



Riding with Angels

*A Journey Down
the Rhine*



In 2011, to celebrate
70 years on this
planet, I set off to ride
the Rhine Cycle Path.
On the way, I decided
to actively ask the
Angels for help when
I needed it. What I
found was amazing.
They delivered on the
nail, every time! Only
sometimes I was too
stupid to see it

*Geraldine
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FOREWORD

There is nothing like the pleasure of pulling on a pair of crisp, clean white knickers fresh from the press especially after weeks of washing out smalls with a bar of soap and hanging them on handy trees or fences, hoping they will be dry by morning to my mind, one of the perks of travel is the way it makes you appreciate the simple things in life.

THE TRIP

The idea was to cycle down the Rhine via the *Rheinradweg* - or Rhine cycle path - usually illustrated by beautiful pictures of wide, tarmaced paths on which I pictured myself riding in a leisurely, relaxed fashion. Knowing the German passion with order, I expected that there would be abundant signposts on these splendid routes, directing me to campsites, restaurants and guesthouses. In practice I never saw anything of the sort, the paths I travelled were badly surfaced, in some cases little more than field tracks, and not only was there no help in finding campsites, but the route itself often disappeared most unhelpfully, usually just as I was entering a city, leaving me stranded. In fact, the whole experience could be summed up as - *Find your way down the Rhine if you can!*

TRAVEL DETAILS

I cycled over the Pennines to Keighley, then took the train to Leeds and another to Hull. I embarked on the Hull-Rotterdam ferry on the evening of 20 June and arrived in Rotterdam next morning.

From Rotterdam I made my way down the Rhine to the Black Forest by bike with two train hops.

I returned from France four weeks later, boarding the European Bike Express (or 'Bolero Bus' as we old-stagers know it) at Beaune on July 17, arriving in UK next day.

I travelled in three countries - Holland, Germany and France.

THE TITLE

On the trip, I decided to actively ask the Angels for help when I needed it the result was astonishing - the Angels delivered on the nail, every time, though sometimes I was too stupid to see it

Full trip diary follows.

Day 1 - on board ship- Monday 20th June

There had been some doubt in my mind as to which way to travel to my destination. At first Eurostar looked like being the cheaper option, but there were so many imponderables - the cost of travelling to London, the inconvenience of having to be at the station two hours ahead of departure (in order to load the bike on the train), then onward travel from Brussels to a point near the German border, and the uncertainty about the type of terrain I would have to cross from there to the Rhine. All these factors would add to my worry quotient. So in the end, looking at the total cost, the train journey, although shorter, offered neither food nor rest, whereas on the boat from Hull to Rotterdam I would have a night's kip, dinner and breakfast, setting off on my travels rested and refreshed in the morning. So the boat won it, hands down.

As the boat sails in an evening, I had all day to make my way to Hull in a leisurely fashion, and on an extremely cheap train ticket, so no sweat there. I had a stop off in Leeds where I got someone to take a picture of me and my fully loaded bike.

Once on the boat, I was assisted to my cabin by one of the pleasant and helpful Filipino crew. I had been offered an upgrade from bog standard to superior when booking on the internet, and yes it was more spacious than the one I had last year, with two single beds instead of bunks, and room to move about.

I had come well equipped with maps of the Rhine route - the only comprehensive book being in German, I had copied the maps onto A4 sheets and discarded the text, but I had also purchased John Powell's *Cycling the Rhine Route*. This appeared to take a completely different route to the German book, so the two did not work together as I had hoped. To follow John Powell, I would have had to cycle up country from Rotterdam, and begin my ride from Amsterdam, and this I was not prepared to do.

The German map showed a complicated network of rivers where the Rhine split into many branches as it approached the sea, making it difficult to decide which one to follow. The initial direction was East to Arnhem, after which the river made a right turn and went due South¹, and became one river again. It seemed logical therefore to take the train to Arnhem, and cut out the complications. This I had decided to do, but on the map the nearest station appeared to be so far from the port that it would take me most of a day to ride. I was sure there must be a station nearer than that, so made my way to the information desk to ask the steward (or whatever they are called). This was a good move, and the man couldn't have been more helpful.

"There is a station nearer, but you must cross the water," he said. "You will find it very easy to cycle in Holland." He gave me complete di-

¹ remembering that I am travelling the Rhine in reverse direction to its flow, which is north and west



on Leeds Station - note newly styled hair - not usually this tidy!

rections, told me what to look out for, and told me I would see signs all the way. Once I crossed the water I would be right next to the station.

“Have you any coins?” he asked. “There are only machines at the station, and sometimes they do not take notes.” He changed a 10 euro note for me, saying that would be plenty, and to make sure I bought a ticket for the bicycle as well, or there would be trouble on the train.

“But why are you taking the train?” he asked. “By doing this you are missing the best part of the ride. You need have no worry about finding your way to the Rhine path, we have cycle trails everywhere and everything is signposted.”

Although he clearly knew what he was talking about, once my mind is made up I can be stubborn and insist on relying on my own (often faulty) judgement. I was going to Arnhem and that was it. I noted two camp sites in the area, depending on what time I wanted to stop - I thought I should camp early the first night, as I would be nervous about putting the tent up for the first time, though I know there is no need, it is the simplest thing I ever saw, and no difficult bits or fittings for my arthritic fingers.

The shipboard dinner was good as always, breakfast starts at six, so I will not have to sit about waiting no matter what time I wake. I can get in there early and have a relaxing time.

I had one setback before setting off - which, had it occurred later, would have been a disaster. When setting up the bike for the trip, I decided to leave in place the front rack I bought on the internet (from Holland as it happened) and which I use to support a large wicker basket. This spreads the load when shopping, and can also be used for carrying small dogs. I bought a large waterproof stuff sack from the local camping shop, big enough to take all the camping gear, and strapped this to the rack. For the first leg of my journey, over the Pennines from Nelson to Keighley, my daughter Diana and her partner Phil offered to ferry the luggage over in their car the day before, which was Sunday. As Phil picked up the camping sack, the fastening broke and the whole lot fell to the floor. This meant a journey into Nelson the morning of my departure, in the hopes they had a replacement. They did, so all was well. But imagine if the strap had given way en route!

In the end I did not have to cycle over the Pennines at all, as my neighbour Brenda saw me coming back with the sack, and offered to take me and the bike over in her 4x4. And a lovely surprise was waiting for me - Diana had changed her hours and was standing by with a bit of moral support before I set off. I did another repack (the third) at her house, leaving some stuff behind. Even so, when everything was loaded I looked at it and thought, *My God, what am I doing?* But I am convinced everything I am taking is not only necessary but essential, and I have kept clothes to an absolute minimum. The netbook is heavy and not the best of things to have along, with the worry of its being stolen, but I have been stern with myself over this, I bought it specifically for touring, and I forced myself to bring it. The main problem will be charging it up.

Well so I have set off – that is the hardest part, actually getting up the courage to leave. But at my age, I feel I have to give myself challenges, or it is all too easy to stagnate. How much longer will I be fit enough to do it, is also the question. Everything becomes more urgent as you age, you speed up trying to cram everything in before the store closes.

I am glad I asked about the trains, now I have absolutely no worries for tomorrow and can begin the journey properly. It may be that I will not need the maps at all, if the signage is good.

So tomorrow night I will be in my pink and purple tent! See how that goes.

Day 2 - evening - in camp at Pannerden - Tuesday 21st June

I am in a fantastic campsite which I found quite by accident, or rather, by a strange set of circumstances. I got off the boat and away by 9.30, following the instructions given me by the steward – I had an 18km ride along-

side the Rhine - rather lonely, no other cyclists being about, and none too warm, shaping up to be a blustery day with a strong threat of rain. The ride was chiefly remarkable for the strange animal 'deposits' along the cycleway - could not be dogs, who on earth would walk their dogs so far out of town - foxes? Or some large water bird. Why do they choose to leave their 'crottes' on the paved way, rather than the grass, of which there is plenty. Perhaps they roost at night on the tarmac, finding it warmer for their bottoms.

I was still near the sea, and there were many wind turbines along the river, getting less as I went further inland. Wherever they were, I saw headless birds scattered around. Of course, as they fly into them, the head is what will get hit, and it appears that it is severed from the body. These sad little memorials were thick on the ground where there were turbines, and not elsewhere.

I was headed for the nearest station, and my first problem was to negotiate the hurdle of the ticket machine, plus it would be in Dutch, a language I find incomprehensible. To be fair, Holland seems the perfect European country to visit for non-foreign speaking Brits - everyone speaks English, even the smallest child, and they don't mind a bit. During today, starting with the attitude *'Let's get out of this country and into Germany'*, I have moved to a position of appreciation for Dutch people. They are pleasant, courteous and helpful. Nothing is too much trouble for them. A coloured girl helped me get my ticket at the station, even though her own train was due in minutes. Unfortunately, she omitted to get one for the bicycle, but she said this would not matter, and as I was travelling on the same train as her, she would explain to the conductor if he made a fuss. But she said no one ever did.

She got off at Centraal, and I continued to Arnhem, with her blessing. I did my usual trick, failing to look at what are proving to be the excellent maps I have brought, and so wasted an unconscionable amount of time getting lost in my three attempts to exit the city over a huge bridge. I finally made it and onto the Rhine path, which was clearly and liberally signposted, with large maps at intervals saying 'You are here', making it easy to plot the next section of the route.

Everything went like clockwork - the bike sped along and the saddle soreness remained at bay. The only problem was the lack of - anything. There were no campsites, not much signs of habitation, no shops, no restaurants, nothing! I had long since finished the water in my bottle, but what I needed more than anything after a dismal night on the ship was somewhere to lay my head, and sooner rather than later. This was not to be. In the end, at around 4pm I began to feel I could go no further. The total on the clock for the day (the stupid mileometer resets itself every morning!) was 40km. I began to think about farms and how someone or other said go and ask if you can camp in a field if there are no campsites.

There was nothing round here. I fixed my gaze on a farm below the dyke and to the left. I could see that further on a road left the dyke to run down to it.

"I will ask the Angels", I said. So I asked, Wolfram² in particular, *"and any others of you that are around"* to make this farm a place where I would get something to drink, and if possible somewhere to stay. I could not believe it when I arrived at the turn to see a board which said *"Terras Open"*. I sped down the lane. Two old men were brushing sand into the cracks of a newly laid path.

"I'll get the lady", one of them said.

Yes, she could do tea, yes I could have water, and "I have a book of campsites, I will find you one". This woman was a godsend, or rather an Angel-send. She even rang the nearest campsite and booked me in, and also directed me to a shop where I could buy essentials.

So I came to Pannerden and this lovely lady called Ans (short for Joanne, work that one out!) met me with a big friendly smile. She invited me in, treated me as a friend, offered me bread and anything I needed for the morning - but I was already provided for by the shop. Her husband Peter came out, and they showed me round their neat, pretty and of course spotlessly clean and well organised site, where I picked an idyllic pitch with its own shade tree, surrounded by the individual hedges that are so much a feature of continental campsites, making you feel pampered and private. Whether you have a backpacker tent or a camper van, you are entitled to the same amount of space. But that was not all. They showed me into the spreading farmhouse, where they have an oldfashioned parlour and kitchen exclusively for the use of campers. I noted it was well equipped with electric sockets, and am writing this in considerable comfort there now! They even have wifi, though I was not able to get it to work³. Ans and Peter felt like old friends from the minute we met, and I had no qualms about telling them the story of the Angels who had led me to their door.

Day 3 -Pannerden - after breakfast - Wednesday 22nd June

The meal plan I devised seems to be working out! I always have a problem when on tour of getting enough roughage, and am determined to eat more fruit and salad items. Vegetables are more difficult, as I do not intend to do a lot of cooking, and if you eat out in Holland and Germany, they are unlikely to be included with the meal, this being mostly meat country. So I hit on the idea of buying ready-prepared soup in cans or packs, and heating it up over the stove for my evening meal, while for lunch I intend to eat German sausage and drink Weissbier, said to be good for athletes.

² my husband Wolfram died in Feb 2006

³ I discovered later that this was because I had got the wrong spelling for their password, not being very good at deciphering Dutch.



Ans and Peter at Pannerden

The lady of the Terras was brilliant, urging me to go to the village shop BEFORE finding the campsite, “because the shop will close at six”, instead of my original idea of getting the tent up and *then* going to look for food. Somehow, because I am holiday, I expect the whole world to be open and ready when I want them! A bit like the Cuban we had staying with us in our back room for ten months, who found it intolerable, on a day out in the Dales, that when she wanted to eat, everywhere was closed. Not a bit like Miami!

Urging myself to buy “only what you can eat tonight” and NOT be distracted by the intriguing variety of new foods, I bought, as pre-determined, a pack of soup. The names were a bit puzzling, and I had to ask another customer to translate – ‘Kippe’ was chicken – ‘Uit’ onion. I got the chicken and it was delicious, with lots of vegetables, the way I wanted it. There was not much choice of bread, and I bought what I thought were four bagels, but turned out to be muesli bread - I ate two with the soup, and heated the other two in the dry pan for breakfast, topping them with cheese slices. I drank half a pint of milk and two large cups of tea and honey.

I packed up after breakfast and went to say goodbye, with an almost tearful farewell from Ans and Peter who seem to like me very much, and were hoping I would stay on another day and see something of the countryside round there. Ans said she loved the tale of the Angels and had rung all her friends to tell them about ‘the woman the Angels sent’.

When it came to settling up, I got out 10€, which was the price of a pitch, but when Ans saw my note she asked if I had a five as well. Not understanding, and thinking there were some extras I hadn't bargained for, I must have looked surprised. Seeing that we hadn't properly understood each other, she stood up and went into the back, coming out again with a 5€ note in her hand. Now I was more confused than ever!

"You give me that," she said, taking my ten, "And I give you this," giving me the five. "That way, you pay half and the Angels pay half."

What a lovely gesture! Maybe she thought it worth it for the Angel story, which she could tell over and over again. I left with promises that we would email each other.

Day 3 - evening - in camp at Wissell - Wednesday 22nd June

Today I felt a little tired - mainly the muscles at the top of my thighs. I have brought the two pairs of cycling shorts I bought last year and never wore, determined to try them. I had searched on the internet for the best way to combat saddle soreness, and the advice was either to buy one of various expensive proprietary 'miracle' creams - or use vaseline. I opted for the latter, buying a huge bargain tub in Boots that had my daughter exclaiming in astonishment! So far I had hesitated to wear the shorts, but with soreness kicking in, it was time to bite the bullet. I lathered up and went commando, having read that there should be nothing but vaseline between you and the shorts. I lacked the courage to appear in public in these skintight garments, so put my fleece pants over the top. It was a cool morning and I could take them off if things got hotter later.

I left the campsite, cycling through shady green lanes. Again all the routes were well signposted, and I began to see that Holland is indeed an excellent place for a cycling holiday. I was in sight of the river most of the time, and it was not long before I made the crossing to Von Millingen - it was gratifying to see that this place marked the end of a section on my map! As I got off the boat there was a restaurant fronting the river, and I had a coffee, my promised sausage lunch, and a Weissbier. Far from the weather cheering up, it was looking like rain as I set out to ride the next section.

My way lay mainly along dykes, so when the rain came on, it was total exposure and I got soaked. My rainjacket does not provide much cover, and I did not bring the cape I bought in Lidl's as it is not very waterproof.

I had pulled up by a bench to have a stop and a drink of water when I noticed another cyclist approaching from the opposite direction. Looked like a local wide boy. He decided to stop and chat to me, offered me a roll-up and invited me for a cup of coffee in the local restaurant! His bike had a motor and it was around 1pm, so I guessed he was on his way to the local 'caff' where he would spend the rest of the afternoon drinking and smoking, so posed no kind of threat of following me or being a nuisance. I



Cycling out of Pannerden towards the Rhine crossing

didn't give him another thought after I shook off his intentions. The sun came out and I enjoyed riding along with swallows darting alongside my head, flocks of huge geese running along in the fields below the dyke, and once a stork flying overhead. I had seen other large birds earlier but never close enough to make out if they were storks. I love those birds and wish we had them in England!

Something interesting happened shortly after the incident with the village creep. A road leading down off the dyke and into a village had a sign - "Zum Wolf"⁴ 500m. *I must see this*, I thought, and set off through the village. At what must have been about 500m I came to another sign, a big one, pointing down a little path off the main street. I photographed the sign with its picture of a wolf, thinking I didn't have to go right to the place, but the Voices thought otherwise, and prompted me to carry on. Photographing the place (which was shut) I found a plaque on one of the walls 'gebaut (built) 1987' – the year Wolf and I were married! Well if that ain't angels talkin'! Or a message from the man himself.

The weather did not improve - it was showery and cool all day - but it was encouraging to see what rapid progress I was making across the maps. Today was interesting as most of it was in sight of the Rhine and included one crossing, though it was the same lonely old day, just me cycling along on traffic-free cycle lanes - but I love it! At one point I passed a monument

⁴ "Zum Wolf" - Wolf's Place



erected in the memory of a young girl who saved several people from drowning in one of the Rhine floods, before perishing herself. Strangely enough, it was in French. I wonder how that came about. The date was early 1800s.

My plan was that by four I should be looking for a camp site, but I decided to carry on till five. I targeted a village called Grieth, deciding to stop there and try to find accommodation. I asked the Angels to provide something, and they delivered on target as before. As I came towards

Grieth I saw a big sign - "*Haus Grieth - B&B*". That was encouraging. I turned down the road into a charming mediaeval village full of old houses and narrow winding streets. *Haus Grieth* turned out to be the local castle! I feared it would be expensive but went up the long flight of stone steps to the main door and rang the bell. A young woman came - the rate was 50€ a night. I said that was really more than I wanted to pay and asked if there was a campsite locally. Yes there was, at a place called Wissell. It did not look far on the map, but the Rhine maps are not good when you are "off piste" so to speak. I got directions off her, but I have found so far that this is not a lot of help. I am not much good at remembering directions deliv-



ered in English, so not a hope when they are in German! My eyes glaze over after the second instruction and I stop listening. But now I am even finding that I cannot remember whether the second turn was left or right! So I have to ask again. One thing I have found, wherever it is you are going, the locals always say it is 2km. Whereas the cyclometer can read 7 or 8 by the time you find it. So it must be an expression, like “*round the corner*”. I pass this on to you, in case you are ever on the receiving end of such advice.

I came to the end of the village and, having asked an old gentleman pedestrian, turned onto a major highway. It was 2km he said, and to turn right ‘after you see the *Mühl*’. I was not sure what he meant by ‘*mühl*’ - was this an oldfashioned wind or water mill, or could the same word apply to a modern factory? I had gone much further than 2km, and could see some dreadful looming edifice in the distance that looked more like a nuclear power plant than a charming little wooden mill. I could not remember at this point whether he said turn off when I got there, or when I first sighted it, so seeing a field path on the right, I turned off onto that. It took a circular route, but was pleasanter than the road, so I carried on. I came to a farm, and then followed a sign to the ‘Strawberry shop’, thinking I could ask directions there, and perhaps buy something to eat and drink.

When I got there it was a farm shop, selling fruit and veg and home made produce (but no strawberries). I bought cherries and ate them sitting on a seat outside, then asked the pleasant country girl who worked there for directions to the campsite.

She told me to go up the drive and I would be back on the road I had left, and to carry on and take the second road on the right. Again, it was to be 2km. I passed two minor roads which looked like field paths rather than roads, but then came to a major crossroads and a highway, so, thinking I had gone too far, I went back and took the second of the field paths. To my horror, I came back to the farm shop! Now the girl was not so pleasant. She said I should have carried on, and that the major road I had come to was the first turning, and to carry on to the second.

I went back to the crossroads and turned down the next right. I was well on my way when I was overtaken by a car which slowed down. A window was wound down and there was the shopgirl, really angry now, shouting:

“You never listen! You are on the wrong road again! Go back and take the next turn to the right! It is not this one!” Then she drove off.

