Motorcycle Tour of The Ardennes – August 2017.

In April 2017, we began to discuss plans for a biking holiday with our friends and neighbours James and Jeanette. Both of them had toured the continent both on bikes and cars extensively and had built up quite a repertoire of routes and places over the last few years.

According to Ben, somewhere along the line, I had indicated that I didn’t want to go too far south though I can’t recall such restriction! However, we finally settled on the Ardennes and after a few evenings, drinks and nibbles settled on places to go and stay. Jeanette sent off emails to the person responsible for a rural properties in Belgium and initial plans were laid.

I have to admit, though agreeing to do the holiday, I was fairly anxious about the whole thing and particularly so in the last week before departure. As always I made up my checklists and started to ensure we had everything required even though James had never been stopped I wanted to know I had everything needed. Fortunately, one of my client had a stock of unsold breathalysers, so all I bought was the florescent vests. I had to work out the means of carrying things and James lent me some paniers which after experimenting fitted perfectly and served purpose.

We waded through our boxes of bike clothes and tackle and found two waterproof tops. I had to buy some leggings which proved useful.

Finally day of departure came and fortunately the weather forecasted for our journey to Folkestone showed dry and warm, as it proved to be. Having packed himself up the night before I waved Ben off to work. He had not ridden with a loaded tank bag and pillion seat before so that was my first ‘worry’ moment. I was pleased to get his text to say had safely arrived at work.

About 3.30pm, we left to meet Ben at Coles Nurseries and headed eastwards towards Peterborough. The sun shone and despite loaded up front and rear my bike moved well. Being the Friday before bank holiday the traffic began to build up past the A1 and was busy in 3 lanes as we hit the m11. I was pleased for the break at Stansted services where we had a coffee and braced ourselves for the run down to Folkestone. I do not like heights or cross winds in any conditions and my first tense moment was crossing the Elizabeth Bridge at the Dart crossing where I crept along in the middle lane not looking around. The final stretch to Folkestone was uneventful and around 7 pm we wound our way into the town and finally to the booked bed and breakfast. James had prearranged for us to park in the garden behind the ‘gaff’ as he put it where we wedged ourselves onto a concrete paving.

Having moved from bike gear to a more casual shorts and T shirts we went off in pursuit of a place to eat. I, of course, had not properly accounted for ‘going out’ with my shorts and shoes in another part of my luggage so had to borrow Ben’s jeans and stay in my bike boots. We briefly took in the Folkestone promenade, saw the channel from the UK side and found a nice Italian where we placed ourselves right next to the pizza bench and oven. Our first beer and pizza consumed we returned to the gaff and retired for night.

At 7 we were up, showered and on bikes on route to the shuttle. We filled up and arrived at the channel tunnel terminal for 7.30. Breakfast didn’t really take place but we had coffee and waited for our train call.

There were several bikers on route to France so the compartment was full. By 10.30 French time we were heading down the motorway on relatively traffic free roads into France and onwards into Belgium. We negotiated the tolls and were soon on the French roads and passing through villages many of which seemed desolate and shuttered. James wisely guided us to petrol stops way before the tanks were half empty. Just in case, our first stop being a supermarket petrol station where we all had a sandwich.

We headed into the Somme battlefields region. Poigniant as the 100 anniversary had recently passed. We stopped at the Ulster Tower – a memorial to the northern Irish regiments. A castle structured edifice of sandstone with commanding views over the landscape where a hundred years ago would have been a scene of mud and destruction. It was so peaceful here and in all the similar sites we visited. Adjacent was a coffee shop so we took in coffee and muffins.

On past visits in the area and on route to southern parts James and Jeanette had stayed many times at ‘Two Wheels Moorings’ a B&B dedicated to hosting travelling bikers. This was our first French overnight stop. We continued on in bright sunshine stopping for drinks and petrol little aware in the pending change of weather conditions.

About 50 km from the lodgings rain clouds arose and drizzle turned to rain. After quite a spell it was time for waterproofs and aptly James drove into an empty car wash where under cover we donned the wet gear. Just in time as heavier rain took hold.

