for the coffee machine—a quick coffee break every hour if possible, right? That phenomenon doesn't exist in France! They just work straight through. No coffee breaks! If you have a handyman doing a job at your house and you, being the good Dutch host you are, kindly offer them a cup of coffee, they'll often decline.

---

### The Sacred Lunch Break

At noon, the French drop everything and head out for a proper meal. This midday break, between noon and 2 PM, is sacred! It's the most important moment of the day! Do not, under any circumstances, bother them! You don't eat in a company canteen, which you won't find much of in France. The employer would rather give their staff lunch vouchers. "Here you go, kids, go grab a bite with your colleagues in town. Just make sure you're back by two!"

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Restaurants are completely set up for this. The chef starts their *mise en place* around 10 AM, preparing the *plat du jour*, the dish of the day, which is always offered at a great price. Guests arrive at noon and can sit down and eat immediately. The chef often goes home around 1 PM to eat themselves. Their wife has a little something cooking for them.

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### The French Midday Meal

A French lunch is usually a three or four-course affair. It generally starts with a salad, followed by a good piece of meat or fish with some vegetables, sometimes with a side of fries. Then comes the cheese board. The idea is for you to cut a small slice from each piece of cheese. The waiter quickly comes to collect the board and places it at the next table. Sometimes, Dutch tourists think they have to eat it all. You absolutely do not! The waiters will not be happy if they see you've devoured all their precious cheese. Nowadays, most waiters pre-cut the cheese for tourists. They'll ask which piece you want and cut a modest little slice for you.

Then, of course, comes dessert, similar to what we're used to in the Netherlands: *crème brûlée*, *île flottant*, or *fondant au chocolat*. The meal is rounded off with a cup of coffee. The French take their time; after all, it's the most important part of the day. Hence the long break from 12 to 2!

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### Cuisson

## Ça va, ça va

When you order meat, the waiter will always ask how you want it cooked. They will ask about the *cuisson*. The levels are:

- **Bien cuit** – well-done
- **A point** – medium
- **Rosé** – lightly cooked
- **Saignant** – very lightly cooked
- **Bleu** – practically raw

For Dutch tourists, the French lunch can sometimes be confusing. They're on holiday and taking it easy. After a good night's sleep and a big breakfast, they head out around 11 AM. A little shopping, a little strolling through the streets—wonderful! To their great shock, around noon, all the shutters start closing. The shop staff are going to eat. Around 1 or 1:30 PM, the tourist thinks, "Hey, let's grab a bite to eat." They walk into a cozy restaurant where there are still a few tables free. But the waiter rushes over to tell them that they are no longer serving food. The chef has already gone home, after all! A glass of wine with a piece of bread might still be an option. The disappointed tourist walks away. This phenomenon happens mostly in smaller towns. In big cities, they are a little more accommodating to the tourist rhythm.

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### The *Plat du Jour*

Because most French people eat out for lunch, all restaurants offer a *menu du jour* or *plat du jour*, but only at lunchtime. There's usually

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a blackboard somewhere with a three or four-course menu that costs between 11 and 14 euros. You cannot deviate from the menu. If you don't like it, you can order *à la carte*, but it will be much more expensive. In the evening, a *menu du jour* is never offered; you eat *à la carte*. After all, they have to make some money. You'll typically pay between 30 and 40 euros per person, including wine and coffee.



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## Obesity and Evening Meals

The French used to be famous for their slender figures. The petite frames of French women, who wore size 36, were particularly noted. Well, my friends, those days are long gone! In France, too, everyone is much, much too fat, and the fast-food industry is booming! The French government tried for a long time to keep McDonald's (*Macdo*) out of the country, but with the European policy of free establishment, they couldn't be stopped. They were finally allowed to set up shops in France, but the tall poles with the big "M" are forbidden; *Macdo* isn't allowed to put them up.

As a rule, work continues until 6, 7, or even 8 PM. The evening meal is usually a hot one but less extensive. A hearty soup, leftovers from the day before, etc. The French never eat before 8 PM. So, don't go to a restaurant too early in the evening. There's a good chance they'll still be closed, or the chef will be annoyed by your early arrival and might even send you away! Go at 7:30 PM at the earliest. You'll probably be the first one there!

### **Ça va, ça va**

On Sunday afternoons, the French go out to eat with their families. All the restaurants do great business then. Sunday evenings, however, most restaurants are closed again, and often on Monday as well.

If you're driving and you see a small restaurant with a lot of delivery vans and trucks parked outside during lunchtime, you're in the right place. You can be sure you'll get good food for cheap, and the atmosphere will be fantastic!

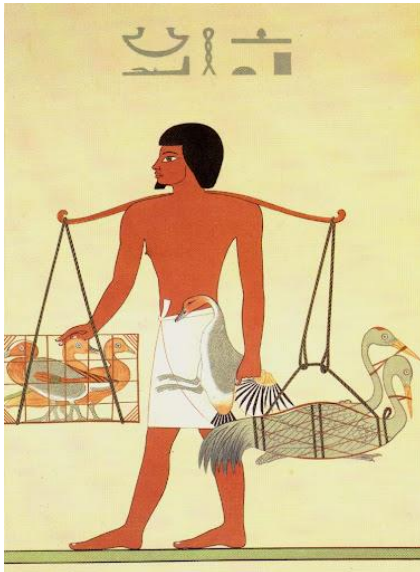


## Foie gras

We all know it: goose or duck liver, a quintessential part of French cuisine. At any dinner of importance—especially a Christmas dinner—you'll likely be served a slice of Foie Gras as a starter, placed on a piece of toasted bread and usually accompanied by something sweet, like fig or plum jam. You might also find a piece of *pain d'épice*, or gingerbread. Most people are repulsed by Foie Gras, their minds instantly conjuring up horrific images of geese being force-fed.

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### The Migration



So, what's the real story behind Foie Gras? What's the history of this delicacy? How do the French feel about it today? And is it true that all geese are treated so badly?

It all began a long time ago. The ancient Egyptians were the first to notice something remarkable. Just before geese and ducks start their massive migration from Africa to the north, they eat ravenously. All day, they build up fat reserves,

which are stored primarily in and around their livers. This fat is necessary to fuel their epic "Nils Holgersson" journey to the Arctic

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Circle. Once they took off, the ancient Egyptians would shoot them out of the sky. Of course, they were after the liver! When the geese reached France, a new danger awaited them. The Franks also had their bows, arrows, and nets ready, even though the livers had already shrunk a fair bit.

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### Modern Goose Farming

Today, we deal with domesticated geese that no longer have this pre-migration eating frenzy. So, the French came up with the idea of force-feeding them. A goose is held between the



legs, a funnel is placed in its beak, and a scoop of corn is put in, followed by a dash of water. This is done twice a day for about four weeks.

We once stayed at a French *chambres d'hôtes* that was also a goose farm. They had about 100 geese. We naturally talked about Foie Gras, and at one point, the owner asked us if we wanted to see the feeding. We went with her, and as she walked into the barn with a large bucket of corn, all the geese came waddling over, honking. She picked up a goose, held it between her legs, gently massaged its neck, and then placed the funnel in its beak. The goose eagerly swallowed the corn and then went on its merry way. The whole

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scene seemed quite gentle—no fuss, no stress, no panic, no animal suffering.

However, when you look at the large-scale industrial operations that we see in those gruesome videos, things are very different. There, tens of thousands of geese have to be fed. It's not a gentle process and is often done by machine. We see the same thing in the Netherlands with pig farms. You hope the little pigs are happily frolicking around outside and rolling in the mud. But sadly, in the big factory farms, you see massive abuses. We've all seen the horrifying images. Yet, despite this animal cruelty, we still happily enjoy a pork chop or a slice of sausage! When it comes to this, we are all a bit hypocritical.

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### The Neighbour's Tradition

Just recently, we found out that our French neighbour buys 12 young geese every year and fattens them up the same way. Twice a day, a scoop of corn and a small bowl of water go into their beaks via the funnel. But it's all done very calmly and without stress.

After about four weeks, they are slaughtered. She gives them a good whack on the head with a club. They are immediately knocked out, and then she cuts their throats. The blood is collected in a bowl, as it's used to make sausage. The dead geese are then boiled briefly to make them easier to pluck.

Over the next week, the entire family comes together. Uncles, aunts, cousins—everyone helps slaughter the geese because everything, and I mean *everything*, is used. The feathers and down

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are dried and used for pillow stuffing. The heads go into soup, the necks are stuffed with pieces of goose meat. The tongues are fried (a delicacy!), the goose liver is made into pâté, and the goose legs and other pieces of meat are cooked in a large pot with a lot of goose fat and then preserved in glass jars. Sausages are made, and finally, the best cut of meat is carved out: the *magret de canard*, or duck breast. These are the two muscles the goose uses to fly and make the downward wing motion. They are strong muscles of red meat, and when prepared properly, they are as tender as a fillet of steak. The *aiguillettes* are also carefully carved out. These are the two smaller muscles the goose uses for its upward wing motion. The *magret* is the bicep, and the *aiguillette* is the tricep. During this week of slaughter, all the old techniques are passed down from the older generation to the young.

So, there you have it, the story of Foie Gras in a nutshell—nothing more, nothing less, and without passing judgment. The French won't be swayed. Meat-eating French people are still the vast majority. Vegetarianism is still an unfamiliar concept here, although that's slowly changing. You can now order vegetarian menus in more and more restaurants.

## Camp chaos

One day, two Dutch families arrived, one with kids and one without. They had booked a spot on the campsite for three weeks. The family with kids—I'll call them Maurice and Karen—was very boisterous.

"Hi!" Karen yelled, immediately sitting down on the gravel with her youngest. "These are Paul and Joep, they're Marcel's. Jannie is mine, and this little rascal, Chrisje, is Marcel's and mine together," she said proudly.

Okay, we thought. We suspected it was a blended family. Chrisje wriggled free and headed straight for our flower beds.

The other family stood there looking a little glum and didn't say much. We weren't sure if they were related or just friends. A little while later, the whole crew went down to set up their tents. But Chrisje was nowhere to be found. A moment later, Marjo spotted the little guy in our carefully tended flower beds, enthusiastically stomping all the plants flat. Marjo walked over and, with a firm grip, pulled the boy out of the plants by his arm.

"What do you think you're doing?! Is this what you do at home?! Don't do that again! Watch it!"

Chrisje ran down the path to his mom, his lip trembling. A moment later, Karen came up to us.

"Hi, Marjo. What happened? Chrisje is completely distraught!"

Marjo explained what had happened.

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"Okay, he's not supposed to do that, of course. But please don't yell at him; he's not used to it, you know."

"I really didn't yell at him. I just asked him to stop flattening all my plants."

The tone was certainly set.

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### **A Cascade of Incidents**

The following days were a string of incidents, noise complaints, heated arguments, and guests complaining—it was a full-blown catastrophe! There was constant strife on the campsite. It seemed to center mainly around Karen and Chrisje. The little boy was indeed very hyperactive, a true "All Days Very Busy" kid with traits of Asperger's and PDD-NOS. Karen, however, seemed to work like a red flag on the boy.

I casually asked the other guests if they were bothered by it.

"Well, it's manageable. You know, when Chrisje is on his own, there's no problem, but when Karen is around, everything goes wrong."

The family had the unpleasant habit of taking over the sanitary building, which wasn't far from the guest rooms, at 7 a.m. sharp. It was a constant scene of arguments, yelling, and commotion, which resulted in all our B&B guests being woken up. I had already asked them to come a bit later and suggested they not all come at the same time. That turned out to be a non-starter. Every morning, the same ritual.

## **Ça va, ça va**

I had a chat with the other family, who just seemed to put up with it all.

"Are you guys related?"

"No, not at all."

"Friends, then?"

"No, not that either. We just happened to meet at a birthday party, and we told them we were going camping in France. We showed them some photos of your campsite."

Karen was ecstatic. "Oh wow! Look, Marcel, how fun! Should we go together? That would be awesome!"

"We didn't have the heart to say no right away. So we all went together."

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## **The Final Showdown**

A few days later, there was a huge fight in the sanitary building at 7 a.m. All the guests were awake again. This couldn't go on. We had to do something. I walked up to them and said:

"Folks, this can't continue. This isn't a fun vacation for us or for you anymore. I'd like to ask you to leave the campsite tomorrow. We're done with this!"

It went dead quiet, and they looked at each other in disbelief!

"But where are we supposed to go?"

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"Find another campsite," I said. "There are plenty in the area. There's a really nice one in the village, by the river; it's great." I even gave them a few other addresses.

"And our deposit?" they shouted indignantly.

"You'll get it all back, no problem. As long as you leave tomorrow!"

"Okay, then we'll go look for another campsite today."

"That's great," I said, relieved, hoping to be rid of them soon.

At the end of the day, they came back elated.

"Well, we found a campsite!"

"Wonderful," I said enthusiastically. "Which one are you going to?"

"We don't remember the name, but it's right behind here, at the top of the hill."

Oh no! I thought. That's our friends' campsite. How did they manage that? I immediately called our neighbours to explain the situation.

"Just so you know, I did not send them to you," I emphasized.

"Ah, don't worry about it. It's good to know, and thanks for the warning. I'll put them in a separate spot, far away from everyone else. It'll be fine!" I hung up, a weight lifted from my heart.

The next day, at 6 a.m., of all times, they were packing up with a lot of noise. A *lot* of noise! Everyone was awake again. They asked if they could leave one tent behind for now and pick it up tomorrow.



### **Ça va, ça va**

"Fine by me," I thought, "just get out of here." The next morning, Marcel and Karen, with all the kids in tow, came back at 6 a.m. to get the tent. As they packed it up, the kids, as if on cue, started causing a ruckus. Finally, they drove off our property, honking as they left.

A few days later, I heard from our neighbours that it was also a catastrophe for them. The second family had already left after a day, following a huge argument.

## Pico

When we left for France, our two sons stayed in the Netherlands. "Good luck in France, but I'm staying here," the oldest said, resolute. The youngest, who was already 24, had a harder time with our departure. Pico, however, was all in for the adventure. Our wire-haired dachshund, with his hunting instincts, would love a life in a 14-hectare forest. And indeed, once we were settled in France, Pico was permanently on patrol! Every morning around 10 a.m., he'd amble into the woods at his leisure and only come back when he was hungry. We also often saw him in the field below, digging furiously. All you could see was his tail wagging above the grass. We immediately knew he was digging for moles.



Whenever we wanted to go out, we first had to find Pico. If he was in the woods, you were out of luck. If he was in the field below, we

## Ça va, ça va

would call for him. You'd see his head pop up above the grass for a moment, and then he'd immediately get back to digging! With a sigh, we'd go and get him.

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### The Hunting Dog

One time, when I was walking in our forest, a good distance from the house, a fox suddenly jumped into the middle of the path. It looked at me wildly, then leaped back into the bushes. A moment later, Pico sprinted across the path, barking loudly, chasing the fox. He didn't even notice me standing there!

He would also catch a rat from time to time. Once, when guests were arriving, I saw Pico walking behind them with a huge rat in his mouth. I immediately steered the guests in another direction while Marjo discreetly lured Pico away. Another time, we saw him dart under the dining table, where he deposited another dead rat! Thank goodness the guests didn't notice anything.

One day he was terribly sick. If you picked him up, he'd yelp and cry. We feared a herniated disc, a notorious dachshund ailment. I took him to the vet—or rather, the farm vet. We lived in a sheep-farming area, so the vets didn't have much to do with dogs, cats, and guinea pigs. I sat in the waiting room. A farmer in front of me was at the counter, arguing with the vet.

"The sheep is dead!" he complained. "Can I return these expensive medicines?"

"So it didn't make it," the vet said. "Where's the animal?"

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"He's in my van out back."

"Oh, well, let's take a look then. I'd still like to know the cause of death!"

They walked outside together and opened the van doors. And there, a sheep lay with all four legs in the air and its tongue hanging out of its mouth! The vet put on an apron, grabbed his knife, and sliced the animal open from throat to tail. He then buried his arms up to his elbows in the dead sheep's guts and pulled the whole mess out.

"Ah, just as I thought!" he said. "Twisted intestines, which led to a severe infection!" He stuffed everything back in and closed the door. A moment later, with blood on his hands, he looked at me and asked, "Can I help you?"

Slightly stunned, I walked with him. After he washed his hands and examined Pico, he suspected Pico might have a neck hernia. "I'd rather refer you to the veterinary clinic in Toulouse; they'll need to take X-rays."

In the end, Pico had neck surgery and, miraculously, recovered.

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## The Thief Dog

At one point, we noticed Pico was getting way too fat. He was getting older, of course. We had to put him on a diet. We also saw that guests liked to give him treats, so we asked them to stop. "Oh, what's one cookie going to hurt?" they'd say. "Well, no, but it adds up when everyone does it!"

## Ça va, ça va

One day, campers came up to us. "Pico ate all their croissants!" they complained. "Oh dear, how could that happen?"

"He slipped into our tent this morning and devoured five croissants."

Behind them, I saw Pico ambling up the path, out of breath and with an enormous paunch!

Over time, we heard more stories about our dachshund's raids. Once, as I walked through the campsite, I caught him in the act. He was just worming his way under a tent, and I just saw his tail disappear under the canvas, wagging.

I then asked everyone to keep an eye on him and to store their food safely. The next day, guests told us that Pico had broken into their



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box of eggs and eaten all of them. "We thought he'd leave the eggs alone!"

Later, as a joke, I put up a sign that read, '*CHIEN VOLEUR*'—THIEF DOG! A little while later, I saw Pico demonstratively lifting his leg against my sign!

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## The Final Goodbye

Just before we were about to go on vacation, Pico got sick. He was throwing up and wouldn't eat. I took him to the vet again. We had since found another one who was more specialized in smaller animals. He concluded that our dog had a liver infection, and we went home with a bag full of medicine. The neighbours would look after him while we were away. We felt terrible leaving him sick. When we called, the neighbours said he was getting better.

When we got back from vacation, we picked him up. The next morning, he didn't come out of his bed. He looked ashen. "Oh, Kees, come here, he's dying!" Marjo screamed. The little animal was barely breathing, and a moment later, he took his last breath. We realized with a jolt that Pico had waited for us to come home! We wrapped him in his blanket and buried him in his favorite spot in the woods.

A year later, we started to feel the loss of a dog again. I saw a photo online of a cute 7-month-old dachshund. We made an appointment with the owner. After a 200 km drive, we couldn't find the address. We called him, and he asked where we were. "I'll come to you," he said. And sure enough, half an hour later, a car pulled up, and a man

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got out with a little dachshund in his arms. The dog looked around nervously. The whole situation felt very strange, like some kind of drug deal.



"Is he okay?" I asked. "Let him walk around for a bit." After we checked the papers, we paid and drove home with our new Pico. We suspected the man was a breeder who raised dachshunds for wild boar hunting and that this one was deemed unsuitable for the hunt—he was too timid!

It took a while for our new Pico to get used to things. He was completely attached to Marjo and wanted nothing to do with me. He was clearly afraid of men. It wasn't until Marjo went to the Netherlands alone for two weeks, and Pico and I were together, that we finally became buddies.

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When we moved to Villeneuve-sur-Lot, it was a big adjustment for Pico, too. He was already eight years old. Dachshunds usually live to be between 12 and 15. When Pico turned 12, his health started to decline. He began to cough. The vet couldn't find anything at first. I asked if he might have lungworm or something similar. We got a dewormer, but it didn't help. The coughing got worse and worse, and sometimes he coughed up a little blood. His energy also decreased. On a walk, he'd trudge along behind us. At one point, we noticed his breathing was getting faster and faster. He was really struggling to get air. So, it was back to the vet. They took X-rays of his lungs. There was something there. A few weeks later, they did an ultrasound. It showed that he probably had lung cancer. We got some medication to help him feel more comfortable. But Pico kept getting worse. At one point, he was breathing 60 times a minute! But he didn't seem to be in pain. He ate well, was happy and alert, but slept a lot. Walks were out of the question; he just didn't have the energy. Marjo wanted to have him put to sleep. I had a harder





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time with that. Finally, we called the vet and asked him to come to our house to put Pico to sleep.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/114602804>



## Metastaticit

It's been a while, but I still remember the reservation we received from Jan and Mieke for a week-long stay. An older couple, they had never been to France before.

July 7th arrived, and no Jan and Mieke. Strange. I checked the reservation again. They were definitely supposed to arrive on the 7th. We called them, but no answer! What now? We decided to wait and see.

The next day, around four in the afternoon, a couple came strolling up.

"Well, look at this, what a beautiful spot," the man said, checking his watch. "Looks like we're right on time."

"On time?! You're 24 hours late! I was honestly expecting you yesterday!"

Mieke immediately gave Jan a firm jab in the ribs.

"See, you idiot! I told you so, you fool, you moron!"

A heated argument broke out in the courtyard.

"Come on," I said, "it doesn't matter. The important thing is that you're here." I took them by the arm and led them to the bar to save the other stunned guests from the scene. "Come on, no fighting. I'll get you your welcome drink. What can I get for you?"

"Phew," Jan said, "I'm glad we're here. This is our first time in France and our first *chambres d'hôtes* experience." We couldn't

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help but laugh. (the sound of hoes means death in Dutch) Jan didn't realize what he had just said.

"Yes," I replied, "I hope it's better than a near-death experience!"

The ice was broken, and all was well again. Jan and Mieke turned out to be a bit scatterbrained but very kind guests with a great sense of humor. Mieke couldn't resist teasing Jan from time to time. We had a wonderful time with them and said goodbye with a few big kisses after a week.

"We've never had such a great vacation! It was fantastic!" That makes you feel good.

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### **Jan's Last Vacation**

The following year, we got a call from Mieke. Jan had lung cancer. It was in an advanced stage and had spread. Jan had basically been given up on. Wow, that hit hard. They wanted to come back to us in the fall for another one of their amazing vacations, "Jan's last vacation," she said.

"My goodness, Mieke, what sad news! Of course, you are more than welcome!"

"We'll be coming with Patrick and Paula. Patrick is Jan's best friend. They'll be driving because Jan really can't anymore after his chemo and radiation."

A moment later, the reservation came in: two rooms for one week.

## Ça va, ça va

In September, the group drove up. Patrick and Paula were in the front, Jan and Mieke in the back. Paula turned out to have a very severe case of obesity, and Patrick didn't look like he was very steady on his feet. With Patrick's help, Paula rolled out of the car, and Jan said cheerfully, "Well, Kees, perfectly on time this time, and on the right day, right?" Everyone started to laugh.

Paula was an incredibly crabby person who complained about everything. We could already tell that Paula and Mieke were not getting along. Jan and Patrick, on the other hand, were having a great time. True bosom buddies.

We noticed that at breakfast and dinner, Mieke always sat directly opposite Paula. We saw her making disgusted faces at Paula and throwing out nasty and sarcastic comments. Nothing was good enough for Paula. She didn't like the food, the weather was too cold or too hot, she wanted different drinks, the bed wasn't comfortable—in short, nothing was good enough. Patrick constantly went out of his way to please her, putting a pillow behind her back, massaging her feet, moving her closer to the heater. Patrick obediently followed her commands. And Mieke kept prodding her, causing Paula's irritation to grow more and more.

The next day, the four of them went on an outing. We and the other guests were relieved. A moment of peace! At the end of the afternoon, the group returned. We could already hear a lot of bickering in the car.

Paula's car door flew open. "Patrick! Get over here right now and help me out of this car and take me to my room! Now, yes! And bring my pillows!"

## Ça va, ça va

Patrick, as compliant as ever, rolled Paula out of the car, after which she hobbled to the room, with Patrick on her heels. They clearly had a big fight during their outing! This promised to be an interesting dinner.



At dinner, Mieke again sat directly opposite Paula and immediately began to stir the pot. We were sitting at the table with about 12 guests that evening. Paula immediately started complaining again. "I don't like pasta! Can't you make something else for me? And what are we having for dessert?!"

Food, and especially desserts, was very important to Paula, given her size of at least 150 kilos.

"Oh," Mieke said, "I'll take your portion. I've got a little packet of crackers for you somewhere."

## Ça va, ça va

Oh, boy. This was going to be a great evening. We were mortified, especially in front of the other guests.

At one point, when the argument was at its peak, one of the guests suddenly slammed her hand down on the table! Everyone jumped!

"PAULA, you are an unbelievably fat and selfish bitch!" Anne, one of our guests, screamed. "Don't you understand, for Pete's sake, that this is Jan's last vacation, you egotistical serpent! You're ruining his last hours with all your whining, your bossiness, and your complaining!"