It was another major crossing. The next instruction was to “look for the place of the horses” but when I found it I couldn’t remember what I was supposed to do next - go on past it, or turn up the road where it was? At this point it began to *really* rain. A torrential downpour, I was drenched through and it was beginning to get dark. Miserably, I continued on down the very long road. I had now done 10km since leaving Grieth, making a

total of 50 for the day. I sheltered under a tree, wondering whether to continue or go back to the horse place and try there. I had turned round and was making my way back when an old couple on bikes came towards me. I asked them about the campsite and they said to follow them. It turned out they were camping there. It was now horribly dark, wet and cold. How was I going to pitch a tent in this? Some campsites have rooms or even cabins for rent, so on arrival I asked, but the reply was they did not let cabins or caravans for one night, and they had no guestrooms. I almost turned round and headed back to Grieth, but I was tired and soaked. I asked if I could wait inside until the rain stopped as I could not pitch a tent in that down-pour.

It did clear up and there was still some light left, but I did not like the pitch. It was an open field, no partitions or divisions, and on it was a children's playground and some kind of clubhouse. I returned to the office and said that for the price I was paying - 14€ - I expected something better, and what was that house about, what went on there? She did not answer, but I forced her to allocate me a space with hedges round it, though she did not want to. But when I found the pitch - which was exactly what I wanted - the ground had been prepared with gravel for touring caravans, and the pegs would not go in.

I returned to the open field, determining that if the ground was hard there also I would simply quit and return to Grieth, late though it was. I already hated this place. But the pegs went in, and another family with tents arrived, parents and teenage children. I was glad of the company, even though they chose the other end of the field, and I got the tent up in record time, fearing another rainstorm.

I went back and told the smug girl that I was on the field, and why, then went for a shower. It was abominable. When I turned it on, water shot out of a faucet in the wall, straight at the door opposite, soaking the floor and anything in its way. I managed to salvage my stuff in a big hurry, stacking it out of the way of the jet, and then had to stand there being horizontally sandblasted.

Next to the office is a kind of cafe-bar where I am sitting writing this and enjoying a wheat beer (as recommended for athletes). I have no intention of buying any food, as I bought black cherries, home-made pâté and a bottle of Apfelsaft⁵ at the farm shop - all this cost 8€ - everything is turning out expensive - but what is life if you can't try speciality and regional foods? It's part of the holiday. I wonder if the 14€ tariff is going to be typical of Germany? I was hoping to get away with 10.

I don't know how long the funds will last but I am not going to worry. I will be careful of course, but if I run out of cash I will come back from wherever I am - I am expecting to do a review when I reach Koblenz. That

⁵ *apple juice*

is about halfway and convenient for Brussels and Eurostar, though perish the thought of landing in London. What to do then? Trains are punishingly expensive if you want to travel immediately and can't book ahead. But I won't look failure in the face. Hope the cash will last. I think I spent €90 in two days. I will check in the morning. Lunch at Millingen cost about €10. Then 1.50 or 2€ every time I have to cross the Rhine, which seems to be a fairly frequent occurrence.

The night of 22 June

There was music coming from the house on the field where I was camped, but I did not worry too much as there are very strict rules on German camp sites (and yes I am in Germany now, I asked at the cafe-bar, as I never went through any borders, neither did I see any signs saying I was entering Germany) and I expected it would all be over by 11. However it was NOT, and the noise continued. The windows of the house were open and the music blaring out, but that was not the worst of it. Various drunken youths came spilling out onto the play area, shouting and arguing. I got up and went to see if I could find someone to deal with it, but everything was locked up. I could not even find anywhere I could get in and sleep. At 2.30 I took my bedding into the shower block. There were bright lights everywhere but I put my bed on the floor and dozed a bit. At 4.30 I woke up and saw a cockroach climbing the wall. I went out and the noise seemed to have subsided, so I got back in the tent, but before long it all started again with the arguing and shouting worse than before. It continued until 6am. I got up at seven, packed up and went for breakfast in the cafe, then when the office opened I put in a strong complaint. I was told,

“That should not happen. There are strict rules. This group will never be allowed to have the key for the house again. They were supposed to close and go away at 11.” This was all very well, but I had missed a night's sleep. The woman went to see her boss and came back to tell me the whole of my money would be refunded. But that did not help with the sleep.

Day 4 - on the road - Thursday 23rd June

I left the disaster campsite and headed back up the road. My aim was to return to the point where I left the road to turn off to Grieth, and resume my way from there. As I passed the entrance to the horse place a whole load of horses and carriages came out. It was quite a spectacle and I photographed it.

I then retraced my route, passing the farm shop with the unhelpful girl, and arriving back at my entry point, continued up the road. The day was sunnier and I began to feel better - until, that is, I started noticing signs to 'Wissel' and even glimpsed the ominous towers of the “*mühl*” in the distance. I tried another road, but the same thing happened. Eventually, it



I photographed the horses



Haus Grieth

dawned on me that I was heading in the wrong direction. A picture of the map came into my mind, and I saw that when I had turned off to go to Grieth, I had actually been following the Rhine route, that it lay through Grieth, and that had I consulted the map before setting off, I would not have made this stupid mistake. I had wasted almost the entire day, was exhausted from lack of sleep, and the best bet seemed to be to return to Grieth and book in at the expensive b&b.

At Haus Grieth - evening of Day 4 - Thursday 23rd June

I think I am being taught a lesson here. That if I ask the Angels for help and they provide a perfectly nice place to stay, then I must stay in it. I failed to take up their offer last night, and see what happened.

It was late afternoon when I knocked on the door of Haus Grieth. I was relieved when a young man answered the door, instead of the girl I had seen the day before. I asked if I could have a room for the night, then there were footsteps in the hall and the girl appeared!

"I have seen you before," she said. I explained about the terrible campsite and no sleep, "It is still 50€," she said sternly.

I said yes, that is okay, and she let me in. I was offered views of the Rhine or views of the garden. She showed me both rooms, and I chose the one at the top of the house, because it had a huge double bed that looked so inviting. There were windows on two walls so I had both views, as it happened! It was a long climb up the stairs but the view of the Rhine was spectacular. I still find it strange to see the ships motoring along at a rate of knots when I am used to watching slow canal traffic. Later, when darkness fell, I leaned out of the window, watching them float past in the dark, glowing with strings of light, and thought what a romantic way to travel and how I would love to try it another year. What a pity we don't make more use of our waterways - but oh no, that would be too sensible for the British.

There was a complimentary pack of Haribos on the bed - Wolfram's favourite sweet.

This may be costing 50€, but as I got a total refund last night, and the lady in Pannerden gave me back half my fee, that reduces tonight's costs to 30, plus I get breakfast into the bargain. So all in all this is not working out so expensive. Anyway the First Rule of Camping (according to Geraldine), states that after a sleepless night the next night MUST be spent in a guesthouse. That was the cause of my downfall on the 2009 trip – failure to recognise this basic rule.

Next Morning - before leaving Haus Grieth - Day 5

Friday 24th June - Johannes Baptist Day

There may be something to be said for this b&b lark, not least to make a mental note to save up more next year and come back and do it in style. The price is off-putting, but this must be the top end at 50. There are gast houses and small domestic operations which will not charge so much and all will provide the same lavish breakfast I am sure, German pride will see to that. I will not go away from here at all hungry, saving at least 10€ on the road, possibly more. If the campsites are going to be charging 15, which looks likely, and breakfast makes it 25, if I could find a room for 35 or 40 that is not so much on top. And I can sleep, wash some clothes and be on the road early, no tent to pack, and less to carry. It bears thinking about. It is the hidden costs that make the difference. But for this year I must try to camp.

The Haus Grieth woman insisted on having the money in cash, and her parents ran the restaurant nearby on the river bank, where the prices were,

thank God, affordable. I ate Wiener Schnitzel with chips, and salad from the buffet for 9€50. A glass of Erdinger Weissbier was 2.10 and I was unbelievably charged 2€ for a glass of water! What is the German for tapwater? Must find out for next time. Mind you, it was amazing water with lemon.

I was watching a group of people leaving - I had not seen them, they must have been sitting round a corner out of my view. Two young women came out and then - Herr Flick* appeared! Yes! Walking with the stick and the bad leg! He also had on a leather jacket – okay it was not a full length coat but it *was* leather! And the glasses. I wanted to laugh. Next morning this same character appeared at breakfast! Now I really struggled to keep a straight face. * *from tv series 'Allo, Allo'*

Haus Grieth is on Schloss Street, so is really a castle, and was built in 1310. I always find it amazing that the Germans keep their buildings so long, and that they always look brand new. It seems odd to someone from England, where if a thing is old, it looks old. But then so does everything else - old - and dirty!

It began to rain as I was leaving the restaurant, so I sheltered in the door. Two men were there talking. I mentioned about going on a barge down the Rhine, and one of them said they all take passengers. I wanted to travel this way, but could not get information on it before leaving. Who knows, if I come across a port where they are loading and unloading, maybe I could still get a ride? Whatever, though, this is definitely a goal for next time. Speaking to locals is the best way to get to know things.

A beautiful rainbow appeared, arching over the Rhine. Part of it was in the water on the other side. One of the men said to the other,



Rainbow with "Goldtopf"

"There is the Goldtopf" (*pot of gold*). They asked me where I was from and where I was going next. The friendlier of the two had cycled down the

Rhine to Switzerland himself, no doubt when he was young, and was still enthusiastic about it. When I said I was making for Xanten he said I would see 'Romanians' there. This sent a shiver down my spine, what with my in-laws in Ringsheim (Baden Wurttemberg) always going on about the Romanian gypsies, but he said he meant 'the Romanians from Italy'. I knew Xanten was a Roman town, about the only thing I learned from John Powell's book. I am not finding it of much use, but am keeping it on in case it releases any further information. The friendly man recommended buying a Radler (*cyclist*) route map, and when I asked where I could get one he said,

"Here, at the restaurant," and the proprietress, who was listening, bustled forward with one. I cannot say it differs much from the maps I have, but at least it shows some of the hinterland, giving more sense of perspective, and possible campsites off route. More to the point, it is bang up to date, which I suspect the Bikeline maps are not – since they are mostly out of print and difficult to find. I have the impression they might be about 10yrs old or did I get that from Powell who clearly states his book is 10yrs out of date. Anyway it is bright and cheerful and cost 5€. It can only be a help when I am lost and need to re-orienteer, which I clearly failed to do with the maps I have. The man said when I run out of map to look in any garage or tourist office for a new one as they are produced for each region.

When I was ready for sleep last night and turned off the lights, I thought, "oh no, there will be ghosts!". But then I realised that if there had been ghosts *in this room* I would have known immediately the girl opened the door. So I knew it would be okay, and if the door handles started rattling in the night, it would *only* be ghosts, so much less dangerous than humans! When I asked her about it this morning, she denied there were any. Mind you, if there were, she would not admit it, it would be bad for trade! It occurred to me though, that you don't hear any stories of ghosts in Germany - perhaps all that cleaning gets rid of them!

There are two perfectly ghastly paintings in my room, and I noticed on going to breakfast this morning that they have many of these, all in the same style, I am sure painted by the same hand - even I can tell that, and I am no expert. They are in a style I would describe as 'tragic' - ie gloomy, over-dramatic, full of foreboding and menace. I thought them done by some local, in a mock-up ancient style, fooling no one. I asked at breakfast, all innocence:

"Who has painted these pictures?" thinking she would say, "Uncle Ted," or "Joe Bloggs in the village," but she answered with a name that was meaningless to me - "Achilles Moortgat." I asked,

"Are they old?" expecting that they were not, but she said yes, they were, so I will have to look up the artist. I asked if I could take some photos of them. But only because they are so awful.



My room at Haus Grieth



... and the view of the Rhine from the window

Later . . . still Day 5

My morning jottings were brought to an abrupt halt by the room phone ringing. It was Katja (the girl who runs the place) asking,

“When will you be ready to leave?” I said,

“About ten o’clock,” to which she replied that it was already after ten o’clock.

“What time is it?” I asked, and was horrified when she said,

“Twenty to eleven!” I had got the small travel clock out last night and had been going by that. I thought I had altered it on the ship but apparently not. She went on,

“When you came down to breakfast it was 9 o’clock, not 8 as you said,” - and there I was thinking I was early at 8.45, but sure that the Germans would be standing by ready. But the poor creature must have got up an hour early for me, as the Flicks put in an appearance when I was almost finished. I said how sorry I was and I could be out in ten minutes, but she wanted to leave right away so asked me to leave my key on the hook when I left.

So I put my stuff away and hurried off. I was enjoying the ride when to my horror I recognised the tower of the “Mühl” I had seen so many times yesterday, in my lost wanderings. And then, worse still, I passed the bloody strawberry shop (which does not sell strawberries) where the stropky girl works and thought of her face if she saw me cycling by - I was tempted to drop in - just to give her the screaming hysterics! - but resisted the impulse. To my relief the route turned left at the next intersection and I did not have to go up the long road that led to the abysmal campsite.

It was a pleasant day’s cycling, a lot of it on top of dykes, which they do not call dyke here but dam. There were some strong winds, but for a change these were behind me, and I positively bowled along! The rain was never far off, we did not have a deluge, but several spitty incidents. I actually achieved a sausage for lunch, with a small Erdinger. People speak English so much, I begin in German but before long ask do they speak English and usually they can.

The breakfast at Grieth was magnificent! The little dear had cut fresh fruit into tiny pieces and these were so good with plain yogurt. Then all the meats and cheeses were set out so attractively. Unfortunately I did not see the hot boiled eggs reposing under a cloth. I might have eaten one with the excellent ham. Some crisp, warm, to-die-for rolls and apricot jam! Plus I made three cups of tea - maybe four. The Flicks when they came ate in total silence. Most weird. If I had a limp and a stick and looked like that, I would jolly well dress up as Herr Flick and at least get a laugh out of it. He was halfway there as it was.

Grieth to Xanten. . . still Day 5

Xanten was my goal for today, and I made it, but as I approached the city I got more worried. I can't help it, it has to be said that I am terrified of cities. I do not feel in control as I do in the countryside. I also probably suffer from psychic stress due to the vibes I pick up off the people there. I should have been excited at going into a Roman city, but was not.

I was not far off when I saw a magnificent *Jugendherberge*⁶, new and purpose built. Since it was at the side of the road I went in to enquire, it could do no harm, though the emphasis on 'youth' on the web, and the hint that staying in a *Naturfreundehaus*⁷ was more suitable for older people, had not been exactly encouraging.

The man behind the counter was businesslike but, as is generally the case in Germany, helpful. One seldom encounters a rude person. He explained the system to me - age was no barrier, people of all ages stay there, and the prices are very reasonable if you stay in a dorm, a little more if you want a private room. The fee for joining the association is not charged upfront, but is incorporated gradually into the price of a visit, so that you pay an extra 3€ for this, a stamp is entered on a card, and when it is full - after six visits - you are automatically enrolled as a member for 12 months - from the date of your last visit, not first - so you see this is extremely fair. After all that, he informed me that there were no vacancies.

"There is a festival in the town, and we have been booked up for months." Not what you want to hear when you enter a city bedless!

The map showed campsites scattered around the city but I got confused again and never found the turnoff to where they might have been, so found myself heading for the city. Mr Jugend had recommended a guest house which he said charged little more than he did. I found it without too much difficulty, but the woman on the desk gave me the 'Festival in our town' story and said there was only a three-bedded room available for that night.

"How much?" I asked.

"60 Euro."

"No thanks," I said, "I don't have that kind of money. Can you recommend anywhere else?" She made a phone call but I could tell from her voice that 'the computer says no'. She then offered me the same room for 50 quid (euros are practically the same as quids, so I got to thinking of them that way). I should have bartered her down I suppose, but have you ever felt desperate with night coming on and nowhere to lay your head? These people bloody know it. It made me scared and sick to be paying this much again, but the alternative, finding my way out of the maze that is always the city, to the campsites outside, and it already 4.30 – and not feel-

⁶ *Youth Hostel*

⁷ *literally - Friends of Nature House*

ing at all like putting a tent up, with the constant threat of rain – I decided prudence was the better part of valour and gave in.

The building was modern and on two floors, with spacious stairs and a corridor running the length of the front of the hotel, with rooms opening off it, but I was shocked at the spartan appearance of the room. Frankly, it was a disgrace. It was clean, yes, but the three beds were three singles such as you would find in a cheap lodging house – bare floor with a few mats, cheap, thin curtains, a spartan wooden table and chair, a washbasin – no ensuite. That was down the corridor. It was without comfort of any kind and I felt most unhappy in it.

Financially, I came out of it better than at Grieth. There was a Netto up the road where I got everything I needed for 5€, whereas at Grieth I spent 13.60 on a meal. I was safe, warm and not on the road. With the camping stove I could make tea and coffee in the room. I bought ham, pretzel and radishes, a currant bread bun and a pint of whole milk. Oh and a luscious fruit slice type of thing which I ate with a big mug of tea. But I cannot go on staying in hotels at 50€ a night!

Tomorrow I am going to plan my route and head directly for a campsite. Unfortunately it is the weekend and no doubt campsites are crowded. But I have to try very hard to do this, or it will be home time before I know it. I am not having any problems with the cycling, I am loving it, the only problem is with money – as always.

The regional cycling map was a good buy. Mine saved my bacon twice. It was my fault that I went into panic mode when approaching the city and did not look properly for campsites – but then, I guess I didn't really feel like camping and I trusted the word of the YH man on this guesthouse.

As I went to bed, I reflected that the breakfast was going to be as dismal as the hotel, and there was little likelihood that it would come anywhere near the standard of the one at Grieth!

Day 6 - the flight from Xanten - Saturday June 25th

The guesthouse had an oddly deserted air, for somewhere that was supposed to be 'fully booked'. I saw one man in the corridor on my floor on arrival, and after that not a living soul on any of my trips to the shower or toilet. Nor did I hear any footsteps in the corridor.

Oh, so they are all at the Festival, I thought, and will come in banging doors at two in the morning. But I never heard a thing. I truly believe I was the only person on that floor. I had been deliberately lied to and robbed! I determined to get some of my money back at breakfast by taking food to eat later. I felt it was justified, but when I got to the dining room there were big notices everywhere forbidding this practice! Also, everything was of poor quality and not really worth stealing.

I had a look at the maps as to what was coming up next, and found a load of really big cities - Duisburg, Dusseldorf, Koln, Bonn - it would mean days and days of cycling through streets. Given my fear of cities, and tendency to get hopelessly lost, I decided to take a train from Xanten and get the hell out. I could have gone to Koblenz, but then that was another city, so I thought to head for somewhere small where I could not get lost - this would be Bingen, a place I definitely wanted to visit because of hearing so much about Hildegard.

At breakfast I spotted the 'computer says no' woman, and asked if I could have a word with her afterwards. She looked startled, guilty conscience! I bet she was relieved when I only wanted directions to the station and to a shop where I could buy a cycle cape! I also asked if it would be okay to leave my luggage until I had arranged things. She did not think I could get on a train with my bike from Xanten, but by this time I had learned that all things are possible, and stopped worrying, so this did not in the least put me out. She suggested I go into town and buy the cape, then return, pick up luggage and bike and head for the station. This seemed a good plan. She also said, if I could not get a train, I could come back and have the same room for 40€! Bitch!

I was amazed when I found my way to the cycle shop without getting lost - a first on this trip! This must be a good omen, and a sign that I had made the right decision to leave the area.

I returned to the hotel, loaded up and did not get lost looking for the station, which was just round the corner, though that has not stopped me in the past. Another good omen. There was also a human in residence, Frau Nagels⁸, a small elderly woman who definitely took her time with each customer. She told me I would have to change at two places, Duisburg and Koblenz. I had almost an hour to wait, and stood reading the tickets. I was disturbed to find that I must remove all luggage from my bike before boarding the train! That was impossible! I waited while Frau Nagels dealt with the next customer, then asked her was this right? She said that on the first train to Duisburg I need not remove anything, but with the next train I must. Naturally I then worried and panicked about this all the way.