I must point out at this point, that in usual excursions I like to be in control - in the sense of knowing the route, the destination and what facilities lie ahead – this time I was blindly following. So on we went leaving main roads for quieter rural roads. Then streaky lightening cracked in the distance followed by loud thunderclaps and rain of strong intensity let forth. It was obvious that our gear, luggage and the four of us were pretty soaked and I had lost all sense of direction - the storm intensified and approaching another desolate village James headed straight up a cobbled slope and into a large cowshed. This was a memorable moment to say the least - mud, straw and other stuffs surrounded the bike wheels. The penned cows retreated to the back wall and there we were - four drenched bikers, cold wet and dripping. For all its adversity, I did find it a funny moment especially when the farmer with not a word of English appeared and proceeded to pick up a pitch fork. He at least was partially smiling and I think understood our predicament. However, we were waylaid there some half an hour while the rain and cascading overflows subsided. Jeanette phoned ahead to tell the waiting B&B we were on our way.

Had I known what awaited us and that it was only some 20km away I would have been less anxious.

We rode into Dun Sur Meuse about 7 pm and just after a parked van, James, Jeanette then Ben turned right out of sight. I followed and rode straight into a garage open to the road. It took me a while to get my bearings. This was the garage of the ‘new gaff’ where we were greeted by Carol and Ian very warmly. In a short space of time we stripped from wet gear, gloves, boots etc were whisked away to ‘the drying room’ and we were shown to our rooms, were able to shower and feel human again in dry shorts and T shirt. This time, I did unpack flip flops etc.

The B&B was sited right on the river with a great view which we discovered in the morning.

First, however there was need for food and beer. Fortunately, the rain had stopped and we were able to walk down to a small but pleasant burger bar for sustenance. After ‘dinner’ and back at the gaff we had another beer and chatted to a group of Dutch bikers who were also staying.

I was ready for bed but in night experienced the most awful cramps in left leg that disturbed and otherwise restful night. A consequence, I learned later, of getting cold and being in the riding position for so long.

With dry kit we remounted the bikes after a typical but filling continental breakfast and headed on to continue our Somme visit at Verdun.

The American cemetery was breath taking, quiet and a sight few would forget on visiting. Row after row of white crosses. Further on, above Verdun itself, was an impressive sandstone monument overlooking another field of graves. On route we saw the preserved trenches and the citadel site where once again one could imagine the horrors of the scenes 100 years ago. After coffee and muffins again we set forth for the Ardennes and the gite that was going to be the main base for our holiday.

We arrived in Alle about 4pm and had the first taste of poor Belgian road surfaces and hairpins as we entered Belgium and approached the village. The detached rural gite sat in its own grounds on the hillside overlooking the Semois Valley. ‘Kathy’ the owner arrived and although totally in french we managed to get the gist of what she was saying and we started making ourselves at home. First thing was to get some provisions so having unpacked, we all headed on bikes with empty panniers and bags to the local spar. This was a well -stocked store and served us well throughout the week.

The road down to the village proved challenging not only with a sharp left hand hairpin on a camber slope but there were several diversions due to the ‘fair’ being in town. We finally located the spar and stocked up with James dealing with the primary provision – the beer.

We retraced our steps fully laden and all managed to negotiate the bend -going up- this time

The basic diet of the week had been discussed in advance so we indulged in the first beer, wine, bread and cheese. It was a fine evening and we stayed outdoors till dark, fighting off the ‘mozzies’ which decided we all tasted good.

Sunday was a late start and I walked down the hill to the boulangerie which was queueing even at nine o’clock. Rewarded by 4 nice croissants I walked back up the hill which during the week became a familiar route. We had a civilised sit down breakfast today - fruit juice, coffee toast and croissants Around noon, we donned our gear and set off on a 50 mile round trip. Initially following the river we experienced the first group of bends, ups and downs.

At Pasmange, we stopped for a drink and then moved on to Bohan where we had a meal at local restaurant. It was quite hot on ride back and a warm pleasant evening for cheese and drinks on patio –‘take 2’.

Monday saw the first ‘runs’ of the week. I ran down to river and around into village for milk etc and Ben and Jeanette went their separate ways completing 3.1 and 4.9 miles respectively.

After a relaxing and lazy mid day we set off for ride to Boullion and had a coke overlooking the river.