Well, that came out of nowhere. All the guests looked at Anne in shock, and then at Paula, who turned as white as a ghost. The other guests chimed in, agreeing with Anne, and Mieke looked at Paula with great satisfaction and a big smile. Paula burst into tears and screamed, "Patrick! I want to go to my room now! Right now! Get over here and help me!" The table was dead silent.

"Marjo, what are we having for dessert?" Mieke asked, as if nothing had happened.

I went to Patrick and Paula's room. With a tear-stained face, Paula was cursing and furiously throwing clothes into her suitcase. "I'm going home, now! I'm done. We're leaving tomorrow morning. Jan and Mieke can figure it out. I don't want to see them again!"

"You can't do that, Paula! How are they going to get home?"

"They can figure it out themselves. We're leaving, and we're leaving without them!"

Oops, we had a serious problem, a crisis, you could say.

### **Ça va, ça va**

The next day, tempers had thankfully calmed down a bit. At our insistence, Anne apologized, and we did our best for the remaining days to keep Paula and Mieke apart. I consistently sat Mieke on the other side of the table where she couldn't see Paula. I sat across from Mieke and kept a close eye on her. I couldn't prevent an occasional nasty grimace or a sarcastic remark from being launched toward Paula. The group left a day earlier than planned, in a big commotion. What a week that was! We had never experienced anything so intense!

Six months later, we received an email from Mieke. Jan had passed away.

## The Village restaurant

Martrin's main restaurant is an endless source of hilarious scenes and gossip. Martrin is a tiny village nestled in the hills of the Aveyron, with a beautiful church surrounded by about a dozen scattered farmhouses. The mayor does his best to keep the village alive. The local restaurant is more of a "Multi Service" establishment, combining a dining area, a grocery store, a post office, and a bakery. Villagers can grab a bite to eat, buy essentials, handle their mail, and get a fresh baguette. The owners also have to provide lunch for the students at the village school.



The monumental building, including its garden and breathtaking view, is leased for a pittance to an operator, on the condition that they keep all four services running. The operators, however, change as often as flies on a strawberry tart.

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**Serge and Fabrice**



## Ça va, ça va

At one point, it was Serge and Fabrice's turn, a gay couple from the Provence area. Serge was a tough, big guy with massive tattooed biceps, always in jeans, a short-sleeved plaid shirt unbuttoned to his navel, from which a thick mat of chest hair protruded. He wore about five chunky rings on his fingers and a huge crucifix on a silver chain around his neck. Serge was the chef, not so much because he could cook, but more because he was notoriously bad at dealing with guests, which often led to arguments.

His partner, Fabrice, was a skinny, kind, plush teddy bear—the exact opposite of Serge. He scurried around serving tables. Customer service came much more naturally to him, partly due to his feminine mannerisms.

Whenever we went there, the mayor and his wife were usually having an elaborate dinner. He had clearly made a deal with Serge and Fabrice. Guest comments ranged from "Great food, nice place" to "That was the first and last time!"

Whenever Serge escaped the kitchen, he'd walk through the guests, his dark eyes suspicious, looking for a victim! You were very wise to keep your mouth shut if something wasn't quite right! When he did get into a fight with a guest, Fabrice would rush over and push Serge back into the kitchen.

One day, I saw an announcement for a *soirée dîner dansant*—a dinner dance. A band was supposed to liven up the evening. We thought it would be a fun idea to take our guests there.

When we arrived, Fabrice was in a state.

"It's just not my day!" he wailed, dejected.

## Ça va, ça va

"Hey, what's wrong?" I asked, concerned.

"My mother died last night!" he sobbed. Everyone comforted him. A moment later, we sat down. But there was no band in sight!

"Fabrice, wasn't it supposed to be a dinner dance tonight?"

"I told you it's not my day!" he cried sadly. "The band was booked and paid for, but Serge yelled at them for being late, and now they won't come! But I'm trying to arrange something else."

Around 10 PM, a man with an accordion showed up, took a seat, and began a series of cringe-worthy polkas from "Accordion Lessons for Beginners, Part 1." His singing did not improve things. An hour later, a drum kit was added.

"Hmm, maybe it'll get better," we hoped.

The accordionist was joined by a girl with a flute and a boy who began to torture the drum kit. A collective sigh of relief filled the air whenever the trio took a break. Meanwhile, a sobbing Fabrice rushed between the tables, serving everyone food and drinks.

Less than a year later, Serge and Fabrice had left without a trace. Serge had gotten into a huge fight with the mayor!

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## Carlo and Papà

Next, it was the turn of two Italians, Carlo and his father. Carlo was the chef, and *Papà* was the waiter.

## Ça va, ça va

Curious, we went to check it out, and the pizzas were absolutely delicious! I had rarely had such a good pizza in my life! "Great, a good pizzeria nearby!" Everyone was enthusiastic.

Months later, we decided to go there with our French friends. It was an unforgettable experience!

There were no other guests when we arrived, which was always a shame. *Papà* came outside to take our order. Of course, we ordered pizzas and a carafe of red wine.

"Scuse," *Papà* replied, "we only have bottles left. I will pick a nice wine for you."

Outside, a speaker box was blasting loud music straight into our ears. When *Papà* went inside, I turned the speaker around so we could have a conversation. A moment later, he came back with a dusty bottle of red wine and tried to pull the cork out. It crumbled completely. When he poured it, the wine looked almost black.

That's no good, I thought immediately.

"This is a very special wine," *Papà* said proudly and walked back inside. On his way, he turned the speaker back toward us. I cautiously tasted the wine. It tasted like fermenting port!

We called *Papà* back, and while I fished the cork pieces out of my glass, I told him the wine was definitely spoiled.

"*Mille scuse!*" he cried, examining the wine. "I'll get another bottle."

## Ça va, ça va

He walked back inside. A moment later, we heard a lot of commotion. Carlo was clearly arguing with his father, and we were treated to a massive volley of insults.

*"Figlio di puttana ci sei. Ti avevo avvertito così!"* Carlo thundered.

*"Non è così che parli a tuo padre, moccioso!"*

I carefully walked toward the restaurant, turned the speaker back the other way, and gently closed the door.

Fifteen minutes later, *Papà* came back out with another dusty bottle of wine. This one was also well past its prime, but we figured, just let it go. We asked when the pizzas would be ready. We had been waiting for an hour.

*"Spiacente!"* *Papà* cried, as he again adjusted the speaker. "Things are a little difficult today."

*"Se lo fai un'altra volta, ti riporto in Italia. Ti odio!"* rang out from the kitchen a moment later.

*"Eh, ti caccio fuori, buono a nulla!"*

I closed the door again and silenced Eros Ramazzotti by pulling the plug from the speaker.

Finally, the pizzas arrived, the ones I had highly recommended to my guests. It was a huge disappointment! One half was pitch black, the other barely cooked. They were inedible!

A moment later, Carlo the chef came out.

"Everything good here? Do the pizzas taste good?"

## Ça va, ça va

Disgusted, we told him the truth.

"Do they taste good?! Just look, they're pitch black, completely burned! And to make matters worse, you've served us spoiled wine not once but twice! And the atmosphere here isn't exactly pleasant with all your fighting!"

Without saying a word, he turned around and stormed back inside, where the shouting match resumed.

*"Vedi adesso, figlio di puttana! Ti avevo avvertito così!"*

At the end of the evening, *Papà* came out again to clear the mess. He asked if we wanted dessert. He had a delicious Tiramisu.

"No, thanks!" we said in unison. "Just give us the bill. We're leaving, and we expect you to offer us a 'commercial gesture' after this terrible performance!"

He frowned and stomped inside, first stopping, surprised, to put the plug back in the speaker.

Again, a huge argument inside. Ten minutes later, he came back out, agitated.

"Just go! Get out! You don't have to pay anything! Basta!" He turned and angrily stomped back inside, slamming the door behind him.

Surprised, we gathered our things and went home. What a night! At least it was a memorable one that we still talk about regularly! As you can imagine, the Italians have since left, too.

## The Pilgrimage

I saw an announcement in the local newspaper for a procession, '*Le pèlerinage de notre dame d'Orient*', a pilgrimage that would cover a 4 km route from the village of Pousthomy to the monastery '*Monastère des Bénédictines Notre Dame d'Orient*', followed by a mass in the church. Believers were called upon to participate in this procession through prayer.

As a child, I vividly remember the magnificent processions held in my hometown of Sittard. Before the procession began, the most beautiful sand carpets would be made on the streets early in the morning. The priest would walk under a canopy held up by four sturdy altar boys. In his hands, he carried the monstrance, a gilded relic holder sparkling in the sun, containing the host, symbolizing the body of Christ. Behind him, a beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary was carried. The entire procession was led by the full Sittard fanfare, which was preceded by the "bielemannen." These were two hulking, Cossack-like men with long beards, bearskin hats, leather aprons, and huge axes over their shoulders. These "axemen" would march ahead of Napoleon's troops to clear the way. They would chop up trees that the enemy had felled to block the passage. The procession was concluded by various rifle guilds and flag wavers. The whole spectacle made a huge impression on me, a boy of barely six.

The procession would then make its way to the church, where the festivities concluded with a Holy Mass. During the Mass, the sacristan paraded through the aisles with his head held high, wearing a beautiful uniform with a sash, golden epaulettes on his shoulders, and a black bicorné hat with a red plume. He wore white gloves and carried a huge staff with a silver knob. People who

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misbehaved or didn't kneel would receive a warning tap with his staff.

I myself stood in the back of the church, messing around with my friends. When the mass was over and we walked outside, the priest was waiting for us. He stepped up to me and, with a massive swing of his open hand, gave me a slap on the ear in front of everyone—a slap I can still feel today! He turned and stomped back into the church, watched by the approving looks of all the bystanders.

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## Back in France

Back in France, I saw this announcement and, out of curiosity, I thought I would go and see what was left of the grandeur of processions today. I didn't expect much. I already knew the *Monastère des Bénédictines Notre Dame d'Orient*—a very small monastery with a beautiful church with a wooden ceiling. Only three nuns still lived in the monastery. When I arrived at the meeting point in Pousthomy, I found about twenty fellow believers, not a single one younger than seventy. At sixty years old, I was clearly the youngest. After about fifteen minutes, a van arrived, and two nuns got out. They then struggled to pull a huge statue of the Virgin Mary from the back. With some help from bystanders, the statue was placed on the ground, and with instructions from the nuns, a carrying frame was assembled and the statue was placed on top. After another fifteen minutes, the procession set off towards the monastery, led by the statue of Mary carried by four volunteers,

Ça va, ça va



followed by the two nuns and a crowd that had now grown to about forty very elderly believers.

During this "impressive" procession, the "Hail Mary" was constantly being prayed:

*Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâces; le Seigneur est avec vous. Vous êtes bénie entre toutes les femmes et Jésus, le fruit de vos entrailles, est béni. Sainte Marie, Mère de Dieu, priez pour nous, pauvres pécheurs, maintenant et à l'heure de notre mort. Amen.*

The Hail Mary was regularly interspersed with a hymn, which everyone sang with gusto. The four men carrying the statue were regularly relieved by other volunteers. I even had a turn. Because I was taller than the other three men, I got the majority of the weight of the heavy statue. The procession stopped a few times, and one of the nuns would read a Bible verse.



## Ça va, ça va

Around 11 a.m., the procession arrived at the monastery church and we were met by the priest and more believers who had opted out of the 4 km walk. The statue of Mary was blessed and carried into the church, followed by the crowd that had been waiting outside. After the mass, we were greeted outside by the three nuns, who served snacks and poured apple juice or sweet white wine into the familiar plastic cups. The oldest nun, *Soeur Marie*, who was in a wheelchair, was well into her nineties and completely deaf.

At one point, an old man in a wheelchair was positioned next to Marie. His companion yelled into the brass horn that *Soeur Marie* held to her ear:

"Bonjour Marie!! Here is Jacques!!!"

"Oui, oui," said *Soeur Marie*, "Saint Jacques."

"No, no," the companion yelled even louder, "It's Jacques, your brother!!!"

Marie didn't understand at all and stubbornly repeated, "Oui, oui, Saint Jacques!"

It soon became clear that communication between the two was no longer possible, and brother and sister just stared stoically at each other. After half an hour, everyone called it a day and went home. All in all, it was another one of those memorable and typically French days. A video of this special event can be seen at:

Ça va, ça va

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhpziqS4BPo>



Ça va, ça va

## The French Flea Market Frenzy

Nowhere are flea markets as numerous and popular as in France. This is probably because the French don't throw things away easily. They use every object until its last gasp and then, in a final act of liberation, try to sell it off at a flea market. Flea markets, by definition, happen in all seasons, typically on Sundays. For the bigger ones, they'll occasionally tack on a Saturday for good measure. France has a few different types of these treasure troves:

### La Brocante

This is more of an antique market where dealers try to peddle their 'artistic treasures' for a pretty penny. Tucked in amongst the pros, you'll also find regular folks trying to unload their cast-off junk. You usually find brocantes in the heart of a village, which makes them incredibly cozy. It's a hive of activity, with restaurants and cafés raking in the cash from packed terraces, creating an absolutely fantastic vibe.



## Ça va, ça va

Tourists stroll between the sun-drenched stalls, grabbing a seat at a terrace for a *café allongé* or a *noisette*, and are endlessly amused by the colorful parade of visitors in the most varied and vibrant outfits. At midday, everyone scrambles for a spot in one of the many restaurants, while the exhibitors are content with a baguette filled with ham and cheese—because, you know, a good sale can't wait for a sit-down meal.

### Le Vide Grenier

Literally translated as "empty attic," these are attic cleanout sales, usually organized by local clubs. To fatten up their club's coffers, every self-respecting association—like the tennis club, the *jeu de boules* team, the dance school, even the fire department or the hunting club—organizes a *vide grenier* on their own turf once a year. This can happen in or around the clubhouse or in some random field. Since there are no restaurants, the catering is handled by the club itself, which, of course, brings in a few extra bucks. So you'll find a table with thermoses of coffee where you can buy a plastic cup for a euro, a party tent selling sausages with fries, and a makeshift beer and wine stand. Every effort is made to make this annual highlight a financial success.

These *vide greniers* are often modest in size, with no more than fifty stalls. However, there are exceptions. Some clubs have worked their way up over the years through sheer grit and good marketing, making their *vide grenier* wildly popular with hundreds of exhibitors and thousands of visitors, often requiring the *gendarmerie* to show up just to keep things from spiraling out of control.

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### La Vide Maison

So, Grandma and Grandpa have passed away. The heirs, being the kids and assorted nieces and nephews, want to sell the house, but first, they have to get rid of all the stuff inside. The family then organizes a *vide maison*, which is basically a garage sale. All the dented pots and pans, the worn-out washing machine, the long-frozen fridge, a creaking desk, the sagging sofa, a bed that's seen better days, an old pendulum clock, and some rusty tools are neatly displayed. The heirs proudly give you a tour, showing off all the



family "treasures," which are then sold for reasonable prices.

Often, the entire house is open to the public. Crowds of people jostle on the stairs, in the kitchen, and in the attic, all on the hunt for a bargain. I always get a morbid feeling when I go to these—like I'm a true intruder in the family's tragedy.

### The Great French Flea Market Hunt

The question, of course, is when and where do these things even happen? The French just *know*! If there's a flea market on Sunday,

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September 12th, you can bet your bottom dollar it's a yearly affair and will be repeated on the second Sunday of September every year! Beyond that, it's all "word of mouth" (*bouche à l'oreille*) and, for the uninitiated, announced with posters on every lamppost.

And, naturally, there's the internet. **www.brocabrac.fr** and **www.vide-greniers.org** are the two leading websites where you can find every single flea market across all of France.

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## Other Places to Find Treasures

France also has its share of thrift stores. The most interesting and well-known is **Emmaüs**. This is a chain of second-hand stores founded in 1949 by Father Abbé Pierre, where the proceeds go to help the poor and homeless, who themselves pitch in to run the shops. This foundation has grown into a worldwide organization. You can find some pretty nice items for next to nothing. Just check their hours first; most stores are only open one or two days a week.

Also well known is **Troc de L'Ile**, or simply **Troc**. Here, you bring your unwanted items, and they sell them for you—naturally, with a fat profit margin. You'll find unique things here, but they're a bit more expensive. You'll definitely find a Troc or an Emmaüs in every major city, though often on the outskirts. Just give it a quick Google!

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## The Big Leagues

Finally, there are some famous *brocantes*, like the **Braderie de Lille**. This is the largest flea market in the world, always held on the first

## Ça va, ça va

weekend of September. The city overflows with old junk, bargain hunters, dealers, and tourists.

And let's not forget the **Puces de Saint-Ouen** in Paris. This one happens every Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. It's an enormous 9-hectare labyrinth of alleys, streets, and passages in the north of Paris. It's basically a series of streets with garage-like stalls on either side. Saturday mornings, all the vendors throw up their shutters, and the party begins! It doesn't matter what you're looking for, the Puces has it! You'll find a stall that sells nothing but curtain tassels—thousands of them in every size and color. Next to it, someone will have a stall that makes you feel like you're in a hall of mirrors because they only sell gigantic mirrors and chandeliers. Even a famous antique dealer might have a "garage stall"—well, three in a row that they've turned into a grand palace. Across the way, someone else sells nothing but gigantic monastery tables, and next to them, a stall with only helmets from World War I and II.

I once saw an old woman sitting on the ground with a small rug in front of her. On the rug were dozens of used dentures. An interested old man picked them up one by one, popped them in his mouth to try on, and left a few minutes later with a wide grin on his face.

If you are ever in Paris, you absolutely have to go to the Puces! You can even ask for a guided tour (*une visite guidée*). A guide will show you the most beautiful stalls and lead you into the deepest corners of the market. A visit to this market is an unforgettable experience. Take the metro to "Porte de Clignancourt." Once you're above ground, walk about half a kilometer north, and you'll find the Puces. If all else fails, just ask the first person you see!

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## The storm

Our driveway always had a secret. In a heavy downpour, a little stream would appear out of nowhere. We'd just guide it along, finding it amusing, our very own little brook. One day, I decided to be a detective and trace its source. A dirt road ran uphill above our place, and above that was an asphalt road with a ditch. The ditch, it turned out, channeled excess rainwater through pipes under the road, sending it straight down to that dirt track just above us. From there, it would flow down the ruts in the path and right into our yard. After a few days of good, solid rain, this little river could flow for days.

In October, we got a call from friends who lived a bit further down the road. They had rabbit in the oven—did we want to come over for dinner? Now, rabbit brings up some... well, let's just say, *unfortunate* memories for us. The last time we had it, we got a call from Holland that our best friend had a heart attack and passed away at 50. But, hey, this rabbit would probably taste just fine.

During dinner, it rained non-stop, all evening long. We even thought we heard a downpour. "Wow," we said later, "this is a real storm!"

Then the phone rang. It was our neighbour. We had to come home immediately; things were going completely wrong! So we left the rabbit to its fate, apologized to our hosts, and rushed out the door. Two steps outside, running for our car, we were already soaked. On the way home, we saw trees swinging wildly, water gushing over the road, and branches and huge rocks everywhere! We decided that this rabbit had brought us no luck either and swore to never eat it again.

## Ça va, ça va

When we got home, in the glow of the lamppost, we saw an enormous torrent of water—or more accurately, a massive river of mud—where our gentle stream usually was. It was swirling down the driveway, into the garage, and down the path. Another part was flowing straight into the campground's restroom block. Our lovely little brook had swollen into a dangerous, savage mudslide, carrying everything in its path.

We threw on our boots and rain gear, grabbed our shovels, and started digging trenches to redirect the water—something we Dutch are naturally good at! When we walked into the restrooms, we found a 30-centimeter layer of light-brown "chocolate" mud. We opened the door to the next room, which was a bad idea; the mud immediately flowed right in. In the garage, our lawnmowers were standing knee-deep in goo. Rocks were everywhere, and the path to the campground was completely washed away. Thank goodness we had no guests. We slogged on until 2 a.m., then, completely exhausted, we collapsed into bed.

The next morning, we finally saw the full extent of nature's handiwork. What a mess. We called our insurance agent and the mayor. The mayor was on our doorstep within 10 minutes, staring at the scene in a daze. "Quelle horreur, quelle menace!" he muttered, completely stunned. He asked if he should rally some people to help.

"Yes, please!" we said. Half an hour later, André, a farmer who lived uphill from us, came to survey the chaos. He was also shocked by what he saw and offered to use his excavator to clear the mud, since trying to shovel that sticky mass by hand was a fool's errand. He gave us a cost estimate.

## Ça va, ça va

Meanwhile, the insurance agent arrived. "Oh la la, quelle sinistre!" he exclaimed. He said all the indoor damage would be covered. "Pas de problème, vous êtes tranquille!" But the outdoor damage? "Tant pis," he said—tough luck, not covered. Just what we were afraid of.

An hour later, André reappeared with his big bulldozer and a helper. They worked for two days, carting away the mess. He later told me he'd shoveled away at least 15 tons of mud and dumped it at the back of our parking lot, which, as a bonus, was now much bigger. A day later, when we walked onto the camping field to check for damage, we found all sorts of our belongings. Crates, plastic containers, oil bottles, and other things had been swept out of the garage and were scattered deep in the woods. After a few days, everything was cleaned up, and we started to wonder what had happened.

It turned out that the farmers had plowed their fields on the hill a few days before. The loose soil, of course, was easily washed away by the storm, and along with the freshly fallen leaves, it clogged the ditches and the pipes under the road. This caused the mud to collect and flow down the hill, right toward us. It was only later that we realized the farmer who plowed those fields was André himself!

"Well, I'll be," we said. "He was shoveling away his own mud!"

We asked the mayor if measures could be taken to prevent a recurrence. He promised that a large catch basin would be built above our house with a culvert running under the road, so the water would no longer come to us. The municipality had to apply for a subsidy. After we pestered them a few more times, the pit was finally built two years later. Less than six months later, there was

## Ça va, ça va

another downpour. More than 64 mm of water fell in one hour, in the middle of the night! The pit worked! When I went to check on it the next day, you could tell all heck had broken loose.

The following year, it was late July, and we were sleeping soundly when we were woken by a massive thunderstorm. The clock read 3 a.m. The lightning was constant, and the thunder was deafening and terrifying. When I looked outside, the rain was flying horizontally past the windows, and the trees were swaying dangerously. A storm was howling around the house like nothing we had ever experienced! We put on our rain gear and boots again. Once outside, I was certain: this was the end of days!

Guests were wandering around the house in a daze, panicking. We immediately opened the bar in the Grange (our converted barn) and ushered all the guests inside, who were relieved to find a safe haven. On the camping ground, it was pure chaos! People were running around screaming. A couple of trees had blown over and landed on cars! A massive broken branch had skewered a tent in two. The occupants were thankfully already in the Grange. Another tree had landed right next to a tent. Further down, acacia trees had snapped like matchsticks, and caravan awnings had been ripped off. The rain was pouring down in sheets, drains were overflowing, and entire sections of the ground were washed away. The chaos was complete!

Back in the Grange, where all the guests had gathered, we brewed coffee and I put on some calming music, like "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head." After an hour, the storm calmed, and we could go back to bed. We'd deal with it all tomorrow. We were able to find rooms for the guests whose tents were no longer with us. The next

## **Ça va, ça va**

day, the true extent of the hurricane's devastation became clear. What a mess! Everyone pitched in to clean up. We carefully used the tractor to lift the fallen tree off the two cars, which had suffered a good amount of damage. Everyone helped out. I remember one couple who just calmly went shopping in Albi, seemingly oblivious to the incredible mess. A giant branch had broken off a big oak tree and was still dangling precariously over a tunnel tent by a few fibers. We moved the entire tent first before bringing the branch down. A few days later, everything was thankfully cleaned up, and I had a year's worth of firewood for the stove!

As you can see, you just can't mess with nature!





## La Pilière Basse

(Story used with permission from Joost & Renée)

On the other side of the hill, a place called *La Pilière Basse* stood. It was an officially uninhabitable dwelling and, at the same time, an inexplicably inhabited one. I say 'lived' because only Joost is there now—Renée has since left.

La Pilière Basse was one of many farms in the Aveyron region that had been standing empty since the 1950s, after a recession sent their residents off to seek their fortunes elsewhere. After time had turned the old farm into a ruin, Joost and a friend bought it for next to nothing. However, due to a chronic lack of money, they never managed to transform this ruin into a home that met modern standards. Joost's friend eventually gave up. But Joost wasn't looking for a modern home anyway.