It seemed it was a bad idea to travel on a Saturday. It was mayhem! I would advise anyone going to Germany against doing this, particularly with a loaded bike. Duisburg is a big station, there was plenty of room, but every train that pulled in disgorged huge screaming, chanting crowds of 'Yoof', who surged all over the platforms completely filling them. My panic grew as I wondered how on earth I was going to spot the bicycle compartment and then get to it, in this mêlée? Turning to my side I saw two young men, and as I just then remembered reading something about there being a sign on platforms to show where the bike compartment

⁸ *Mrs Nails*

would pull up, I asked them did they know where this was? One was dark and one fair, both pleasant and well-mannered. They said they did not think there was a sign, but that the bike space would be either at the end or at the beginning of the train. They had no idea which, but said they would help me. When I explained about having to take all the luggage off, they said it was not necessary.

“But it says so on the ticket, and I checked at the station.”

“Oh, they always say that,” the dark one said, “but no one does. You just push it on. Don’t worry, we will help, and the guard will wait if we are at the wrong end of the train.”

It reminded me a bit of the stuff I read on the internet, by some writer who had gone to South America to take ayahuasca. He had been under the supervision of a shaman for his daily sessions with the drug, then after a night’s sleep he had to report back with his dreams. On about the third or fourth day, some scary, batlike creatures appeared and told him that they were Masters of Outer Space and that he must obey everything they said. When he reported this to the shaman, he said, “Oh, not them again! They always say that! Take no notice.”

So these two lovely boys sat with me in the bicycle compartment, when they could have sat somewhere much more comfortable. It did not take long before I realised they were gay - the fair, outgoing one did all the talking, but touched the other’s hand from time to time, in an affectionate, reassuring way, as though to let him know he hadn’t been forgotten.

If that clue were not enough, they were going to Dusseldorf for ‘an afternoon’s shopping’, and then to see a musical in the evening. In order to clinch it, I asked them if they had heard of Jedward, they loved them! and had been to their show in Dusseldorf three times! I filled them in on a lot of Jedward history and they were surprised and intrigued. So that proves what I thought, that Jedward are gay icons.

We covered a lot of ground. The outgoing one writes - he won a prize in a national short story contest at his first try. I told him about the cookbook and he said he loves cooking, he and about eight of his friends get together on a regular basis and cook. He said,

“We will buy your book and cook something from it.” I gave him the website address and there he was looking it up right away on some ipad thing. He promised to email me. If he does, I will invite them over - it would be fun. They got off in Dusseldorf, sadly missed!

Quite a lot of people got on with bikes, so I had to stick around and keep an eye on mine. I was almost tempted to get off in Koblenz, but didn’t, and it was five in the afternoon when I disembarked at Bingen. Being psychic/sensitive is a funny thing - you either love a person or hate them the minute you meet, and it can be the same with places. I only had to set my foot on the station platform and smell the air, and I fell in love with the place. A great sense of happiness pervaded me and I *knew* every-

thing would be well. Perhaps it was the great number of prayers that have been said in this place for over a thousand years. It has to have some effect.

The first thing I saw on leaving the station was a sign saying "*Jugendherberge*" - pointing up the hill. It was a long way up, but when I glimpsed the Youth Hostel at the summit, and saw how huge it was, I thought I was home and dry. But no, it was the 'Festival in our town' story all over again.

"Everything has been booked up for months," said the woman on the desk. "The whole town is booked, you will not find a room anywhere, and there is also a festival on the other side of the river, and we have people coming over here looking for rooms. So you will find nothing."

I looked at her.

"What am I going to do?" I asked. She shrugged her shoulders. Obviously she did not care what I did.

"There is a campsite 4km outside the town," she said, but after a whole day spent on trains, and it getting late, I felt too tired to attempt it. "There is another Youth Hostel," she said, "At Bacharach." I had seen Bacharach as we went through on the train. The 'no going back' principle kicked in⁹.

"How far is that?" I asked.

"17km."

"I can't possibly cycle 17km", I said.

"There is a train."

"How frequent are the trains?" I asked. She shrugged again. "Could you ring the hostel at Bacharach and ask if they have room?" Reluctantly, she did. They did not reply. She tried several times, but no one answered. I had to leave.

I remembered that on the way up I had seen a whole street of hotels, and that was where I headed for. I felt pretty desperate, and asked the Angels for help - *please get me a bed for the night!* I reached the street and yes, it was full of hotels. I said, *I will knock on every door in this street until I find a room.*

I began with the first one. It was a small, one-storey house, but it had a big sign - *Gästezimmer*. I knocked on the door and a small, silver-haired gentleman appeared.

"Have you a room for me for tonight?" I asked (in German). He shook his head,

"I am sorry," he said, "the business is finished. It is closed." I looked at him. He may not be running the business any more, but he had the rooms! It was worth a try.

"I need a place to stay. I have been to the Jugendherberge and they have no room. Can you help me?"

⁹ *born with all my planets in forward motion, I have always found it impossible to go back - to anything or anyone*

“You can try the hotel across the road,” he said.

“At the Jugendherberge they said there is a festival in the town, and every hotel is full,” I told him. “They told me I will not find a room anywhere. I am alone and I am 70 years old. Can you help me?” He looked me full in the face, as if making up his mind about me. Then he said,

“Excuse me. I will make a phone call.” He got his mobile out of his pocket and after a short conversation said, “I am also the owner of the hotel across the road. I have spoken to them and they have a room for you. It is only small, but it is clean and it is cheap. Go there now.” I was so grateful. I tried to thank him but he patted my shoulder and said, “It is a pleasure. I wish you all the best.”

So it was that the Angels triumphed again! No long weary walk up the street, knocking on doors. They delivered at the first knock.

I crossed the street and entered Hotel Römerhof, leaving my bike at the door. Behind the counter I beheld a Being of Light. I have never seen anyone so full of angelic light before, it shone out of her and illumined the whole space around her. Her name was Gudrun. We began chatting as if we had known each other always. Her English was perfect, so I quickly abandoned the effort to speak German.

“You are a very happy woman, Gudrun,” I said, “is everyone in this town as happy as you?” She thought a minute,

“When I think of my friends, yes, they are all happy. If you think of others, you forget your own troubles.” I don’t know how it came out, but next minute she was telling me that she had had cancer.

“Did you cure yourself?” I asked, knowing she had.

“Yes. They wanted me to go to the hospital, but I said, if it is my time to die, I will die, and if not, then I will live. And I set out to find how to cure it. And the cure is B17. There was a man, he discovered this in the nineteen fifties, he is German and we call him Dr Krebs (cancer). There is a book written about him, I cannot remember the author or the title¹⁰, but I will come tomorrow and bring it for you. You can also buy it in English.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I would be very glad if you could do that. I have a friend who was recently told she has cancer, and we are doing all we can to fight it.”

“Now you want to go to your room,” she said. “How long do you want to stay?” I decided on two nights. I felt so exhausted, I did not fancy moving on in the morning. Yes, there was a campsite nearby, but I could ride out and have a look at that on the first day, and move there on the second if I wanted to stay in this town. I liked it so well, and it was getting better now I had met Gudrun.

“This room,” she said, “is one we never let, because it is so small. We keep it for when large parties come, and there is a bus driver - we give the

¹⁰ Griffin, G. E., *World Without Cancer*

*a Being of Light . . .
Gudrun*



*Bingen -
Hotel Romerhof*

room to him. But though it is small it is very nice, and it has its own shower and toilet, so you will be very private. The cost is forty euros.”

When she said they never let it, I thought she was going to say it was because it had a ghost! She handed me the key.

“It is Room 101,” she said.

“What?” I said incredulously - “do you know what that means?” She shook her head. “In England there is a tv programme,” I told her, “and Room 101 is where you put all the things you most hate! The name comes from a book by George Orwell, have you heard of him?” Again, no. “The book is called 1984, and Room 101 is where you find your worst fears. The man who is put in there is eaten by rats in the night.”

She thought this extremely funny.

I went up to the room. It was small, as she said, but when the people are nice everything seems better than it is, and conversely when they are not. It had everything I needed, and when I had showered and changed, I went out to look for a shop. When I came back, all the bells in town were ringing. There was a church across the road so I reckoned a service must be beginning, and went there. Gudrun told me the hotel was built on the very ground that Hildegard’s convent - Rupertsberg - occupied, and an inscription in the church said that this was the exact spot where Hildegard had worshipped all those years ago. The service was in plainsong, and very moving.

Day 7 -Bingen - Sunday June 26th

Breakfast was the usual excellent spread, and now that I was 'in the know' about eggs, I located them reposing under their cloth.

I made it my first task to ride out to the campsite. It was an easy place to find, and I was helped by a map which I picked up at the Tourist Information Centre - surprisingly, open on a Sunday. It was about 3km out of town, going South. I encountered a lot of bike traffic in the town and along the cyclepath, and when I reached the campsite, it too was busy. It had the usual tented restaurant, and the serving hatch was also the check-in for camping. I had looked round the site and found it heavily occupied, but when I enquired about staying, the guy behind the counter immediately whipped out the forms. I explained it was not for today - possibly I would return tomorrow.

I ordered meat salad¹¹ and chips, with a Weissbier to wash it down, and got a man at the next table to take my picture. Since I travel alone, there are never any pictures of me on my holiday snaps, and I had decided to make sure there were some this time. Germans are always more than happy to photograph you if you ask. However, as you will see, this picture (like the others) does not feature me. Some fat woman was following me



Campsite - Bingen am Rhein

¹¹ in Germany, 'meat salad' is neither meat nor salad - it is strips of luncheon meat piled into a dome and liberally laced with a vinegary dressing. Sometimes

around, always managing to slip into the frame at the last minute, leaving me out. I, as you will know, am a slim, attractive blonde. I don't know who she is, but she certainly seems to have let herself go!

Afterwards, I rode back into Bingen through the riverside park instead of the cycle path, which was out in the sun and too hot. It was shady and green in the park, and I could hear beautiful Chinese music - it seemed to be coming from some strange red balls which were crammed into a tree - though I could not be sure. It was meditation music, so I parked my bike and sat on a seat to listen. Then I noticed some steel recliners dotted here and there, apparently provided for the use of the public. I went and got one and lay down, enjoying the soft chimes.



Strange Fruit

Nearer the centre of town, various small groups of musicians were playing. One very bad jazz band featuring a suzaphone was worth filming, but I had not studied how to do that with the camera, and nothing came out. I had noticed the Hildegard Museum as I rode out that morning, and decided to give it a whirl. I have been hearing about Hildegard from one source or another all my life, and that was why I wanted to visit this town. Anyway, it was impossibly hot - so I went in.

The entrance fee was only 3 euros, and for a retired person, only 2. But would I understand any of it?

bits of vegetable are added, but don't count on it! Each area prepares it their own way.



. . . even stranger Fruit

“Everything is in English as well as German,” said the man on the desk. I spent a good deal of time there. It was fascinating. I had been unsure of Hildegard’s dates, but it appears that she was active about the same time as Richeldis had her vision in Walsingham¹² - and at one time formed a close friendship with a woman named *Richardis* - a very similar name - bit of a coincidence.

Hildegard was her parents’ tenth child, and at the age of 8 she was ‘gifted’ to the Church. They looked on it as ‘a tithe to God’. They sent with her an older girl, aged 14, to look after her, and they were both shut up in the convent. It must have been a very lonely life and a sad one for a little girl, never to go home again, and it does not seem to have been in any way her choice. She made the best of it, becoming a great scholar and one of the best-known women in Europe, especially for her sacred music, which is still played today.

I say she made the best of it, but apparently parents also pulled strings in those days – most unhappily in the case of Richardis, who was Hildegard’s right hand and administrator. Richardis’ mother wanted better things for her daughter, and managed to get her a position in charge of her own convent, far away from Bingen. Hildegard was distraught at the news, in fact it is only through this that we know anything about the relationship. We have the letters that Hildegard wrote in her agony, begging for her friend to be returned to her. She pleaded with the woman herself, the woman’s mother, various Bishops, even, when she got nowhere with these, the Pope! None of it did any good, and in the end she had to put it behind

¹² 1061 Richeldis had her vision; Hildegard born 1098

her, saying that it was 'very wrong of her to have so admired a noble human soul'. In the end Richardis either relented, or managed to get a transfer back to base, but died before being able to accomplish the journey.

Hildegard lived to be 81, though said to have been frail from an early age and to have remained so all her life (a bit like my mother). She wrote a great many books and of course the music, for which she is best known. She composed music for her own convent and for other convents and

churches. The books she wrote - on science, the natural world and natural healing methods using plants and stones, are still available. Most of her life, however, was occupied in writing about her visions, which she experienced

from the age of three. She told Jutta, who accompanied her to the convent, about them, and Jutta repeated them to their tutor, Volmar. He passed them on to the authorities where they were authenticated and highly regarded. At the age of 42 Hildegard received a command from God to write them down, and this occupied her up until the age of 75, when the last book was finished. In the books she describes the visions, interprets them according to the Bible, and then has them lavishly illustrated by monks and scribes. The paintings (or prints from them) were also on view.

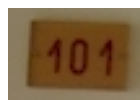
It was still terribly hot when I came out of the museum, and I went back to the hotel, which had wifi, so I am afraid I spent rather a lot of time on the internet, which is very bad, when on holiday. Made me think of Joshua, the crystal skull man, who was desperate to get online whenever he could, and was then lost to the world. Not much point in travelling to different places if all you do is communicate with the virtual world. The best thing about it was I could listen to the BBC, caught up on the omnibus edition of the Archers, and listened to some 'Now Show' back numbers, one of which had a very funny takeoff of Prof Brian Cox.

I did an assessment of what I have spent so far. Money is disappearing at a terrible rate, and not likely to improve. I doubted that it was going to last the six weeks that I planned to be away, so I went and had a look on the Bolero website and found space on a coach coming back from Beaune



Hildegard having a Vision

on 17 July instead of 31st, which I had booked. I sent an email asking for a change of date. I also rang their office on skype but there was no answerphone.



I slept well in spite of it being Room 101.

Day 8 -Leaving Bingen - Monday June 27th

I rang Bolero this morning and spoke to someone. The office did not open properly until 10, but promised to make sure my request was dealt with. There would be a £15 charge. Never mind. They fixed it later in the day and confirmed by text. The tickets will be on the bus, they no longer fax them. So there was nothing more to do, it was all settled. I packed up and left without seeing Gudrun again, but I have the hotel's website and email.

I rode out to the nearby campsite and asked how many km it was to the next one, Heidenfahrt. The answer was 20 so I went for it. The cycling was superb, within sight of the Rhine all the way, and though unpaved, a good wide road and good surface. I sat on a rock by the river for a while, and when I turned round there was a stork tower in the field behind me.

I came upon Heidenfahrt before I had done 20k, so it took me by surprise. There it was spread out along the river bank, and the cycle path went right through it. I was glad to see it had the usual outdoor restaurant, and when I asked for reception, I was directed to a tent where the owner (or manager) lived with his family. He had built a little wall around his area to make himself more at home, and had adorned this with gnomes. His wife was nursing a baby. He couldn't have been kinder or more attentive. It was horribly hot and he wanted to make sure I had a nice spot in the shade, but was specific about where I could and could not pitch.

I picked one of the spots he indicated and he went back to his tent. As I was clearing the pitch of twigs and stones, a man came from the caravan behind me and said I could not pitch there as he 'owned all the land down to the river'. I did not feel like an argument, and it was true I was right in front of his van, so I politely asked him where he would like me to pitch, and he showed me. This was in the burning sun instead of the shade where I would have been.

I patiently cleared the twigs from the new area and put up the tent in my usual methodical manner. He stood watching me from his doorway. As I finished he walked up to me and asked me if I was a teacher!

"No," I said, "I was a Head Chef."

"It would have been better for you in the shade," he said. Yes it would, Dickhead, I thought. There was no chance of going in that tent until after the sun went down. But it was a lovely spot. Right on the river's edge - my feet practically in the water.

The toilets had been pointed out to me, they were in a mobile van and I was not expecting they would be very good. In fact, they were excellent,



Heidenfahrt



View from the tent, evening

and the van also contained a shower area which was clean and efficient with lots of hot water.

I went to the restaurant and had a meal. Then I sat by the water watching the sun go down, and got the idyllic shot which I used for the cover.

Day 9 - Going through Mainz - Tuesday June 28th

I had not thought about breakfast, and being up early I set up my stove on one of the benches and brewed coffee, then decided to head into the nearby village and get something decent to eat, and a bottle of milk. The village was further than I thought, and I was so hungry I made the mistake of eating and drinking at the Stehcafé¹³ before cycling back. The sun was up and pretty fierce, so I did not feel too good by the time I got back. Then I had to pack up.

My way lay through Mainz. This would be the first city I had tackled, though the path looked straightforward, running along the river bank all the way. There was a campsite the other side of Mainz, and I decided to aim for that and go no further.

I chose to take the riverside paths rather than the paved cyclepath, which again was away from the river and out in the sun. Consequently I had a rough, and in some places almost impossible, ride. I only came across one place I could have stopped for water, but I encountered such hostility that I gave up the attempt and continued on my way. I get pretty fed up of the German habit of insisting that all bikes are parked in the bike racks provided. It is very good of them to provide so many, and they are fine for bikes without luggage, but they somehow fail to see that you cannot stick the front wheel into a rack and expect it to bear the kind of weight that my bike carries. But it was more than that. The man in the kiosk wanted me to pay 3 euros for a miniscule bottle of water. When I said I wanted something larger, he sent me across the road to his 'other place' where he said they had larger bottles. It took a long time to get served, due to the crowd, and I was again refused a large bottle.

"We need it to make the drinks," the woman said. I was so fed up that I drank the rest of my by now heated up water (horrible) and left. This was a bad idea. I got so desperate later that I approached an allotment where I could see someone working. I could not make them hear and had to go through the gate and onto their land before they noticed me. Then I saw that they were some sort of Middle Eastern couple. They were not very good at German so I tried them with English, which they understood better. I felt a bit awful when the woman went to where she had left her basket under a shady tree, and extracted a whole bottle of ice cold water, which she insisted I take. I had imagined they would have mains water. Anyway, I took it, and very glad of it too!

¹³ *stand-up café*

When I finally reached the city, I found myself faced with a maze of streets and no idea which way to go. The map was no use at all. Instinct told me to go straight ahead, but it looked like a residential district, and I noticed several other cyclists heading up a long hill to the right. I therefore decided to take this route, though there was no logic in going uphill to find a river.

After a short while I turned off this road and went to the right, which made no sense at all, since the river had been on my left all day, so it goes to show that my brains had become addled by the sun. I looked at my watch and it was 4pm. I was worried about reaching the campsite in time and I asked the Angels for help.

I asked the first person I saw 'the way to the river'. I think he was some kind of foreign student, he was certainly odd. He stared at my map and then declared that it had 'Keine Ahnung' - no meaning.

Next up was a woman. She was brilliant. I asked her the way to the river. She looked at my map and I explained I had to find my way onto the cycle path, showing her the route on the map.

"Oh my God," she said, "You will never do it. Mainz is a nightmare and I could never begin to tell you the way. You should get on a bus." I looked at her in surprise.

"A bus?" I said, "But I have the bike."

"Yes," she said, "You can put the bike on the bus."

"Really? Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes. All the buses have a space in the middle for prams and wheel-chairs and bikes. You can get the bus to the Hauptbahnhof¹⁴ and ask directions from there. The bus stop is across the road." This was a revelation. I could not believe it could be so easy. I followed her across the road.

At the bus stop, I spotted the name 'Laubenheim', recognising it as the place where the campsite was. I told her that was where I wanted to go, and she told me there was a bus at 1.30 - in 15 minutes - which would take me there. This was incredible - another triumph for the Angels - how was it I turned onto that road, and asked for directions right by that bus stop? And had I been mistaken over the time, or had the Angels turned the clock back?

The woman was right. Mainz was a nightmare. I was an hour on that bus, so it would have taken me a long time to do it by bike. The bus driver dropped me off at the right spot, and even gave me directions, even so I got lost about three times before I finally found it.

The Alcatraz Campsite

When I got there, the whole place was surrounded by barbed wire and fencing ten or twelve feet high. Everywhere was locked, with notices say-

¹⁴ Central Railway Station

ing they did not open til 4pm. It was now 3. I have never come across this before, but then I have never arrived at a campsite so early. There was a bell, so I rang it, but no one came. After a while a woman drifted up on the inside of the gate, apparently an Alcatraz inmate. She said it was siesta time, but that I might get in around 3.30. Then she drifted off again, walking her dog round the compound.