This evening, we went in search of some food at a restaurant in Alle. The village ‘pub’ was bigger inside than it appeared somewhat ‘Tardis’ like and right inside, at the back, was a fairly respectable but pricy restaurant. English, both in people and menus, was in short supply but the meals we eventually chose and were served were first class and probably worth the price. Having ambled down to the village we all had to negotiate the hill back again.

Tuesday dawned as a nice day once the early mist over trees lifted and we got ready for a full day out. During preparations, I cricked my back and unfortunately the discomfort stayed with me the rest of the holiday rather spoiling my riding. About 11am, we headed out for Bastogne where we visited the American memorial. After coffee, we headed on to Dinant and had a light meal by the river in glorious sunshine and very hot humidity.

Wednesday was more overcast though brightened up as the day moved on. We stayed put most of the day taking a walk to village to the butchers - having decided to have a barbecue. Again, without any English, but helped by a conveniently laid out butchers counter we were able to choose and buy our meat.

Back at the gaff Ben exercised his fire lighting skills and got a respectable fire lit and functioning reasonably quickly – so tonight was varied mix of kebabs, chicken, herbed sausages and salad.

With an aching back, some trepidation at the twisty roads and a long ride in prospect, I was less enthusiastic as I should have been for a ride to Luxembourg. Apparently, my withdrawn nature and quietness supposedly indicated I’m was not in the best of spirits. It was a cold morning and a blast along motorway and A roads to the border of Luxembourg did not ‘lift me ‘ so Ben put me firmly in the dog house and scowled at me all day. We stopped for coffee on the border – literally – as a metal line through the café showed. The day improved and entering Luxembourg we found some great roads well tarmacked and smooth winding through some fantastic scenery.

James’s excellent briefings on riding certainly made things better than they otherwise would have been but Ben and I learned some further lessons that day. He became more confident at riding which he had been -in all honesty -since arriving in Europe and I became less so realising that my days of riding were unlikely to be what they had been in the past.

We entered a quaint cobbled town of Vianden overshadowed by its romantic medieval castle. Ben acquired his obligatory fridge magnet –and a new snow globe for his godson Alec – and then we sat in a small picturesque square for sandwiches, dessert and drinks.

I could have cheerfully dawdled home enjoying the Luxembourg scenery but Germany – to do 4 countries in the day was on the plan - so we headed on. The smiling face of Angle Merkel on election posters told us we were in Germany and James’ Tom Tom started to take us on some extremely narrow roads until at last we had to follow a diversion. After, what appeared to me to be a long time, we re- entered Luxembourg, then Belgium and stopped for drinks.

We were back in time to replenish food supplies and ended the day with a pasta and crusty bread.

With the prospect of the longer ride home on Saturday I stayed behind when the others went out for a ride around on Friday. In the afternoon, Ben and I took a walk to find something signposted ‘Sacre Coeur’ from the road. We initially went up a cul de sac only to be accosted by a very friendly but persistent local who talked in French to us for a good ten minutes

After a climb we found a statue of Christ perched on hill top. On the way down, we hit rain and got soaked on way up the hill for which I entered the dog house for second time in the week. Ben does not like walking in the rain!

We began sorting out and packing up in the evening so we could get away reasonably early on Saturday. We left the gaff around 10am and headed off on a fairly straight road via countless French villages – still deserted – to Cambrai, then on to Arras. On route, we were held up by police and army patrols- in evidence due to a large cheese and food fair which obviously was major event which needed some security presence. We stopped for a coffee and moved on.

We arrived in Le Touquet around 5pm and checked in to the Hippohotel. The bikes were chained up in front of hotel. We settled into our rooms, changed and set off into town. We took in the channel – this time French side – and then went in search of a hostelry for food. After dinner we decided to indulge in a take away crepe as we walked back to the hotel.

The first part of our final day was uneventful until we reached the Shuttle Terminal. The approach is via raised and curving roadways where we had to join a queue due to a security incident which had closed the terminal and stopped the trains. We were ahead of time planning breakfast before embarking so we weren’t thrilled to be held up. Unfortunately, we had stopped on a camber and although successfully getting off Ben’s bike fell over snapping its brake lever. Naturally, Ben was in some trauma over this but despite this event we successfully all got home after a truly enjoyable holiday and experience.