

A French 2004-05



Futuroscope, Saumur and Normandy March 2005

This year's French trip was, as always, full of adventure and we explored three different regions of France, feeling the thread of their history, language and culture.

On Sunday evening, after a long journey to Poitiers, we swept hungrily through the great oak doors of the Abbaye du Pin, which, like most Cistercian Abbeys of the 12th Century, stood isolated in a misty and chilly forest, close to a rushing stream. A huge log fire and hot soup from the kitchen warmed us, although time stood still in the ancient stone corridors.

On Monday everyone was full of excitement about Futuroscope, and we were not disappointed. Every cinema at Futuroscope explores a different method of creating an exhilarating experience of the world around us. High definition IMAX projection, surround screens, 3-D images and moving seats everything adds up to a feeling of real experience! The simulator 'rides' were very exciting. Other films were awe-inspiring and moving for example the portrayal of Shackleton's epic escape from the ice floes of the Antarctic to the whaling station of South Georgia. In 'Guillaumet, les ailes du courage' we almost seemed to be present as Henri Guillaumet crash-landed his plane amidst the endless snowy ridges of the Andes and struggled to freedom. The IMAX 3-D photography wrapped you in an intimate cocoon for the interior shots, whilst opening out majestically as we entered the cavernous valleys and wide panoramas from the mountain tops.

On Tuesday after breakfast we stroked the horses in the Abbey stables for the last time and set off for the Loire valley. Here we were to see horses of a different calibre! Since 1814 the Cadre Noir has been training the French cavalry in Saumur. In 1972 a national centre of excellence was opened the 'Ecole Nationale d'Equitation' (E.N.E.). Thus the 24 'Ecuyers' of the Cadre Noir have a new home. During our guided tour in French we met the colonel in chief in his full riding uniform, and saw that there were also one or two lady members of the Cadre Noir. The facilities are amazing stables for 400 horses and numerous Olympic-sized manèges and outdoor schools. Everyone will remember the horse that dangled his tongue and dribbled! For Angus D-J it was all too much: he started to wheeze, and he spent nearly all of the visit being looked after in the medical centre! After a hearty French lunch in the E.N.E. restaurant, we went to see some of the many 'mushroom caves' which have sprung up in the troglodyte caves along the Loire Valley.

From Tuesday evening until Saturday we were to be staying at the Château du Livet, near Falaise in Normandy. Not many of the children knew very much about the 2nd World War, and we hoped to develop a little understanding of the sacrifices that were made by young people only a few years older than them in the summer of 1944.

We began at the Caen Memorial museum and then drove to Pegasus Bridge, where the 6th Airborne Division began the invasion with the landing of three gliders. The capture of the bridge is featured in the film 'The Longest Day' and you can still see the original bridge and the places where the gliders landed by the Orne Canal. A few genuinely felt tears were shed at the cemetery in nearby Ranville, as we looked closely at the beautiful memorial to the thousands buried there.

On Thursday we enjoyed a close look at the Bayeux tapestry, which is an incredible artifact considering it is nearly as old as Mr. Whitehead! We then drove to the coast to see the remains of the Mulberry Harbour and the interesting museum at Arromanches which explains how it worked. After our visit we paused for a photo by a Sherman Tank.

Our final day lived up to the expectations we had for our week, beautiful weather, blue skies and deep turquoise sea. The bomb craters in the cliff-tops at the Pointe du Hoc, stormed by the U.S. Rangers, were huge! Many of the dark concrete bunkers were still there to be explored, and a great deal could be imagined and pondered at length. Fortunately our only casualty on that day was Winky, who cut his knee on a sharp piece of concrete. We then drove on to Omaha Beach and the American Cemetery at Colleville, where we talked with some American families. The trip ended with Longues battery, 4 huge guns which were engaged put out of action by the Allied warships on June 6th.

Our final memory of a great trip was feeding a lonely donkey that we had observed for several days. He really enjoyed the apples!