The Alcatraz campsite

Another pair of cyclists arrived, super fit, probably married. They ignored me, but I spoke to them and learned they had come from some far distant place that day and were going on to Mannheim the next. They settled down to wait on the opposite side of the track. After a while I had to move to get into some shade, and was sitting near the gate when a lone cyclist approached to read the notice. I helpfully informed him that they did not open until 4.

“Thankyou, I have seen that!” he said in an annoyed tone, reminding me of Wolfram¹⁵ when I would point out puddles to him - “I’ve seen it!” he would say, in just such a nasty tone. So I would stop telling him, and when he stepped in one, say - “You didn’t see *that*, did you?”

When the owner finally surfaced, she was an overblown, gushing blonde. Throwing her arm round me as if I were her closest friend, she continued to hold onto me, with difficulty, as we set off for an inspection of the site, the boring married cyclists following behind. She stopped at the first pitch, with a shade tree, and the man cyclist, with a neat flanking

¹⁵ Wolfram was registered blind, but had some peripheral vision

movement, took possession - though I had been first in the queue and indeed ahead of him to the pitch. Thinking this rather rude, I said pointedly,

“Oh, there is no room for me here, then,” and prepared to move off. But Madame was not for letting us any further into the site than this. She indicated that we must share the pitch. I could see Herr Fitness-Cyclist was annoyed, but she was right, there was enough room for two small tents, and to spare. Herr Fitness bagged the area near the river, but I was nearer the tree, and a bit of fencing which would be handy for hanging out washing. It then became a competition to see who could get the tent up first. I had to concede defeat on this, as the two of them were at it on theirs. But I came a good second.

I was tired and ready to eat - nothing since breakfast - but I needed a shower and a change of clothes. Madame signalled her approval when I appeared - more attractive when scrubbed up and more to her liking, she enfolded me in her roomy bosom once again. I did not mind being cuddled! It made a change from being entirely alone.

“Would you like to eat?” she asked. Although the whole camp had a somewhat dingy air, there was a homely atmosphere on the well-shaded terrace where an enormous table was set into a corner, surrounded by well-cushioned benches.

“Yes, I’m starving,” I said. I had read the menu at the gate. It was awful, but it was food, and it was cheap.

“Later, I am talking to friends,” she said, going back to her table. The Fitness cyclists turned up and were similarly ignored. None of us had been asked to sign in, which was unlike the usual German thoroughness. Apart from the odd feeble attempt at conversation, we sat in silence as Madame chatted at her Stammtisch¹⁶.

I suddenly became aware of a man standing at the side of me, outside a door which I now realised led to the kitchen. This must be Busty Blonde’s partner, waiting for business.

While she was madly gushing, he had an implacable stare. He was wearing nothing but a pair of long bathing shorts, and was as overweight as she was. Both were 50-60 years of age I would say. My psychic senses told me that they were both completely mad, off their trolleys, fervent drunks and probably into weird sexual practices. It was in the air - it pervaded the whole camp.

“Can I order some food?” I asked him. He did not answer, but stared at me in a way that told me that, although he already hated me about as much as he could, he was going to hate me a whole lot more when he had to fulfil my request. Madame, with an air of annoyance, sprang up and pushed a menu into my hands. It was the same awful menu, but 30% dearer than at the gate. There were only three things on it:

¹⁶ *In any Gasthof or similar establishment, the Host always has his Stammtisch, at which only his personal friends, or in a Gasthof, the Village Elders, can sit*

Swine Steak unadorned;
Swine steak hunter style;
Swine steak paprika.

I was about to order when Madame snapped -

“Not here, in the kitchen!” and the surly man held the door open while I entered the small, confined space. I said I would like the plain Schnitzel.

“Plain?” he snarled. “Why don’t you have the Jaeger¹⁷ schnitzel? It is much better.”

“Why, what does it come with?” I asked. Fixing me with a look somewhere between derision and contempt, he snarled,

“Mushrooms.” I would have thought a hunter could do better than a few mushrooms. At least a bit of hare, if he couldn’t manage a deer. It was clear he was not going to accept any refusal, so I gave in.

“One Jaeger schnitzel, Komplett!” he shouted triumphantly to his wife, if indeed she bore that name. “Drink?” he asked, hand already at the pump.

“A small Erdinger, please,” I said.

“I have no small glasses,” he replied, seizing a large glass and starting to fill it. It seemed it did not matter what you asked for, you got what he wanted to sell you. But I had had enough of his nonsense and said firmly,

“Then fill it half full.” He did not like this at all, and suddenly was able to find a small glass. I noted with glee that when the other cyclists got their meal, they too had Jaeger Schnitzel. But before that, way before that, we had to give a radio interview to a friend of Madame’s, about why we were visiting this part of the country and what we liked about it.

The whole place had an air of rundown filth, as though no one could ever be bothered to clean it. There was a notice (with illustration) in the toilet which when translated read something like “Clean up your own filth before it begins to stink” and one in the shower which said “Do not wash your filthy boots in this shower” – bit of a strange one, that! There were other little written notes pinned up in various places – one said that anyone wanting to visit a camper must pay a 2 euro ‘entrance fee’ and that any ‘not-campers’ wanting to use the toilet must pay 50cents.

By the time the meal finally appeared I was almost asleep – the effects of the Erdinger - and when I finished it Madame’s ‘Stammtisch’ was in full swing. I was undecided whether to attempt to pay, or go to bed and pay in the morning. I decided on the former and went into the shack which served as kitchen, determined to brave the implacable stare once more. Madame miraculously appeared and started pulling camping registration forms out of a drawer. I was too tired for that.

“No,” I said, “I want to pay for the dinner.” She began making complicated notations on the forms, then shot at me –

“21 Euros.”

¹⁷ *Jaeger* = *hunter*

“For what?” I had reckoned the dinner and beer came to about 12.

“For everything,” she said, “That includes the camping.” There was no bill, no receipt. She could have attempted to charge me all over again in the morning and I would have no proof I had paid. The whole place had a shaky feel, as if you were always on the verge of being ripped off. However, on my reckoning, I paid about 9 euro for the camping, which is cheap.

I asked if there would be any breakfast and received a cold stare.

“You can order bread rolls,” she said.

It had been a hot day, 36C (97F), and was still hot when we turned in. Herr Fitness said they were going to drag their mats out and sleep outside. It was a good idea, and I did too, only crawling inside when the cooler air of night wakened me. In the morning they were off early, packing up and leaving apparently without breakfast. They were real mile-eaters, hungry for the road. They were heading for Mannheim, how far that is I have no idea, but no doubt a great distance.

Madame was different in the morning, hair scraped back and with a totally different manner. I realised that this must be the sober version, and that she was probably drunk by 4 in the afternoon. However, she was pleasant enough, and brought me milk for my tea, and butter and jam for the roll, at no extra charge.

The Gate to Alcatraz had been left open for my departure, and I took to the road once more.

Day10 - I quit the trail - Wednesday June 29th

Frankly, by this time, I had had enough. Enough of the heat, of struggling with the heavy load, of getting lost and above all of the weary task of putting the tent up each night only to take it down again next morning.

(Though I do love the pink tent, and it is the easiest to erect I ever had.

That alone is argument enough for another camping holiday.) I was in theory heading for Oppenheim, and if I made good time, for Worms, but I saw, on consulting the maps, that the railway went through Oppenheim, and the temptation to hop on a train and go to Strasbourg was very strong. From there I could cycle down the French bank of the Rhine to the crossing at Rhinau, and head for Ringsheim, home of Wolfram’s mother. On the whole this seemed to me the better plan.

I must say, if you want a cycling holiday which is logical and sensible, do it in Holland. There are cycleways everywhere, and every turning is signposted – once you are in Germany, the signposting system breaks down. Oh yes, the cycle paths are everywhere, but the twists and turns and junctions of them are known only to locals, who whizz along at top speed. Setting out from Camp Alcatraz, I remembered I had turned off a broad, wide path to get there, and headed back that way. There was even a signpost telling me which way to go, but this did not last long. However I had

by now discovered the trick of the thing, which is, when you do not know which of two paths to take, stand and wait a few minutes, and some German is sure to come along on a bike, and you can ask him. It is imprinted in the German dna that, if asked to supply information, they must give it.

I had by now got used to thinking of the Angels as a ready facility, and today I needed them to find me some milk and a cash machine, so I put in the request as I was awaiting instructions at a turning. A man came cycling by and I asked him which path led to Nackenheim. He was of the endemic German Inquisition turn of mind, and wanted more information:

“Why do you want to go to Nackenheim?” he asked, “There is nothing there. Are you staying there or do you wish to go further?”

“I am my way to Oppenheim,” I said, and he immediately began to tell me of a quicker route - because whatever you want to do, Germans always know a better way to do it. I interrupted him to say that I needed to go to Nackenheim first, to find a shop and buy milk, and also find a cash machine. At which he turned round and pointed to a path leading to the right, saying,

“Go down there and you will find Lidl’s!”

Oh! My favourite shop, definitely angelic intervention. He also let slip that there was a station at Nackenheim, saying I must go under it via the tunnel, and that the path continued on the other side. It was at that point that I decided I would get the train there. So down to Lidl’s, where I bought the most enormous and juicy radishes and spring onions to replace essential salts lost in the tremendous amount of sweating I have been doing, as well as milk, cheese, fresh bread and a bag of cherries. I went back to the turning where there was a small wood providing welcome shade. I sat in the grass and had a wonderful picnic. Nothing tasted so good in a long time as those onions and radishes!

At the station it took some time to mastermind the fiendish German ticket machine, but it at last took my Amazon card and delivered three tickets, one of which was an itinerary with detailed times, stations to change at, even which platforms the train would arrive and depart from. I only managed it in the nick of time, as the train was coming even as I stuffed the tickets into my purse, so it was not until I was settled that I saw the next train I caught, at Mannheim, would be an ICE, and you cannot take bikes on ICE unless fully dismantled, which was definitely not an option. I knew Mannheim to be a University town, therefore I assumed it would be large enough to have a ticket office. I would head there and get the ticket changed. This left me strangely unconcerned, and I realised that I had learned to trust Germany, and to know that all will be well, and all *shall* be well, and all manner of things shall be well¹⁸. As indeed they

¹⁸ quote: *Julian of Norwich, mediaeval mystic*

were, and, like the man said when he shagged the ugly girl, *better* than expected.

The ticket cost me 46€, even at Senior prices, but when I found the ticket bureau (it was far more splendid than an office) and explained what had happened, the kind young man not only gave me a new ticket, with another itinerary, but also an instant refund! Now you and I both know I wouldn't get *that* in Britain, not in a month of Sundays. Or not without endless difficulty, and copious form-filling. In effect, all I had to sign was a piece of paper something like in Asda when you want your money back.

The original ticket to Strasbourg had involved changing at Offenburg - not knowing the routes, I could not have foreseen this - and as this was my eventual destination, I asked could the new ticket end there? No problem! He was in the process of making it out when it struck me that I needed to travel on to Ringsheim - could he add that on for me? Yes he could. And I got 12€40 back! I found both the German and the French Railways to be extremely accommodating to their passengers, UNLIKE BLOODY BRITISH RAIL! who will not even let you travel on a later or earlier train than the one you booked. Other countries have no problem with this, so what is wrong with this bloody country? No wonder we have riots!

Day 10 - in camp at Ettenheim - Wednesday 29th June

Looking back to when I got off the boat in Rotterdam seems a world away – a lot of water has flowed down the Rhine since then! I've been through some real shock, storm, horror, and got over it. Learnt a lot, naturally; stopped panicking about everything and learned to trust that it would all be okay.

I did realise before I came that I was wrong in referring to this as a 'holiday' and that it was a challenge. To get right away from home and place oneself in difficult circumstances is the equivalent of the Native American 'Vision Quest' – undergoing pain and suffering in order to gain enlightenment. Well I don't know if I have gained enlightenment, and it ain't over yet, though it does feel like I am on firmer ground.

Even if I did not attain my objective, to do the Rhein Radweg, I have navigated myself one way or another from Rotterdam to the Black Forest, which few of those people who live on my street could have done. I have lost weight, I have toned up, though I think there are far easier ways to do that. I have also found out that those 'assisted' cycling packages which seem so expensive are in fact good value for money – I have spent an absolute fortune. Nevermind, I saved it up for this and I have spent it. So what.

I felt a rush of excitement on arriving at Ringsheim station - I have no idea why this should be, but it was the same last year. It is not my home, nor ever has been, and I cannot say my experiences here have been totally delightful - but on seeing the village and stepping down from the train I



Ringsheim station

felt totally exhilarated. Maybe it is the Wolf within who is excited - this was his home, he grew up here and told me such happy stories of it, even though he was sent away to blind school when he was 8, but that could have made homecoming more special. I wanted to rush right round to Maria's there and then, but stopped myself. I had not told her I was coming, and more than that, had heard nothing from her since I sent her a Christmas card - so I was not even sure she had received it. She gave me such a welcome last year, I did not want to spoil it by doing something rash, turning up on her doorstep bag and baggage, looking as though I were treating her like an hotel. The proper, ie the 'German' thing to do was book in at the campsite and call a day later, see if there was a welcome on the mat, and if so, move in. Besides, it looked like rain was threatening, and I could not waste any time. It was already after four and I must get to Ettenheim and get the tent up.

I was dying for something to eat, but dare not stop in Ringsheim in case it was reported to Maria - she would be furious that I had chosen to eat out rather than with her, and I didn't want to annoy her at the outset - it would be easy enough to do that later. I cycled out to Ettenheim but did not come across anywhere to eat that looked likely to be cheap and quick, so continued on to the campsite. Pushing my bike up a cobbled path I spied a woman taking her shopping from a car and asked her if I was on the right road. I thought I remembered it from last year, but it never hurts to make sure - especially as I was making so many mistakes this time.

She asked where I was from and when I said England, a look of longing came over her face, much the same I expect as when someone mentions Germany to me in England! Turned out her husband came from

Kent, her inlaws lived there and how she wished she was there now! I said we should swap, as I think Germany is the best place in the world to live.

Arriving at the *Oase* (oasis) camp I booked in and was directed to the same row as last year.

“The ground is so hard there,” I said, “it was difficult to get the pegs in. Do you have anywhere with softer ground?”

“Everywhere is the same,” she said, “we had a special surface put down, you see, when it rains, we must have good drainage -” and in the usual German fashion, treated me to a lecture on how thorough this had been, how much it had cost, and what advantages it offered. She seemed quite put out that I did not appreciate the effort that had gone into this - which I was left feeling was all for my benefit. However, after delivering this lecture, she went on to say I could try one of the *allées* further up, where the grass might have grown as these pitches got less use, and might therefore give less trouble.

“Won’t it be a long way from the shower block?” I asked, but no, apparently there was another set of everything up there. Excellent! Listening to all this were a couple, already in reception when I arrived. They were about my age, and the woman seemed interested in me and my strangely loaded bike, and spoke English with me. She was both amazed and impressed by my feat of coming all the way from Rotterdam down here, and when I told her I was 70, even more so. She appeared to think it a triumph both of femininity and age and could not stop championing my cause. They followed me outside, and she asked if I had been to this place before, saying they made a regular thing of it, as it was one of the best places they had been.

“It is indeed excellent,” I said, “though I was not impressed with the restaurant.”¹⁹

“Oh that!” she said, “It is now closed.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said, “they couldn’t be bothered to cook anything.”²⁰ We chatted for a while and then I said I must get my tent up before the rain came.

“Of course!” she exclaimed, as though chiding herself for her thoughtlessness. “I will come and help you.” I hesitated only a second before shaking my head. In such cases, help can be more of a hindrance.

“No thanks, I have learned how to do it quickly,” I said, and rode off to the upper part of the site, where I found a charming grassy spot where the ground did indeed seem softer, in an enclosure with space for about eight tents, separated by hedges. I had the whole place to myself, chose

¹⁹ *a separate concern, not run by Oase*

²⁰ *in spite of having three separate menus I was told they did not in fact cook any of the dishes, as ‘not enough people come in’. This would appear to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.*



one and hurried to get the tent up before the rain came. Pitching was perhaps a little easier, but was greatly aided by my foresight in bringing a long screwdriver, which I hammered into the ground first, making a hole into which to insert the peg.

Tent up, my next task was to take a shower and change, and the spare set of ablutions were as absolutely perfect as those near the office - heated shower block, toilet block and a roofed outside area with dozens of sinks where hot and cold water is laid on. Admittedly, you do have to put 50 cents in the shower, but for that you get 7 mins and everything is so scrupulously clean and pleasant you do not mind at all.

After that I decided to see if the restaurant that couldn't be bothered was open for beer. It was, and a pleasant, curly-haired man in his mid-fifties behind the bar said I could sit where I wanted, do what I wanted. He was chatting to a friend, and couldn't be bothered to take my money for beer.

"Are you staying more than one night?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Pay next time you come in, then," he said.

"Where is the gorgeous boy who was here last year?" I asked. He gave me a blank stare.

"You know," I said, "The one who looked like Rudolf Nureyev."

"Oh him," said the barman, "He was crazy. He ran off." Yes, I thought, and I bet he ran off with some woman who could afford him. Had I the money, that would have been me. He was too delicious to miss, in spite of being a bit bent – I would say he swung both ways, in fact in whichever direction brought most profit.



crazy boy

Whatever happened to him, I wish him well. I am a sucker for a pretty face.

I had certainly picked an idyllic spot to camp, though when I returned later that night, after writing up my notes in the recreation room (where some teenagers, watching tv in the dark, did not like it when I put the light on) I realised how isolated and lonely it was, and wondered if my choice had been wise. Lying in the tent listening to the rain sluicing down, with additional large sashes from the branches of the tree I was under, I reflected that no rapist or murderer was likely to be creeping around in this. It was well into the small hours before I fell asleep, though that was more to do with nerves than the weather. This was the first night I ever recalled spending under canvas in the rain, which is strange, considering that Wolf and I camped many times. I do remember one rainy day in Verdun, when we took a day off, but maybe it cleared up by nightfall. The pink tent held up well, no water got in and I was not cold. Being on the road all day does wonders for the circulation.

Day 11 - into the Dragon's Den - Thursday 30th June

Never at my best after a sleep-deprived night, I felt gloomy and depressed on waking, my elation of the night before quite gone. This was not a good frame of mind to be in when approaching Maria, and I was also feeling guilty at not having told Erika and Irma in Neukirch that I had altered my return dates. Having arranged to spend the last week of my holiday in Irma's guest room, I would now have to break my promise and was dreading the reaction. I could hardly expect that they would have room for me earlier, and Irma might well have turned down bookings to keep the room free. Besides, it was a very un-German thing to do. Once you make an arrangement, they expect you to stick to it. They are not so laissez-faire as the English, and in fact their law allows them to call the police and force you to pay what you owe, whether you turn up or not. Wolf and I found this out when we walked out of a place we had booked over the internet, because it was under the roof, there was hardly a place to stand upright, and no balcony. In a German summer, we would have roasted alive. We managed to find another billet, but were surprised one evening when eating in the local restaurant, to be approached by the rejected proprietress and two policemen, and forced to pay up! To add insult to injury, the woman and her daughter then proceeded to dine in the same restaurant, on their profits!

Although I knew neither Erika nor Irma would behave like this, it still was not a kind action to let them down, and I knew they would feel hurt.

Feeling I had several ogres to face, I cycled into Ettenheim, desperate for some lunch, and shocked at the prices. I was looking at basically ten quid for a sandwich! And all the menus were of a sameness – Schweinesteak or Hahnchenbrust – pig or chicken. One adventurous establishment

dared to put a lamb kotelett on – at about £20. Nowhere do you see much beef.

I wanted local food - Bauernwurst and Bratkartoffeln²¹, but with this area coming so upmarket since they got the Europapark (Wolfram said it was the worst thing ever happened, it made everywhere so expensive) they seem ashamed of their regional dishes. At last I spied them on a Gasthaus menu, and only €8.20! However I was charged 2.50 for a small bottle of mineral water, so that evened things up. And it was not that good.