He got to work and, in his own inimitable style, created his little slice of paradise in the middle of nature, devoid of basic amenities like electricity, phones, sewage, and running water. With his vegetable garden, his chickens and ducks that provided eggs, and a deep knowledge of plants, herbs, and mushrooms, he was able to forage for his food. The occasional fox or rabbit he found that had been hit by a car also added a little variety to his diet.

Tormented and existentially-stuck youngsters would regularly visit Joost, searching for the meaning of life, and finding some semblance of it there. In exchange for room and board, they lent a hand to help make the ruin more and more livable. They chopped down trees for beams, dug holes for a compost toilet, used plastic hoses from the local dump (*déchèterie*) to create an irrigation

## Ça va, ça va

system, and tilled the soil to make a vegetable garden. With some old windows scrounged from a thrift store, they cobbled together a greenhouse.

Joost wanted nothing to do with plasterboard, aerated concrete blocks, spray foam, click laminate, or silicone sealant. No, Joost built with wood from his own forest, especially bamboo, because it was so light, strong, and didn't rot. The rest was stone from the farm's collapsed sections. One of the few concessions Joost made was the occasional plastic tarp.

Winter was a bit of a grind. When it froze, the water supply stopped because the hoses leading to his well were frozen solid. The well itself would turn into a block of ice. Joost was forced to go fetch water from the neighbours with a few jerrycans. It was a good lesson in water conservation. The wood stove barely kept the bedroom warm, but with a couple of thick blankets, it was manageable.

One day, Renée showed up. A creative and restless theatrical spirit, Renée had been wandering the world in a rickety camper van her whole life. She saw something in La Pilière Basse, and in Joost. She decided to stay for a while. Joost was fine with that, and together, with their very limited resources, they expanded Joost's little spot into what you might call a rather curious domain.

To make ends meet, Renée would occasionally put on a theatrical performance and do odd jobs in the wider area, while Joost preferred to stay home and wait for whatever life brought him. The relationship between Joost and Renée was never entirely clear. Were they a couple? Just buddies? Nobody knew for sure.



## Ça va, ça va

During our hikes, we would sometimes stop by La Pilière Basse for a cup of tea. Of course, it was herbal tea, brewed from wild mint, verbena, and other unidentifiable plants that Joost swore were very good for you. Joost was a former gardener and seemed to know all about plants and what they did to you.

We would sit for tea in the outdoor kitchen, which was built against a rock face in a small courtyard and covered with a plastic tarp to protect it from the elements. In one corner stood an old, rusty, wood-fired stove where they cooked their meals.



"Look," Renée said, "I use dried orange peels to get the fire started."

And indeed, with a loud crackle, the peels quickly got the fire going, after which Joost placed the blackened kettle on the stove. After rustling up a few mismatched mugs, we sat down for tea and homemade biscuits.

## Ça va, ça va

I asked Joost and Renée if they'd be up for an idea: that we, with our guests, could stop by La Pilière Basse during a group hike. Joost would give a tour, Renée would put on a show, and we could have a simple lunch.

"It'll bring in some cash, right?" I added.

They liked the idea, so a few weeks later, I headed out with 16 guests to visit Joost and Renée. I had given our guests a bit of a heads-up, telling them a little about our illustrious duo during the walk.

Renée met us halfway and, like a forest nymph, led the group deeper into the woods toward their hidden paradise in the jungle. Once we arrived, our guests were in a state of utter shock and amazement!

"How can you live in a ruin?!"

"There's not even a roof on the house!"

"No running water? Well, just a plastic hose with a few drips coming out."

"No hot water?" "Nope, no hot water."

"Do you have electricity?"

"Yeah, of course. See, there's our little solar panel. It provides a whopping 100 watts!"

"And do you have a washing machine?"

## Ça va, ça va

"Of course! See, we put the dirty laundry in this tub. We add some soft soap and beat it with this stick to get oxygen into the water. Works perfectly!"

"And where's your toilet?"

"There," Joost said, pointing to a little shack made of sticks and a tarp, with a wooden box over a hole in the ground and some straw. "That's our organic sawdust toilet."

Joost continued the tour, showing everyone the big vegetable garden, the greenhouses, the sauna, the natural stone bread oven, the chicken coop, and the part that still had a roof, which served as their bedroom and living room in the winter.

You could see that all the guests were gaining more and more respect, appreciation, and admiration for Joost and Renée's life philosophy. After a fantastic theatrical performance by Renée, we sat down at the table they had cobbled together themselves and had a lively discussion about the hows and whys of their life. Everyone enjoyed a strained soup made from garden herbs and vegetables, served in a wild medley of plates and bowls. While Joost talked about the cosmic universe, the dangers of Wi-Fi radiation, the nefarious plans of "the cartel," and how to heal yourself with herbs and mushrooms, Renée served a large salad of garden cress, winter purslane, carrots, oak leaf lettuce, thyme, tomatoes, eggs, onions, cardamom, and a homemade mayonnaise. All, of course, from their own land. The meal concluded with a cheese platter, homemade spelt bread, and a cup of coffee with a slice of cake.

After the meal, I heard one of the guests whisper to her friend:

## Ça va, ça va

"Jan, I have to use the toilet!"

"So? Just go!"

"Yeah, but, I'm not going to squat over a hole like that! Did you see that shack?"

"Why not? Come on!"

"That shack doesn't have a door!"

"What does that matter?!"

"I want you to stand lookout, otherwise, I can't go!"

At the end of the afternoon, Renée played the guitar and sang a few songs, while Joost explained how he flitted through life without health insurance.

Around four o'clock, the visit ended, and we walked home, still deep in discussion, taking a different route. Once we got back, everyone was quite impressed by the afternoon.

"It must be wonderful, living like that in France without a mortgage, without stress, without pressure."

"I would love to live like that, but maybe for a week or three."

"I would still miss my washing machine, and my TV, and my iron..."

And so the discussion continued for a good hour.

Ça va, ça va



<https://youtu.be/piB5BFXozio>



## Roquefort

Roquefort cheese, along with wine, the baguette, the croissant, and foie gras, is one of France's culinary monuments. While bread is more of a national symbol, cheese and wine go much further, forming a core part of a region's identity. Every region has its own cheese, and every village within that region creates its own unique flavor. It's wonderful, of course!

But some cheeses rise above their regional identity, such as Brie, Camembert, and, of course, the king of cheeses: Roquefort. How is this world-famous sheep cheese made? How did it originate, and can a cheese lover see the production process? I lived near this famous cheese village for years and will now lift the veil on its secrets.

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### The King of Cheeses: Roquefort

Who hasn't heard of Roquefort, the world-famous blue-veined cheese? Some people love it and can't get enough, while others are repulsed by it, exclaiming, "Gross, there's mold in it!"

The cheese comes from the village of **Roquefort-sur-Soulzon**, located in the Aveyron region just south of Millau, in the shadow of the famous viaduct. Most foreigners mispronounce "Roquefort," saying "ROSJFOR" or "ROKFOR." That's not correct. The French say "ROKKUFOR," with the emphasis on "FOR."

The cheese is made from sheep's milk. Roquefort-sur-Soulzon isn't a particularly beautiful village, but it's situated in a magnificent

## Ça va, ça va

natural area with steep, impressive cliffs. This is the secret to the famous blue cheese.

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### The Mold

These cliffs contain caves and shafts that create a chimney effect. In the underlying caverns, a draft creates a natural air circulation. This, along with many other factors like temperature, humidity, and microbes in the air, forms the ideal climate for the development of this blue mold, also known as **Penicillium roqueforti**, a fungus related to penicillin. Some doctors even prescribe Roquefort cheese to patients with intestinal problems.

This blue-green mold only forms in this specific environment. All sorts of attempts have been made to reproduce it elsewhere, but it only thrives in the caves of Roquefort. The mold, however, grows on bread and thrives very well in sheep's milk.

Today, the name Roquefort is protected. In the past, any producer of blue cheese could print "ROQUEFORT" on their packaging without a problem. That's no longer allowed, so if you buy a package of Roquefort cheese now, you know you're getting the real thing.

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### The Legend

There is a persistent legend about how Roquefort cheese was discovered:

## Ça va, ça va

Once upon a time, a shepherd boy grazed his sheep in the mountains every day. One day, a thunderstorm began, and he took shelter in one of the caves. When the weather cleared, he spotted a beautiful shepherdess. He left the cave in a hurry, forgetting his lunch—a hunk of brown bread and sheep's milk. Weeks later, he took shelter in the same cave and found his old lunch. The bread and the milk, which had already curdled into cheese, were completely moldy. However, he was extremely hungry, and after sniffing the cheese, he ate it anyway. He was ecstatic and took the rest back to the village.

The mold, as the legend suggests, grows on bread. To this day, loaves of bread are still placed in the caves, where they become completely covered in mold after a few weeks. The mold is then scraped off and put into small pots. During cheese production, a little bit of this mold is mixed with the sheep's milk. Just 4 grams is enough for 1,000 liters of milk.

A curious detail is that no cheese is actually made in the village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon itself. The cheeses are only stored and aged there in the caves. Well, "caves" is an oversimplification; they are enormous cellar vaults built against the rock faces. The actual cheese production takes place in factories throughout the Aveyron. One of the factories of the largest producer, **Société**, is in Réquista.

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## The Sheep

So how does the cheese production work? There are currently seven producers: the largest, **Société**, then **Combes**, **Fromageries Occitannes**, **Vernières**, **Carles**, **Gabriel Coulet**, and **Papillon**.



## Ça va, ça va

Each manufacturer has its own designated sheep region. Farmers are given precise instructions they must follow, regarding the sheep breed, breeding, hygiene, feeding times, and milk production.

Most farmers have a flock of between 200 and 500 sheep—ewes, that is, or *brebis* in French. The ram, or *bélier*, apparently doesn't produce milk...

The **Lacaune** sheep breed used for the cheese looks more like a goat than a sheep (*mouton*) and always appears a bit disheveled. The ewes are milked early in the morning and then go out to pasture. Around 2 p.m., they return to the stable, are milked again, and then go back to the pasture to return in the late afternoon.

This makes for a constant procession of flocks in the Aveyron landscape, as evidenced by the many sheep droppings on the roads. The sheep's milk is collected in large milk trucks and taken to the cheese factory, as the milk can only remain with the farmer for a maximum of 24 hours.

Before the white liquid is pumped into the factory's large tank, it is meticulously checked to ensure it contains no harmful bacteria. Each manufacturer has a cheese factory in their area. All the milk from the entire district is collected there, the mold is added, and the cheese-making process begins. Lastly, the cheeses are pierced with needles to ensure the mold thrives, and they are injected with salt.

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## The Caves

## Ça va, ça va

The cheeses are always made in a round shape, weighing 2.7 kg with a diameter of 20 cm and a thickness of about 10 cm. These cheeses are then taken to Roquefort-sur-Soulzon and placed on wooden racks in the caves. Each manufacturer generally produces three flavor variants: normal, mild, and strong. This depends on the aging time and the amount of salt in the cheese. A cheese master monitors the process closely, smelling, tasting, weighing, and judging all day long.

Société also makes three flavor variants: Cave des Templiers, Cave de Baragnaudes, and Cave Abeille. Only the Cave des Templiers is distributed worldwide and can be found in all stores. The other two are reserved for restaurants and exclusive cheese shops.

The caves are open to visitors. In fact, after the Millau Viaduct, they are *the* biggest tourist attraction in the Aveyron. If you go to Roquefort, visit the caves of Société; they are certainly the most impressive. Just be sure to bring a sweater, because like all caves, it's not warmer than about 11 degrees Celsius!

A fun fact: from August to November, no cheese is produced, and the shelves are empty! The ewes are pregnant then. To avoid disappointing visitors, the racks are filled with plastic replicas...

Also, try a Roquefort dish in one of the local restaurants. Just try a Roquefort quiche—it's delicious! You can finish the day with a walk in the beautiful surroundings. You can get wonderful hiking routes at the tourist office.

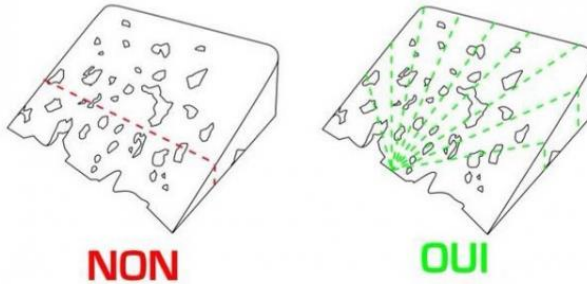
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## How to Cut Roquefort Cheese

## Ça va, ça va

Finally, I'd like to tell you how to properly cut a piece of Roquefort cheese. Unfortunately, everyone does it wrong! The tastiest part of the cheese is in the heart. If you start cutting the cheese as shown on the left in the image, the first guests get lucky, and the last ones are left with just the crust.

Therefore, cut the cheese as shown on the right side of the image.





Ça va, ça va

## Poisson d'Avril

Even in France, they have April Fool's Day. Here, they call it *Poisson d'Avril*—April Fish. Kids cut out colorful fish from paper, stick them on someone's back with a friendly tap and a "Bonjour, ça va?" and then you walk around all day with a fish on your back. When you discover the fish, they hilariously shout, "Poisson d'Avril!"

We've been living in France for 16 years now, and that's about the extent of the French April Fool's joke we've noticed.

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### The Airbus A380 Prank

Back when we lived in the Aveyron, I thought, I'll show these Frenchies a real April Fool's joke.



At the time, the Airbus A380, you know, the world's largest passenger plane, was being developed in Toulouse. So I put together a letter, supposedly from the Airbus factories, addressed to all residents of the Aveyron. The letter explained that the A380 had successfully completed its series of test flights and would begin a new test flight in early April where the aircraft would break the sound barrier! (Which, by the way, that plane can't do at all.)

This test, due to the enormous size of the plane, could result in several very powerful "sonic booms." Because the Aveyron was the most sparsely populated area, Airbus had decided to perform the

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test there. All residents were urgently requested by Airbus to close their windows and especially their shutters on April 1st and to safely store away valuable porcelain and glassware.

I put official Airbus logos on the letter and sent it in a corresponding envelope. Then I mailed it to all our neighbours, including the town hall.

And then I waited...

Well, on April 1st, all hell broke loose! My neighbour was on my doorstep, completely *en colère*! She asked if we had received a letter too.

"Have they completely lost their minds?! You can't just do this! And what now? Can we claim damages somewhere??"

The entire village was buzzing with rumors! Our Dutch friends called each other:

"What now?! What is this?!"

"I'm closing the shutters, for sure!"

"It's not an April Fool's joke, is it??"

I can tell you that the whole town was completely turned upside down. Later, I heard that it was the first item on the agenda at the town council meeting! The mayor, in the end, had a good laugh about it.

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## The Wastewater Treatment Plant Prank

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Later, by then we were living in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, I prepared an April Fool's joke for our new neighbours.

The neighbours would receive a letter supposedly from the municipality, complete with the town logo and the mayor's signature. The letter explained that a new, ecological wastewater treatment plant would be built right behind their houses, including two windmills to make it sustainable and energy-neutral! I put together a nice story and found a real design of a treatment plant on the internet. To make the story complete, I included a cadastral map showing the exact location of the plant.

I wrote the story in Dutch and had Google Translate do the initial translation. (I have to say, Google is getting pretty good at it.) But it was, of course, full of grammatical errors, so I corrected and refined it myself. Then I sent it to my good French friend. His usual response is: "Kees, I understand what you mean; I'll rewrite it!" He always sends me back a truly fantastic piece of prose. I told him, "Let your





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imagination run wild and make it a beautiful, official-looking document."

On March 31st, under the cover of darkness, I secretly dropped the letter into the mailboxes. Now, I just had to wait. The next day, no reaction! Around three o'clock, still nothing!

"Did something go wrong?" I feared. For a sanity check, I had put a letter in our mailbox too, just in case. So I checked my mailbox. There was a package inside, but the letter was gone! Shoot! The mail carrier had been there and had taken the letter! I hadn't thought of that at all! Here in France, if you want to send mail, you can just leave it in your mailbox and the mail carrier will take it with them. There went my plan!!! My only hope was that the others hadn't received any mail and the mail carrier hadn't been there yet.

Around four o'clock, the phone rang:

"Bonjour Kes, c'est Eveline, ça va?" "Oui, ça va, ça va, et toi?" "Oui, ça va."

The usual French greeting ritual.

"Dites-moi, Kes, as-tu reçu une lettre de la Mairie?" "Je ne sais pas, je n'ai pas encore regardé dans ma boîte aux lettres."

I pretended to be completely in the dark.

Then she burst out: "They're going to build a 'station d'épuration' here, right behind us!" she screamed in a panic.

"Let me check the mailbox," I said. "Yep, I got a letter too!"



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"See! What do we do now??"

Thank goodness, everyone else had received the letter. Apparently, they just hadn't had any other mail. Meanwhile, people were frantically calling each other. Eventually, I arranged a first "assembly" at our place to discuss an action plan. So around six o'clock, the neighbours were all sitting around the picnic table in our garden, each with their letter.

"What scoundrels!"

*"Les cons!"*

"How can they do this!"

"There goes our peaceful country life!"

"They talk about low-noise pumps and odor filters. Yeah, right, can you imagine the nuisance that will cause, and then those windmills! They're 'only' sixty meters tall!"

"We'll take it to the tribunal!"

"Yes, if necessary, to the European Court of Justice!"

I started to worry that the joke was going too far and would backfire, as emotions were running high. Marjo had baked cookies in the shape of a fish. So at a certain point, to put them out of their misery, I decided to end it and motioned to Marjo to serve the cookies. Everyone looked at them and yelled:

"Oh, mon dieu!! C'est un poisson d'Avril!!!"

Everyone burst out laughing. They had never been so completely

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fooled in their lives! Thank goodness the joke was taken extremely well. They found it hilarious!



I then gave everyone a comforting pat on the back, and at the same time, I taped a paper fish to their back, the original French April Fool's joke.

My neighbour shouted excitedly, "Oh, I'm going to trick Henri!" Our neighbour Henri was not there at the time. He was on his way home. "I'll let him read the letter and give him the scare of his life!" she said with glee.

"Here," Marjo said, "take a few cookies with you."

"Oh, great, can I?" and she grabbed a few cookies from the tray.

We sat and chatted for another hour with a nice apéritif, after which they all headed home in relief, each with a paper fish on their back!

The next day, I heard that my neighbour had gone to see his friend who lived a little further behind him, and had fooled him as well!

## The Asian

*Still groggy with sleep, I slowly awoke from a kind of coma. I was completely stiff and sore. What do you expect after a hibernation of nearly six months? I gradually came to my senses and, still dazed, crawled out from under the roof tile. The warmth of the sun felt wonderful, and I spread my wings. The sun's rays burned the stiffness from my body.*

*An important task awaited me. I had to build a shelter and create an entire colony of hornets—hundreds of workers, a few queens, and finally a bunch of males. No small feat.*

*My thoughts drifted back to last autumn when, as an aspiring queen, I left the nest and was chased by dozens of lust-crazed males. For days, I had wonderful sex with I don't know how many guys. I couldn't get enough, until my pouch was full of sperm. Then I'd had enough and immediately sent those guys packing. They were destined to die a miserable death anyway, while I still had a whole future ahead of me.*

*My mother was from China. She thought she'd found a nice winter spot in a bamboo stalk. Her hibernation was rudely interrupted when workers unloaded the shipping container full of bamboo poles, and she found herself in the south of France. France turned out to be a dangerous country. Our kind is discriminated against here, because we're Asian, I think.*

*As a larva in the nest, I was well fed. I remember it clearly. Pre-chewed honeybee marinated in a delicious nectar sauce. My workers knew what I liked. Thanks to their good care and a special diet, I grew into a future queen. But after this pampering, I had to get to*

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*work myself and find a suitable spot to build my own nest. I almost found something when I was nearly swatted to death by an angry farmer. No, they really don't like us in France. But oh well, the climate is great here.*

*Flying on, I spotted a beautiful property. "**La Bakénia**" was written at the entrance. I saw a small pond near the veranda—perfect for getting water. There was also plenty of wood available. The spot under the veranda seemed perfect for me to build my nest. Sheltered from the rain, with water and wood close at hand to make the paper pulp I would use to build my home. First, I would hunt for a few tasty bees to regain my strength.*

*A few days later, I was well on my way with my nest. I had already built a strong anchor point and started on the first six combs to lay my first six eggs. From these eggs, my first workers would soon crawl out to help me with my future colony. Later, I would have hundreds and only have to lay eggs. But first, I had to deliver this initial batch. I flew back to the wooden beam. This was exactly the right wood—easy to gnaw off some wood pulp. Then I'd go to the pond for water and mash it all together into papier-mâché.*

*When I flew back to my nest, I suddenly saw a ladder next to it. What is this? It wasn't here a moment ago. Then, a scoundrel sprayed a stream of biting liquid into my eyes. In a panic and blind rage, I flew at the culprit to give that bastard a good sting, but the liquid disoriented me, and I flew away from the danger. I couldn't see anything, and the caustic substance caused unbearable pain in my eyes and airways. I ended up in a rose bush. I didn't know what this stuff was, because hellish pains shot through my body,*

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*paralyzing my limbs. I couldn't think... couldn't... breathe... and... I... I... just... went... to... sleep...*

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One time, when Marjo and I were walking through the woods, we saw a commotion high up in a tree. There was a hornet's nest up there, a huge ball. "Look," I said to Marjo, pointing up, "a frelon nest! I think it's the common European hornet!" The words were barely out of my mouth when a dozen of those nasty creatures buzzed down, straight toward me. I started to run, chased by a bunch of murderous flying machines diving down in a kamikaze flight. One got tangled in my hair. I swiped it away but was immediately stung viciously, right on the top of my head. A searing and stinging pain was the result.

We were a fifteen-minute walk from home. Marjo asked with concern, "Are you okay?"

"No!" I said. "That hurts like hell!"

"We have to get home as fast as possible before you collapse!" she said, determined. "We still have a long way back up the hill!"

We immediately walked home as quickly as possible. I was anxiously checking myself and rubbing my painful head as we trudged up the hill at a brisk pace. Once home, I took about four paracetamol tablets and lay down on the bed. The pain got more and more intense. I had never experienced anything like it! Once the painkillers started working, it became a bit more bearable. Fortunately, that was the end of it, and all the doomsday scenarios of falling into a coma or being hospitalized with anaphylactic shock

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didn't come to pass. The next day, I was back to my old self, apart from a somewhat sore and itchy scalp.

## The Mulberry Tree

"It's mid-November, Kees, time to prune the mûriers (mulberry trees)," Maurice, my French neighbour, said, looking at my trees.

"Do you have to prune them, and why in November?" I asked him, intrigued.

"You have to prune them because otherwise, they'll get way too big; you have to take everything off. You do it preferably in November, just before they lose their leaves. That way, you have less work because you clear away both the leaves and the branches at once," my neighbour and seasoned expert said wisely.

Now, the mulberry tree was reasonably unknown to me. The name rang a bell, but that was it. It was high time to learn more about it.

It turns out there are several types of mulberry trees. The four best-known are:

- The red mulberry (mûrier rouge) gives red fruits.
- The black mulberry (mûrier noir) gives black fruits.
- The white mulberry (mûrier blanc) gives white fruits.
- The 'sterile mulberry' (mûrier stérile) gives no fruit.

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You can make delicious jam from the fruits of the first two. The 'sterile parasol mulberry' (mûrier stérile parasol) is a grafted version whose large leaves provide plenty of shade, like a parasol. It's ideal for a



patio. If you plant a fruit-bearing mulberry there, your beautiful patio will be stained by the falling fruit, and it will attract entire armies of annoying insects drawn to the sickly sweet sugar.

The white mulberry was used in silkworm farms. I say 'was' because there are hardly any of these farms left in France. However, between 1850 and 1950, many French people earned their living from it; the Ardèche region, in particular, was the center of silkworm farming.

The caterpillar of the silkworm eats the leaves of the white mulberry tree. Sericulture originated in China, where it was known as far back as 3500 BC. The Chinese were able to keep it a secret for centuries, selling their silk fabrics via the Silk Road, until silkworm eggs and larvae were smuggled first to the Middle East in hollow bamboo stalks and later to Europe.

