

Against the perfect greens and yellows of perfect French farms on perfect rolling hills along perfect craggy coastlines, they are starkly beautiful, these 240' high white three-bladed windmills.



They are also starkly efficient: it takes just six of them to provide full-time electrical power for 4,400 people. They are not France's primary source of energy, but they play a great part, along with a well-developed and respected nuclear power grid, in showing that there are paths away from dependency on oil.

But it goes farther. The smallest Renaults, Citroens and Peugeots can fit in the wheel housing of an Escalade. The largest Citroen is about the size of a Ford Focus. There's a new Fiat that you could fit in a matchbox and, of course, the streets are filled with these delicious little smart (the s is lower case on purpose) cars. Two to three of them can fit into one American parking place. They are just 106" long and, incredibly, attained the Institute for Highway Safety's highest crash test ratings. This new generation of Euro cars also gets 40-60 mpg which isn't bad when, at 1.47 Euros a liter, the French are paying the equivalent of about \$8.00 a gallon.

This, then, is the new theory of relativity: We are relatively lucky to be paying \$3.61 a gallon, or whatever it is this hour of this day, depending on who's manipulating what on Wall Street, which hurricane is giving us all tropical depression or which Middle Eastern nation is threatening which Middle Eastern nation with yet another threat that sends the gnomes of Zurich into frenzied fits of fiscal fear.

Three weeks in France; Brittany more precisely, with daily temperatures between 67 and 71; sunshine and spectacular clouds; an amazing array of cliff top hiking trails, with surprisingly Caribbean-green waters and white sand beaches below. The unmistakable aromas of French boulangeries, with their insane pastries and remarkable breads; the \$8.00 diet cokes alongside the \$3.00 glasses of wine on most menus. Now, there's a society that understands what matters!

And if you shift your mind and behavior to the style of life of the French, this strange thing happens. You relax. On Thursday, market day in our village of Plougastel (this was our 25th house exchange through Intervac ([www.intervac.com](http://www.intervac.com) for those of you who want your vacations to be something different than hotels and tours), we'd walk down the hill to the church square, grab a couple of papers and sit on the terrace of the Café for an hour or two taking it all in.

French coffee vies with Italian as the tastiest in my world and, fortified by this wonderful stuff we'd make our way from the cheese lady, to the fresh fish and seafood, to the ham and chicken guy, to the green grocer and then walk back up the hill to the house stopping to buy the baguette for that day.

The people of Brittany are wonderfully friendly and if there was any anti-American feeling, I couldn't see it or hear it. The Nazis had occupied this coast of France and there were collaborators. It was also a bastion of the free French, the resistance. The coast is dotted with German gun emplacements and pillboxes. It was a tough place from which to unseat the Nazis and the job was finally done by the US.

Getting the Germans out of Brest, in particular, required ferocious US bombing and the city was virtually destroyed. It was also rebuilt with massive assistance from the US and there remains a bond based on genuine appreciation. It helps you understand that blanket statements about one country's feeling for another, as we get them in TV newsbytes, merit greater investigation than today's so-called journalists are willing to provide.

There were at least three points on this imposing coast where memorials have been built to French Marine pilots who were lost defending France. It made me think of MCAS Beaufort and our Marine pilots. It made me understand how similar we are, despite our differences.

Talking to old soldiers over coffees or "une verre" (literally a "glass" of beer, wine or that 4.5% Brut Apple Cider these people make) you get a clear picture: Chasing the terrorists in Afghanistan is right. Iraq isn't. While we were there, 10 French Paratroops were ambushed and killed by the Taliban. The country stopped and mourned just as we do.

August is vacation time in France and people are at their best. There are phenomenal folk festivals; there are hordes of three year olds decked out in tiny yellow life jackets in sailing camps all over the coast of Bretagne. There are fresh and delicious Moules et frites (mussels and fries) for 9 Euros (an American bargain at \$13.50). Honestly, they give you about 5 dozen of them and they're never anything but perfect. There's also an unpronounceable Breton pastry, the recipe for which is essentially this: mix one pound of butter with one pound of sugar, place it between two thin pieces of phyllo dough; bake, eat, visit the cholesterol doctor.

By the way, the Barbiers, the couple with whom we exchanged, loved Beaufort. They loved (as they called it, Plooms (that's Plums to you and me). They preferred Charleston to Savannah but what knocked them out were the storms. They have experienced "tempetes" or serious storms on their coast; but this was the first time they'd experienced what they called a "hot" storm with warm rain.

It's wonderful, isn't it, how the smallest things expand our horizons.