It was extremely hot, and I climbed the hill to the church where I rested in a cool and shady churchyard before cycling into Ringsheim and, as it was siesta time, out into the countryside. Coming back into the village about 4.30, I noticed a train coming in and realised it was the same one I got off the day before. How different I felt then! I now wished I had obeyed instinct and gone straight round to Maria's, but I still felt nervous about turning up, so I went to the Bahnhöfle²² and ordered a glass of water. Faced with the demons of my two unpleasant jobs, I procrastinated and tackled the less urgent first. I texted Erika –

"I have a problem. I have not enough money for six weeks so I have contacted the bus company and I can go back two weeks earlier, on 17 July. I am now in Ringsheim and am going to see Maria. Can I come to Neukirch earlier? Say Wednesday or Friday next week?"

I felt bad sending this text, even though I had said to Erika, *don't make any firm arrangements*, these she had made, informed me and I had accepted. To a German, that is an unbreakable contract. Now here I was saying I was going home two weeks early. I did not add that I was sorry, because I was not. Things were the way they were and could not be helped.

I hung around a bit longer, not knowing what to do about Maria, whether to phone or turn up. I left the Bahnhöfle and went in the churchyard, where Wolf's ashes are buried with his grandfather. I sat on a seat in a newly created rose bower, to think over my problem, but instead I received a spirit message: *This will be your last time in Germany*. This would turn out to be true, I knew, as I had received a similar message on my second visit to Penzance and had never returned there, in spite of having had a past life experience there.

"Better get it over with," I thought, picking up the phone and calling Maria. As soon as I said,

"Hello", I got the sugary tones of :

"Ahhhh, Jennet!" This was not a good beginning. The hearts and flowers were out for 'Jennet'²³, but what about me?

"Valerie," I said. But the welcome continued without pause. She laughed,

²¹ *Farmer's sausage and fried potatoes*

²² *Station guesthouse*

²³ *Wolfram's first wife*

“Ah, you and Jenet, you sound the same. How are you?” I cut to the chase,

“I am here, in Ringsheim.” Without missing a beat,

“You must stay here.” I said I was camped at Ettenheim, and asked could I come round. It is only one minute from the church to 21 Siedlungstrasse, you can see the spire from my window there, and Maria was glad to see me. She had received the Christmas card, but said she had not my address to reply, or to send me a card for my birthday. So that was okay. I said I would return to Ettenheim that night and come over in the morning.



She said Melanie and Herman's Hermit²⁴ were coming, and I remembered, oh yes, they come every Thursday. We chatted for a couple of hours and I was able to follow most of it - she said my German was better than last year. I pointed out that I had been on the road since 21 June, and had to speak German (mostly to ask “where is the camping platz?”). She consulted the calendar and said it was okay to stay until Friday the 9th, then they would be going away for the weekend.

The conversation was flagging a bit by now, but it seemed rude to leave before Melanie put in an appearance. Maria remembered she had arranged a day out with her women friends on the Wednesday, this threw her into a tizz, something to do with Joshe coming home for his tea, which she always left prepared. I think the main problem was she did not want me alone in the house with him. She said she would phone her friend and try to arrange to take me also, though this seemed to pose some problem.

“Okay,” I said, “Freiburg is a nice city, what will you do there?” By her expression she appeared to think this a ridiculous question –

“Shopping, of course, and if it is nice, we go Titisee.” I went to Titisee with her once and it is not an experience I am keen to repeat, sitting on a bloody boring boat for hours on end, or looking at endless shops full of articles no one wants or needs, with frequent pauses for eating. How they all stay so slim I do not know – any German event always involves massive amounts of eating. I knew that her friends would not talk to me and would not include me in their conversation.

Eventually I was driven to ask when Melanie was coming -

“She has already been!” was the reply, so I left, and back in camp was happy to receive a text from Erika, simply saying,

²⁴ *Maria's daughter and her husband*

“When do you want to come to Neukirch?” These loving and sweet words went straight to my heart. No reproval, when I had thought she would be hopping mad. I replied,

“Wednesday,” That would dispose of the trip with friends. I considered ringing Maria to tell her of the new arrangement, but reflected the morning, when I saw her, would be soon enough.

That second night in the tent in Ettenheim was cold, taking me by surprise, as every night up till then had been too hot. I was early to bed and had plenty of time to think. I was proud of my progress so far - yes it had been a challenge, and I think a ‘challenge’ like this is a necessary thing at my age. Surely it must clear the system of all kinds of blockages, and any nasty illness trying to get a hold will be beaten off by all that hammering in the blood, and the body pulling out all its resources to survive. There is no time to be ill when all energy and effort is needed simply to keep going. But it has certainly changed my opinion about those cycling packages where they transport all the gear, and you do not have to carry tents. I have realised there is wisdom in letting someone else take the strain, and although it seems you pay more for it, in fact because they are able to strike a better deal re prices, it won’t come out any more expensive.

Since my guides told me I won’t be coming back to Germany, I’ve been thinking that I wouldn’t mind going back to exploring England a bit more. I’d like to see Angie Kruger’s (trance medium) place in Cornwall, and maybe those folk on Dartmoor. Or a cycle tour in Norfolk, staying at youth hostels. I am beginning to think there is plenty to do in my own country, and getting home in the event of a disaster much easier.

It also occurred to me that I had achieved one of my wishes, made many years ago, when I first read ‘Billy Liar’. I was only young then, and the character of Liz had struck forcibly home with me. If I wanted to be anyone, I wanted to be Liz, the girl who takes off at a moment’s fancy, and travels to faraway places without batting an eye. To me, as to Billy, she represented the ultimate, but impossible goal. Billy had not the courage to follow her example, and neither had I, at the time. I could well understand how he never made it to London, and had to walk back from the station, having faced his demons and been defeated by them. At a time when we did not even have the terminology for it, Keith Waterhouse created for my generation an archetypal free spirit and, even more unusually, made her a woman. That night I realised that I have done what I dreamed of all those years ago. I have faced the demons and won. I have earned ‘the right to be Liz’.

Day 12 - An evening at the Lake - Friday 1 July

I woke at 5.45 and decided to get up and hang the tent out to dry. I made a small office outside the shower block, using a stool from the washroom and a children’s rocking horse for the desk. I brewed up tea and ate some



makeshift 'office'. Ettenheim

fruit bread I bought last night. When all was packed I went down to the camp shop where there is a sitting area. I bought a yogurt and sat at a table under the awning. The couple from last night were there, and asked me to join them. I don't know how we got onto the subject of books, but I was telling her (the man, it turned out, did not speak English) about the ones I have written, and mentioned I was now writing a book on dreams. She was translating bits for the man, but I noted these were severely curtailed and limited to what she thought was good for him to know. Now I was not such a hot potato with her. She said she was a 'realist' and did not believe in dreams. The man, however, became extremely enthusiastic, saying he dreamed every night. I said he should write them down. He said that when he woke, he forgot them. I told him to keep a piece of paper by the bed, and he nodded vigorously, as though he intended to do this. The Frau was looking sourer by the minute.

When they said they lived in Zurich, I said that Carl Gustav Jung lived there. They had not heard of him, and the woman, when I told her he had studied dreams, written about them and cured people's problems through them, expressed doubt that such a man could be Swiss! I said he had built a tower at Bollingen, on a lake, and they should go and see it. The Mister was nodding his head, I noticed that he had an ornate silver moustache, and that when young must have been something of a ladykiller. By their conversation they did not appear to be married, and I think Mrs saw me as something of a threat to their relationship. She hauled him off in pretty short order.

So I cycled off to Ringsheim, and in spite of sleeping all night, felt extremely tired. I expect it is the accumulated stress of these two weeks.

I got settled in the little room under the eaves, Maria made coffee and we sat and chatted. I reminded her of the ‘*Johannesbeeren*’²⁵ incident of the previous year - a whole carton upended on the bed and the duvet soaked with bright red juice! She said yes, she had to wash everything and I said it was all her fault for shouting at me to hurry up when Melanie came to dinner. I had thrown my bag on the bed, forgetting about the berries, and when I came back found the mess. She refused to accept the blame as always.

Joshe has completely recovered from his kidney problems of last year, but there was some sad news. Wolfram’s Uncle Heinz - Maria’s brother - died in June. Perhaps that is the reason Wolf has not appeared - he may be busy helping Uncle Heinz settle in.

Then she launched the startling news that Melanie and Herman’s Hermit are to have a baby! Somehow I never expected that. Maria said that in Germany mothers get a year off work on full pay after giving birth, but because Melanie is so important (second in command), she will not take this year off – she will go into work two days a week to start with, and then return to full time working after one or two months, not sure which. I asked who was going to look after the baby Hermit, and she said,

“Me, but I am not going to do it every day”. Well, blow me down, the woman is 76 and cracked up to be not well at all, surviving on pills only. A bit of a tall order, though obviously she is going to love having this new life to cherish.

“What about the other grandparents, where are they?” I asked.

“They are both dead, a long time ago,” she said. So he really is a Hermit. I reflected that with Maria’s unfortunate family history – Wolf’s father (her first husband) dropping dead at 39 and his baby sister scalded to death at 2, not to mention his own blindness at age 8, and being sent away to school – Melanie had not done the best thing for future genes by marrying into another cursed family – see Oscar Wilde – *to lose one parent is unfortunate, to lose two looks like carelessness*.

A social event was arranged for that evening - something I hate, but I had to put a good face on it. Joshe belongs to some sort of men’s club - they have these ‘fraternities’ here - they call them ‘*Verein*’ - and everybody seems to belong to at least one of them. The Germans form very strong bonds - Wolfram used to get invitations from his classmates to join them for important anniversaries - like when they were all 35 or 40. But he was in England then, so did not go.

Joshe’s club were holding a weekend Fest at the local lake - the one where Wolf and I went swimming in ’95 with Louise, the reporter from the

²⁵ *redcurrants*

Real Holiday Show. I had been trying to find that lake again and could not, so that was a happy chance. This being Friday night, the Fest had not yet got going, Joshe was helping get everything ready, and Melanie and Herman's Hermit were to pick us up and take us there.

I did not recognise the lake, and told Maria I did not think it was the same one, but she said that Wolf and I would have been at the other side. Since that side was more spacious and open, I could not understand why they were crammed into this extremely small space. No doubt they had their reasons.



At the Lake

Joshe often talks about fishing, and now he told me this is his favourite spot. He gets a dreamy, faraway look on his face and I can tell it means a great deal to him. He tells me how much he loves it here and how big the fishes are that he catches.

There was food being got ready, and drink. We sat at a table and I prepared for an evening of total boredom. Which was entirely fulfilled.

When I congratulated Melanie on the forthcoming sprog she had a different take on the story.

"We have built a house last year, we need the money to pay for it." Surprised at that, I asked,

"So, did you plan this baby?" Looking at Hermit, she gave a somewhat doubtful,

"Ye-es".

"Well, did you or didn't you?" I asked. The answer was complicated.

"The doctor said it would take two to three years to become pregnant." Biting back the urge to ask if he thought it would take them that long to find out how to do it properly, I asked for further information.



Melanie and Herman's Hermit

"Because of the headaches," she said. Well, I know that headaches do prevent women having sex, but this was not the full answer. Getting anything out of her was like pulling teeth – slowly.

"?"

"Because of the medication."

"The medication stopped you being pregnant?"

"Yes. I had to stop taking it, and then I had to wait for my body to return to normal." - What, for *headaches*? What the hell was she on?

"Was it migraine?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know there is a plant you can eat for that?"²⁶

"Yes, but I cannot eat it due to all my other problems with my stomach."

"Perhaps the baby will clear out your system," I said, "it often does."

"I do not think so," she said.

At that I lost interest in her and her problems.

Somehow I do not see her as a mother. And Maria certainly cannot cope with full time child care. Especially such a young child. I am sure there are excellent kindergartens where one can dump offspring, Germany is very enlightened and there will probably be one in her workplace. But again, as I have so often reflected, why do people have children if they do not want to care for them? Those first years are so precious. Since people no longer

²⁶ *feverfew*

have children in the hope that they will provide an insurance for their old age, I am at a loss to understand why they do it at all. Maybe a child is another 'must have' on the current list of acquisitions. Like, put it on your Christmas list and maybe Santa will bring one.

When I gave Maria the glad tidings that I was leaving Wednesday, there seemed to be an argument about it. While it was flattering that she wanted me to stay longer, I was already doubtful of how much Maria I could take. It started that first morning when I walked outside with bare feet:

"That is not allowed," she said, "the feet will dirty the bed." I assumed, with her cleanliness record (you could eat off the garage floor) that her courtyard would be as clean as her house, and wasn't she going to wash the bedlinen after I left? She was not going to keep it until next year, or the next visitor, was she? But for the sake of peace, I got the shoes which I had left on the stairs. They were the sneakers I wore for cycling.

"These will not do. What is your size?" she fussed, diving into the cellar and rummaging through piles of shoes no doubt left by previous generations, since she throws nothing away.

"Oh stopit, I have other shoes," I said, going upstairs to fetch the crocs, thinking - *what the hell difference does it make what shoes I wear?* She was so annoying, but I knew that already and was prepared for it. I appreciated her kindness in having me stay, and did not want to upset her, though this was unavoidable, given her nature and mine.

The argument over leaving appeared to be, as far as I could make out, something along these lines:

"You must stay longer - someone or other (surviving sister of the cursed Herman) is coming on Saturday, and you can leave on Sunday."

I had understood I was not welcome after Friday, so this was a new twist. The conversation was banged out at top speed, I was not given an opportunity to reply, and I was worried that in her mind it was now settled that I stay till Sunday. I thought my patience reserves would be stretched to survive even four days, however well intentioned both she and I were. I decided merely to wait a while, and then reintroduce the topic.

I had already texted Erika that I would come Wednesday, and as far as I was concerned that was when I would leave. I told Erika there had been an argument but I did not know what it was about, and that I would try again later.

One thing Maria said made me feel better. She told me that 'Jennet' is coming next month, with Jamie²⁷ again.

"So last year was a success?" I asked. She had been dreading it - Jamie was 30 that year and she had not seen him since he was a small child.

²⁷ *Jennet and Wolfram's son*

“Yes, and he and Melanie got on like that” – two fingers stuck together. Well, that is good, they are of an age, Melanie is 34. So if Jenet could expect a yearly visit, and she did less time with Wolf than I did, I do not feel so bad about imposing. Of course she has the grandson, which gives her a distinct advantage, but my contribution cannot be overlooked.

Before I had time to broach the subject of my departure again, a text arrived from Erika,

We are delighted that you will come on Wednesday, and we have arranged a special welcome for you on Thursday morning, at Irma's.

This is the minor civic reception that they told me about last year - not the full blown thing you get after 25 years – in the Rathouse²⁸, with the Mayoral chain an' all – where you are presented with a cuckoo clock – but a minor jubilee for a five-year record. I decided to keep this text and read it out as a closing argument.

By the time we got to Joshe's lakeside 'do' I was desperately hungry. I had no breakfast on the camp site, and only a meagre cup of coffee and croissant on arrival at Maria's. She explained that the rules of engagement had changed since last year. Joshe was on short time, in preparation for his retirement, and now came home at 3.30, when a meal would be prepared. She gave me to understand that if I was not on the premises at 3.30, no food would be available after this.

“The kitchen closes,” she said with a laugh. Apparently it does not matter what time your man returns, that is the hour you put a meal on the table. Being the middle of the afternoon, you would think it more sensible to have a cool drink and a lie down, eating later. But no doubt this is one of the things her mother instilled into her, and would beat her for not doing, which rule was still being enforced from beyond the grave.

When it came, it was light, a kind of Hawaian toast that hardly touched the sides. I did not like to say I was hungry and ask for more, and no one explained that there would be food later. Perhaps I should have remembered that ALL German occasions include food.

There was indeed food, more than enough, and very good it was. Attempts were made to shove a lot of drink down me, which I repelled. One drink was enough for me but they insisted I have a second, and while we waited for Joshe to come back from the bar, Melanie suddenly jumped up saying,

“I must have a word with Papa”, then returned with the drinks, looking smug and saying, “Papa says this is the English drink, it has more alcohol.” When she turned away I swapped it with Hermit's drink. If anyone was going to get spiked it would be him not me. He drank it later, and I only drank a small amount of mine, which was remarked on, but I reminded them I had not wanted it in the first place. Perhaps they will not be

²⁸ *Town Hall*

so stupid next time. We returned home with nothing sorted re leaving. It requires quite a bit of energy to take Maria on, and I was not up to it yet.

The bed was still as bad as last year, impossible to sleep on. Knowing this, I had insisted on bringing in the sleeping mat, passing it off as 'necessary for my back'. Even so, I have backache this morning. I may put it on the floor tonight. Or it could have been the stress of sitting at the 'do' – when I am not happy it shows in my posture and then I get pain next day.

Day 13 - the Mediaeval Fair - Saturday 2 July

I settled the leaving question. I read out the text and there was no further argument. I thought of leaving the bike and camping gear, calling in on the way back to pick them up, but it was not offered and I did not want to ask. I do believe she said something today about 'come back if you want', but I could not be sure, and when I said I had not understood, I got a different answer altogether, so didn't pursue it. It means hauling all that stuff up to Neukirch, and back, but it does mean I can get out on the bike a bit while there.

I spent most of the day in my room writing, and having a lie down. Joshe was home all day, being Saturday, so Maria cooked at lunchtime, and Joshe told me how hard things are in Germany now. I sympathised, saying it was not right that the Germans should have to bail out the whole of Europe. He agreed - I know they both felt very bitter about having to pull up the Eastern half of Germany to their own level - at that time an extra tax was levied on everyone to pay for it. They paid double tax one year and normal tax the next, and married couples could arrange it so that they paid the tax in alternate years, to spread the load. And they have been paid for it in increasing crime and a general breakdown in law and order, which the West Germans always respected and those from the East do not. And now they have the burden of Europe. They are such good people and it really is not fair. Joshe told me that now he has to work one month without pay in every year to pay for this new funding.

The lunch was good, spaghetti bolognese, such a relief to eat beef instead of the eternal pig! - and about 3pm I felt like taking a ride.

Melanie had told me there was a mediaeval fair at Kenzingen, so I made my way there.

The ride out did not seem as pleasant as I remembered. I thought the way through fields had been longer, but I was pleased to see I am getting the feel of the local geography, and can more or less navigate my way from one place to another without a map.

As I approached the main gateway to the town I saw the way was shut to traffic, but they were letting bikes in. I had to pay 3 euro which is not at all bad. It was not that brilliant, lots of them had got into mediaeval costume, but it did not feel right to take pictures - they did not appear as though they were putting on a show, more as though they were doing

something terribly important, and that photographing them was a form of frivolity. I took a few pictures, but not as many as I would have liked.

I wandered round for a bit, then heard an astonishing noise as down the street came a pair of mediaeval players, one with a kind of early bagpipe, playing haunting music - a primeval wail that hit me in the pit of the stomach and felt as though it were imprinted in my blood. The bagpipe player looked as though he had stepped out of mediaeval times and into ours – his face drew me like a long-forgotten memory, his music enthralled me – I wanted to dance, to dance with him and for him. I

parked the bike on the pavement edge. I took off my hat and slung it down my back. I tapped my feet, I jiggled from one leg to another, and I could no longer resist, I swung into the empty space around the players.



... an astonishing noise!



Mediaeval Fair

I knew what to do, what the right steps were, and if they were not, I did them anyway. The bagpipe player's eyes locked on mine, and his body acknowledged me, he leaned towards me, we swayed in a duet. I left with the sight of his face before me, it would not leave me. Did I fall in love without knowing it? Have I encountered another of my past lives? I want to find him again, look at him again and see what it is I recognize. I will return to Kenzingen, try and track him down. I cannot let this pass without making some effort to find him.