A silkworm farm, of course, consists of a number of mulberry orchards and one or more enormous barns. In those barns, there



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are racks with shelves. On these shelves, the leaves of the mulberry tree are placed, and the silkworms happily and undisturbed eat their way through them for forty days. After that, they decide they're done and spin a cocoon in which they pupate to transform into a silkmoth, a nocturnal moth and a relative of the notorious box tree moth! The larva spins this cocoon with a hair-thin and incredibly strong thread. It works for four days and makes 1.5 kilometers of thread to complete its cocoon.



The cocoons are then collected and briefly boiled to kill the pupa. The thread is then unwound from several cocoons at once and spun into a silk thread, from which the most beautiful silk garments are woven. In China, this pupa is also considered a delicacy.

The attached video provides a good overview of silk production.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klZeS-g0UHo>



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Anyway, back to pruning the mulberry trees. We have six of them along our driveway, three on each side. I put a ladder underneath and, full of good cheer, clamber into the tree. Especially at 71, you notice that your balance isn't what it used to be, and you have to work hard to stay upright.

As I went, and this is a tip I want to share with you all, I noticed that you're much more stable as soon as you have three points of contact in the tree. If you only have two, be careful; you are not stable! The risk of an unpleasant dive to the ground increases significantly. Your feet already provide two points of contact; you just need to find a third. It doesn't matter what it is. Your hands are tricky because you're holding your tools. But your knee, your elbow, your side, your behind, or your upper leg against a branch all work just fine. Find three points of contact, and you'll stand firm. This could save you from a nasty fall and a broken hip.

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My neighbour also advised me not to throw the leaves on the compost heap. "Mulberry tree leaves compost very poorly," he said. Now, I'm pretty stubborn, but I didn't want to argue with the knowledge that has been built up and passed down from generation to generation here for centuries.

So, the prunings went to the *déchèterie* (waste disposal center). The mulberry trees are now beautifully bare again, ready to sprout anew next year.



## La porcherie

Our neighbours told us that the pig farmer in the village on the hill had applied for a permit to expand his pigsty from 600 pigs to a megastall of 6,500 breeding pigs! As you can imagine, we were absolutely floored when we heard this! The farm was less than four kilometers away from us! So we went to ask our neighbours what they knew.

"Yes, that's right, we heard too. Luckily, he won't get that permit so easily. First, there will be an inquiry where everyone can file an objection at the town hall."

Just imagine, 6,500 pigs! An adult pig produces as much poop and pee as two or three people. A megastall of 6,500 pigs is equivalent to a city of 20,000 residents!

One single barn would produce as much waste as a town of 20,000 people and consume even more in raw materials, including clean water.

Later, I understood that the main problem was the manure itself—specifically, where to put all the mess. The surrounding farmers were all ears. They were promised free pig manure for a year. A quick calculation showed that approximately 1,200 hectares of farmland were needed to spread all the manure! The unrest visibly grew in our otherwise placid French countryside.

Those 1,200 hectares were found shortly after. A large number of farmers signed up, more than happy to get free manure. Four municipalities were involved in the whole project. At each town hall, an information folder was ready for residents to review.

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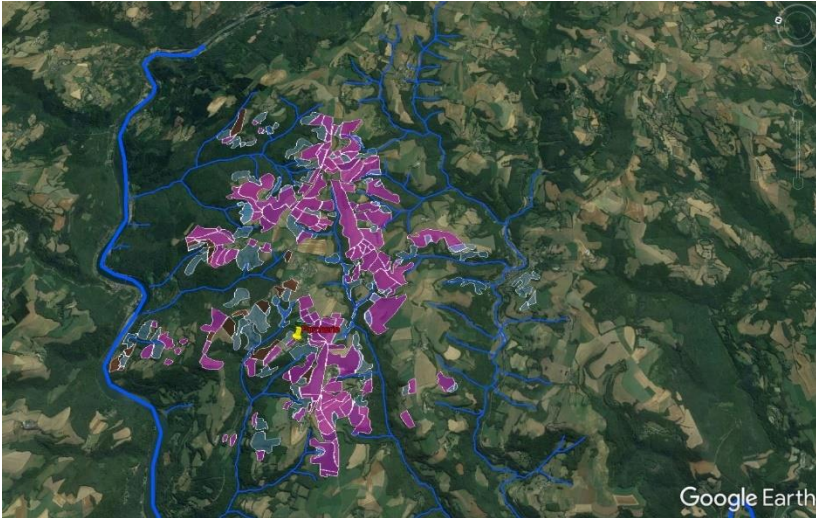
I decided to take a look. Outside the town hall, a dejected group of people was already agitatedly discussing the matter. Inside, it was much the same, although the conversations were more hushed, like at a funeral. Two folders were neatly laid out on a table. It felt like I was signing a book of condolences. The folder contained, among other things, a list of the farmers who had signed up and how much farmland they had made available for the "spreading" of the muck. Cadastral maps were neatly included. It all seemed, at first glance, not so bad. I then went to the next village. The same ritual. A neat folder with a list of all the farmers. But that list was different from the one in the previous village, and so were the cadastral maps!

"Yes, that's correct, this is a list of the farmers in this municipality," the town secretary said.

Okay, I thought, that's clever. By dividing it among the four municipalities, it seems a lot less severe at first glance. I took pictures of all the cadastral maps and did the same in the other three villages. At home, I colored in all the plots on Google Earth, a strange task. It was only then that it became clear what a catastrophic impact this would have on our environment. We would literally be living in the middle of crap! I then printed out my map a zillion times and handed it out. The purple areas on the map were the fields where the poop would be sprayed, and the blue lines were all the streams and creeks that crossed the area.

Everyone was absolutely horrified! It was crystal clear what kind of soil pollution this would bring. Imagine all the antibiotics, hormones, ammonia, and all the other crap that would sink down and mix with the groundwater! And we weren't even talking about

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the stench and the nuisance from trucks and livestock carriers transporting pigs and bringing in feed!

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## The Civil War

That's when all hell really broke loose! The objections poured into the town halls, and everyone demanded a hearing with public consultation rounds. A veritable civil war erupted, with the local farmers on one side and the "foreigners" on the other. In this case, the foreigners included Dutch, Belgians, and English, but especially French people who were not from this region. A special form of solidarity emerged within our group to form a strong front against the farmers.

During information evenings, the proponents mainly emphasized job creation and the unique opportunities this would offer.

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"Oh, stop it with your job creation!" the opponents screamed.  
"These kinds of barns employ at most four to five people!"

The atmosphere became increasingly grim. Farmers suddenly stopped talking to their neighbours and turned their backs on them. There were insults and gossip. People came to blows with each other! One farming family threatened to pull their children out of school so that the village school, which was just at the limit of its minimum student quota, would have to close—all because the teacher was a fierce opponent. The pig farmer's wife even once drove her car into a group of "foreigners" who were discussing the issue and barely managed to jump out of the way.

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### **The Corporate Conspiracy**

It became more and more clear how the whole construction worked. The pig farmer had been tempted by the large supermarket chain Carrefour and a few major slaughterhouse consortiums to invest heavily in his pig business. He could get European subsidies and borrow three million euros under very favourable terms. Within a few years, he would be filthy rich, as long as he could deliver meat for less than €2.50 per kilo. We heard that France was already importing pork from Poland and Romania for €2.20 per kilo. But of course, that wasn't "Produit de France." We also heard that Carrefour had a bad reputation for offering these kinds of crippling contracts and that things had gone very wrong at other farms in Brittany.

Ultimately, the farmer backed down from his megastall plans, and peace returned. A few years later, I heard that due to a change in

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the law, the pig farmer was allowed to expand to a maximum of 1,200 pigs without any further procedures.



## The French holidays and parties

The French are people of traditions, fixed customs, habits, and rituals that they will not change anytime soon—or likely ever. One of those firm traditions is the French village festival. Every single village, without exception, has its annual village festival, usually held sometime between July and August. You could compare it to the funfairs in the Netherlands. The celebration usually begins on Friday evening and ends in the wee hours of Sunday morning.

Typically, the name day of some saint is used as an excuse. Every village organizes the most hilarious events. Once something is a success, the exact same formula is repeated, year after year after year. No one can get a word in edgewise or suggest, "Hey, this year, why don't we grill sausages instead of doing whatever?" Not a chance! Once a formula is a success, it's set in stone.

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### Village Festivals

In our village, a tiny place with fewer than 100 residents, the highlight of the year takes place on the first Sunday of August. It starts modestly on Saturday morning with a group hike (thankfully, they do change the hiking route every year). Of course, there are also petanque competitions and card games, a game called *belote*, similar to bridge.

Sunday is when things really get going! The day begins early with a communal breakfast where blood sausage and *tripoux* (tripe sausages) are served. I can't imagine eating something like that on an empty stomach. Afterward, there's a Holy Mass in the church.

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Then, a small group of young people with an accordion goes from farm to farm, bringing a musical serenade with a gift from the town and a bowl of candy.

While a *musette* tune is played, you are handed this small token and are expected to make a contribution on the candy bowl. On Sunday afternoon, there are more *jeu de boule* and card tournaments, and the famous soapbox derby gets underway. Enthusiastic soapbox builders whiz down the hill at dizzying speeds to come to a halt against a mountain of hay bales in the center of the village.

Sunday evening marks the start of the village *repas* (meal), which includes the famous *soupe au fromage*. This village meal is always held in the *salle de fête* (town hall or event hall), which in our case is an enormous barn that also serves as a caravan storage facility. The caravans are pushed to the side, and a huge number of tables and benches are set up. Not the most romantic setting... but oh well.

People from the whole region show up, and soon there are about 500 farmers packed into this barn. I once suggested they set it up outside, in the fresh air! "No," they said, "we've been doing it this way for years. What if it rains?" There was no arguing with them.

### The Feast Menu

The menu is the exact same every year. It begins with a slice of cured ham (*jambon sec*) and a piece of melon as a starter. Then the famous *Soupe au Fromage* is served. This is a thick mush of cabbage leaves, bread, cheese, and broth. You get a thick dollop on your plate with a ladle. It doesn't look like much, but it's delicious.

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The next course, after the wine carafes have been refilled, consists of a hearty piece of meat, a large sausage, and the traditional, usually overcooked, green beans (*haricots verts*) with pieces of bacon. They sometimes switch this out with white beans. Then comes the cheese. We're in the heart of Roquefort country, so platters are put down with huge chunks of the very best quality Roquefort cheese (the sheep farmers get it for free).



In the meantime, the wine carafes are generously refilled again. For the next course (you have to quickly try to get your plate somewhat clean with a paper napkin), a huge slice of peach, apple, or apricot pie is plopped onto your plate. Then comes an ice cream, and finally, coffee is served with a shot of homemade *eau de vie* (brandy)! As you can imagine, by the end of the night, you can barely stand on your own two feet! The evening concludes with

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music. The orchestra starts with a few polkas and tangos for the older folks, after which the youth take over with music from today's musical heroes.

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### Major National Holidays

Just like in the Netherlands, France has its fixed holidays. As a tourist, it can be useful to be aware of these. It has happened to us several times that we went out to get groceries and all the stores were closed! You just stand there with your shopping bag in front of a locked door!

Here are the most important holidays:

- **February 2nd, La Chandeleur:** Exactly 40 days after Christmas, this is Candlemas. In Catholic circles, candles were blessed on this day, followed by a candlelit procession and a Holy Mass called "Maria Lichtmis," where the entire church was bathed in a sea of candlelight. It is also a tradition to eat pancakes on this day. The leftover flour from the last harvest was used up, and the round shape and golden-brown color of the pancakes symbolized the desire for the return of the sun. Now, today, all French people eat pancakes on *La Chandeleur*, and there's still an old saying: "No woman is so poor that she can't warm her pan for Candlemas!"
- **February 14th, Saint Valentin:** Valentine's Day is also celebrated in France. Stores are open as usual. Romantic products are offered everywhere, flower stalls are extra

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stocked, and all restaurants try to tempt you with special menus to treat your loved one to a romantic dinner.

- **May 1st, Fête du travail:** Labor Day. This is celebrated enthusiastically in France. All stores are closed. There are flea markets, sports competitions, and other events everywhere. People give each other a "Muguet de Mai," a small bunch of lilies of the valley. This is a very old custom. It celebrates the end of winter and brings good luck. Unfortunately, this day is often used for demonstrations.
- **May 8th, Fête de la Victoire:** Victory Day, commemorating the end of World War II. This is remembered on a smaller scale in France than in the Netherlands. Stores are generally closed, and the day begins with a ceremony at the war memorial. Every town and village has its own war memorial, usually near the church. Take a look at how many names are on them. You often see a small, modest inset with a few names of victims of World War II, nowhere near the numbers of the First World War, which left very deep scars in France.
- **Last Friday of May, Fête des voisins:** The Festival of Neighbours. On this day, you invite your neighbours over for a little get-together or organize a neighbourhood party. It's a nice initiative to improve community spirit.
- **June 21st, Fête de la musique:** All of France is dedicated to music! In the larger cities, orchestras, both professional and amateur, play everywhere. Not just orchestras, but also drum bands, choirs, brass bands, etc. Dance groups also put

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their best foot forward. It's an absolute must! Just go to the center of a medium-sized or large city on June 21st, and you won't believe what you'll see! Stores are open.

- **July 14th, Quatorze juillet:** This is THE French national holiday! It can be compared to King's Day in the Netherlands. This day celebrates the storming of the Bastille prison in 1789, which marked the beginning of the French Revolution and the guillotine's brutal end for the French monarchy. All stores are closed, and events are organized everywhere—disco parties and orchestras on every square. The day usually ends with a spectacular fireworks show! This day is truly sacred to the French! Once on that day, I was mowing the lawn. My neighbour spoke to me and asked if it wasn't a little strange to be mowing the lawn on *Quatorze juillet*. Oops... Note that there are also many fireworks shows on July 13th.
- **August 15th, Marie l'Assomption:** The Assumption of Mary. Yes, France is predominantly Catholic, so this is celebrated enthusiastically. All stores are generally closed, and everyone has the day off. (It's a great day for traveling, by the way, because the highways are empty.) Everyone goes to church, and events are organized everywhere—flea markets, fairs, etc.
- **Second weekend of September, Jour de Patrimoine:** Heritage Day. Throughout France, museums are open and free to enter. There are artisan markets everywhere. Stores are open as usual.

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- **October 31st, Halloween:** People here also celebrate Halloween; they love it. Stores are open, and there are scary costume parties and parades everywhere. You can often visit castles that are teeming with ghosts, trolls, zombies, witches, and other riff-raff. Entry at your own risk!
- **November 1st, Toussaint:** All Saints' Day/All Souls' Day is another typical Catholic event. Stores are generally closed. The French have the day off, buy bouquets of chrysanthemums, and visit the graves of their deceased loved ones. If you wonder why all the flower shops are overflowing with chrysanthemums, it's because of Toussaint! By the way, do not give chrysanthemums to friends or family. It's not appreciated!
- **November 11th, Jour de l'Armistice:** The commemoration of the end of the First World War. This is remembered much more in France than World War II. All stores are closed. Every village and every city has its commemoration ceremony at the war memorial, led by the mayor in full regalia with a sash, usually flanked by military authorities, the police commissioner and fire department, and the local fanfare. Often, a parade of fire and police corps follows, trailed by a procession of vintage cars or something similar.
- **December 25th, Noël:** Christmas. France only has Christmas Day, so December 26th is a normal day, and stores are open again. Most French people have their Christmas dinner on the evening of December 24th, eating a lot of oysters, prawns, and foie gras.

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- **December 31st, St. Sylvestre:** New Year's Eve. New Year's Day is called *jour de l'an*. While Christmas is celebrated with family, on New Year's Eve, the French go wild with friends, and it can get quite intense. They often rent a *chambre d'hôtes* or a few *gîtes* for a few days and really paint the town red. On New Year's Eve, there's a big meal and lots of drinking, of course, followed by a party that sometimes includes costume parties. Many restaurants organize a "Soirée St. Sylvestre," an elaborate dinner followed by a dance party. However, they don't really have private fireworks on New Year's Eve; instead, there are big public fireworks shows!

Of course, France, like the Netherlands, has the familiar holidays like Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost, as well as Mother's Day and Father's Day.

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### Local Events and School Holidays

The holidays listed above apply to all of France. In addition, there are well-known and lesser-known local events, some with worldwide fame:

- **February:** The Nice Carnival, with its highlight being an enormous parade with spectacular floats.
- **May:** The world-famous Cannes Film Festival. The entire city of Cannes is turned upside down and flooded with celebrities.



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- **First 3 weeks of July:** The Avignon Theatre Festival. Tens of thousands of people flock to this. All of Avignon is dedicated to theatre. Thousands of street performers and theatre groups showcase their talents. An absolute must!
- **July and August:** The Sylvanès Cultural Festival. During these two months, the Sylvanès Abbey is dedicated to religious and cultural music. A wide range of artists perform with afternoon and evening concerts. This varies from a men's choir from Corsica, Djerba dancers from Egypt, monks from Tibet, sitar music and dance from India—too many to mention. Afterward, meals are served in the spirit of the performing country.
- **August:** The Orange Opera Festival. If you're an opera fan, you can't miss the performances in the old amphitheater of Orange.
- **August 14th and 15th:** *Medievals Monflanquin*. A medieval festival in Monflanquin with musical groups, a parade, knight fights, a medieval market, and themed meals.
- **Last week of September:** The Charleville-Mézières Puppet Festival. Every two years, an immense puppet spectacle is organized.

And there are many, many more events like these, all of which are part of French traditions and cultural heritage.

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## School Holidays

## Ça va, ça va

They also have a holiday schedule here. France is divided into three zones: A, B, and C.

France has the following holidays:

- **Christmas Break:** from December 22nd to January 7th; no staggered holidays.
- **Winter Break:** 3 weeks from mid-February to the first week of March, with staggered holidays.
- **Spring Break:** 2 weeks from mid-April to the end of April, with staggered holidays.
- **Summer Break:** from July 6th/7th to September 1st/2nd; no staggered holidays. All of France goes on vacation on July 6th.
- **Autumn Break:** from October 19th to November 4th; no staggered holidays.



## Les impôts

If there's one thing we can't stand, it's accounting and the tax office. I remember our first conversation with our French accountant. At the time, he advised us to choose the business form "Entreprise à petite échelle" (small-scale business). Since we still had to invest quite a bit, we could reclaim the VAT. We would, however, have to keep a VAT administration.

He kept talking about "cinq cinq" and "dix neuf six." We thought, "What on earth is this man talking about?" He was already hard to understand since he spoke very quickly, very softly, and mumbled. We finally understood later that he was talking about the VAT rates: 5.5% and 19.6%!

Furthermore, our company was split into two, at least for accounting purposes: a private part and a business part. All the buildings and inventory were neatly divided accordingly.

Years later, we were doing our best with our VAT administration—or rather, Marjo was; I was far too sloppy with it—when our accountant called.

A new law had been passed. If we were to sell our house later, we would have to pay a lot—a huge amount—of tax on the added value of our business. They call it "**Plus Value**" here. This applied to the business part of the company. The private part remained exempt from "Plus Value."

"This could end up costing a lot of money!" they warned us. They advised us to change our business form to a "**Micro entreprise**," a sole proprietorship, which would make everything private again. We

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would have to pay back the collected VAT, because, well, the tax office isn't stupid!

When we eventually sold our business much later, this turned out to have been a very good move. Kudos to our accountant.

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### **The Tax Office Visit**

The tax office was another curious thing. At one point, we had some tax questions, specifically about our savings in the Netherlands. We decided to call the main office for an appointment to present our questions to an expert—the tax office itself.

The office turned out to be a stately old mansion that could use a coat of paint, right in the center of town. The three-meter-high front doors squeaked and groaned as we pushed them open with all our might. After we had announced ourselves, we were asked to take a seat in the waiting area in the hallway. After about fifteen minutes, a skinny man in a faded shirt with rolled-up sleeves and damp armpits, with a wild shock of gray hair and glasses perched on the tip of his nose, stuck his head around the door and asked us to come in.

"Asseyez-vous," (have a seat) he said kindly, and we took our places in front of a gigantic antique oak desk that was cluttered with stacks of papers, files, a computer, and a huge printer. The musty-smelling office, with its stained, curling wallpaper in places, damp rings on the ceiling, and faded floor covering, along with the tax official himself, made a profoundly depressing impression.

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He sat down behind the desk but left the big oak door behind us wide open. We could see everyone sitting in the hallway.

"Should I close the door?" I asked, trying to be helpful.

"No, no," he said, "just leave it open, it's quite warm in here. How can I help you?"

Dumbfounded and for the education and entertainment of the public in the hallway, we brought up our problem. He typed our tax number into his computer and nodded in confirmation.

"Perfectly correct," he said. "You don't need to worry. We don't want anything to do with your savings in the Netherlands. Furthermore, your tax returns are perfectly in order and are being handled by a reputable accounting firm. My compliments. Can I be of any other service?"

We looked at each other, relieved and astonished at the same time. "Uhhh, no, that's it, really. Thank you!"

He stood up and escorted us to the exit.

"Au revoir et bonne journée," and a moment later, we were back on the street.

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## The Online Declaration

Years later, we were living in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, and I decided to tackle the "**DECLARATION DES REVENUS**," the French tax return,



## Ça va, ça va

myself. For years, our ridiculously expensive accounting firm had been doing it. Acquaintances assured us it was a breeze.

"With your current business form, all you have to do is fill in what you've earned with your gîtes. Besides, you can always go to the tax office. They're happy to help you," was the advice.

So in the middle of the year, I went to the tax office with the tax form. This time, it was a large three-story modern building that looked like it needed some maintenance. The building was on the "Chemin de Velours" (Velvet Street). What a name for a tax office... Anyway, outside the entrance, there was a line of at least twenty people in the open air! I thought, what's going on here? An open house at the tax office or something?



This, it turned out, was the normal procedure. Inside the reception hall was a huge waiting room, where another fifty people were sitting, with several booths around it: A through G. My heart sank into my shoes. There was also a single employee at the reception desk. She asked the purpose of my visit, told me which booth to go

## **Ça va, ça va**

to, and asked me to take a number and wait here in the waiting room. I drew number 97; the counter was at 35!

My God, I thought, this is going to take hours!

When it was my turn at the desk, I asked if someone could help me fill out the "DECLARATION DES REVENUS."

"Of course," she said kindly. "Do you have an 'espace client,' an account on the tax office website?"

"Yes, I do," I replied, hopefully.

"Oh, perfect, then we can do the return online. Walk with my colleague, and he'll help you further."

"Okay, wonderful!" I said, relieved, and walked with a young man to a computer set up on a table at the edge of the waiting room. I took a seat, astonished but happy that I didn't have to wait for hours in the waiting room again. Once again, everyone could listen in. He entered my tax number, and I gave him my little Excel sheet with an overview of our earnings. And a moment later, in front of dozens of people, the printer spat out a summary.

"Voilà, c'est fait," the young man said. "You'll get €240 back. It should be in your bank account in a month or so." In the waiting room, someone gave me a broad grin and two thumbs up. Still confused by it all, I went home in the best of spirits, happy to have it behind me!

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## **A Confrontation with the French Tax Authorities**



## Ça va, ça va

Until 2018, an accounting firm always did our bookkeeping and tax returns. When we retired and the whole process became much simpler, I did it myself. Every year, I would go to the tax office here in Villeneuve-sur-Lot with a single sheet of A4 paper containing our state pension and retirement income and the income from the two gîtes we rent out. They would fill out my "**declaration de revenu**" for me on my "**espace client**" on [impots.gouv.fr](https://impots.gouv.fr), a form that I don't understand at all due to its complexity. At the tax office, they would place those few numbers in the correct boxes. The first year, I even asked if they needed the information from my four Rabobank savings accounts in the Netherlands, which together yield barely €400 in interest per year.

"No, that wasn't necessary," they said. Whether I misunderstood or if it was just wishful thinking, I don't know, but it recently became crystal clear that they absolutely do want that information.

What happened was... when we returned from a month-long vacation, there was a note in the mailbox that a registered letter was at the post office nearby. It took me a week to get my hands on this letter. The post office was closed; the branch manager was on vacation for a week?%\*&\*#@#

It turned out to be a letter from the tax office. Oops, what is this?!

The letter neatly listed our four Rabobank savings accounts, with the account numbers and everything. They ordered me to declare them using form **3916** and the interest income with form **2047** for all these accounts for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023, and to send a copy of the annual Rabobank statements.

## Ça va, ça va

I went to work like a maniac, and by the end of the day, an email with twelve PDF files went out to the tax office. Now, I just had to wait.

For a month, nothing happened, until we received another registered letter with a huge "**amende**" (fine)!