Back at the inlaws, watched tv with them in the evening, some crazy candid camera type show. One was called 'Hippies on Tour'. A pair of old hippies, one a cross between John Lennon and Boris Becker – the Lennon hair and glasses, Becker headband, and a woman in flowing skirts, were lying in wait at a petrol station. They had an old caravan with them, and when a car pulled up and the owners went inside the shop, the hippies pulled their van over and hitched it to the back of the car. They then shot inside the van, and soon smoke was pouring out of the door and windows. The man and his wife returned, thinking "what the hell is going on," looking round and seeing no one, they bang on the door of the caravan, whereupon the hippies fall out looking totally stoned, and start doing the love and peace thing. Ignoring the protestations, they get out some maps and ask to be taken to where they want to go! This is repeated a few times with different victims, then when they are hooking up the van again, they see another car approaching and take off running. Apparently they have stolen the van in the first place, and this is the car they took it from. So, the new victims come out of the shop – two Russian women – see the van hitched up. While they are scratching their heads over it, the owners of the van descend on them, screaming at the tops of their voices that they have stolen their van. And so on.

The punchline, and name of the programme, is *Verstehen Sie Spass?* It means 'do you understand fun?' At which point the victim 'gets' it and dissolves into laughter. Or not, depending how annoyed he is by then.

Day 14 - we visit the Fest - Sunday 3 July

Both Melanie and Herman's Hermit caught colds through sitting out at the lake on Friday night. How very delicately balanced these Germans must be. Maybe if they weren't on so much bloody medication they could cope better. Joshe and Maria go on about work all the time. And money. What things cost, how many taxes they have to pay. I asked them what was the point of it all. You work, you pay taxes, then you die. I could not see what kind of achievement they thought this was. They seem to have had this 'work' thing drummed into them, to have made 'work' into a god. They keep going on about Melanie having bought this house, how last year she was paying rent and now she pays even more out but it is hers. Then there is the question that she cannot afford to stop working, so she will have no

family life. And Joshe told me that if a person loses their job and has to apply for assistance, they must first sell their house and live on that, before bothering the state. So I really cannot see where owning a house is going to get anyone. I tried to have a conversation with Maria about the life Wolfram and I had together, and when I said that I decided not to go to work, but to stay home and keep him company and make us a good life together – she shook her head and said,

“There is no good life without work,” and she had that closed off look she gets, as though that is somewhere she is not prepared to go - it is against her dogma, her creed, and she is not going to accept that it is possible. What is the point. I was not going to argue with her.

As well as being beyond the pale for being ‘*arbeitslos*’ - unemployed - she does not like the fact that I travel by bike and sleep in a tent.

“I would never do such a thing,” she says.

“Neither would I, Maria,” I said, “if I had the money to stay in hotels. But I do not, and so this is what I must do.”

“You are like a gypsy,” she says. In her terms, this is about the worst thing you can say about a person. Irritated beyond measure, I dealt the blow that would put the final nail in the coffin of my reputation -

“Well, my family *were* gypsies long ago,” I said. Topic closed.

I went to morning service at the village church, simply to sit and have the experience. I understood nothing, but then it is the same when I go to the Catholic church in England. I go for the atmosphere. After lunch I was told to go and sleep, a walk being planned for 3 o’clock. The ‘walk’ only went as far as the lake where the ‘group’ were hanging out for the weekend. Maria and Joshe knew everyone and of course it was nice for them to sit all afternoon and talk with their friends, but they do not give any thought to how I feel about all this. Bored, but not so bored as I would once have been. I have learned to relax in the face of the inevitable, and anyway there is nothing I want to do here, now that Wolfram is not here. The place seems empty without him. And the guides have told me I am not coming back, so it is finished for me.

It was the middle of the afternoon and I did not wish to drink, so asked for water. Joshe kept on asking me if I wanted a beer and I kept on saying no. After a while I asked if they would mind if I walked around the lake a little. Maria (who knows everything) said she did not think it was possible. I went anyway. When I got back, Joshe asked me if I went through the gate that led into a little bay - I said I did, and he said that was where he sat to fish.

I poured the rest of my water, and one of Maria’s friends asked me if I would like some of her apple juice in it.

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

“Would you like a cognac in it?” asked Joshe, and I said - emphatically - no. But that did not stop him. He went to the bar and came back

with four glasses of something dark brown. He put one in front of me, saying it was coke, but there was the same performance of making sure I got one particular one, so I knew whatever was in the others there was a double dose in mine.

"No thank you, Joshe, I don't want it," I said. Both he and Maria looked shocked.

"It is coke!" says Maria.

"I don't want it," I repeat.

"It is coke with schnapps," says Joshe. Maria insists on a toast as she rather stupidly thinks I will have to drink it then. I raise the glass in the air and then put it back on the table without drinking. Maria raises another toast and I do the same thing. Enraged, she shouts,

"Drink it! Drink it!" pushing her face into mine across the table.

"I have already said no," I say calmly. Nothing annoys me more than people who want to get you drunk. What on earth is the point? They accept defeat and have to share the extra drink between them. Some people take longer to get it in their heads than others.

To be fair, they don't harbour a grudge, and on the way back only made one reference to it.

"Alcohol macht mich krank," I tell them, "ich kann nur ein bisschen trinken." - *alcohol makes me ill. I can only drink a little.* Whose business is it anyway? What does it profit them to force drink on a person who does not want it?

On the way there Joshe had spotted some plum trees, and was determined that we should fill our pockets on the way back - he had even begged some paper bags from the 'Fest' - so the day did not end badly after all. I had been looking for fruit the day before in Kenzingen. My bowels were suffering from the all-meat, no-veg, no-fruit diet at Maria's and desperately needed help. So I had asked the Angels to find me some. There had been none at Kenzingen, but now they came up trumps.

He was talking about fishing again, and I found myself wondering when he actually *went* fishing - he got up early for the long drive to work, came home, ate, then sat in the courtyard, perhaps having a beer, watered the garden and went to bed early. Perhaps he did it at weekends. I asked him.

"I don't actually *go* fishing", he said, "I don't have the time - ah - but if I did!" and there was that look again!

As we walked back into the village, our pockets and bags bulging with plums, we came to one of the small back roads that cut through the countryside. Joshe made a great play of advising us to be careful crossing the road -

"You are two old ladies," he said, "and these cars come very fast. Ah, but the man who knocks down *Maria!* - he gets ten per cent! Yes! ten per cent I give him *willingly!*" and he threw back his head with a hearty laugh,

missing the look of pure poison Maria shot him. He has a lot to put up with, she frequently shouts at him and calls him "*Auslander*" - foreigner - telling him he has no rights in her country - but it is at times like these that he gets his own back. He knows how much she would hate to die and leave him the house and money!

Day 15 - a visit to Melanie - Monday 4 July

The previous evening, Joshe explained to me all the merits of Europa Park, which I had not known, assuming it to be another Blackpool (which it is, with knobs on). He held forth upon its wonders, there is everything you want there, every country of Europe represented, it seems, except for Britain - strangely. Surely they do not think that we have no culture? What about red buses and telephone boxes and policemen? We could always send them a few dirty back streets.

As a special treat an evening expedition was planned today so that I could view the delights, but from outside, since it costs 36 quid *each* to get in. After a round tour of the site, with magnificent views of the roller coaster from all sides, Joshe parked up and we went in. There is some relaxation in an evening, and we could go into parts of it, specifically to places where they could take our money. We went to a hotel called the Coliseum which greatly amused Joshe, who kept asking did it not feel like we were in Rome?



Coliseum - Europa Park

He is an uncomplicated man, and easily amused, but he is genuinely kind and I can truly say he has never annoyed me. I enjoyed the artistic water display taking place in front of our eyes, with jets programmed to a pattern, and half-naked kids running in and out. I planned that when they

reached their height again I would run in there myself, and get Joshe to take a photo, but we left before that happened.

Maria talked a lot about Melanie's house, which I had been supposed to view the previous year, but it had not happened, and I strongly suspected this year would be the same, however what a surprise when, on the way to Europa Park we called there. I had been in the habit of enquiring daily after her health – that morning her cold had taken a turn for the worse, and the story was she was ordered to bed by her doctor. However, when we arrived she was out in the garden looking no worse, and not a sign of a cold. She has been pretty po-faced with me, but I put on a great big smile and said how absolutely wonderful it looked. She even cracked a bit of a smile herself, and offered to show me round.

It was certainly on a grand scale, compared to the Siedlungstrasse house, which is cramped, though that has probably more to do with Maria's habit of throwing nothing away – there is scarcely room to move. There was a mature garden round Melanie's property, which surprised me, since she said they built it last year. I asked where she got the mature trees, and she said they were already there. In the end it turned out that when speaking English to me she had used the word 'built' where she meant 'bought' - the German word for built is 'gebaut' so that is a logical mistake - similar sound.

She unbent a little as she showed me round, probably because I was liberal with my praise and pleasure. It is a lovely house but sparse, with bare floors and minimal furniture. Still, it is beautifully finished and they have spent a lot of money on it, and put in a lot of their own time, and that of friends. I asked if she cleaned her shower after every use, like her mother, and she said she had better things to do, which I was glad to hear. She has not had an easy life with a mother like Maria, she deserves some happiness, poor thing – her and the cursed Hermit.

Ah but, to the main point of the day. I had to find out more about the bagpipe player and so I went to Kenzingen, via Herbolzheim where I wanted to call in a bank and see if I could get money over the counter without paying £5 for the privilege. I had drawn money in Ettenheim and been charged for '*use of the machine*'. The answer was, I would still have to pay. The German banks must be stinging the foreigners (and Germans who do not belong to their specific bank) to make up for having to contribute millions to bail out other European countries. I was not pleased to be charged £5 to draw money, on top of the £3 in every hundred I have to pay to my own bank - and the exchange rate never works in our favour. I drew £200 in Ettenheim and paid £11 in fees. I decided to wait until I really needed money.

So, after that annoying start, I went on to Kenzingen, after a sandwich in the park - Maria had gone on strike over breakfasts after I asked if she had any Muesli. When I went down the table was bare of the usual meat

and cheese, and she said that I would have to go get my own muesli as she did not know what kind I wanted, but that I could have toast if I wanted. I was certainly not going to the shop before breakfast, so I had toast and two cups of coffee and thank god did not have to wade through the meat and cheese.

I reached Kenzingen shortly after 12, reflecting that the information centre would probably be shut, like most other things, until 2pm. It was open, but the person on duty said he did not have the full information, the other person would be back at 2, so I hung out in the churchyard round the corner.

My story was to be that I wanted to know the name of the group, and if they had an internet site, because I wanted to buy some of their music. While waiting I studied the festival programme, which had a map of the streets, and a list of the different times and places where various groups were playing.

I went back at 2pm, and a woman in the office said she was pretty sure it was Lasterlust, and wrote a telephone number on the programme, saying this was the woman who had booked all the groups and she would know more. I did not think my German equal to a telephone call of such a delicate nature, but I kept the number. When I can get on the internet I can go and find as much out for myself. I will also check U-tube and may even find myself there, dancing. I bet it was worth filming, though I probably looked a right sight - now I want to get thin so I can dance without getting breathless. And I am going to track this man down. No doubt that would be called stalking, instead of simply being interested in someone, but now we can't do anything without being labelled, and, if possible, criminalised.

I got back to find the inlaws relaxing in the yard, and went to sit with them. I could not help grinning whenever I thought of Lasterlust, and, seeing Maria looking suspiciously at me, told her:

"Maria, I have fallen in love!" I showed her the pictures of Lasterlust which I had loaded into the netbook.

"He is old," said Joshe, "about fifty."

"That is good," I said, "if he is too young he will not want me."

"He is goodlooking," said Maria, "what is his name?" When I told her, she laughed. "Do you know the meaning of that?" she asked.

"No?"

"It is love for women of the streets," she said.

"Oh good."

Tomorrow is my last day here and I am going up the Berg (mountain) if it does not rain. According to Joshe, it will. One more day - I can do it!

My friend Alan rang yesterday - I was sitting in the yard and sent a text to his home phone, giving him Maria's number - and the next moment there was Maria at the door saying,

“Telephone call for you – and it is a man”. Detecting suspicion, if not disapproval, in her voice, I said to her afterwards,

“He is an old friend, and he loves men, not women.” To this there was absolutely no reply, meaning I take it that she did not believe me.

I told Alan about the two gays on the train –

“Were they completely ‘out’ then,” he asked, and when I told him my deduction – the touching of the hands, the ‘out for an afternoon’s shopping’ – what red-blooded male goes shopping with no woman to compel him? – and then they were going to a musical – he roared with laughter. I told him that if they email I am going to invite them over – he was thrilled! It would be a good cross-cultural exchange, as well as a bridge over the age divide.

Day 16 - I go up the Berg - Tuesday 5 July

I never liked holidays until I took up serious cycling and then it was brilliant as I always had something to do, a task or a challenge, something different every day. And this was supposed to be a Grand Tour of the Rhine and has turned into something else. Ah well, the I Ching says everything turns into its opposite. Like me, the opposite of the slim, beautiful girl I once was. But I don’t let it bother me. When I had my glasses on I noticed that the black patches on my calves are not all bruises, some are broken or varicose veins – I looked at them and said, oh well, you are seventy. What do you expect? People have to take you as you are, and if by the time you are seventy you have not become more than the sum of your parts, you have failed somewhere. We are supposed to develop as human beings, or immortal souls, where the body has no place at all. Unfortunately while still being on earth and moving amongst humans, one is judged on one’s appearance, and I must do something about the weight and shape. It is okay to be old, but not okay to be fat.

Think the stay here will have been quite long enough, though it is doing my German good – I am aware that I am speaking with a local accent, and wonder if it will be noticed in Neukirch. Last night there was a row over the kettle – thank God she at last got a kettle, last year she said she had one in the cellar but that it was too big, so we had to wait 20 mins for a pan of water to boil on the stove if I wanted tea. However she caught me switching said kettle off when it reached boiling point and I was told I must not do that, I must leave it as it is ‘*automatisch*’. I said,

“Yes, I know it is *automatisch*, but it does not matter, you can switch it off.” She shouted that it did, and as she looked about to go screaming bonkers, I had to comply and let the bloody thing boil its head off every time.

I also upset Joshe by opening the window in the back of the car. They both chuntered on about how they have ‘*klimat*’ and I must not open the window. They might have bloody climate but there is no substitute for real air! And with the sun beating down on the windows it was intolerable. It

might have been alright in the front where they were, in the back I was frying. So, working on the Wolfram principle - *you don't want to come back do you* - I opened it and sat there in the breeze. By this time I had had enough of them.

Also got several penalty points from Joshe for opening the door and *touching* – touching mind you, that's all it was, the neighbouring car with our car door. I noticed that when we returned to the car he grabbed the door and held it for me to get in. They are so paranoid about everything. No wonder Wolfram said he could not live in Germany because 'there were too many rules'. There are rules about everything. You must wear shoes in the house but not any shoes, they have to be a certain kind. You must shut every door you go through. The *pièce de resistance* was my rising at an unaccustomed time. I was awake from 6 and did not go back to sleep, so decided to get up at 7 and have a shower. Consequently I was downstairs at 7.30. I realised my mistake at once as there was no breakfast laid. Oh well I thought, I will go sit outside. No, the door was locked and had no key in it. Then comes Maria, bustling downstairs –

"What is going on here? Why are you up so early? Nothing is ready – I have not been to the bakers." Well, at least I saved her that task, if she has been going to the bakers every morning just for me. I apologised, asking if she had been asleep.

"I went to bed at quarter to ten," she said.

"No, I meant now, were you asleep now?"

"Of course not! I get up at five, I am not asleep!" So what is the fuss about, I wonder? Just the break in routine I suppose, which they cannot bear.

"What time do you get up in England?" she asked. That's a difficult one.

"Depends what time I go to bed," I said. "Sometimes I am up writing till 3 in the morning, then I sleep til 10. Other times I go to bed at 10, get up at 7".

"This would not do for me," she said, "if I went to bed at 3 I would still have to get up at 5." Ah well, have it your own way dear! So it looks like an early packing session would not be possible tomorrow. Hm, what to do? I could pack in the bedroom. That would be simplest.

The programme for today was to go up the Berg, something of a tradition with me and Wolf, and I was looking forward to it. I was right to limit the stay in Ringsheim to four days – more than that and I would be off my head.

So I set off up the Berg. I have learned to set off early, before the heat gets going, it is too much in the blast of midday. The paths are always changing because of the ongoing work – they use the old mine shafts for recycling - and you have to find your way anew every year. The chapel is still there – *at least they cannot move that* – I thought, and then came the

answer – *oh yes they can!* They would be quite capable of lifting it, every stone, doing some work, then replacing it. The Germans really cannot leave anything alone, they must be always improving.



the Chapel in the Forest

I have not seen or heard anything of Wolfram this trip, and I wondered if he would put in an appearance today. When I went in the chapel it was full of spirit energy and I spent a good deal of time there, as it was very strong. When I left, and was closing the door, a voice said, *if you go back in now you will see Wolfram*. I knew exactly where he was standing, on the left of the altar, and the feeling of his presence was overwhelming, but different. He has a different energy now, as though from a higher plane, and it is thinner, rarer, lighter – there is no way of seeing him at all, he has gone beyond our range of vision. But I could hold and touch this very rare essence of him, and even could kiss him on the mouth, though there was no physical feeling to it. We stood there by the altar and I told him how much I love him and that I will love him for ever. He asked me to sit with him and we held hands quietly together.

I made my way to the *Aussichtsturm* (viewing tower) where there is a small restaurant. I was dying of hunger and had to eat something, though ever mindful of the meal that must be eaten at 3.30. I ordered a sausage and some tea, and then made my way slowly down the berg, arriving *Chez Dolensek* at 2.15.



How's that for a Sausage?

The kitchen door was locked, as it increasingly is these days. This never used to be the case, but now she says she feels the cold. Cold! It is like a bloody sauna. She insists if the door is locked I must ring the special bell they have installed inside the gate, but I

had no intention of waking the woman if she was taking a much-needed siesta. Shunning the courtyard, surrounded by high walls on three sides and extremely hot, I took a chair into the garden, where they never go, except to tend their ‘exhibition crops’ – food they grow *for interest only*. There was shade at the back of the garage and shed, and I dozed off and on until 3.15 when I thought she must be up as she had to cook. I put the chair back, then, noting the door was still locked, went towards the gate to ring the bell. At which she came darting out of the kitchen, rushing up the path ahead of me, shouting,

“You did not ring the bell, you turned the light on!” Not knowing what on earth she was on about, I asked her what light? Rushing to the thing by the gate, she jabbed her finger at two bell pushes. “Here,” she shouted, “Here is the ‘*klengel*’ (bell) – you did not push that, you pushed here instead and turned the light on!”

“That was not me,” I said, “I touched nothing.” Of course she cannot bear to be corrected,

“Yes, yes, see, the light is on!” I reached out a finger and switched it off. “No, leave it on! It is ‘*automatisch*’!” she screeched, turning it on again, “it must stay on now.”

Although I continued to insist that I had turned nothing on, and had been asleep in the back garden, she returned to the subject several times during the rest of my stay (mercifully short) insisting that I had pressed the wrong button. I refrained from commenting that, in the total scheme of things and the current state of the universe, it was hardly worth discussing. She would have considered that a victory for her and admission of defeat on my part. No wonder ‘Jennet’ does not stay there. Total bonkerdom sets in 48 hours after arrival.

To cap it all, for dinner we had exactly the same sausage I had eaten on the Berg! I could hardly face eating more of it – not that it is not nice, but one sausage in a day, especially the size they are, is quite enough! She had also cooked some slices of *speck* – the extremely fat bacon they usually eat raw. There was much made of *see, how the fat has all come out of the bacon* – apparently to claim that it was now fat-free. Again, I did not bother to argue the point – that stuff is never going to be fat-free! Honestly, the fuss they make about cholesterol – I repeated my mantra that I do not believe in it – and then look at their diet! It consists almost solely of pigmeat and cheese. They hardly eat anything else. To add insult to injury, she showed me a large plastic bowl – which I had to descend into the cellar to view – of extremely fine green beans, which she informed me she had ‘forgotten to cook’ and must now freeze tomorrow. How I would have loved a large bowl of those beans, with salt, black pepper and butter, and nothing else! Instead I had to sit and eat bloody sausage and fat bacon, accompanied by potato salad which she pointed out ‘is extremely good in hot weather’! Oh yeah! Not really.