They had not heard from us. If we did not respond within 30 days, we could expect a fine of €16,500. The fine was for not declaring four bank accounts.

You can imagine all the blood drained from my face. I immediately called the number listed in the letter. I got a friendly lady on the line who immediately knew what it was all about. I explained that I had indeed sent everything via email a month ago. After some searching, she said she had not received anything.

"Should I just send everything to you again right now, but to your personal email address?" I asked her.

"Yes, please do that." A moment later, she confirmed she had received it. She would get to work on it.

We waited in suspense. Two weeks later, we received another letter. For not declaring those accounts for the past three years, there was a fine of €16,500.

However, because they could see that we had good intentions and after consulting with her boss, the fine was reduced to €4,500. That was still a pretty hard blow to the face!

€4,500! What a waste of money!

## Ça va, ça va

I called the tax inspector again. I told her I found the fine to be exorbitantly high compared to the offense of not declaring a meager amount of interest. She told me I was lucky, as they had already drastically reduced the fine. Furthermore, she said, I would also receive a tax assessment on the total undeclared interest amount. That can't be much, I thought immediately.

So, people, the moral of the story is: declare your foreign bank accounts!

Don't think they'll never find out! With form **3916**, you declare your foreign accounts, and with form **2047**, you declare the interest income.

When you fill out the "**déclaration de revenus**" yourself, do the following:

In the section "**SELECTIONNEZ CI-DESSOUS LES RUBRIQUES QUE VOUS SOUHAITEZ FAIRE APPARAÎTRE**," make sure the box for "**Comptes à l'étranger**" is checked. Forms 3916 and 2047 will then automatically be added for you to fill out.

Every morning, I still walk to the mailbox with fear and trembling. So far, I still haven't received a fine... I hope.

## Our General Practitioner

It's a wonder that we even have a general practitioner here. Years ago, thanks to the mediation of our neighbour/tiler, who had tiled a kitchen for him, we were allowed to be added to his overflowing patient list.

Our doctor, let's call him Dr. Bernard, is a small, scrawny man with glasses on the tip of his nose who should have retired long ago. His practice is overflowing with patients, and the man himself is visibly struggling to keep all the plates spinning. Lately, I've had to call on him quite a bit, bothering him with all sorts of vague, shall we say, old man complaints.

Making an appointment is done through a central secretariat, and with a bit of luck and some threats, you can get in in about five days, as long as he's not on a two-week vacation or attending a continuing education seminar. I usually try to make the earliest appointment possible. If you come later in the day, he's sure to be running at least two hours behind. When you finally get your turn, after twenty games of Sudoku on your smartphone, he shakes your hand in a Trumpian fashion, pulls you into his office, and asks, in passing and already turning to his computer: "**Qu'est que vous arrive?!**" (What's wrong with you?!)

I then tell him my story, which I've already been there for a few times before. He usually asks: "Qui est votre médecin traitant?" (Who is your treating physician?).

"Médecin traitant? C'est vous!" (Treating physician? That's you!) I say to him, surprised and with a strong emphasis.

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"Ah bon!" he says, frowning, and types something on his computer. I then bring him up to date and, as best as I can, give him a summary of my previous visits with him. Then comes the standard obligatory routine on the examination table, where he takes my blood pressure and prods and pokes my body here and there. After my 10-minute consultation, Dr. Bernard then takes his prescription pad and scribbles, in truly illegible hieroglyphics, a prescription for a blood test, an order for a CT scan, a visit to an "ORL" (ENT specialist), and another prescription for a bag of medicine, which undoubtedly includes a course of antibiotics. After handing over your "Carte Vitale" (health insurance card) and paying for the visit, you're back outside.

For the next few days, you are typically busy organizing all these appointments with the various testing facilities. Luckily, this is fairly easy to do online, but... you can't get a CT scan for at least a month, and the ENT specialist only has 10 minutes for you in three months.

With the test results, you go back to your doctor, and everything starts all over again. These days, before I go to Dr. Bernard's, I prepare a list of my complaints at home. I call it my "aperçue de tous mes bricoles" (overview of all my little things). In it, I make a short chronological summary of everything that has happened and been agreed upon, and I write down my questions. All this to help Dr. Bernard get up to speed a little faster. Now, he already understands the routine; at my next visit, before you know it, he snatches my "aperçue de tous mes bricoles" from my hands, starts reading, and no longer asks who my treating physician is...

## The French funeral

Anyone who regularly travels through the French countryside will undoubtedly have noticed that the cemeteries here are massive. They are often located on the edge of a village or next to a church and are frequently walled, forming a sort of village of the dead. As you walk through such a cemetery, you quickly start to wonder how a French funeral actually works.

December 31st, the last day of the year. They call it Saint Sylvestre here in France. The old, graying year makes way for the young, energetic one. This year, we had a New Year's Eve that was different from the norm. Our neighbour's 98-year-old mother had passed away. We thought we would just offer our condolences, but after asking around, it turned out that it is customary to attend the funeral.

The news of someone's passing here travels by word-of-mouth. No bereavement cards are sent. People simply call each other, and the news is passed along. That's how we learned that the funeral would take place on December 31st at 10 AM in Saint Aignan, a tiny village of 20 inhabitants, where a Holy Mass would be held and the body would be buried in the small cemetery next to the church. And so, on this bleak day, we went to the funeral.

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### The Service

When we arrived, about a hundred people had gathered outside the church, waiting patiently with hunched shoulders and chattering teeth for the hearse to arrive. It is customary here for everyone to

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wait outside. First, the coffin with the body is taken into the church, followed by the family, and then by friends, acquaintances, and all those who wish to pay their respects—like us. We had never met our neighbour's 98-year-old mother, but of course, you want to offer condolences to the grieving family, in our case, our neighbour down the road.

While the bells tolled, the hearse arrived. Prayers were said outside, after which the coffin was blessed with holy water and carried into the church, followed by the entire company. Inside the small church, it was freezing cold. Luckily, there were some gas heaters hanging on the walls that made the temperature somewhat bearable. We had secured a spot under one of these heaters, so it was a little more comfortable.

The Catholic Mass was led by a female sexton, but without the consecration and Holy Communion, as only a priest is allowed to perform those. Priests are becoming a rarity here. One of the grandchildren gave a short speech, and after forty-five minutes, everyone walked outside after making the sign of the cross by the coffin. The coffin was carried back out of the church, slid back into the hearse, and the entire procession walked behind the car to the cemetery, which was about a hundred meters away.

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## The Burial

In the cemetery, there were mainly family graves. These are enormous, semi-above-ground sarcophagi in which an entire family can be interred. The coffins are stacked next to and on top of each other. At the cemetery, you can clearly see that a certain

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competition exists to show which family in the village has the most status. The more prestige and the wealthier the family, the more conspicuous and pompous the grave. The amount of applied sculptures, in particular, is meant to command respect. The more modern graves make an impression with huge, expensive, and large marble slabs, where the thickness of the marble is a key factor. It was funny to see that all sorts of techniques are used to make the marble look thicker than it actually is.



The capstone at the front of the grave had already been removed. After a brief word from the sexton, one of the gravediggers, to our great astonishment, put on overalls and boots, crawled through the opening in the grave, and clambered further inside over a pile of half-decayed coffins. The coffin with the body was then pulled into the sarcophagus with the help of a thick rope and placed on top of the other coffins. The gravedigger then crawled out with great difficulty, bumping his head significantly in the process. (I couldn't help but momentarily entertain the thought that the gravedigger might be walled in as well, just like the Egyptians did...). Everyone



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then took a dried flower from a basket and threw it into the opening of the sarcophagus.

I was curious to see what would happen next. In the Netherlands, a room in the local pub is usually rented out where coffee and a slice of cake are served. I was certainly ready for that by now! Here, however, everyone just lingered at the cemetery for a bit, offering condolences to the family at the grave. After about fifteen minutes, and forced by the grim weather, everyone drifted home, and the village once again plunged into a deep silence to prepare for the next event—probably another funeral, or maybe a baptism or wedding, or the annual village festival. Who can say?

## French Linguistic Quirks

We've been living in France for over 18 years now. After all this time, we are still far from mastering the French language. We get by just fine, but an in-depth conversation about, for example, politics or social issues remains quite difficult for now.

A while back, I was watching a French comedian on TV. I couldn't understand a single word, not one. It was way too fast!

What always fascinates me is that the French language, like all other languages, is full of funny exceptions, linguistic quirks, and other weirdnesses. The French also use their favorite filler words in every sentence. Just like a Dutch person might use "so" or "you know," I've noticed that by far the most popular word in France is "du coup." "Du coup, je vous envoie la lettre demain." (So, I'll send you the letter tomorrow.) It means something like "by the way" or "so." "Je ne sais pas, du coup, comment ça marche." (I don't know, so, how it works.) A French acquaintance of ours literally uses "du coup" in every single sentence. After a while, you start to notice it, and it gets pretty annoying.

There are other filler words as well. They frequently use "franchement" (frankly) or "tellement" (so much). The word "alors" (so, then) is also used many many times, as is "d'accord" (okay).

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### "Tac" and "Oppe"

Something else we noticed: if you're talking to a bank teller, who's working on a computer and has to enter your information, they say "tac" or "oppe" with every action. Pay attention to it; it happens

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even if you have a helpdesk employee on the phone who's working on a PC. Every time something is entered: "tac!"

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### Eggs and a Word Game

If you want to play a fun word game with French people, try this. It's a bit difficult to explain in writing, so I'll try to describe it.

Ask a French person what an egg is in French. They will say "**un œuf.**" (**uf**)

Ask how they say eggs. They will say "**des œufs.**" (**eu**)

Then you ask, "And two eggs?" They'll say "**deux eu.**"

And "three eggs?" They will answer, "**trois eu,**" and you can see them thinking, "What is this nonsense? Where is this going?"

You continue: "And four eggs?" There will be a moment of silence, and then they'll smile and say "**quatre uf!**"

If you continue, they'll say "**cinq uf,**" "**six eu,**" "**sept uf.**"

It comes down to this: when the number ends in a "soft consonant" sound (**trois, six, neuf, dix**), they do not pronounce the 'f' at the end of "œufs". But if the number ends in a "hard consonant" sound (**quatre, cinq, sept, huit**), they pronounce the 'f'.

This is regional, by the way. In some regions, they do say "**dix uf.**"

When we had French guests at our *table d'hôtes* and the conversation wasn't getting started, we would play this word game.

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It would immediately break the ice, and the conversation, even between the French people themselves, would really start to flow.

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### "Quatre Vingt Un" and "Oui"

I still remember how much trouble we had with the French numbers at the beginning. If someone left their phone number on our answering machine, we often had to listen to it ten times before we finally were able to write the number down correctly.

The message on the answering machine would say: **"Rappelez-moi au numéro suivant: zéro six, soixante douze, quatre vingt dix sept, quarante neuf, trente et un."** (Call me back at the following number: 06, 72, 97, 49, 31).

Now I want to talk about **"trente et un,"** which means "thirty-one." They say **"trente et un"** (thirty and one), but not **"trente et deux."** They say **"quarante et un"** (forty and one), and that goes on until **"soixante-et-onze"** (sixty and eleven), because for everything above that, they drop the "et" and just say **"quatre vingt un"** (four times twenty one) and **"quatre vingt onze"** (four times twenty eleven), and so on.

When French people have to say a number, they always, always say it in groups of two digits. I once asked if they could please spell the number **"chiffre par chiffre"** (digit by digit), and they simply can't do it! They don't know how!

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## The Case of the Mute and the Aspirated H

In every language, there are words that tie our tongues in knots as foreigners. French is no different. "Linden tree" is a perfect example: *tilleul*. It looks so simple, but to pronounce it perfectly requires a few bizarre twists of your tongue at just the right moment.

One day, while chatting with our neighbours, we simply couldn't get them to understand us. We wanted to ask if they had already visited the newly renovated halls downtown. "Avez-vous déjà vu les halles?" I asked. Phonetically, "laysal." They just stared at us blankly. I tried again, pronouncing "les halles" a bit more emphatically. They exchanged another bewildered look. Suddenly, our neighbour's face lit up. "Ah! Les halles!!" Phonetically, I'm not sure how to write that down, something like "layal." You're not supposed to make a liaison between "les" and "halles"! The "s" in "les" is silent, even though it's normally pronounced!

Soon, a heated discussion broke out about the correct pronunciation. Why do you say "les hommes" (phonetically "layzom"), but not "les halles," which is "layal"? I hope you're still with me.

They explained that it all comes down to whether the word has an *h muet* or an *h aspiré*—a mute or an aspirated H. With a mute H, you do make a liaison, but not with an aspirated H. For example, you don't say "laysolandais" but "lay olandais." Immediately, I thought, "Oh, wow, that's a mistake all Dutch people make!" I asked my neighbours how you're supposed to know if an H is mute or

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aspirated. They looked at each other, shrugged, and said you just know.

I did some googling, and sure enough, it was true: mute and aspirated. I started to memorize a list of words with an aspirated H but quickly gave up, as the list was rather extensive. I closed the page, deciding from then on to just blindly aspirate or mute all the H's I came across.

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### The Letter 'W' and Word Stress

Two other things struck me. The French language has almost no words that contain the letter '**W**,' with the exception of a few words imported from English. Just look it up in a French dictionary. You'll find half a page with a few imported words.

"Well," a friend of mine said, "the word **OUI** (YES) has a 'W'!"

Another curious phenomenon is the fact that French people always, and I mean *always*, put the accent on the last syllable of all words. Just name a few random words: "Maison," "Président," "ordinateur," "chemin," "école." The last word, "école," ends with a silent vowel, which doesn't count. So, while in other languages the accent can be on any syllable, the French always put it on the last one. When French people speak English, they continue to do this, which creates that funny "'Allo, 'Allo'" accent.

Now, in this account, it might seem as if I think the French language is a crazy language with ridiculous exceptions. The opposite is, of

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course, true. French is a beautiful language, and every language is crazy, full of the strangest linguistic quirks, and defies all logic.

## The Yellow Vests

Of course, we regularly went to the Netherlands to visit our children and grandchildren. Well, "regularly"... maybe once or twice a year. One day, completely exhausted but satisfied after a day with our grandchildren, we flopped down on the sofa at our temporary stay and turned on the TV. The news reported that all hell had truly broken loose in France with the "gilets jaunes" (Yellow Vests). Large-scale protests and demonstrations were planned for the upcoming weekend, which would completely paralyze traffic. The entire country was to be shut down.

A brief explanation for the uninitiated: In the autumn of 2018, fuel prices were raised again, to the great fury of all French people. "That's it, we've had enough!" was the general sentiment.

It all started when an activist on social media called for resistance and asked everyone to demonstrate while wearing the yellow vest from their car. Every French person is required to have a yellow vest, or *gilet jaune*, in their car for roadside emergencies. So everyone had one! Spontaneously and out of nowhere, a protest movement was born, made up of people from all walks of life. For the first time in history, this movement managed to organize itself incredibly well, thanks to social media. The government didn't know what hit them and was at a complete loss. Who should they negotiate with? Who was the leader? What kind of movement was this? Normally, it was the unions they had to sit down with.

Gradually, fuel prices were lowered again. The government thought this would meet their demands and silence the protests, but the genie was out of the bottle, and the population turned massively



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against the government, also demanding better pensions, higher social benefits, more purchasing power, and so on.

Unfortunately, the demonstrations became increasingly grim, and there were even a few deaths. In the big cities especially, many rioters from "les banlieues," the poor suburbs of Paris and Marseille, joined in, causing billions of euros in immense destruction. After difficult negotiations, Macron promised additional benefits, particularly for the elderly and those on minimum wage. The protests continued for more than half a year before they gradually subsided.

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"Oh, of course!" I said angrily to Marjo. "This would happen to us, of all people, the very weekend we've planned our return trip!"

"Jeez, we can't postpone it, Kees. Guests are arriving on Monday!"

"Well, we're just going, and we'll see where we get stuck! Let's avoid the highways; that's where things are sure to go wrong," I reasoned. "And not through Paris; that will definitely be a nightmare!" Marjo added. "Should we bring extra blankets and provisions in case we get stuck on the highways?"

I got the idea to borrow a jerrycan from our son for extra gasoline, just in case. You never know.

Normally, we always drove via Antwerp, Lille, and Paris. I had already figured out an alternate route: Liège, Luxembourg, Moulins, and then entirely on local "Route Nationale" roads through the Champagne region to the south. The first day, we tensely crossed

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the Belgian-French border. We had expected protests here, but to our surprise, we passed a completely deserted border crossing; not a soul was to be seen. In France itself, we drove further south on completely empty roads. Nothing was happening! All the French people had played it safe and stayed home. Around six o'clock, we decided to look for a hotel. We selected a hotel 10 km away on the GPS. The TomTom sent us through all sorts of country lanes to a completely deserted area until it said, "YOU HAVE ARRIVED." We looked around in astonishment. There was nothing but meadows and a deserted trailer park.

Annoyed, I typed a small town 40 km away into the GPS, and we drove there. Marjo searched for a hotel on her laptop. There were two. We stopped in front of a large, gray building in the middle of the town. This hotel, which clearly hadn't been renovated since the 1930s, had seen better days. The nicotine-smelling reception area was utterly depressing. Once inside, and after a long wait at the counter, we were finally greeted by a dusty old lady with gray hair in a bun and glasses with a little chain half-resting on her nose. She had clearly seen better days herself. I couldn't help but stare at the huge pimple above her lip with three gray hairs sticking out. When we told her we wanted to book a room for one night, her mood sank to a low point. After the necessary formalities, we were given a key.

"Second floor, room 12," she said, already turning away.

We reached our room via a number of creaky wooden spiral staircases covered with a stained runner that was once red with a floral pattern. We groped our way through an obscure hallway, searching for the light switch. At the sight of the dismal room, our

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mood also sank to rock bottom. The brown-stained and peeling wallpaper, the sagging beds with musty blankets, and the strong smell of nicotine quickly made us decide to leave this sinister hole as fast as possible. Down in the lobby, I casually placed the key on a small table and said we were going to get our luggage. We then got into our car and quickly drove to the next hotel. Well, that next hotel didn't promise much better. The door was locked. However, there was an intercom on the doorframe. I pressed the button, and a voice apologetically told us he was "temporarily absent."

"I'll open the door for you remotely in a moment, just take the key from the board behind the counter and take room 7 on the first floor," was the message. A penetrating hum sounded, and we pushed the door open. This hotel, completely deserted, also had a less-than-cheerful atmosphere. After grabbing the key from the board, we walked upstairs and opened room 7.

"What a mess!" Marjo exclaimed in disappointment. The room hadn't been cleaned; the beds were slept in, there were towels on the floor in the bathroom, and it was a total disaster.

I walked back downstairs to the intercom and informed the voice that room 7 hadn't been cleaned. There was a moment of silence before the voice said:

"Ah bon..." (That's what the French always say when something isn't right), "Ah bon... just take room 10 on the second floor instead," the voice said, apologizing again.

I went back inside, grabbed key 10 from the board, and we walked to the corresponding room. This one, thankfully, had been cleaned.

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After freshening up, we walked into the town to look for a restaurant. After walking around for a while, we found that the choice was limited to a pizza place or a kebab shop; everything else was closed. We chose the kebab shop since we'd just had pizza recently. When we entered, we were immediately sent away.

"Ici, pas de chiens, désolée!!" (No dogs here, sorry!) the cook called out resolutely when she saw Pico, our dachshund.

"Not even this small, sweet dachshund?" Marjo tried.

"Non!" the woman said resolutely, looking sternly at us over her glasses and gesturing to the exit. So, pizza it was. Pico was allowed inside for this one time. An hour later, with a brick in our stomachs, we tiredly flopped onto our hotel bed.

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The next day, we were back in the lobby with our suitcases, which had now become a departure hall. No one was to be seen; the entire hotel was completely deserted. After walking around for a bit, I went to the intercom again. To be safe, I put my foot in the front door and pressed the intercom button. No response. After pressing a few more times, still no response.

Back in the lobby, I called out a few more times. Nothing.

"Come on!" Marjo said. "Let's go. Let's just leave a note with our phone number on the counter!"

A moment later, we were back on our way south. On the car radio, we heard that all of France was in an uproar and that it was a huge

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mess: blockades throughout the country, protest marches, and riots.

"How strange!" we said to each other. "Everything is completely deserted here! Nothing is happening!"

We had no sooner said it than we came to a standstill on the ring road of Moulins. A little way ahead, we spotted a group of about twenty demonstrators in yellow vests, who were doing a kind of



conga line around the roundabout. At the roundabout itself, another group was standing by a wood fire, blowing on their hands to warm them up. The road at the roundabout was blocked with large red and white plastic barriers.

"Well, here we are," Marjo said. "By the way, do you see that everyone has a yellow vest on their dashboard?" she asked, looking at the other cars in the traffic jam. We heard on the radio that this was a signal that you sympathized with the protest.

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"Let's do that too," Marjo suggested. "Maybe they'll let us through faster."

It turned out that the Yellow Vests were letting about five cars through every ten minutes. After a good half hour, we arrived at the barricade and rolled down our window. We decided to strike up a sympathetic conversation with the demonstrators and, most importantly, not to get angry. The demonstrators engaged in a long discussion with us and explained the reasons for their grievances. We convincingly confirmed their point of view, and that seemed to help, because after a look at the vest on our dashboard, we were asked to drive on.

After two hours in traffic at various points on the ring road, we finally left Moulins behind.

But unfortunately, at the next town, it was the same story, and we were in a traffic jam at every roundabout again. Sometimes we saw unpleasant scenes of French people who tried to drive through, cursing and swearing, trying to break through the blockade. Things got heated sometimes, with demonstrators almost being run over! At one point, when we were stopped again and talking to the demonstrators, Marjo suddenly snatched the tin of cookies we had gotten from our daughter-in-law from the back seat. It was full of "**pepernoten**," Dutch spiced cookies left over from a Sinterklaas party.

"Here!" she said, holding the tin out to them. "Take some Dutch cookies; they are really delicious!"

The vests looked suspiciously into the tin, then at Pico, our dog, and back at the cookies.

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"Cookies?? Ha ha, you mean dog treats! We're not falling for that!"

"No, really, they're cookies. Here, look!" Marjo said, laughing, and she took a *pepernoot* and put it in her mouth. Hesitantly, a protestor took one and cautiously put it in his mouth.

"Oh, they're good!" he said, and took a few more.

Immediately, our entire car was surrounded by yellow vests, and everyone took a handful of *pepernoten*.

"Jean! **Enlever la barrière!**" (Remove the barrier!) one of the vests called out, and they gestured for us to drive on. So, the *pepernoten* helped us get through the roadblocks a little faster. The radio gave a detailed report on the nature of the protests. It turned out that roundabouts in the big cities were being blocked.

"You know, I think we're doing this all wrong!" Marjo exclaimed.  
"Wouldn't it be better to just take the highway?"

"Maybe so, but wouldn't they just block things at the '**Péages**' (tollbooths)?"

Nearing the highway, we took a chance and drove onto a completely deserted A75 where no one put up a single obstacle for us!

But indeed, after an hour, we saw a large number of blue flashing lights in the distance at the *Péage*, and a lot of police vans were lined up on the shoulder. At every toll booth, a group of yellow vests was manually holding up the barriers and waving everyone through. The police had apparently decided not to intervene to avoid the situation from escalating.

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Laughing, waving, and honking, we drove through the tollbooth without paying and with a big thumbs-up, continuing on our way with a sense of relief. Once we got closer to home and off the highway again, the trouble started around the cities once more, and we brought out the tin of *pepernoten* again to bribe the vests. By the time we got home, we had had enough and, exhausted after a journey that had taken twice as long, we unloaded the car. We never heard from the hotelier again.



## My Pinky

I was cutting a piece of iron with my angle grinder when suddenly the thing bit into the side of my pinky! Damn! I barely noticed; it didn't even hurt.

Lucky I didn't decapitate my pinky! Just put a bandage on it and move on, I thought. But after taking another good look, the cut was pretty deep; it really needed stitches. Luckily, I could move my pinky normally, so no big deal. Marjo said in a tone that brooked no opposition: "To the 'urgence' (emergency room), I'm taking you! Now!"

"No way," I said. "I'll go myself; I'll be right back."

She quickly put a banana in my hands; it was just around lunchtime.

Upon arrival at the emergency room, I was immediately greeted by a "corona escort" and was registered. He asked, of course, what had happened. After 10 minutes in the waiting room, a nurse gave me a first examination. She, of course, asked what had happened. She gave me a first local anesthetic shot and looked at the wound.

"Well," she said, "I'll have a doctor take a look."

After half an hour, a white coat came in. He took my finger and asked what I had done. He looked concerned. "To be sure, i'll have my colleague take a look as well."

After another half an hour, a second white coat came in, who also asked what I had done. He too looked thoughtful. I thought, come on, people, I can move everything just fine; it's no big deal. Put in the stitches, and I can get back to my project. Oh no, this had to be

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treated further in the "chirurgie ambulatoire" (ambulatory surgery) department!

After half an hour, I was escorted to this department and parked in a hospital room. A nurse came in with a stack of bath towels, a bottle of Betadine, and hospital clothes. She asked what had happened, to which I in turn asked what on earth they were all organizing!

"You're going to shower now, wash well with Betadine, and then put on these clothes." I said that I'd really like to speak with the Doctor first to ask what was going to happen!

"The surgeon will be here in a moment," she said to reassure me. Surgeon?? I thought?? After another fifteen minutes, a white coat came in. After he asked what I had done, he checked when I had last eaten, if I was allergic to anything, and started with a huge list of questions. I said I had eaten a banana around noon. "But what are you going to do?" I asked, annoyed!

"I'm the anesthesiologist, and we'll numb your entire arm for the operation." Well, I'll be damned! I thought.

"Why an operation! I really want to speak with the surgeon first!" I protested fiercely.

"Yes, he'll be here in a moment." After another half an hour, the surgeon finally came. I said to him, "Just put in a stitch and be done with it; all this fuss is really not necessary!"

"First, I'll take another look, and you tell me exactly what happened," said Mr. Daaboul, for that was his name. After a small

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examination, he said that this really had to be done carefully. I would be helped at five o'clock, and then I could go home.

At that point, I finally put my fate in the hands of medical science, informed Marjo, and went to shower. A moment later, I was lying in bed, freshly washed and smelling of Betadine, awaiting what was to come. After an hour, a nurse came to get me with a wheelchair. After checking my name and date of birth, he, of course, asked very kindly what had happened (sigh). A moment later, I was transferred to a gurney and wheeled into the preparation room. There, a medical team of at least six people in blue scrubs and face masks "attacked" me to prepare me for the major procedure. I was completely rigged up with a blood pressure monitor, heart monitor, IV, wrapped in gold-colored foil—the whole shebang! At one point, a whole nest of students stood around me, asking "if they could watch!" A moment later, someone started fiddling with my arm, and with the help of an ultrasound, the correct nerves were located so the injections could be placed in the right spots. I got the impression it was an anesthesiologist in training because someone was attentively looking over his shoulder. To make me feel at ease,



he asked me, reading my file, what had happened and if the banana was tasty...

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After a good half hour, I was finally wheeled into the operating room, a huge space with lights and everything, which seemed to be completely prepared for a complex open-heart operation! There, another team of at least six people in blue scrubs got to work, and on the left and right, twelve eyes above face masks looked at me intently. They kindly asked what I had done. Then my anesthetized arm was washed and disinfected at least three times and lathered with, yes, liters of Betadine! I then began to wonder if my arm was properly numb because I could still move it and feel everything they were doing. After I had just mentioned that, they pinched my arm meanly, and I felt nothing! Peculiar—I had feeling but no pain. They worked on me for half an hour. I didn't feel a thing. The surgeon said that a small tendon had been cut and that I had sawed through the bone by just 2 mm!

After another half hour in the recovery room and being deconstructed, I was wheeled back to my room. A while later, a nurse came in and asked what I wanted to eat!

"What I want to eat?" I said, bewildered. "I want to go home and eat at home."

"No, no, I have to give you something to eat, otherwise I'm not allowed to let you go! Shall I give you a cookie with a glass of apple juice?"

"Just do that, then," I said impatiently.

"Oh, and you absolutely cannot drive. Someone has to pick you up, and I still need to go over the post-treatment with you."

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Well, I'll be damned. I got a prescription for two types of painkillers, antibiotics, and a stomach protector, a prescription for bandages and... Betadine, as well as a referral for home healthcare, which would come by three times a week to change the bandage, and a prescription for a "kinésiologue."

"Kinesiologist?" I said, surprised. "What's that for?"

"You have to go to the kinesiologist three times a week for 're-education' of the little finger, otherwise you risk getting a stiff pinky." That's all I needed! In the end, I called Marjo and asked her to pick me up. I was already starting to walk toward the exit.

"Hold on, you can't do that. Your wife has to pick you up here in the department and sign for receipt, otherwise, I'm not allowed to let you go!"

I finally got home at eight o'clock in the evening, completely exhausted. After letting everything sink in, I calculated that in that hospital, I had kept at least 50 people busy for my pinky, filled at least a large waste container with bloody bandages, dirty plasters, tapes, IV materials, clamps, tubes, clothes, little bottles, vials, containers, syringes, needles, fluid, and anxiety sweat, etc., etc. Furthermore, I had relieved the state of at least €30,000, and for the next two weeks, I was still providing employment for some people. I was, by the way, impressed by the discipline with which all this happened. Not only in this hospital but also in other French healthcare institutions that I have had the honour of visiting before. Hats off!

## Selling Our Paradise

We had been in France for 15 years and were running our bed and breakfast and mini-campsite with great pleasure. Meeting people, exchanging stories, and providing guests with a wonderful and relaxing vacation is incredibly fulfilling. It's also very hard work, fortunately only during the holiday season, but after 15 years of cooking dinners, preparing breakfasts, making beds, cleaning toilets, and hanging laundry, you eventually burn out. It was time to change course. With a heavy heart, we decided to put our little paradise up for sale.

And there was interest. After the first visits, we discovered that people come to view your house for a variety of reasons. Many people with "rose-coloured glasses" were more interested in daydreaming about the idea of one day emigrating to France. They enjoyed poking around and getting a feel for things. When you pressed them, it turned out they might take the plunge someday, but certainly not in the next 10 years!

We quickly changed our tactics and asked prospective buyers directly, even before making an appointment, what their plans were.

"Yes, we definitely want to move to France, absolutely! We've set up a 10-year plan. Phase 1: for the first 5 years, we're going to see which region of France we want to live in, and Phase 2: for the last 5 years, we're going to look for our dream spot."

"Okay," we said, disillusioned for the umpteenth time. "And what phase are you in now?"

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"Oh, Phase 1. We think it might be this area after all, or maybe Provence, or perhaps the Verdon."

We immediately showed these people the door and told them to come back in 5 years.

We also learned to carefully observe the female half of the couple. He desperately wanted to change his life, sooner rather than later! When you asked her for her motivations, she would say something along the lines of, "Wherever Jan goes, I'll go too," followed by a giggle, "I just don't know if I can live without my mom and my sister!" We knew enough. This wasn't going to happen.

For the more serious candidates, things always fell through because of financing. Time and time again, convinced they would get a mortgage from their bank, they couldn't get a loan, or couldn't get enough of one.

We became increasingly blunt in our questioning:

"May I ask you a rude question?" I would ask pointedly.

"Huh, uh, yes, go ahead," they would respond, surprised.

"How much of your own capital can you contribute to buy our business?"

"Well, that is indeed a rude question; we consider that to be absolutely private!"

If we couldn't get a clear answer, we would politely but firmly say goodbye.

### **The Belgians and a Secret House Hunt**

One day, two years later, a Belgian couple came. They were both extremely enthusiastic and wanted to do business. They had a holiday home in the Auvergne and wanted to sell their house in Belgium. However, they had a foster child. A judge would have to rule on this. They needed the parents' permission if they wanted to settle in France. This would unfortunately take a lot of time. They asked if they could get an option on our house.

After much deliberation, we agreed, provided they paid us a €10,000 deposit, if only to be sure of their intentions. We then drafted a simple contract ourselves, and the requested deposit was transferred. We just hoped it was all legally sound!

Then we started to get excited ourselves. What would we do after our adventure in the Aveyron? We wanted to stay in France, but a bit closer to local amenities. At the moment, the nearest supermarket was 22 km away and the nearest big city was 40 km. Having everything a bit closer would be comfortable. Now, we had firmly decided never to buy a house before our current one was sold. Just for orientation, of course, we started a search on the internet.

We took great pleasure in trying to find the owner directly once we found a house on a real estate website. We would get to work with Google Maps, Geoportail, and Street View, and we usually managed to find the property. The contours of the roof and the swimming pool, in particular, provided a good clue to find the location.



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So we were looking for a spacious and comfortable house, closer to the city, with one or two cottages that we could rent out to supplement our rather meager pension. After much internet wandering, we finally found our "ei van Columbus" (the perfect solution) on one of the many real estate websites. Of course, the ad didn't mention exactly where it was located. The real estate agent didn't have exclusive selling rights. We got back to work with Google Maps but couldn't find it at all. On another agent's website, the house was also listed, this time with a photo that showed there was a fighter jet in the garden! So it was near Villeneuve sur Lot. We still couldn't find it. On yet another real estate site, the text mentioned that the new hospital was nearby! That significantly narrowed the search area. And sure enough, there it was: a house with a pool and a jet in the garden! Got it!



## **Ça va, ça va**

When we called the owner, we were able to schedule a viewing. It was an instant hit; this was the one—a spacious and comfortable house, 2 small rental cottages, and a beautiful pool. During our introduction, where it became clear that he was a collector of model airplanes, among other things, we told him about our situation, about our prospective buyers, and about their foster child. The word "option" soon came up. I proposed transferring €10,000 as a deposit. The extremely friendly French owners agreed, and we transferred the money from the Belgians to their account. We had done it again... bought a house without having definitively sold the current one.

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## **The End Game**

After a tense time, the good news finally came from Belgium: the foster child was allowed to come! Then, however, there was more bickering about the price. I thought we were past that. They wanted to get every last penny. Eventually, we agreed on a price, and a whole series of viewings and negotiations over the furniture began all over again. Later, they brought up that they would actually like to sell their house in Belgium first and only then sign the final contract.

"Don't worry, our house is selling very well and will be sold within a month!" they told us. When we saw photos of their house, we had our doubts.

In the meantime, we had also been in talks with a Dutch couple. They were very eager to come and see the house. Since the whole story with the Belgians was starting to fall apart, we agreed to a visit, and they booked a flight to come over.

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A week later, we finally had an appointment with the Belgians at the notary's office to sign the preliminary purchase agreement. They asked if we would mind if they brought their family. They really wanted to see the place. On the day of the truth, we worked ourselves ragged to provide food and drinks for the entire family.

I then called the couple from the Netherlands and told them that our house was as good as sold and that there was no point in them coming all this way.

"Well," they said, "we're coming anyway. We can't cancel the flight now, so we'll just go out in Toulouse or something."

"Well, here's what you can do," I said. "Just come here anyway. I'll show you a different house belonging to good friends of ours. It's a truly beautiful property, a real gem that's also for sale. The owners aren't there, but I can show you around."

"Okay, cool, good plan, we'll do it. We'll be on your doorstep tomorrow."

Meanwhile, we went to the notary's office with the Belgians. Once there, they told our notary that their counsel had strongly advised them not to sign the deed but to sell their house in Belgium first. They then wanted a 6-month option, and if the sale didn't go through, all costs would be on us!

We were dumbfounded, as was our notary.

"No way!" he said resolutely. "This is not legally or lawfully possible!"

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A moment later, we were standing outside, disillusioned, and at the end of the day, the entire party left with the promise that they would do everything they could to sell their house in Belgium as quickly as possible.

The next day, I went to pick up Rob and Ciska for a tour of our friends' house. Without telling them what had happened at our place, I first wanted to give them a full tour. After an hour and a half tour, it turned out not to be the place for them. It didn't give them the "coup de coeur" (the love at first sight).

"But," Rob asked curiously, "how are things with you now?"

"Well," I said, "in all honesty, everything is up in the air again. The preliminary purchase agreement still hasn't been signed!"

"Oh!" Rob looked at his watch. "Our return flight isn't for another 2 hours. Can we still see your house?"

I had honestly been hoping for that. So we rushed back to our house and gave them a very quick tour. And yes, it was there, the "coup de coeur"! That feeling that creeps up on you, the tingling, the fever, when you've found the place of your life. It's often a feeling that goes against all reason but is an indispensable ingredient in the buying process. Rob and Ciska had to leave quickly, unfortunately, or they would miss their flight.

Meanwhile, we were dealing with the Belgians. The sale of their house was going very badly and wasn't making any progress. We were clearly being led on. In the meantime, negotiations with Rob and Ciska continued, and two months later, we signed the

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preliminary purchase agreement. The financing was already in place.

Now we had to inform the Belgians of this development. That did not go well; it did not go well at all!

"And our deposit? We want it back immediately!" they said furiously.

"Of course," I said. "I'll just draft a dissolving contract, and as soon as it's signed, we'll refund the money."

We had to wait another three weeks for that signature. There was, of course, always the possibility that they would take legal action. But eventually, I got the signed contract back and we refunded the money.

In August, we were back at the notary's office with Rob and Ciska for the "acte de vente" (deed of sale). We had an appointment for 2:30 PM.

The four of us sat tensely in the waiting room. There was no sign of the notary. At three o'clock, he stuck a sleepy head with messy hair around the door. He asked us to follow him. He's clearly just woken up from his siesta, I thought immediately!

The contracts were signed, and Rob and Ciska now continued our French dream. A month later, we signed our own purchase agreement at the kitchen table of our new house in Villeneuve sur Lot.

## Summer Snow

Twice now, here in Villeneuve sur Lot, we have witnessed an outbreak of white flies. This time, we were at a concert on the banks of the Lot River on *quatorze juillet* (July 14th). The singer of the band was trying her best while the other band members listlessly played their song. Around ten o'clock, the place was suddenly swarming with white flies or moths. Their numbers grew exponentially as they came en masse toward the stage lights, swarming by the thousands around the huge lamps.

The singer's performance was brutally interrupted. She waved her arms wildly, at one point panicked, and ran screaming off the stage on her stiletto heels. The other band members also called it quits and walked down the stage steps.



## Ça va, ça va

The following year, the exact same thing happened, but with a different band. This prompted a thorough investigation on the internet to figure out what kind of strange "bird" this was.

The insect responsible for this cruel disruption of human habitat is the "Ephoron virgo," or in Dutch, the "schoraas." It's commonly known as "summer snow" because it truly looks as if it's snowing. It is a white fly or moth. The larvae live all year in the mud of the river, where they eat microorganisms. Once a year, they rise to the surface by the hundreds of thousands, quickly pupate while floating on the water, and then fly out. The male looks for a female that is full of eggs, fertilizes her, and then dies immediately. The female flutters back to the water, where she more or less explodes as she releases her eggs and also dies. They are truly mayflies! The eggs sink to the bottom, and the cycle begins again. It is a feast for all the fish. This phenomenon then repeats itself for a few days, only on a sultry summer evening sometime at the end of July. After that, it is quiet again for a year.

## The Stump

Our house in Villeneuve sur Lot has a huge conifer hedge, at least three meters high, on the front and on one side.

The hedge at the front had unfortunately been trimmed too short at some point and had died, while the one on the side was fine. This dead mess was a thorn in our side. "Shouldn't we get rid of that junk sometime?" I asked Marjo. "And put a mix of shrubs there instead?"



"Oh no," Marjo said. "Then we'll be right out in the street! I don't want that!"

At a certain point, four years later, they were trimming a poplar hedge a little ways down the road, using a "broyeur," a big shredder. What a terrible noise that thing made, good heavens!

"Hmm, I wonder if they could get rid of our dead hedge?" Marjo said, to my utter astonishment.



## **Ça va, ça va**

"So now you suddenly want to get rid of it?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, actually. Just the one at the front of the house, not the one on the side!"

So I walked over to the loud crew. After a "ça va, ça va" and some small talk, I finally asked if they could also remove our hedge.

"Yes, we can, *comme vous voulez* (as you wish)," said the crew chief. I pointed out where we lived, and he said he would come by sometime.

As I walked back home, I thought, "We'll never see him again!" But damn, the next day he called to ask if he could come and take a look. Surprised, I said, "*Oui bien sûre, à tout de suite* (Yes, of course, see you soon)!"

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### **The Misunderstanding**

An hour later, the doorbell rang, and we looked at the work to be done together. I told him that all the conifers at the front had to be removed, adding "*les troncs inclus* (trunks included)" for clarity. Naturally, I wanted the stumps out and everything taken away.

"*Oui, oui, pas de problème* (Yes, yes, no problem)," he said, nodding.

Stepping, measuring, and pondering, he said, "*pour milles Euros c'est fait* (for a thousand euros, it's done)." I had expected something like that, so I agreed and asked when he could do the job.

## Ça va, ça va

"Oh la la, pas avant février (Oh my, not before February)," he said with a shrug, "désolée (sorry)!" I had expected that, too. I said, "Okay, that's fine. I'll see you sometime in February." We were in no hurry.

A week later, he called to ask if he could remove the hedge tomorrow! I was extremely surprised and said that was no problem. A "chantier" (job site) was delayed, so he had some time and could do this in between.

"Okay, great, see you tomorrow, then," I said.

The next day, having gotten up a little earlier, I already heard a huge racket at eight o'clock. There were two of them making our hedge "a head shorter." An enormous shredder was parked on the edge of the forest across from us, where they were pushing the conifers. They laid the main trunks aside. The cannon of the shredder blew all the debris into their "camion" (truck).

I started clearing the huge amounts of leaves that had gathered under the conifers, dragging them with a tarpaulin to the edge of the forest and dumping them there. When they saw me doing that, they turned their cannon towards the forest as well. That was, of course, easier than having to haul away all the wood chips! Around three o'clock, all the conifers had been removed. The road was neatly cleared with a leaf blower, and they tidied up everything else. I walked over to them and asked when they were going to remove "les troncs," pointing to the stumps that were still sticking out of the ground.

"les troncs??" he said, surprised. "vous voulez que j'enlève aussi les souches?? (You want me to remove the stumps too?)"

## Ça va, ça va

"Oui, les souches, les troncs!!" I said, "I don't know what that's called exactly."

"Désolée," he said, "that wasn't the agreement! That costs extra!"

Disappointed, I realized we had a linguistic confusion. "Tronc" means "trunk," not "stump"! Dammit!

"And what now?" I asked him.

"I really have to do that for an extra charge. I need a different machine for that, and I have to rent it."

"How much will that cost me extra?" I asked him, disappointed. After counting 59 stumps, he came to an extra €400, and he could only do it in February!

"Just leave it for now," I said. "We'll see later."

After paying in cash (without tax), they left. Eventually, the next day, I dug out the stumps a little and sawed another 10 cm off with a chainsaw so that everything was at least below ground level.

All in all, another lesson learned. **"Un tronc"** is not the same as **"une souche."**





## Lieu dit

(A story with a wink...)

It took us a while to figure out how the addressing system in France works. In cities, it's regulated just as we're used to: a street name with even numbers on the right and odd numbers on the left. In the countryside, however, it's completely different. They don't have street names or house numbers. In the countryside, every house and every farm has a name, often centuries old, usually derived from Occitan. Here are a few examples: Puech sec (Dry Hill), Montclar (Clear Mountain), Carrière Basse (The Low Road).

When two farms were on the same road, people would simply refer to Carrière Basse and Carrière Haute—the low-lying and the high-lying farms.

Our address was La Libaudié, and we never managed to find its exact meaning. The term 'lieu-dit' is often used before the name to indicate that it's not a street name but the name of the house. It means something like 'the place called...' or 'the spot one calls...'. So our official address was:

La Famille Wijnen Lieu-dit 'la Libaudié' 12550 La Bastide Solages

No house number. In fact, your family name is your house number. The postman only needed the name 'Wijnen' to find us. Package delivery drivers, however, always had problems finding us because it wasn't a routine delivery for them. They would often call, "Where are you?" in an annoyed tone. I would then ask if they had a GPS. To my surprise, most delivery drivers didn't.

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The postal codes, on the other hand, were well-organized thanks to Napoleon. He simply put the 100 departments in alphabetical order and gave them a number from 1 to 100: Ain - 01, Aisne - 02... Vosges - 88, Yonne - 89. The departments around Paris, in the 90s, deviated slightly from this order. The first two digits of the postcode are the department, and the next three digits determine the cantons and neighbourhoods. At one point, one of the ministers decided this 'lieu-dit' system was no longer tenable and managed to secure a subsidy from Brussels to reform the house addressing system in France.

When we moved to Villeneuve-sur-Lot, we again had a '**Lieu-dit**':

La Famille Wijnen Lieu-dit 'Joinissou' 47300 Villeneuve-sur-Lot

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### The New Address

One day, a brand new post with a street sign, 'chemin de Talou,' suddenly appeared at the beginning of our street. "What's this now?!" we thought... "Oh well, we'll see!" Our neighbours had already heard rumours that we would be getting a new address. About six months later, we did indeed receive a letter from the municipality asking us to update our address information.

Our address was now:

372 Chemin de Talou  
47300 Villeneuve sur Lot

"What is this?!" we said, amazed. "Great, now we have to change everything! New business cards, address signs, etc. And why on

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earth is it number 372??" We were the third house on the right side of the street, so we had expected a house number like 6 or so. But no, number 372! We inquired with the municipality. "Yes, that's correct," they said. "It means your house is 372 meters from the street sign at the beginning of the road." Our neighbours had number 426, so that seemed to add up. For houses on the right side of the road, the distances were rounded to even numbers, and for the left side, to odd numbers. It's a clever system. The postman and delivery drivers know roughly how far they still have to go, and you don't have re-numbering problems if another house is ever built in between.

We were kindly asked to update our address with various organizations, such as the electricity company, telecom, banks, etc. So I went to the websites of the various organizations to change our address. On all the sites, I got the message: "Chemin de Talou, address unknown!" No matter what I tried, I couldn't update my address. Apparently, the address databases of the various government agencies had not yet been updated. Fortunately, our mail still arrives, and the delivery drivers still call us to ask where we are, so in that regard, not much will change anytime soon.

But... it soon became clear that this new numbering system had led to an amusing and hilarious misunderstanding for us!

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## **An Unexpected Summit**

It was a Sunday morning, and it was about to become a very different Sunday from normal. Marjo and I were having our Sunday coffee when a gigantic limousine suddenly pulled into the

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driveway—a truly massive, mobile-bunker type, with an American flag on the left of the hood and a French flag on the right. This tank stopped at our front door, and two hulking figures with glossy sunglasses and stiff hair jumped out and began a conversation with their left wrists. One of the two rang the doorbell, and we opened the door, suspicious. The hulk asked in English with a distinct Texas accent if this was Chemin de Talou number 372.

"That's right," I said, surprised. "This is TALOU 372, but I suspect you're in the wrong place. What are you looking for?"

The man scratched behind his ear where his coiled wire came from, looked at a piece of paper, and said that a summit had been organized by Mr. Macron here in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, where a number of world leaders were to meet in all discretion. Something began to dawn on me! I had heard something about this, and I had a suspicion where the mistake lay.

"You're probably looking for Chemin de Talou number 732; that's the castle further down the road," I suggested.

"Oh," the hulk said, surprised. "Then it's wrong on the invitation! I'm afraid you'll have a few more visitors today!" he said with a wry smile.

He had no sooner said it than a second car with a motorcade arrived. At that moment, the back door of the first limo swung open, and to my astonishment, Biden got out! Yes, Joe, Joe Biden, the President of the US of A!

"Walter, ask these friendly people if I might use their bathroom. I'm exploding! Sorry!" he asked his bodyguard in a strained voice. Mr.



## Ça va, ça va

Biden walked over to us and shook our hands. We were perplexed! Meanwhile, the door of the second limousine also opened, and Emmanuel Macron and his Brigitte got out and walked toward us. They shook hands with Joe and us, and an animated conversation soon began, until Joe suddenly walked into our house and asked Marjo, "Can you show me the bathroom, please?" Joe walked into the house behind Marjo, followed by the rest of the party who also just walked in! Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two more cars approaching. Two big, black Mercedes with an orange flag on one and a German flag on the other. Before I knew it, Angela Merkel in a bright red blazer, Willem-Alexander, and Máxima were in our living room. One of the bodyguards apologized for the misunderstanding and asked if some coffee or something could be arranged. They had been on the road for a while.

Fifteen minutes later, Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko walked in.

"A peculiar location for a summit," Vladimir said, looking around, highly surprised. Emmanuel walked over to him and apologized.