There was the usual untouched bowl of fruit on the side and I plucked up courage to ask if I could eat one.

"Eat all you like," she said, "I never touch it." Mind you, I have to say they all look extremely well on this diet, and none of them are fat – Dr Atkins must have had something after all.

It always amuses me that Maria gets out the champagne when I am *leaving* – not when I arrive! Shows what she thinks of me.

The next morning I was up at 7 and packed and breakfasted and ready for off at 9. I enquired about Maria's Freiburg trip.

"I am not now going," she said, "It was cancelled because of your visit." She had a look of smug satisfaction as she delivered this piece of information - *look how I have cancelled my trip for you and now you are leaving* - sort of thing.

I took a walk round the 'willage' as Melanie calls it, buying a card and a gift for Maria at the shop, as last year. I did not see Siegelinde²⁹ either that day or the previous one, when I had called in to buy Muesli. I hope she has not also gone to the Great Beyond.

Maria mentioned that a schoolfriend of Wolfram's had contacted her.

"She went out with him when they were teenagers," she said, "she saw on the internet that he was dead and rang me to find out if it was true."

"I think this same woman contacted me," I said, "she saw it on my website."

"Yes," said Maria with a sour face, "we do not do that kind of thing in Germany."

So glad I am not coming back here again! She is never pleased with anything, not even with the fact that her son is honoured by having his own dedicated website, something given to very few people, in England or Germany. But then she was always the same. When we arrived in 1995, she did not deck the streets with flags or ring up the local newspaper with the astonishing news that her son, brought up in a blind school, had *ridden a bicycle* (solo, not tandem) from England to Germany - no - she said *you live like gypsies*.

Mind you, if they were anything like our local newspaper, it would be a waste of time. Before we left on our momentous trip, I was in the Nelson Leader office, and that week's front page headline was *Blind Man Rides from Huddersfield to Nelson on back of tandem!* shock horror! Not much of an achievement, unless he had no legs.

"Blimey, what are they going to make of Wolfram when he rides to Germany," I thought. And what did they make of it? A small paragraph on page 24 - "*Thomés on holiday trip*". I could not let this pass and steamed into the office to point out the discrepancy in the two articles. I demanded an explanation of their poor treatment of us -

²⁹ close schoolfriend of Wolfram, both named for Wagnerian heroes

“We got better coverage in the *Spenborough Guardian*,” I said, “and I left there when I was sixteen!”

“Well you see,” was the lame reply, “we didn’t know if it was *legal!*”

“Whether what was legal?”

“For a blind man to ride a bike.”

Day 17 - I leave for Neukirch - Wednesday 6 July

Erika had worked out my train times. When I texted her that *I may come earlier*, I received the reply *you must not come earlier, but you must not come later as Max must not wait*. I had no intention of hanging around in Ringsheim any longer than necessary, so, contrary to instructions, got an earlier train, texting Erika en route to say I would arrive early, but not to worry, I would wait. There is a pleasant little café on the station and of course the forest air, when you are just arrived, is superb, and it was a pleasure to sit and drink tea. Besides, I thought it would be a good opportunity to have a trial run at dismantling the front rack, as this will have to come off when I board the bus. I was glad I had this practice run, as Trevor³⁰ had attached the bike computer to the rack, which meant I had to remove it or the rack would not have left the bike. Then I turned the head-set. So now I know I am competent in both these tasks and need have no fear at the pickup point in Beaune.

Thanks to my extensive German practice I had no problem conversing with Max, which I have found a problem in the past - partly because I don’t know very much about him, Irma does all the talking.

I was tired when I arrived, and Irma was her usual unstoppable self, dragging me in the office to consult the timetable Erika had given her, demanding to know what had gone wrong with the trains. Apparently, once given a timetable, no German would dream of deviating from it.



Erika's delightful creation

Irma and her Max have a little wooden hut in the front garden, and tea was laid there. Irma produced a large and delicious apple cake, and two slices of this were down me when Erika arrived bearing an enormous Swiss roll, covered in strawberries and cream, and stuffed with cream and home made jam! Though I now regretted the second slice of apple cake, there

³⁰ the bike mechanic in Nelson



Irma and Max in the Tea Hut



Max and Max - Zweimax

was no way I was going to resist Erika's delightful creation.

I was dropping with tiredness but reflected that they had all got together in order to welcome me, and I could hardly retire to my bed. Then Erika's Max came over and the jollies began again. When things seemed to be dying down, I asked to be excused so I could have a shower. Irma had gone into the house, and was seen to be preparing a buffet for our guests, so I was requested to come back after the shower and eat with them.

Eventually I escaped to bed, but after lying down for a short time was fully awake again. I think it is the air, or perhaps the excitement of being here. Whatever it was, it kept me up until 12.30am, when I went to sleep.

I am informed that tomorrow the whole English class, plus other interested parties, will come to breakfast, to 'honour' me for my 5th time in Neukirch. I pointed out that it was more than 5, at least 6. There was the first time with Wolfram, when Josef and Maria drove us up in the car, then we came again and stayed in one of the *Tanne* flats, and on a third occasion we misunderstood the booking, and had to leave 3 days early as Max and Erika were due to go away themselves. We spent those 3 days in Hornberg, a town whose sinister atmosphere struck me the minute we got off the train. Most unnerving, not to say disappointing, as I had wanted to visit it for some time, the romantic view of the Castle as we passed through on the train having always intrigued me. I am convinced there must have been some nasty goings on there in the past, to leave such a bad atmosphere, though I never found anything on the internet.

So that was three times at least with Wolf. Then I came in 2007 with Diana, and on my own last year. That makes five. No argument against this was put forward. It seems to me though, that I have been coming here all my life, and cannot believe it was so few! I suppose a check with the photographic record would confirm it. Speaking of which, I again asked Maria about photos, and she said they are in the cellar and she cannot find them. I can well believe that, but considering I asked about them last year, she might have made the effort.

I still have not got on the trail of Lasterlust. Tomorrow I will ask Irma if we can connect my netbook to the internet.

Day 18 - First Day in Neukirch - Thursday 7 July

The English class does not bother me, and now that I have met the ladies a few times, I look forward to renewing their acquaintance. But to be presented with them at half past eight in the morning, when I am dying for breakfast, is a bit difficult. Also, I am expected to be bright and entertaining, and they are looking forward to this!

I notice to my horror that there is no food on the elaborately laid tables, but cannot believe that Irma would leave me without breakfast. There



festive table



The ladies gather

are only coffee cups, and a mini Twix next to each one. A hopeful sign is the paper napkins. Then Irma starts bringing in the food. But Kristin (the English teacher) invites me to begin talking! My mouth is too dry to do anything, so I suggest we eat some of Irma's lovely food first!

"Ah, you are hungry," says Kristin, who does not miss a trick. I did not recognise her when she came in, and thought she was someone I had not met before. She looks so much different from last year, when she seemed to have aged very much. Now I was greeted by this tall, upstanding, confident woman who radiated health and wellbeing. Though she bore

only a slight resemblance to the Kristin of last year, I eventually realised it was she. Remarking on this later to Irma, she said that last year Kristin had many problems, and now she had ‘some relief’ from them.³¹

So we are allowed to eat, and when we all feel better I give them a brief rundown (with many interruptions and side excursions) of the progress I made, and then turn to the subject of the Angels, and the experiments I conducted in asking for their help. They love the stories and none of them are the least surprised, they all – to a woman – believe in angels. I am again struck by the differences in national character - I cannot imagine an audience in England being so accepting of an account of supernatural intervention - most would be squirming in their seats with embarrassment.

Kristin told a moving story of her husband, who returned from the war declaring that he no longer believed in God, after what he had seen, and wanted to hear no more about Him. This he kept up the rest of his life, and Kristin found it difficult always having to decide whether to attend church or not, as he would not go. Their children went unbaptised, as his unbelief went so far.

However, during his last days, when he was less in this world than the next, he often appeared to be talking with unseen presences, and at the end of what proved to be the final conversation, smiled and said,

“Yes, now I believe.” And then he raised both hands high in the air above his head (which really he was not able to do), smiled and said, “I am coming to you now.”

After that he fell into a coma, and three days later he departed. So, Kristin says, she knows there is something beyond death, and she is not afraid any more, except of being ill, as we all are.

I told her of the many stories I have heard, how the loved ones who have gone before gather round the person about to make their own journey, and how the person talks about visits from family and friends days or weeks before they pass. I told her about the woman in the home where my friend Christine works, who came down to the kitchen in the middle of the night, saying her husband had been sleeping on the spare bed in her room, and now he had woken up and would like a cup of tea please. And not long after, she was gone too. But good to know that our loved ones come to collect and look after us. And so it is with Wolf, he is looking after Uncle Heinz. He, Heinz and Opa will all be having a good old chinwag.

The English class occupied three hours, and before they left, Idun³², who is an artist, presented me with a little box done up in green ribbon. Inside was a ceramic Angel. She has her own studio and her speciality is making angels!

³¹ I later learned, when discussing this amazing change in her appearance with Kristin, that she is taking a product called Cellagon - this was not available in this country on my return, but I just found it now at www.envida.info/uk/

³² Idun - Norse Goddess of eternal Youth, guardian of the sacred Apples

“I wanted you to have this because of the story you told,” she said. I was both pleased and surprised, and said that telling the Angel story seemed to bring me luck, and I should tell it often if I always get a present like this!

It was now 11.30. I had planned to go shopping with Irma to Furtwangen - it is the only place to buy food since the village shop closed, but now I did not feel like going. I said I would get water and milk at the baker's, and then walk to the Hexenloch. But she insisted on supplying me with water and milk and plated me up some food leftover from the breakfast.



bench above Ochsen

I left to do my walk, but only got as far as the bench above the Ochsen, where I fell asleep. Waking up, clouds had gathered, rain was predicted, and I had not brought a raincoat, so I returned to the house, first looking at the bus timetable. There was a bus at 2.20 and I decided to lie down for a while and then get this. But I fell asleep, waking at 6.30.

Irma's Max knocked on my door about 7. Irma had gone with the rest of the women on a bus to Furtwangen and they had not known where I was, or they would have asked me to join them. He had been told to ask if I needed more food.

I spent the evening listening to Carolyn Hillyer on the headphones and typing up the notes. So all is in order – *alles in Ordnung!*

Day 20 - Ritual Visit to the Man in the Tree - Saturday 9 July

Friday's breakfast was a bit of a surprise. Nothing was on the table when I presented myself at 8am, and I was served only herb tea with bread and jam! Max is working every morning in his brother's workshop, from 8-12,

and has his breakfast earlier, so I think maybe it slipped Irma's mind, though I did wonder if I had got it wrong and was not supposed to have breakfast with them.

Today I went down at 8 and there was nothing laid, empty kitchen, no sign of anyone and the house completely silent. A bit nonplussed, and reflecting that with the German habit of punctuality, if there was nothing on the table at 8 there wasn't going to be, I returned to my room and made breakfast there. I ate muesli with yogurt, and a little later coffee and cake, so that when Irma coo-eed with her usual exuberance at 9.15 that breakfast was ready, I was completely full up.

"Oh, but you can eat a second breakfast!" I reflected that I had already done this with the coffee and cake and it would be stupid to stuff food down me that I did not need or want. I am not a human dustbin after all. But I agreed to sit with them and have a little to eat and drink and our usual morning conversation.

While we were at breakfast their son Thilo appeared, he must be about 6ft6. Max is a tall man, but looks small when Thilo walks in. On reflection I should have asked Thilo if he could connect my netbook to the internet, as Irma has no idea of the password. However I did get to do my emails on her computer this morning and was very pleased to get one from my grandson Ben. Max and Irma went shopping, I did the emails and then had a shower before meeting Erika and Max at 1 for our ritual visit to the Man in the Tree. While I was in the shower the doorbell went, but there was nothing I could do about it. One can hardly appear on a German doorstep dripping and wrapped in a towel so small that it hardly covers anything. When I came out I heard voices in the hall, peered over the stair rail and saw it was the other son Axel with his wife and baby. I explained in German where Max and Irma were and apologised for being in the 'dusch' (shower).



Man in the Tree - Balzerherrgott

Erika is lovely, such a beautiful, natural face, and a personality to match. As we push our bikes back up the track she struggles to tell me something important. I say struggle because neither her English nor my German is very good, but we understand each other the best we can. She told me she had been afraid to travel to France on her own to visit her daughter Sandra, who married a Frenchman and lives there. Usually she goes with Max, but he could not spare the time, being busy with other things. Sandra was having problems and Erika very much felt the need to see her.

“When you told me you were going to cycle all that way down the Rhine, on your own,” she said, “I said to myself, if Geraldine can do this, I can go to France on a train! And I did. It was very frightening, but I did it. And it is because of you. You have great *mut* - do you know what *mut* is?” I said I did not. “It is courage, and power. I admire that. And now I have it too!” This was a lovely tribute and such a compliment.



Sausage Salad and Beer with Erika

Max did not come on this trip, he had been walking almost every day this week and said it was too hot for cycling. However we found him waiting for us on the way back and we all went to the Hirschen. Having had no lunch I asked for a sausage but they do not do it and I had to have a Wurst-salat - ‘sausage salad’ - which is neither wurst nor salat, but a pile of strips of luncheon meat covered in a vinegar dressing, with a few slices of country bread. For this privilege I paid £5. I much regretted it.

Day 21 - A walk to the Rocky Mountains - Sunday 10 July



"Rocky Mountains"

At our breakfast 'reception', Kristin invited me to take a walk in the forest with her and Pino, her dog, today. She picked me up at 10 and enquired about the various places I have been. When she mentioned Martinskapelle I said I very much liked it up there, and she asked had I seen the 'Rocky Mountains'? No I had not! These are some big rocks scattered among the trees in the forest, like the ones Wolf and I saw at Blindensee, when Max took us there one time. Kristin told me she used to take her children to play on the Rocky Mountains.

Walking in the forest was, as always, peaceful and calming, and the rocks were impressive, even bigger than the ones at Blindensee. We talked a great deal, about many things, and a lot about spirituality. Seems we are on the same wavelength. She told me when we first met she thought I must be mad, the second time she thought there was more to it than that, and this time she had decided to be my friend! For my part, I always thought her standoffish - now I knew the reason! I also thought she did not really approve of me, and had been more or less right.

After our walk we went to eat on the terrace of the Brend Turm Hotel and Kristin insisted on paying, to thank me for always coming and helping with the English class, and also for promising to meet her two other classes this year. She said I was an excellent speaker as I always spoke slowly and clearly and the class understands much of what I say.

Walking in the forest she told me she has a terror of thunderstorms - luckily the storm held off, but as we finished lunch the rain came on and we dashed to the car. It rained furiously all the way back to Furtwangen, where we bought cakes to have with coffee back at the house, where we talked about books.

Finding I had only been once to Freiburg, she said it is her favourite city and we would go the next day, and then I would see her again on Wednesday when I came to talk to the two other English classes. She has fixed it with Irma to drive me in and I do not have to be there until 10 - better than half past eight!

Kristin had a new take on the Man in the Tree story. I seem to get a new angle every year! She said that it is now believed that the statue was brought here during the Napoleonic wars with Austria, because it has been examined and found to be made of a type of metal³³ which has been traced to a certain part of Austria, where the war was fought. They think that it was looted and carried here by soldiers returning to France, and that it was left behind in the forest, leaning on the tree, and discovered by no one for a long time, as that part of the forest was not so open as it is now. German forests I know to have been very thick and deep, and this story is quite feasible. Perhaps the soldiers were attacked suddenly and had to flee, or perhaps through exhaustion and lack of food they simply could not carry it any further. It must have been heavy.

Kristin surprised me by offering to have me stay as a guest with her next year, if I could tear myself away from Neukirch. I was very touched by her offer, as I always am when anyone shows me kindness.

Day 22 - Freiburg - Monday 11 July

Irma had eye examinations all day, so Kristin picked me up at 9 and we drove to Freiburg. She said it was best to go early as by lunch time the 'tourists' arrive and it gets too crowded. I also expect it is easier to park the earlier you go. Anyway, I am getting used to the German habit of doing everything early in the day. In the hot summers they have here, it is best to get out and about while it is still reasonably cool.

Freiburg is picturesque with its old houses and narrow streets, and there are a great variety of shops, but as usual, not much fun with no money to spend. I had thought of buying a new set of tarot cards and mentioned this to Kristin, whereupon it became a mission - strange to say, she thought we would find them in a toyshop, whereas in England it would certainly not be the case! We did not find any, and I had to be pretty firm about giving up the search - in the end I convinced her it did not matter that much, not to the extent of wearying us both. Once more I was impressed at the German attitude to dogs, she had no problem taking Pino into any of the stores.

I 'almost' bought a watch in Freiburg! I had left mine behind at home, and seeing in a shop window what looked like plastic watches, I went in to inquire. Neither Kristin nor I had been able to make out the price in the window, and I asked the assistant. I *thought* she said 9 euros 50, which

³³ *or perhaps the cross is metal - the face looks like stone or plaster*



Kristin & Pino in Freiburg



Lasterlust boots - and the price tag!

was reasonable and I said I would take it. To make sure, I asked her the price again but she ignored me and started making out the guarantee and all. I thought it a great palaver for a ten pound watch. I had only a 50 euro note, so it was a good thing I looked at the receipt she handed me. The price was €49.50! Thank God I had held onto the money.

“I am sorry,” I said, “I thought you said 9.50!” She was flustered and not a little annoyed when I handed it back. “I thought it was plastic,” I said. Indignantly she told me it was *silicon*! But I looked up silicone watches on ebay when I got home and you can get them for as little as 1.99. It did feel great on the wrist, but wow! 50 quid is too much.

After that Kristin wanted to look for a shoeshop a friend had recommended. She has trouble with her feet and the friend said she would find

shoes there that would give no trouble at all. It was down a cobbled alley off a tree-shaded square, and the whole place smelt delightfully of expensive leather. Some boots in the window intrigued me, they reminded me of the mediaeval boots Lasterlust was wearing. Beautiful, soft and squashy, and my size too! But when I turned them over the price was unbelievable - 259 euros! The price of a holiday! The shoes Kristin chose were equally alarming - I think about 170. She apologised for taking a long time choosing, but I told her at those prices she needed to! I photographed the boots, and strolled out into the square. On afterthought, reflecting that no one in England would believe that price tag, I went back and photographed the underside! We both find cities tiring, and after a coffee in the main square and some 'people-watching' we drove back.



People-watching

I was resting on the balcony when Erika called me from over the road and invited me to a barbecue. Her Dutch guests were also there. Supposedly we had met before, but I did not remember. I did not get good vibes off them, and did not want to stay in their company, so fell silent. Erika, bless her, noticed and asked if I wanted to go and rest, so I escaped to my room.

Since yesterday I have been connected to the internet - Axel came over Sunday and tracked down the password.

It is so relaxing here, especially now Irma does not always want me to go here and there. With Max working she spends the morning cooking his lunch, and naturally, after working hard he does not want to do anything in the afternoon - this suits me fine!

Day 23 - Hexenloch - Tuesday 12 July

I have been getting herbal tea for breakfast every day, and really cannot start the day without caffeine. I do not like to be rude, but yesterday I asked Irma if she had coffee, but alas there is only instant! So far I have made coffee in my room, before going to breakfast, but today I put it in my insulated camping mug and took it down with me.

Irma was involved in making some herbal concoction with forest berries, which she said would cure her eyes. I told her I had made my own coffee, and was relieved that she was not upset.

We had breakfast and a long chat, she likes to practise her English, but when Max is there I speak mostly German, so he can understand and join in. He does not say much, but laughs a lot.

I set off early to walk to the Hexenloch, going the 'quick' way straight down the village and up the grassy slope on the other side. At the top near the football pitch I came on a group from the primary school practising their long jump skills. One shouted,

"Sind Sie von England?" - are you from England?

"How do they know?" I asked their teacher, before talking with them in German.

"You can speak English to them," the teacher said. I was surprised, they were very young, about 8 maybe. One said his name was Arthur, and I told him it was the name of a Great English King in the *mittelalter* - Middle Ages. He was very pleased about that! They invited me to jump.