"Sorry, Vladimir, a small mistake on the invitation; the number was printed incorrectly. We're going on to the correct location in a moment, my apologies! We're just waiting for President Biden!" At that moment, Joe clearly relieved, returned to the living room, surprised by the motley crew that had gathered in our living room, and shook everyone's hand. Through the window, I saw two bodyguards rolling out a red carpet, and Xi Jinping got out! That's right, Xi Jinping, Secretary-General of the Communist Party of China, with Kim Jong-Un in his wake—you know, from the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea! At that point, the chaos was truly

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complete. Marjo had hastily brewed a few pots of coffee, and the bodyguards were in a panic, bending over backward to explain to everyone what was wrong. But the mood was good. Everyone was clearly enjoying the informal get-together and weren't making any move to leave. How lovely—no protocol for a change!

In the crowd, I saw Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos walk in. I asked Emmanuel if they also belonged to the company; they were not exactly government leaders.

"That's right," Manu said. "We thought it was a good idea to invite a few 'influencers'."

"And Angela?" I asked curiously. "She's not chancellor anymore, is she?"

"Ah, Angela, she's my best friend. She just belongs," Manu said affectionately, casting a sideways glance at Brigitte.

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## The Conversations

Bewildered, I walked among all the visitors, shaking hands here and there. Marjo was running around like crazy to provide everyone with coffee and tea.

Joe and Vladimir stood in a corner of the room, discussing and gesticulating animatedly.

"Listen, Joe, I can't allow NATO troops and missile systems to be installed in Ukraine," Vladimir said resolutely.

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"I get it, Vladimir, that's not going to happen, at least as long as you keep a low profile!" Joe replied.

"Maybe so, but you're already supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine, and NATO is breathing too much down my neck! I won't accept that; it has to stop! Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania are already members of NATO! Ukraine as well is really going too far for me! The security of my beloved Russia is at risk! Unacceptable! Remember when we wanted to install missiles in your backyard in Cuba, Joe?" Vladimir reminded him pointedly.

"I understand your concerns," Joe said, "but Ukraine must be able to defend itself."

Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos joined the conversation.

"Calm down, gentlemen. Can I offer you a space trip on my 'New Shepard' instead?" he asked Biden and Putin. "Going into space together, isn't that a great idea? It only costs 30 million per person. Then you can stay in my space hotel afterward!" Bezos boasted.

"You can get to know each other better up there."

"Jeff, stop it. I'm 79 and not so steady on my feet anymore. Doesn't sound like a good plan to me!" Joe said, irritated, and turned back to Vladimir.

"Age doesn't matter, Joe! We recently shot William Shatner, you know, Captain Kirk from Star Trek, into space. He's ninety!" Bezos bragged. "Easy as pie."

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Next to us, I heard Angela asking Alexander Lukashenko why on earth he had sent all those migrants to the Polish border and not kept them himself.

"But Angela!" Lukashenko said. "They don't want to stay in Belarus; they want to go to paradise—Germany, France, and Holland! You have to understand that! If they really want to, I'm not the one to stand in their way; I'll even go get them myself!"

"Well, you're already doing that," Angela said, piqued. "We're not happy about that!" In a corner of the living room, I saw Mark Rutte talking to Bolsonaro. I gave them their coffee when I heard Mark say,

"Listen, Jair, it's great that you stood up for the Amazon rainforest during the climate summit in Scotland and expressed your intention to stop deforestation in your country. But you're not even home yet, and you're already cutting the budget of your Ministry of the Environment by 20%! How can you reconcile that?"

"Yes," Jair said, "that was a bit clumsy of me. But you know, the worldwide demand for soy is gigantic! To meet the huge demand, we need more agricultural land! What else are we supposed to do? And besides, Mark, you know that the Netherlands is the largest importer of soy products in the world! Isn't that crazy? One of the smallest countries imports the most soy in the world! So, in fact, you Dutch are primarily responsible for deforestation, not only in our country in Brazil but also worldwide!" Mark looked around uncomfortably, searching for a way to quickly change the subject, and struck up a conversation with me instead.

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"How's the political climate in the Netherlands?" I asked Mark Rutte casually.

"Don't even get me started, Kees, it's terrible. We're heading for difficult times. Frans Timmermans managed to push his 'Green Deal' through the European Parliament. This will make it impossible for multinationals to do business anymore. One after another, they are fleeing the country. They can feel in their bones what's coming. Take Tata Steel, for example; they have to invest billions to reduce CO2 emissions! If we don't pump in billions in government support, they'll be gone!"

"You know, Mark, with that CO2, do you know, for example, the percentage of CO2 that is actually in the air?"

Mark looks at me, surprised: "Uh, what do I know, 10% or something? What do you ask that for?"

"0.03, Mark. The air contains 0.03% CO2! And only 10% of that is caused by humans! Most of it comes from natural emissions like volcanic eruptions, forest fires, permafrost, etc." Mark looked at me, bewildered, and I continued:

"We think we can make a difference with billions in investments. I don't believe in that. You know, Mark, the Earth is about 3 billion years old. Since then, our planet has experienced a thing or two in the form of tectonic plate shifts, unprecedentedly fierce volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, superstorms, floods, tsunamis, meteor impacts, a change in the poles, one ice age after another, one tropical period after another, etc., etc. In contrast, humanity has only been dominant for the last 10,000 years, and the Industrial Revolution only started 200 years ago. One thing is certain: the

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Earth will always exist, but humanity will become extinct, spewed out by nature, and in the end, only a very thin layer will remain in the sediment. It's pure hubris to think we can turn the tide and bend nature to our will."

"Well, Kees, you have a nice little place here," Mark said, a bit peevishly, and, shrugging and scratching behind his ear, looked for another topic.

At that moment, Marjo called me to come help and pushed a pot of coffee into my hands. On the way, Xi buttonholed me, asking if I had any coffee left.

"How are the preparations for the Olympic Winter Games coming along?" I asked him while pouring him some coffee.

"Ah, don't even get me started," he said, disappointed. "Of course, there's a boycott from the West again. It's always the same song! You hypocritical Westerners!"

"Yes, with the Uyghurs and Tibetans, right?" I said cautiously.

"Exactly!" he said. "Listen, Kees, I have to get 1.3 billion Chinese people to face the same way. 1.3 billion—that's a lot of people to keep in line, do you understand that?" I nodded and thought, "I understand, but you're committing a kind of genocide!"

"You also know," he continued, "that for centuries, religion has divided humanity and has been a source of unrest, wars, murders, bloodshed, and merciless hatred! We want to nip that in the bud! In our great country, we must eradicate religion root and branch if we want to keep our nation united and become the largest economy in

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the world." I gave him some more coffee and saw Elon walking around, looking for something.

"Looking for something?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "where do I find the bathroom?"

"How's your Starship coming along?" I asked him, curious.

"We're launching in February/March," he said. "Then it will go into space on top of Booster 5 for its first test flight. Yes, Kees, it will be the largest and most powerful rocket ever built! It's 119 meters high with a total of 39 rocket engines! Can you imagine? Blue Origin, NASA, and the Russians can all learn a thing or two from that!"

"And the Chinese!" I added scornfully. "Incredible! I'm curious!"

"The first launch won't go flawlessly. But hey, we're still waiting for a launch permit from the F.A.A."

"F.A.A.? What's that?" I asked him, interested.

"The Federal Aviation Administration, a huge bureaucratic institution!" Elon said. "They have to give permission. They are still investigating the environmental impact of our plans. Some kind of little beach lizard at our base in Boca Chica, Texas, is supposedly threatened. It makes me sick, a bunch of pencil-pushers! You know, honestly, I'm thinking of selling all my shares and handing over the torch to someone else."

"Oh? And what will you do then?" I asked, surprised.

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"I don't know yet," he said. "New challenges like nuclear energy, artificial intelligence, influencing. Right now, I'm pretty much fed up with rockets," he joked.

"Kees," he continued, "believe me, nuclear energy is the future! That tinkering with solar panels and windmills is really not going to cut it, a drop in the ocean," Elon joked. "Small modular reactors are the future. They're very safe, efficient, produce hardly any waste, and are much cheaper to build. We already have a pilot model on the way. Thorium reactors can take over after that."

"What a day this is!" I thought, walking on. In the back of the living room, I was cornered by a small, old, shriveled lady in a bright red suit who had taken a hunched-over seat in Marjo's armchair. "Excuse me, Sir," she said and looked at me, "do you have a cup of tea, thank you?" Shit! I thought... Queen Elizabeth! Her too! Behind her, Boris Johnson and Mark Rutte were clowning around with Willem-Alexander, and I saw Máxima having a profound conversation with Brigitte. Fortunately, Marjo was already walking over with a cup of tea and gave it to "Her Royal Highness." Willem-Alexander asked me if I had a beer for him.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also walked over to me and wanted to know if I had a chair for him. He found it outrageous that he had to stand all this time! "My back is a bit sore, you know," he complained. I apologized and said that we weren't prepared for so many people and gave Willem his beer.

"Can I have her chair instead?" Recep asked, looking in the direction of Ursula von der Leyen. Meanwhile, I saw two bodyguards talking nervously to Macron and Biden. I understood that they really had to



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leave now. The security risks were far too great, and at the actual location, they were in a panic over where everyone had gone. With great difficulty, they managed to get everyone to return to their limousines to continue on their way to Chemin de Talou 732. Joe thanked us warmly and apologized for the inconvenience caused.

"What a little trip to the bathroom can cause..." he joked.

"No problem at all," I said. "By the way, I would really appreciate it if we could take a group photo at the entrance to our house. Our friends will never believe this otherwise!"

"With pleasure!" Joe said and ordered one of his bodyguards to arrange it.



## The Party

We are having a great time in Villeneuve sur Lot. Renting out our two **gîtes** is a piece of cake for us, and on top of that, it's going incredibly well. Because we're close to town, we rent out the cottages all year. In the summer, we get tourists, and in the winter, we get a lot of 'ouvriers,' or laborers, who have a job somewhere in town. They reserve from Monday to Friday, are only here in the evenings, and leave early in the morning for their worksite. It's perfect!

Most of the reservations come through the big rental websites. All in all, we can't complain. We welcome the guests, show them to their cottage, and afterwards, we clean... and that's it! Easy peasy! When we feel like it, we organize a barbecue 'à l'auberge Espagnolle,' which is a potluck. The Dutch call it an American BBQ, and Americans call it a Dutch BBQ.

Once here, we came across a phenomenon we hadn't experienced before. One day, we got a 3-day reservation. A guy named Rashid Amhali booked by phone for the coming weekend. That same day, two young guys of North African descent arrived in a flashy black BMW. One of them pulled a thick wad of cash from his pocket and paid in full. They lived right here in Villeneuve. We found that a bit odd.

In the afternoon, they asked if two friends could come over. We're generally not a fan of that, but fine, we said okay. Sure enough, around eight in the evening, two more guys arrived. They asked if they could use the barbecue.

"Yeah, of course, go ahead, but don't make a mess!"

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"Don't worry, we'll clean everything up nicely."

Half an hour later, two girls arrived. "Yeah, they just came to say hello."

"But don't worry, we'll keep everything very tidy!"

You can probably guess what happened: by the end of the evening, there were twelve North Africans partying around the pool. Loud Arabic hip-hop and rap music blared across the property, and bags of drinks and food were brought in. It went on like that all night. Thank God we had no guests in the other gite.

Around three in the morning, having not slept a wink, I was fed up. I went over to them.

"Will you go to bed now, please? That's enough! Get out!"

All of them looked at me with watery, uncomprehending eyes.

"But why? We're not making any noise, are we?"

"No noise? The neighbours just called with complaints!" I made up to make a point, and a back-and-forth argument started.

"Stop now and everyone go home. The two of you, go to the **gite**. Now!!!"

I walked away angrily and didn't expect them to listen. It got a little quieter, but less than half an hour later, it was a party again! At 6 a.m., Marjo put on her bathrobe and stormed over to the pool, fuming. I don't know what she said to them, but they finally slunk away.

## The Aftermath

The next morning, when I saw one of the two stumble outside around noon, groggy and clearly with a gigantic hangover, I walked over and told them to pack their bags. There was no way this wouldn't happen again in the coming days. Well, they really weren't planning on leaving; after all, they had paid for three nights.

"No problem," I said. "You'll pay me for this one night and the cleaning costs. You'll get the rest back." I said, looking at all the mess.

That's when a fierce discussion started, with emotions running high. I said I would have to call the police.

"Ha!" the youngest, a snot-nosed punk of no more than sixteen, shouted. "Go ahead and call them, we know how to deal with these pigs!"

They finally agreed, on the condition that they could still have lunch, and then they would leave. They definitely didn't want to pay the cleaning costs.

So, during lunch, there were about eight of them at the pool again, and the barbecue got another beating. Around four o'clock, they finally headed out.

We spent the rest of the day cleaning up the mess. There were cigarette butts everywhere, food scraps, roaches from joints, empty bottles of liquor, trash bags full of garbage, and empty beer cans. The gite looked a mess too! It was chaos; there was grease

## Ça va, ça va

everywhere, pans were blackened, the microwave was burnt, all the towels were covered in filthy gunk, and the bedding was full of stains. The purpose of ashtrays and trash cans had completely escaped these people. "Just throw it on the ground!" was clearly their motto.

It turns out that young people like to rent a cottage with a pool for the weekend and then invite all their friends for a crazy pool party. We really needed to avoid this in the future. We're prepared now and will immediately refuse these kinds of requests from now on.



## The Cataract Operation

I can't say anything other than that everything in the medical field in France is organized very thoroughly and with discipline, with nothing left to chance. For instance, my ophthalmologist determined that both of my eyes had cataracts, the left more than the right.

"Mr. Wijnen, as things stand now, I can no longer let you drive a car!" was the ophthalmologist's verdict.

So, I was forced to decide to do something about it. The ophthalmologist who would perform the operation told me after an eye exam that I had a prescription of -8, which is legally blind, and that he could correct it to -3. So I would still need to wear glasses. I didn't mind that so much, as I've been wearing glasses since I was twelve and have developed quite the 'owl face.' The secretary got all the paperwork in order. First, I had to go to the dentist.

"The dentist?? For a cataract operation??"

"Yes, you need a statement that you have no hidden infections in your mouth. This can cause complications!"

An appointment with the anesthesiologist was also scheduled.

"Why do I have to go there too?? I'm not getting a general anesthetic, am I??"

"No, you will get eye drops, but you still have to visit the anesthesiologist!"

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"Okay," I said with a sigh, having completely put my fate in the hands of medical science again.

"A COVID test also has to be done."

I had absolutely no desire for that! I wasn't looking forward to a cotton swab in my brain via my nose! I also received prescriptions for eye drops and Betadine. For three days, I had to use the drops, and the day before the procedure, I had to thoroughly wash myself with that 'wonderfully scented' Betadine. I had a trauma from a previous procedure from that stuff.

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### The Procedure

On the day of the operation, Marjo dropped me off at the 'Chirurgie ambulatoire' (outpatient surgery) department. After signing I don't know how many forms, with which I pretty much gave up all my rights, a nurse took me to the intake room. There, I was given eye drops and a pill to 'calm' me down; my blood pressure and temperature were taken. Next, I had to strip naked in a cubicle and put on paper pajamas. After half an hour, I was taken in a wheelchair to the preparation room, where I was transferred to a gurney and fitted with a whole assortment of gadgets consisting of ECG stickers, IV needles, and other unclear clamps and wires. After another half hour, I was finally wheeled into the operating room. There, the left eye was numbed with drops, and all I could see were bright lights in all the colours of the rainbow. After some reassuring words from the ophthalmologist, he began the procedure. It didn't hurt at all, but it was not pleasant. After fifteen minutes, I was wheeled out again with a transparent cap over my eye. All I could

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see were cotton balls. After I was relieved of all the wires, needles, and clamps in the recovery room, I was wheeled back to where it all began.

Marjo came to pick me up, and once home, I took a look at what I could actually see now. I had hardly any pain in the treated eye, at most the feeling of having some sand in it. Everything was quite blurry, but they had warned me about that. After an hour or so, my vision noticeably improved. At one point, I could see better without glasses with my treated eye than my untreated eye with glasses! The colors, in particular, were much more brilliant.

For illustration, it was something like the photos below. It was a remarkable experience. I thought: "How is that sky so incredibly blue and the trees so green!!!"



The left photo was taken with my treated left eye; the other photo was taken with the untreated right eye. My right eye was scheduled for an operation in a month.

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## The Glasses



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A difficult period followed. Should I wear my glasses or not? In either case, I saw everything sharply with one eye and blurry with the other. The operation on the right eye was identical and also went without a hitch. Now I had to wait another month before I would get my final glasses. So for another month, I saw the world through a kind of tracing paper. Finally, after an eye exam with the ophthalmologist, I could go to the optician for a new pair of glasses. I wasn't completely happy with my new eyes yet. When I looked down, I started to feel dizzy. Getting used to the new glasses, I thought. But after a few months, I was still dizzy. Furthermore, the reading section was far too large. So I went back to the optician. After he re-measured my glasses, he said: "You chose the cheapest lenses for your glasses. No wonder you're getting dizzy!"

"The cheapest lenses?" I said, surprised. "We didn't talk about cheap or expensive lenses at all! These are the ones you recommended to me!"

"That's strange," he said. "I would advise you to get better lenses."

He then offered me better lenses. Luckily, I only had to pay the price difference. The new lenses were a lot better.

## The Collection Agency

Two months ago, we had three construction workers in our gîte. We get them often, and in 99% of the cases, they pay on arrival. This time, the leader of the group said I could send the invoice to their administrative office and gave me a business card. He said they would transfer the invoice immediately. We are absolutely not in favor of this, but, oh well, we'll go with it; it was only €300.

I immediately sent the invoice by email to the address on the card. Two days later, I checked our bank account, nothing had been transferred! I sent an SMS saying we hadn't received anything yet. We got a text back: "ne vous inquiétez pas" (don't worry), the amount had been transferred, but it might take a few days with their bank. I felt somewhat reassured. A few days later, the men had already left, and still nothing was in our bank account. I thought, I'll just call the man.

He reacted with great surprise when I told him that still nothing had been transferred. "Ce n'est pas possible," he exclaimed indignantly. "I'll call you back this afternoon, I'm at a construction site now." You guessed it: no response.

The next day, I sent another text. The answer I got was: "Invoice has been paid!" After waiting another couple of days, still nothing. I'll try calling him again. He didn't pick up. When I called with Marjo's phone, he did pick up. He had apparently blocked my number. He said irritably that he would call back and hung up.

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### The Saga of the Collection Agencies

## Ça va, ça va

Someone told me that I should send a 'Mise en demeure,' a formal demand. I should just look for a sample letter on the internet. And indeed, I found a good example that was useful and had a quite convincing tone. With some adjustments, I went to the post office to send it by registered mail. It cost me another €6.20. In the following days, I kept an eye on my bank account, but nope, I still saw a steady decline in our bank balance instead of a small rebound.

Shouldn't I turn to a collection agency? That's such a hassle. I found several agencies online that operated on a "no cure, no pay" model. That seemed like a good idea. You only had to fill out a form online, and the machine would start running.

I chose JURISTU.FR; I thought it sounded like a serious name, a name that would surely strike fear in the heart of a non-payer, causing them to immediately write a bank transfer order. On the collection agency's website, there was a "chat popup" screen where you could chat in real time with an employee. I typed my little problem in there and asked if they thought it was worth their time. No response!

I typed "Bonjour, il y a quelqu'un là??" (Hello, is anyone there??) No response. I waited a while longer, reading all the terms and conditions again. No response! Well, dammit, I thought involuntarily, that's just another one of those typical French things!

I saw an email address, so I sent my whole story to them by email. I immediately got an auto-reply. "Ah, a sign of life," I thought hopefully. After waiting a week, still no answer. I went back to the site and filled out the form, where I could attach copies of the invoices and all other correspondence. I was thanked for my

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"confidence", and my case would be handled in a few days, I was assured in an auto-reply. After waiting another week, there was no word or sign.

I went back to their website and found a phone number. I guess I'll call, for God's sake. I usually use that as a last resort and only if there's no other way, because I absolutely loathe it! I know exactly how it goes. After a long-winded menu, if you're lucky, you'll be connected to a young woman who is barely understandable because she's in a very noisy telemarketing room with dozens of other chirping ladies, God knows where in India or Pakistan, who, in flowery French and with an extremely bad connection, will ask you how they can be of service. But none of that happened. After dialing the number, I heard it ring once, and then, "plop," nothing more! After trying a few more times, nothing, nada!

I went back on the internet and found another agency, [legalcity.fr](http://legalcity.fr). It looked impressive. You won't believe it... same story, no response, no reaction! I'm getting discouraged!

You know what? I'll try contacting a collection agency here in the neighbourhood, a little closer to home. After a quick search on Google, I found one here in Villeneuve sur Lot. I sent an email via their website asking if they were willing to take on my case. No response! Grrrr!

Anyway, it's not at all about that €300, it's just the fact that you're being swindled right in front of your eyes that bothers me. I'm not giving up yet and will keep looking until I find an agency that wants to do something for me.

## The dentist

Our dentist had been sick for a while. For months, we had been trying to make an appointment to get our crumbling teeth fixed. We were told each time that he was still at home. I had a nagging toothache for a while and suspected an infection under a crown. For Marjo, a crown had fallen out, a piece of a tooth had broken off, and another tooth or crown was quite loose. So it was high time for a complete overhaul before everything completely disintegrated. I had been suffering from a considerable facial pain for a while now. I decided to call again and give them a piece of my mind.

"No, Monsieur le docteur is still sick; call back in about a month or so."

I asked if a colleague could help me. After all, there were about five dentists in the practice. She said that was absolutely impossible.

"Not even for emergencies?" I asked.

"Not even for emergencies!" she said very emphatically.

I exaggerated quite a bit and told her I was dying of pain, that I really had a nasty infection, and didn't know what to do. She suggested consulting with a colleague to see if he could prescribe a course of antibiotics. Fifteen minutes later, she called me back and asked which pharmacy I used. They would fax a prescription to the pharmacy, and I could pick up the medication there. I was astonished. A prescription just like that, without having consulted a doctor, how strange!

I picked up a box of pills at the pharmacy that afternoon. The course of medication helped; the pain disappeared, but after a month, I felt

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it coming back. In the meantime, I had called every dentist in the area. I couldn't get an appointment anywhere, not even for an emergency! I called our own 'dentiste traitante' (treating dentist) again to ask if he might be back at work. Unfortunately, Monsieur le docteur was still sick, and I was asked to call back in a month. After putting on a firm act again, she told me I could call 'le dentiste d'urgence' (the emergency dentist) every Sunday from nine o'clock. She gave me a phone number. So, on Sunday, I was ready by the phone at nine sharp. I only got an answering machine that listed the phone numbers of all the dentists on duty that Sunday. No matter which number I called, I got an answering machine, all of which ended with the message that the machine had already reached its message limit, so I couldn't leave a message. On a few, I could still record a message, urgently asking them to call me back. As expected, this also turned out to be a futile effort!

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## The Search and The First Consultation

At some point, a friend gave me the address of a dentist who was still accepting new patients. I called immediately and, to my great astonishment, was able to get an appointment for the next week. And it was right nearby, too! A sign on the door said I had to ring the bell and absolutely not go inside. After about ten minutes, I opened the door anyway. A secretary immediately jumped up, irritated, and gestured for me to wait outside. Surprised, I closed the door again. A lady was also waiting patiently outside.

"Yes," she said, "you always have to wait outside here! COVID, you know!!"

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After fifteen minutes, the door opened, and I was allowed inside. The dentist turned out to be a friendly female doctor, a small, plump woman in her late forties. She was from Portugal. After I shared the status of my teeth with her, she said she would first take an X-ray. I was directed to a cubicle with a modern 3D scanner. That inspired confidence. After studying the photos, she told me the bad news. The top right molar with a crown had to come out. There was an infection there. The molar next to it also had to come out. She would then place two implants, and that would not be cheap, as my insurance wouldn't cover much.

She suggested creating a quote and a new appointment to pull the two teeth. After fifteen minutes, I was back outside with an appointment for the following week to have the teeth pulled. After a few days, I received a quote by email. This little joke was going to cost me €5,500! And that was after the contributions from the mandatory and supplementary insurance had already been deducted! I thought I was going to fall out of my chair! This clearly called for a second opinion. The next day, I called the secretary to tell her that I first wanted a 'deuxième avis' (second opinion) and asked if Marjo could come in my place next week with her complaints. She completely understood and said that €5,500 was indeed a lot of money. Marjo could come in my place without any problem. Marjo had the same experience. She also had to wait outside, and an X-ray was taken. For her, four teeth had to come out! The dentist understood that implants would cost a lot of money and suggested placing a denture. This would cost €1,350. As you can imagine, we were in shock. A denture would not appeal to me at all. You get that little plate in your mouth, every night in a glass of water on your nightstand, Polident, brrr!!!