"Ich bin siebzig Jahre alt," (I am seventy) I said, "but I will try." The teacher got the measuring tape out with mock seriousness, and told me I managed a metre!



the forest was full of butterflies

I did the familiar walk down through the forest, and this time it was full of butterflies. I have not seen them in such quantities before, but I am usually here in June, and this is July. It seems each month has its own flavour -



forest walk to the Hexenloch



I bought a hat . . .

cherries and strawberries in June - and once we came in September, and there were little marzipan-modelled fungi, delicately painted, in the shops - and market stalls full of all kinds of forest mushrooms.

I had a meal in Hexenloch Mill and potted round the shop. I bought a wild boar hat - it will be brilliant on the bike in winter!

I rested as much as I could, and soaked myself in the cold spring at the picnic platz, but it still took me three hours to get to the top, and was hard going at times, chiefly perhaps due to the couple of bottles of physic I had in the rucksack. One cannot go to the Hexenloch without buying some of their splendid brew! I almost gave in at the Ochsen – I was tempted to text Erika and ask for someone to fetch me, but I would have died of the shame, so I struggled on up the last final slope. Rain was threatening, and that night we had a tremendous storm. The thundering bit was over at the end of the evening, but in a strange phenomenon the lightning continued all night. It was going strong when I fell asleep, and when I woke at four in the morning, light was still flickering all over the hills.

Day 24 - The English groups - Wednesday 13 July

Kristin teaches different groups on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays (Irma's group). She taught her Tuesday group as usual, and invited them to join the Wednesday group to meet me if they wanted. Only one of them turned up, even so it was a very large group, so if she also teaches that number on a Tuesday she has her work cut out. Irma's group is small, but Kristin says that is because they have been coming so long, over ten years, and gradually students have fallen away, but these that are left, will not stop! She tries every so often to stop them, but they beg her to continue.

Kristin had made scones with cream and jam. I am assuming that these are not a feature of German cuisine, as they fell far short of the scones I am accustomed to making (recipe in my book). When I was there the other day she showed me the net curtain in her kitchen and told me she had to buy a new one, 'as her daughter in law said it was old-fashioned'. The whole class knew about this too, and now we all had to troop into the kitchen and view the replacement.

"Do you think this one will be approved of," asked Kristin. Everyone agreed it was very nice, and someone asked how much it cost. I was astonished at the price. Her window is not large, a normal sort of kitchen window such as a small house in England might have, and the curtain covered only the lower half. There could not have been more than a yard in it - if that.

"Eighty euros!" said Kristin. Seeing my shocked expression, she explained that the curtain itself cost only 50, but that she had 'paid a woman 30 euros to shorten it!' We simply could not imagine paying these kinds of prices in England. I am quite sure I could go down Nelson market and get that amount of net for a couple of quid.

There were some elderly gentlemen in the group, who tended to take the floor, pushing the ladies into the background. They all spoke good English, which attests to Kristin's teaching abilities.

One woman stood out from the rest. She was the sort of person who commands attention - her authoritative bearing and deep, throaty voice reminded me of a woman I know at home, someone you tangle with at your peril, but definitely worth knowing if you are woman enough to take her on. She seemed to have something on her mind, and was earnest in her questions, beginning by saying she admired me very much, and wanted to do the same as I had done, but her main question was, what did I do about punctures? I told her I didn't have any, but that if I did, I was unable to take the tyre off, due to arthritis in my hands, so I had an emergency spray which will re-inflate the tyre until I could get it to a bike shop. She said she also had something special to ask me, but that she wanted to do this afterwards as it was personal.

Kristin informed me that the class had met at nine and spent the first hour discussing me and the trip, and preparing questions to ask, so it all went well. They thanked me afterwards for the slow and clear way I spoke, and said they had all been able to understand and follow. Kristin told me the bossy lady had asked her if I had special powers - I think I told Irma's group that I am a witch, so word must have spread - and when she made her request, it was to use my supernatural powers to help her son get a flat in Munich! She explained they had a flat which they must leave, and how difficult it was to find something affordable in Munich, and as nice as the one they had. I was greatly amused at her faith in me, but before I left for England, Kristin phoned to tell me the magic had worked! I had done nothing, but was not surprised - it often happens this way. After all, Jesus said, "Go home, thy faith hath made thee whole".

I needed to get money from the bank, but it rained steadily all day and I did not leave Kristin's - I would be going in again on Thursday and would do it then. Kristin made a very good lunch, cooking a large mushroom she had found in the woods. She asked me if I was not afraid of being poisoned! I think she is a great tease, and likes to have fun with people. I told her I trusted her completely.

The rain cleared up a little, and Kristin asked if I would like to have a little walk in the forest at the back of the house. It is a walk she does every day with Pino at six am, and she thought perhaps I would like to do it with them when I go to stay, but I thought probably not - not at that time!

We crossed to the other side of the street and went round the back of the houses. Kristin told me about the people in each house as we went past. She is full of stories and collects them from everyone she knows - she has the knack of capturing lives in a nutshell. It would make an interesting book, especially what she told me about the spoiled lives of German women who lived through the war, or the years after the war, when times

were unenlightened. Some of the tales were harrowing. We don't know the meaning of the word hardship today.

The houses were built into the steep hillside, with the forest rising up behind them, so that as we walked past the top of the gardens, we looked down on the houses below. As we came to the last one, I saw a small glass shelter at the top of the garden, like a bus shelter, or the smoking shelters they put up in England. It looked incongruous, and I asked her what it was for?

"Oh, this is a man who lives here on his own," she said, "and see what a big house he has. It has much improvement. Inside this glass shelter is a jacuzzi, and often when I walk past here he is sitting in it with three ladies, all with no clothes on! I try to look the other way, but he calls out, 'Guten Tag, Frau Wolff!' and I have to look at him and answer him." She was laughing, and had a twinkle in her eye - I think she was hoping he would be cavorting there with his ladies, and she could watch my reaction!

"He is able to afford all this," she said, "on the money he gets from doing odd jobs for the people in the houses here."

"Has he another job as well?" I asked.

"No, this is his only income." Well no wonder he can afford it, I reflected, if a person can earn £30 for sewing one metre of cloth! That's about a pound an inch! Some handymen I know in England should think about coming here.

It was tough walking on the steep hillside, and I was glad when we were back in the house, talking books and looking things up on the internet. And I took this lovely picture of her cat, napping in a basket on her desk.



Kristin's cat

Day 25 - Another English class - Thursday 14 July

I knew Irma was a perfectionist - her habit of getting up at five in the morning to learn ten new words of English is evidence enough of that, but she certainly surprised me today. She appeared a bit agitated at breakfast, and was looking at me strangely. Then she said,

"I have a problem with your bicycle." As this is in the storage area beneath the house, and I knew it was not blocking anything, I wondered what she meant. "I do not know how you are getting your leg over," she went on. "I have been practising every day, and I can get my leg no higher than this" - she demonstrated - "and it is not high enough. You must show me how it is done."

We went down to the cellar and I threw my leg over the saddle. Knowing she did not like to be bested at anything, I told her that probably her

legs were shorter than mine, and not to worry. But that image of Irma, secretly practising ‘getting her leg over’ whenever I left the house, will stay with me. I did not tell her that in England this phrase is also used to describe the sexual act.

It seems such a long time since I arrived here. It has been totally different from last year, or any other year for that matter. There have been times when I could not stay here more than four days, but then that applies to a lot of places I have been. When I came with Diana in 2007 it was hectic, they took us to so many places, and last year when I stayed with Irma I had to fight to get time on my own. This year however *everything* is different. I am different, she is different and Erika is different. Most surprising of all is the change in Kristin, who is more different than anyone!

Maybe when you come back to a place after 12 months you notice the differences more clearly. Changes that have gone on imperceptibly day by day are glaringly apparent after a year’s absence. Max and Irma have become grandparents in my absence, and have a strong and sturdy little granddaughter of nine months. This, or something else, has totally changed Irma, and I have not seen that much of



Irma and baby

Erika, which again is different. Perhaps she was busy with her Dutch visitors, who have been coming 25 or 30 years, and must be like part of the family. So time might have hung heavy on my hands were it not for Kristin!

Today is the English group which Irma attends, and the ladies are like old friends, so it was no hardship to turn up again.

Irma offered me an excursion and I requested the Vogtsbauernhof³⁴ - this was to have been Friday – my last day – but had been changed when they received an unexpected invitation, which could not be put off, to go out that day, so it was re-arranged for this afternoon. But a phone call from Irma’s ‘oculist’ changed that, and now it is to be next year, so I spent the afternoon in bed, feeling thoroughly exhausted. All the talking I think, as well as the air.

I have been invited by Kristin again tomorrow, but not until 3 in the afternoon, and hopefully will not be late back. Saturday I begin the long trek home, as far as Strasbourg, and on arrival there, book my ticket for

³⁴ *a reconstructed Black Forest village consisting of houses from different periods of history and various areas of the region, saved from dereliction or destruction, and re-erected in one place*

Beaune for Sunday, then find a hotel. If there is any problem about getting my bike on a train for Beaune, and it becomes impossible for me to reach there Sunday night, I will phone Bolero and ask if there is still space on the 31 July bus, and then spend two weeks bumming around in France. Hope it doesn't come to that though.

Day 26 - Hinterzarten - Friday 15 July

Did my packing in the morning, as much as I was able. I have so little that most of my stuff is in use.



Hinterzarten

Kristin wanted to take me somewhere I had not been, so we headed for Hinterzarten. It looked like one of those 'watering places' where the rich used to go - plenty of big, picturesque hotels. Kristin said we must eat German cake, and chose a place with its own lake - with swans as I thought, but she was laughing. They are plastic, but from a distance certainly lend an air of distinction. The cakes were magnificent, and we did a circular walk with Pino and saw the artificial ski runs. We had to be back for 6 as Kristin had a couple arriving from Spain. So we had a meal and talked books again until they came. After a short tour of the flat they immediately left again, saying they wanted to visit Triberg. Kristin asked why they wanted to go there as (her words) it is horrible (very touristy anyway). They said they wanted to see the source of the Danube - I don't know if she told them, but that is entirely the wrong place. Never mind, I think they really wanted to see the lake.

So, back home about 8 o'clock.

Day 27 - Strasbourg - Saturday 16 July

I gave Max three possible train times and left it to him to decide - he chose the earliest, so I wondered if it might be possible to do the whole journey to Beaune in one day and then relax, rather than split it into two as had been the plan. It all depends on the availability of trains once I get to Strasbourg.

There was the usual annoyance with the ticket machine on Triberg station, which refused to sell tickets to anywhere outside of the country, so I had to book to Offenburg, get off there and buy another ticket.



Gare de Strasbourg. from hotel window

Arrived in Strasbourg early, but great difficulty in finding their ticket office, kept going up and down the station from one end to the other, finally realising that the 'glass hall' they kept sending me to was actually the big dome thing on the outside of the station. It was not possible to get to Beaune that day without changing four times, and I knew there was a route with only two changes, so I booked that for Sunday, then set about finding a hotel. There are lots of them in a semicircle outside the station, but the cheaper ones as usual were full, so I started on the side streets and was lucky first time.

Lovely room in small hotel and good price. I was comfortable and there were plenty of places to eat nearby. Unfortunately the only one I wanted to eat at did not open until 7, and it was way short of 6, so I settled for somewhere else and it was not good.

Day 28 - Pickup day at Beaune - Sunday 17 July

I was pleased with myself at finding my way to the pickup at Beaune, where I went immediately on arrival. It is essential to locate this first off, then plan everything else round it. There was a hairy moment in Strasbourg when I went to check train times and was told "where did you get

this ticket, you cannot take a bike on this train”. However, he made a phone call and then said I could. The train he referred to was a SCNF and believe me it was a nightmare. I had to remove the luggage as the bike had to be carried up three steep steps through a narrow doorway, and then make a tight 90deg turn to get to the bike compartment. I spent the whole of that journey planning how best to get off without the bike, me or the luggage getting left behind.

Then came an announcement that the train was running late, I did not have much time for my connection, and in fact we pulled in five minutes after my train was due to leave, but hey presto, guards were standing by with walkie talkies, helped me with my luggage and escorted me to the platform where the train was waiting. Once again I thought, *not in England, eh!*

I had two changes, which meant three trains, and while on the third, congratulating myself it was almost over, had a text from Bolero saying the bus was delayed by three hours ‘due to delays in the Channel’. Great! Now I would need a hotel to wait in - it had been optional before, now it would be essential, a 3-hour delay brought pickup time to 2am and I did not want to sit outside all that time.

I amazed myself by finding the right roads out of the station at Beaune, but had problems getting to the pickup, as it is right by the péage³⁵ and it was not only scary but confusing, no way should a bike be headed for the motorway mouth! I couldn’t believe they had chosen such a location. I knew I was in absolutely the right place as the Bolero map gave the number of the phone box where they wanted me to wait. There was also a toilet block so things were not that bad. I looked for a hotel nearby - there wasn’t one, but there was a police station and a policeman came out and wanted to know what I was doing there.

I headed back up the road to where there is the usual hotel and restaurant complex, and set about finding a hotel. I knew Étap was the cheapest, and queued with a big crowd in the lobby, so was annoyed when I got to the desk and the woman said they were full.

“Couldn’t you have told us that sooner?” I asked.

“Comment?” (What?)

“I have been here for some time.” It was no good arguing. They were full and that was it.

I went round the others and they were all between €70-80 (cheapest) or over 100. I was starving, and had seen a restaurant called ‘Buffalo Grill’ so I thought, if I had to spend the night outside I might as well fill up with steak. Happily I was able to park my bike next to a window and sit on the inside. The meal was wonderful, just what I needed, but very hard to go outside and get back on the bike afterwards.

³⁵ *péage is where vehicles pay to get on the motorway, big barriers across the road with gates that take money or automatically deduct it from credit cards*

There were two more hotels I could check out, they were actually on the motorway a short distance from the péage, but of course could not be reached from there on a bike. I was one side of a roundabout from which lots of roads radiated off to various hotels, on the other side of it were two roads, one leading to the péage - with the Campanile and Formule 1 at the end of the other. First up was the Campanile - €85 a night. As I neared F1 I had a word with the Angels - *now this is my last chance, please make this one affordable! I don't want to be on the street all night!* I turned the corner and there was the price - 35 euros! Cheapest yet. Unfortunately, it was full! The young coloured man on the desk looked sympathetic and it was my last shot.

"The thing is," I said, "I have a problem. I was being picked up at the péage at 11pm, on a bus going to England, but it has been delayed by three hours, and I really only need somewhere to wait."

"Oh, you can wait here," he said without turning a hair! So Angels came up trumps again. What are the odds of that? That woman at the Étap wouldn't have let me stay. It was not the best of comfort, formica counter tops and small round stools, but it was warm and it was inside. It was staffed throughout the night, so I could walk about outside at regular intervals, essential to keep from going numb. The young man gave me a free cup of coffee, and after that there were machines with drinks and snacks. Best of all, they had free wifi, and even though I was not a paying customer, he had no objection to my logging on, so that passed a couple of hours until my eyes began to ache.

The night was mild and warm with a moon - if the rain kept off I would not get wet cycling to the pickup point - though one thing did worry me, I had no front light, only a back one. There were no lights on the road, and with that police station nearby I stood a chance of being stopped and charged. I think they are pretty strict about things like lighting on the continent.

Things went from bad to worse. Another text from Bolero said the bus had run into the Tour de France in Narbonne, and was further delayed by another two hours. Looked like I was in for a long night.

At 2am I received the message that the bus had left Mâcon and would be with me within the hour. Already panicky about the ride, not to mention the unpacking, and dismantling of the front rack in the dark, I set out immediately. I could hardly see a thing without the front light, though I hoped the back one was working and protecting me from being cannoned into. One never knows. I thought, 'this is what was like for Wolfram'. I could make out the different colour of the grass to my right, and by keeping it in a straight line could stay on the road. Luckily there was no traffic to speak of.

Eventually I arrived at the péage, unloaded and dismantled the bike. I had just finished when my phone rang. Hurray! This meant they were coming! But no, it was Jason's very weary voice saying,

"We just refuelled at Mâcon and are on our way now. We will be with you in fifty minutes". Bummer. But there was a telephone box where I could shut the door and wait, it had 360 round vision, but I reckoned if I stood still any vehicles approaching the péage would probably not see me - my one fear, as always when the bike is dismantled, is of being approached by a mad raving loony and having no getaway vehicle.

But all was well. The bus arrived just short of 4am and Jason loaded the bike. I refused to go and look for whatever seat they had allocated me, downstairs was empty so I sat there. I did not sleep, it was nice watching the sky for signs of dawn, which never came.

Determined not to use the bus loo (and I never did) I sat it out until the breakfast stop about 7am, and had three espressos, a pain chocolat and an apple pastry at the excellent French services.

The crossing was awful. I had determined to have a shower on board, and was directed to the (locked) facilities. There was a changing room, a toilet and the shower. I was in it when we got underway and, with the tossing and heaving, felt like a tadpole, wriggling about under the shower trying to stay upright! Extremely sick getting out and difficult to get dressed. I thought I was going to throw up but didn't. Eventually made my way slowly and painfully back to the desk and handed in the key. Then found a seat and sat perfectly still, hands braced on either side, eyes tight closed, praying for it to be over and holding onto the contents of my stomach with difficulty.

Took hours to recover.

Got into Leeds 9pm, but there wasn't a local train into the city until 9.50. Somehow this annoyed me more than anything. Train out at 10.28 and arrived at Dinah's 11pm, where I spent the night. Brenda rang and offered to pick me up next morning and bring me home, lovely end to the holiday.

Later, when I was home . . .

I thought of all the amazing things that had happened, and how the Angels had helped, and I wanted to give them a special Thankyou. I remembered that some churches are named for *St Michael and all the Angels*, and I went on the web to find one. It didn't take long. The pretty church at Foulridge, on the edge of the lake, is so named, and the Brontës' church at Haworth. Haworth is too far to go, but I cycled along to Foulridge to find out the opening hours. The church was locked, as is usual these days, a sad sign of the times, but something told me to hang around and someone would come. It was a lovely evening and I walked into the churchyard and sat looking out over the lake. I stayed there about an hour enjoying the late

evening sun, and when I got up to go I saw that a car had pulled up on the forecourt and some people were getting out. Then I saw the vicar walking up the drive. I hurried my pace and was just in time to follow the party into the church. They had come about a wedding and I asked if I could look round while they conducted their business.

As soon as I walked in, I knew this was right. Some churches have an atmosphere, some don't. This one had it in buckets. A lady I met at Walsingham told me that this special feeling occurs when they have the Host on the premises, but I have my own theory, that these 'special' churches are built over pagan sites, and it is my old ancestors' call that I feel.

There would be a communion service the following Thursday and I determined to be there.

When I arrived, there was a further treat in store. A lady presented me with a hymn book and told me that as there were to be only a few of us, the service would be in the Lady Chapel. This was a further sign that I was on the right track. Wolf and I always looked for the Mary Chapel, and went to sit in it, when we visited a church. It was magical in there. I told them about the Angels and donated £10 in thanksgiving, saying that no way was it enough, but it was a lot for me to give, in my present circumstances. None of them were the least bit interested to hear about the Angels. You see, Christians do not really believe in them . . . but we Pagans do.



Geraldine Murfin-Shaw, 2011



St Michael and All Angels, Foulridge



set on the shores of the lake



I sat looking out over the lake

Other books by Geraldine Murfin-Shaw

Books about life as a chef:

Fresh Out of the Pan

Sweet Chef

Four Geminis and a Jacuzzi

(coming: Island Chef First Helping;

Island Chef Second Helping)

Stories of sex, humour and witchcraft:

Mrs Jackson Rides Out

Poetry:

Val Kirkham: the collected poems

Cookery:

The Curious Cook's Book

Travel:

The Open Road 2010

Riding with Angels 2011

Almost ready for publication:

At Least She Never Drank Much (autobiography 1st vol)

A Bit on the Blind Side (autobiography 2nd vol)

Dream Diary of a White Witch

all available on Lulu.com/murfinshaw

amazon.co.uk - and on

Amazon Germany, Amazon France, Amazon Spain, and Amazon Italy

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