## A Second Opinion in Toulouse

Other acquaintances recommended that we call a clinic in Toulouse or Bordeaux. After a little searching, I called a clinic in Toulouse. After a long conversation, we could both go in the very next day, to my utter astonishment. So, the next day, we were in the car at seven in the morning, having taken plenty of time, on our way to Toulouse. We planned to make a nice day trip out of it. Have a nice bite to eat somewhere, stroll around, have some fun! Due to a protest rally in the city center, we ended up just barely arriving on time. The whole of Toulouse was turned upside down where thousands of demonstrators had gathered. After a short wait, we were picked up by a young girl. I estimated her to be about twenty-five. I thought she must be the assistant. But no, it gradually became clear that she was our treating dentist. Luckily, I had brought my X-rays on a USB stick. After she studied my "graveyard" and the photos, she concluded that there was nothing wrong with those two teeth. One did indeed have a slight infection. She told me that the 'dévitalisation' (root canal treatment) performed by my previous dentist had been done very poorly. She suggested removing the crown, redoing the root canal, and placing a new crown. The net cost would be €330. For Marjo, she found that two teeth, one of which was already loose, had to come out, but the other two were fine. She suggested replacing the two bad teeth with implants. The net cost was €2,700. That's a little different than €5,500!

After consultation, Marjo had one tooth pulled right away. When we were outside again, we already had a new appointment for a week later, where my crown would be removed and I would have a



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root canal, and Marjo's second tooth would be pulled. We gave up on the nice meal and the stroll, especially when I looked at Marjo with a half-paralyzed mouth and a bloody piece of gauze between her teeth.

A week later, my crown was forcefully hammered off, and she spent at least an hour and a quarter on a root canal. I remembered that my previous dentist had spent a maximum of fifteen minutes on it at the time.

Marjo's second tooth was pulled, and a new appointment was immediately made to measure a new crown for me and for her to get a temporary denture. The implants could not be placed until sometime in May. The area first had to heal properly. So far, so good.

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## **The Revelation and the End Plan**

Three weeks later, we had our third appointment at the dental clinic in Toulouse. For me, after the root canal, the crown would be measured. For Marjo, preparations would be made for a temporary denture. The implants could not be placed for another two months. Hence, this temporary denture, which would be fully reimbursed. However, there was one problem that bothered me.

Our dentist was young, small, and slender and very talented—at least, so far, she had performed all the procedures meticulously, carefully, and precisely with great patience—but she was (of course) always wearing a face mask, as was her assistant. That bothered me enormously. I had found out in the meantime that her name was

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Paola. So I didn't know what Paola looked like! I couldn't picture her face. Because of this, I slept poorly and had regular nightmares in which I woke up screaming after Paola's face appeared in my dream with a terribly stinking mouth full of black, rotten teeth. I racked my brains over how I could see her face. I could, of course, just ask her if she would take off her mask once because I wanted to see her face. In my sick mind, that immediately gave me associations as if I were asking her to take off her bra because I wanted to see her breasts. So how was I going to approach this...



After my treatment, I therefore asked her, "Ça vous dérange si je prends une photo de l'équipe qui m'a sauvé mes dents?" (Do you mind if I take a photo of the team that saved my teeth?). To my great relief, I thought I saw a wide smile appear behind her face mask, and she said wholeheartedly that she didn't mind. The assistant also nodded in agreement. When I took my camera and

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the ladies took a nice pose, I gestured for the masks to come off, and finally, that annoying face covering disappeared, and I could put a face to Paola and her assistant. See the result here, a photo of our guardian angels. On the left is Paola, our dentist.

Marjo and I, overjoyed, went to celebrate this happy occasion with a dinner on the Capitole square in Toulouse!

Two months later, Marjo had to go back to the dentist in Toulouse. Paola would place the bases for two implants. Marjo was super stressed and was dreading it enormously. "She's going to drill holes in my jaw!" she wailed!

We had decided to leave early, have a nice lunch somewhere so that we would be at the dentist's office at 2 p.m. sharp. But unfortunately, on the way, we got stuck in an hour-and-a-half traffic jam caused by some kind of farmers' protest! We arrived in Toulouse much too late, so we skipped lunch, at least... after I dropped Marjo off at the dentist with a croissant, I went to have lunch at a delicious Thai place.

Fortunately, the treatment was not nearly as bad as she feared, and we had our next appointment in three weeks. After the screws were placed, everything had to heal properly; only then could the stitches be removed and control X-rays be taken. We decided to approach this visit differently. Marjo had the idea of booking a hotel room near the dentist the day before. A little shopping, strolling, a bite to eat, a little catnap, and then the next day, we would walk into the dentist's office rested and stress-free.

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It was early December. In the distance, we saw a huge crowd of people; it turned out that the Christmas market in Toulouse had already been set up in all its glory. First, we had to go through a strict security check where all bags were thoroughly checked for explosives, Kalashnikovs, cluster bombs, and chainsaws. All people with a knife up their sleeve or a machine gun on their back could pass through without a problem. We had already noticed that there were huge concrete blocks everywhere, of course, to prevent radicalized jihadist truck drivers with a fatwa in their heads from running people over. Once inside, it was a festival of Christmas and food and lights and hundreds of white Christmas huts. "They could learn a thing or two here in Villeneuve sur Lot," I thought. Most of the stalls were about food. A stall with Aligot or Tartiflette, a booth with chocolate-covered, or nougat, or sausages, or mulled wine, or chocolate, or those bone-dry brioches. After we slumped down from hours of walking, we went back to the hotel for a bit, and around eight, we headed back into the city with new energy in search of a nice restaurant. Well, there were plenty of those! We finally settled down at an extremely cozy Italian restaurant, where we had a delicious meal.

The next day, after a reasonable night's sleep, we found a nice place for breakfast around the corner, and after strolling around some more, for example, in the French department store 'Lafayette,' we went back to the hotel to check out.

The dentist found that everything had healed well for Marjo; at least, she was very satisfied. Then she also removed some plaque from both of us. It turned out to be necessary after a year and a half, at least that's how it felt...

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Now Marjo still has to go back two more times. Once to bite into a piece of clay and another time to finally have the new teeth placed.

Now we are toying with the idea of renting an apartment in Spain in February, when it's cold and gray here, instead of paying hundreds of euros for heating costs. So Marjo said, "Why don't we combine that with the dentist?" On the way there, we can stop by her place to take the impression, and on the way back, we can have the teeth placed. "Good idea," I thought. That way, we're once again making a virtue of necessity.

## Our Neighbours in Villeneuve sur Lot

Fortunately, we have the most wonderful neighbours here in Villeneuve sur Lot. They are a few years older than us, and we get along splendidly. When we walk by, we always stop to chat. He always calls me (at 73) a 'jeune homme' (young man).

"Bonjour, jeune homme, comment vas-tu?" (Hello, young man, how are you?) he always says with a cheerful grin from ear to ear. Yes, we use the informal 'tu' with each other!

We have invited them over for dinner a few times. They always react a bit shyly to the invitation. We make something that we are sure they have never eaten in their lives. For example, we once treated them to a Dutch 'rijsttafel' (rice table), and of course, a pea soup, and once, 'boerenkool' (kale) with the genuine Dutch smoked sausage. Now, every time we go to the Netherlands, we have to bring some back for them. To date, we have only been invited back once. We considered that a great honor because we know that the French don't do that very often. However, we do occasionally drop by for coffee or an 'apéro' (aperitif), which usually happens during a spontaneous visit when they ask us to stay for a lemonade.

Every now and then, I ask Maurice for a small favor. He used to be a metalworker, and his workshop holds an immense supply of hardware. In addition to cabinets with hundreds of drawers filled with screws, bolts, and nuts, there are impressive heavy machines dating back to a heavy industrial past. For example, there is a man-high solid cast-iron drill press weighing at least 500 kilos, a gigantic welding machine the size of a refrigerator with cables as thick as a wrist—something that nowadays fits in a shoebox—and an equally solid cast-iron grinding machine that you could use to saw a

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submarine in half. I always pay close attention when I watch him work. After all, you're never too old to learn.

One day, I asked him if he would be willing to part with a few copper water pipes. I had seen them lying in a gigantic pile of steel once. He looked at me, startled, as if I had made him a dishonourable proposal. In his eyes, I probably had.

"No, no, that could always come in handy; no, I'm definitely not getting rid of those." I could feel in my bones that I had broached the wrong subject and quickly changed topics.

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### The Patient Approach

Weeks later, I was looking for a large iron or plastic drum. I had already checked the 'déchetterie' (recycling center), where you usually see a few lying around, but no luck. I knew Maurice had a couple of those drums, along with iron poles, rolls of electric and barbed wire, empty paint cans, and other such things, that had been unused for years behind his workshop—exactly what I was looking for, those big plastic drums. I thought I had to handle it differently this time.

One day, I organized a dinner in town with our two neighbours. I casually mentioned to everyone that I was looking for a large drum and asked if anyone knew anything. As I expected, everyone shrugged and shook their heads. Maurice also shook his head at me. "The egg has been laid," I thought to myself.

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A week later, Maurice called to ask if I had time for a cup of coffee. I walked toward their house, surprised. This wasn't part of our neighbours' standard routine. When I walked up their driveway, I saw a large blue drum standing by his garage, with a few copper pipes sticking out of it. I chuckled and walked inside, thinking to myself, "What peculiar and funny people the French are!" I realized again that in this beautiful country, you just have to have patience and make more of an effort to understand its inhabitants. I made a wind chime for him out of the copper pipes. Our neighbours were very happy with it and would hang it in a nice spot.





## Corona

My oldest brother, Harrie, who lives in Canada, was turning eighty in the coming year. My brother Fons, who lives on an island near Seattle, had been pestering me for years about when we would finally visit. We ourselves had always dreamed of taking a road trip along the west coast of the United States. So, we decided to put our words into action and planned the camper trip, visiting my brother Fons on his island and ending with Harrie's eightieth birthday in Toronto. Geerd, my third brother who lives in Paris, would also come.

In November 2019, we started making plans. First, we'd fly to Las Vegas. Marjo had never been there, and we thought it would be fun to dive into the glamorous life for a few days. Besides, we could earn back our vacation costs in one of the casinos...

After that, we'd rent a camper there and travel through Salt Lake City, Yosemite, and San Francisco, and then along the West Coast to Seattle to visit Fons. Then, we'd fly to Toronto for Harrie's eightieth birthday. Finally, we'd fly back home. Quite a significant trip!

After making the decision, we booked all the flight tickets, hotels, camper van, and so on. We thought it might be cheaper to book early. We were scheduled to leave in April 2020, and the anticipation had already begun.

But... in March 2020, Corona broke out! At first, we thought, "This will blow over!" But as the misery began to unfold, it became clear more and more quickly that our trip wouldn't happen. As time went on, it became clear that we could whistle for our money. We might be able to get a few vouchers, but that was it!

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We were incredibly disappointed. This was supposed to be our first major vacation! Las Vegas, Yosemite, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, the camper trip—it all passed us by! On TV, it was only Corona, COVID-19! It was terrible! Everything was canceled, concerts were postponed, everything was closed, lockdown. It was depressing. Bizarre initiatives sprang up everywhere: home concerts, virtual tours, Zoom sessions, home performances!

"Gee," Marjo said, "should we just do our trip 'virtually' then?"

"What do you mean, virtually?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, we'll just pretend we're on vacation. We'll make a whole travel blog on Facebook! Let's see who falls for it!"

"That's an idea!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. "We'll add photoshopped pictures! Let's do it!"

We started inventing a story about why we could suddenly go on vacation. We posted our first post on Facebook with a photo of Marjo packing our suitcases. We had concocted a story that the American embassy had given us an entry visa because of our family visit. We would then be able to go with a special Air France flight that was picking up a stranded French rugby team in Las Vegas. We would be able to fly business class on a practically empty plane!

The Facebook reactions came pouring in! Here are a few:

"Have you been tested? Are you sure no one you're going to meet there has or is a carrier of corona? A bit of an unwise decision, it seems to me. But have fun!"

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"Well... I wouldn't even consider it. We are in a complete lockdown here—and not for nothing, dammit—and you're just going to travel all over North America for fun, for no necessary reason. I find it extremely irresponsible and I really don't understand why it's allowed! I can only hope that no one will suffer negative consequences—and I don't just mean you... But still, have a lot of fun there."

"Isn't that a bit irresponsible?"

"If you never take a risk, you won't have any adventures. And you are going to have an adventure! You so deserve this! Enjoy your wonderful trip and the family over there. Celebrating your brother's 80th birthday this way is very special. Stay healthy, stay safe, and ENJOY! It will be fun to follow your adventures here."

It was clear that everyone was completely falling for it!

Over the next few days, Marjo and I were constantly busy making up stories. I created one fake photo after another. We regularly had to change clothes, strike a certain pose, and then I photoshopped us into a new scene!

For example, on the plane to Las Vegas, since we were flying business class, a whole dinner was served to us.

On Facebook:

"That's how I want to fly one day!"

"Wow, that plane! Glad the trip went well!"

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"You could get used to that!"



No one had any idea and thought we were really in Vegas. After visiting the Grand Canyon and the Hoover Dam, we decided to 'renew our vows,' as they say over there, and went to a wedding chapel, complete with an Elvis Presley impersonator! On Facebook, I published the wedding certificate.

"Congratulations, many happy and healthy years together with many beautiful adventures!"

"Love is in the air, happy honeymoon."

"Congratulations on renewing your vows to each other. You two are rock solid. Enjoy your trip and each other!"

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Again, everyone was completely convinced we were in America. Even my oldest brother thought we were on our way to him for his 80th birthday!

But little by little, a few comments started to appear:

"This photo looks a bit weird! I think it's photoshopped!"

"Is all of this true? I think you're just at home!"

Sometimes, we would personally message these people and tell them they had figured it out, but they had to keep playing the game!

Anyway, little by little, we traveled in our camper through famous places like Salt Lake City, Yosemite, and San Francisco toward Seattle, accompanied by the most insane tricked-out photos.

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At one point, just before our virtual visit to Harrie, we were at Niagara Falls and were supposed to take a boat to the foot of the waterfall. So we both put on rain gear, sprayed ourselves with a plant mister, and pasted Niagara Falls into the background. Everyone on Facebook fell for it again!



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## The Revelation

Finally, we arrived at Harrie's for his 80th birthday. We then decided to end the story and posted a very exaggerated birthday picture of Harrie's party. After all, there were some very special guests there...

This time, the reactions on Facebook were a little different:

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"For just a little bit, I really believed you guys were in the States 😄

😄 🤔 🤔 well done man!!!"

"All the VIPs of the world in one row!! Great! You've made my day.  
Have fun and regards."

"We really fell for it! Unbelievable! So well done!!"



All in all, we had a lot of fun putting this together, and we were sometimes doubled over laughing at the reactions. It was as if we had actually made the trip.

In the fall, we actually rented a camper for a week and traveled through the Camargue in southern France. We also made a report of this on Facebook. However, no one believed us and thought they were being pranked again.

In September 2023, we finally made the trip for real! We enjoyed it immensely and were finally able to visit my brother on Lopez Island and get him to stop nagging us...

## The prostate

Today I had an appointment with the urologist for a fibroscopy. I've had prostate problems for years; I've even had a previous treatment where they reamed out my urinary tract at the prostate. But a year later, I had the same symptoms again. So, after a severe prostate infection, I decided to go back to the urologist. Dr. Fraisse was recommended to me. Today, he was going to examine my urinary tract with a fibroscopy. He inserts a fiber optic tube into your penis to examine the entire path to the bladder.

A nurse came to pick me up from the waiting room and led me to a changing cubicle.

"Enlève tous en bas," she said as she closed the door behind her. So I obediently took off all my clothes except my T-shirt. "Come in when you're ready," I heard her call out at some point. So I walked into the treatment room with only my T-shirt on, under which my little pecker was just peeking out to say hello.

"I'm going to give you a local anesthetic," the nurse said and gestured for me to lie down on the treatment table.

Meanwhile, Dr. Fraisse came in. He shook my hand and immediately dove behind his computer to consult my file. In the meantime, the nurse, now wearing blue gloves, carefully held my "valve" between her thumb and forefinger as if it were a slippery slug, held a syringe without a needle upside down, and squirted an anesthetic fluid into my urethra.

"This person must have seen an incredible number of penises," I thought. I really wanted to ask her, but I didn't immediately know



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what "penis" was in French, so I pointed to my private parts and asked: "Combien des petits garçons vous avez vue dans votre vie?" (How many little boys have you seen in your life?). She looked at me, not understanding.

"Des petits garçons," I said again, pointing at my crotch. She didn't understand what I meant, but the doctor looked up, laughing, and blurted out, "vingt cinq milles!" (twenty-five thousand!).

The nurse didn't see the humour and continued her work imperturbably, disinfecting my thing, which she was still carefully holding between her thumb and forefinger. A moment later, Dr. Fraisse grabbed the fibroscopy, which resembled a vicious venomous snake, and inserted the beast's tail into my urethra. He looked inside my body through the snake's eye and pushed the reptile deeper and deeper into my body, and despite the anesthesia, I felt a sharp, unpleasant pain. He mumbled that everything looked good, "mais, vous avez vraiment une prostate énorme" (but you really have an enormous prostate), he said with conviction.

I felt a little proud that something down there was apparently still "enormous." After five minutes, I was able to get dressed again. The next exam on the program was an MRI scan of the prostate, after which I had an appointment with the urologist that same day to discuss a treatment plan with me.

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## The MRI and Biopsy

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Two days later, I reported to the MRI department. After half an hour of waiting, I was allowed to get changed again. First, I was given an IV with contrast fluid, and I had to wait for another fifteen minutes. Finally, I was led to the magical machine, the pride and holy grail of every hospital, a large monster with a huge mouth. All kinds of spooky images involuntarily flew through my head. They were going to put me in a kind of shredder or a "meat grinder." Before I was sacrificed, I was asked to lie down on the bed, which the beast extended like a huge tongue, and I was slid into the meat slicer like a summer sausage. I wanted to ask if they could slice it into thin slices—I like it best that way—but before I could say anything, a pair of headphones with radio station 'Chérie FM' was put on my head, and between Ed Sheeran and Michel Sardou, I heard the banging, growling, and humming of the meat machine.



After 20 minutes, the beast calmed down, and I could leave this place and hurry with Marjo to the urologist for an evaluation.

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After waiting ten minutes in the urology waiting room, the urologist told me that they had observed some small spots on my prostate, which were not really alarming. However, he wanted to take a biopsy. This would be done under a general anesthetic, more like a twilight sleep. Since I would be unconscious anyway, he suggested that, in order to improve urination, he would ream out the urinary tract again right away. He called it an RTUP treatment, or a 'Résection transurétrale de la prostate' (transurethral resection of the prostate). That would go smoothly in one go. I would have to be admitted for two to three days. "Oh well," Marjo and I decided. You just rely on the advice of the all-knowing doctor. "Can I pee cement between stones again after that?" I asked curiously. He could not guarantee that.

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## The Anesthesiologist and The Hospital Stay

A week before the procedure, I had the mandatory visit to the anesthesiologist. I always find the purpose of this consultation a bit vague. He asks if I'm allergic to anything and has me fill out a long questionnaire, half of whose medical terms I don't understand, so I just check "NO." He asked how I wanted to be anesthetized, locally or under general anesthesia.

"General anesthesia," I said, convinced. "I absolutely do not want to hear all those sounds, and especially not the conversations of the surgeon. Just imagine," I said, "that I hear him say to an assistant: 'Shit, Angela, what are we going to do with this piece of pee-pee? I can't put it back on!' No, please just knock me out completely!"

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The anesthesiologist looked at me uncomprehendingly and said goodbye. The French really do have a different sense of humour.

On June 2, I had to report to the hospital for the biopsy and the RTUP treatment. Marjo had dropped me off at the hospital and wished me good luck with a hug. I was prepared for the procedure by a beautiful Belgian nurse. She even spoke a little Dutch and chattered away to practice her rusty Flemish. I had to undress, put on a handy blue hospital gown that shows your backside, and lie down on a bed. She placed an IV in me, and fifteen minutes later, an orderly came to pick me up. In the meantime, numerous nurses, assistants, and other medical personnel had asked me dozens of times what my name was, my date of birth, and what procedure was going to be performed. Finally, I spoke with the urologist, Dr. Fraisse. I also asked him what his name was, his date of birth, and what procedure he was going to perform. He looked at me in surprise and answered my questions, laughing. The anesthesiologist then told me he was going to put me to sleep. I thought, "I'll pay close attention to the exact moment I go under." A moment later, I felt a cold, slightly painful stream crawl up my left arm, and before I knew it, I was gone, from one moment to the next. Some time later, a friendly voice asked if I was awake yet. I nodded and said that everything was okay. I felt fine, had no pain, and began to seriously wonder if they had actually helped me. Half an hour later, I was wheeled to my room. At my headboard hung an IV bag with probably some medication, at the foot of my bed was a stand with two 3-liter bags of saline solution, and on the side of my bed hung a urine bag with a pink-colored urine fluid in it. I now had a catheter in my penis, through which my bladder was continuously flushed by means of those water bags, which I called my "vinibags." That's

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what they call those boxes of wine with a bag inside here in France, similar to what was hanging on my bed. I had to warn the nurse when one was empty so it could be changed. So every few hours, I called the nurse and told her that my "vinibag" was empty again. She always looked at me, uncomprehending.

A day and a half later, when there was no more rosé in the bag under my bed, but a more urine-coloured fluid, the catheter came out. I was a little sad about that, actually; the catheter was quite handy. You didn't have to get out of bed every half hour to pee. Since everything looked good, I was allowed to go home that day.

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## The Results

Two weeks later, I had an appointment with the urologist for the results of the biopsy. So Marjo and I were sitting in Dr. Fraisse's waiting room with shaky knees. He asked me how I was doing, while I thought, "Just give me the results first, dammit!" I told him I was doing reasonably well because I still had to urinate very often. He said that was normal and would improve over time. He also had good news for me. No tumour tissue had been found in the twelve biopsies taken. Relieved, I gave him a high five, and Marjo and I looked at each other with a deep sigh of happiness. I have a new appointment in six months for a follow-up. For now, I can continue my uninhibited life and continue to misbehave

## Epilogue

Well, this is it. These are a few of our adventures from our 18 years in France that we felt were worth sharing with you.

Some will say, "WOW!" while others will say, "Is that all?" It's all about your perspective. I'm also sometimes asked, "Did you really experience all of this, or did you make it up?" Yes, we really did experience all of this. Okay, the stories are a little exaggerated here and there to make a point. There is one exception, though. The story where we get a visit from all sorts of dignitaries was completely made up, but you probably figured that out yourselves. In any case, we have fully enjoyed ourselves and are still doing so, though in slightly calmer waters now.

What's next? No one knows for sure, not even us. Something like Corona or the climate crisis shows once again how quickly the world can change. For now, we're still doing well here in Villeneuve sur Lot in our comfortable home with two gites that rent like crazy. As long as our health allows it, we will probably continue to do so. We don't know what our old age will bring. We are now in our early seventies and, aside from a minor ache here and there, still healthy in body and limb. If we can no longer keep this house, we will probably trade it for a much smaller house, likely still somewhere in France, or who knows, maybe back in the Netherlands. If we truly become in need of care, we'll see what life has in store for us then.

I hope you enjoyed reading this collection of stories.



**Ça va, ça va**

**With thanks to:**

My wife, Marjo, for all the corrections, the patience of a saint, and the fact that I was unreachable during moments of inspiration.

**Also published by Kees Wijnen:**

De Moordvallei

Een pilletje van Rosa









In 2002, Kees and Marjo Wijnen exchanged their lives in the Netherlands for a more adventurous existence in the south of France. In the Aveyron region, they started a **Chambres d'Hotes** (bed and breakfast) and a mini-campsite. After 15 years, they traded their business for a quieter life. They are now enjoying a well-deserved retirement, but old habits die hard. They still rent out two gites on a beautiful estate in the Lot & Garonne. Follow their adventures by reading this collection of stories.

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The author, Kees Wijnen, born on November 4, 1950, in Sittard, spent his youth in Eindhoven, where he met Marjo. After a series of automation courses, he worked in the computer industry until 2002.