

## Part Two: France

## 6: From Cherbourg to Beaune

It's cold; it's a gloomy, misty morning and I'm now cycling on the right hand side of a monotonous, straight road in Normandy, in the north of France. Fortunately there is little traffic on the road. I notice that whenever a vehicle passes, it gives me a very wide berth. The signposts are placed in unfamiliar positions at junctions and at first I find them a little confusing. The last time I cycled in France was during the previous year, when I hired a bike and went off exploring the glorious Dordogne valley. At that time my French had been reasonably fluent; as I haven't spoken it since then, I wonder how I'll fare this time.

I arrived this morning in Cherbourg at 7 a.m. and, following a very general map, escaped from the sleepy town and took this monotonous road that is now leading me south-westwards, in the direction of Les Pieux and the coast. I am surprised at how hilly this region is: I have always imagined Normandy as being rather flat. Thanks to the enveloping mist, I can see nothing of the scenery; all I can discern are the rather rough but solid farmhouses and cottages of grey stone that line the road. Here and there I catch glimpses of farming people and hear hens clucking; as I pass, my nostrils are assailed with strong farmyard smells.

I finally reach Les Pieux, a dull, grey town, where I stop and breakfast on brown bread and cheese. I buy a couple of detailed maps and, in a bank, I change a traveller's cheque into the local currency. The rate is 10 francs to the British pound.

I resume my journey at ten and, as the main road is now becoming busy, I branch off and take the country roads. Some of these are picturesque, though not as beautiful as what I have seen in England. Soon I am back on the main road, which brings me to the sea resort of Cartaret. I stop at its nearby sister town of Barneville-Carteret for a simple lunch of chips and a stuffed tomato for just 10 francs.

After I have eaten my last English apple, I battle onwards, hugging the coast – again I am travelling along a rather uninteresting road. By now it is hot and the wind blows against me, slowing me down. I leave the road at Lessay and continue along narrow country lanes, passing through a succession of small villages. By now I am beginning to run out of energy and am slowing down considerably. As if this is not enough, it then begins to rain. Although I have been planning to stay at an *auberge de jeunesse*, a youth hostel, I decide to cut my losses and head inland towards the town of Coutances. While searching for a hotel, I meet two teenage English girls who are doing the same. I volunteer to find somewhere to stay if they will mind my bike and luggage.

After quite a lot of walking, I eventually stumble across the *Syndicat d'Initiative*, the tourist office, where I am told about a cheap hotel nearby. Happily, I discover that they have a large room containing a double and single bed for an affordable price. I return to the girls and walk with them to the hotel.

Rested and dry again, we find a restaurant nearby; although it looks rather exclusive, the prices are reasonable and the food is excellent. We read the menu as best we can; the word *truite* puzzles me. As I don't have a dictionary with me, I call the waiter and he explains that it is a type of fish. I order it, still a little uncertain of its meaning. The starter (*crudités*) consists of a tomato salad and the main course is trout and potatoes. Now I've added an extra word to my vocabulary – though I had a hunch

that the unfamiliar word did mean trout. We share a small bottle of Muscadet wine and I finish with delicious ice cream.

Back in our room, I use the bathroom, then back in the bedroom I settle down to write my diary. While the girls are in the bathroom, I change into my pyjamas and continue writing. The two young ladies eventually appear in tee-shirts that cover their underwear. Although one of them mischievously says, 'Now, who's going to sleep in which bed?' they clamber into the big double bed. I put my diary away, get into my comfortable single bed, and it's lights out. No hanky-panky. End of day one.

This morning I wake from a deep sleep to the sound of raindrops pattering against the window. Down in the bar, I pay the lady for my share of the night's accommodation and cross the road, where I buy a *demi-baguette* in the *boulangerie* (baker's shop). This half stick of bread and some cheese is my simple breakfast, eaten in the bedroom. Mercifully the rain stops by the time I leave. I walk up the street and visit the large cathedral, which looks impressive as it has been recently cleaned and is in excellent condition. I then jump on the bike and spend some considerable time finding my way out of the town. Again, I am confused by the signposts.

Following a long and fairly straight minor road southwards, I now pass through some very fine countryside with picturesque views and interesting old houses. Many of the houses are large and imposing; they are constructed of grey stone and have elegant windows, some of them equipped with shutters. Most of these fine buildings are surrounded by farmland. Even though the sky is overcast, it is pleasant to be out and about this morning as the air is fresh after last night's rain. The only bad thing about this area is that the road is in a poor state; here and there it has been repaired using some type of pink gravel.

I eventually arrive at the small town of Cérences, where I stop to buy a couple of apples at an open-air market, then continue southwards towards Avranches along another straight country road, but this one is not as pretty as the previous one. I'm hoping to make it to Avranches for lunch, but stop instead at la Haye-Pesnel. I quickly find a small restaurant with a *menu* (a set meal) for just 28 francs and sit down to an excellent and hearty meal: a starter of salad with rice and bread, a main course of kidneys with chips and onions, and a dessert of apple tart.

Fed and happy, I set off again, this time taking the main road southwards. Fortunately, there is little traffic and it passes through pleasant scenery. By now the sun is shining. I make good speed and reach Avranches, which is a busy city full of traffic and tourists. Music is blaring from loudspeakers in nearly every street. I leave as quickly as possible and hurtle downhill to a spot that overlooks a spectacular view of the bay to my right and the famous Mont Saint Michel just off the mainland. I stop to photograph the scene and head off towards the island with the familiar tall church spire at its summit. I now encounter groups of young cyclists who whizz past me effortlessly. Cars with caravans and luggage tied to roof racks appear – I have obviously strayed into a tourist spot. Nonetheless, it is pleasant here; I skirt the wide bay, passing interesting old farmhouses.

On turning off the road for the island, I encounter scores of camping sites, hotels, motels, rooms in farmhouses, restaurants, bars and an endless stream of slow-moving traffic. However, I press on towards the picturesque town built on the rock and stop to take photographs. All along the raised causeway are parked cars, caravans and coaches. Because of the number of tourists making for and milling around the little town, I make no attempt to walk around it; instead, I sit on a wall and gaze at it from a distance. I admire the buildings, the 11th-century abbey and the Romanesque church

at the top. After a while I lie down in the sun – it has become very hot now – and doze.



Mont St Michel

Refreshed, and delighted that I have finally visited this famous landmark, I leave and head southwards again. Although I have planned to spend the night at the next town, Pontorson, I decide to keep going as it is such a pleasant evening, and stop at Rennes, where there is a youth hostel. However, I do stop briefly in Pontorson for some provisions. On I go, along a flat, almost traffic-free road, passing more farm houses and pleasing scenery, making good speed.

At the village of Antrain I go slightly wrong and decide to take the turn for the nearer town of Fougères, where there is also a youth hostel. This road is hilly and I see black clouds looming ahead; in the distance is a bright rainbow. The scene is quite dramatic: fields are bathed in the warm evening sunshine under a blackening sky.

The gathering clouds soon engulf the sun and rain threatens, but miraculously nothing happens. At last I reach Fougères and arrive feeling both exhausted and elated. When I ask for directions to the youth hostel, a young man in a car instructs me to follow him. He kindly drives at a snail's pace up the hilly streets and stops right at the entrance.

In the hostel, another young man greets me, brings me to his office and signs me in. I pay him 22.50 francs and we have a brief conversation, partly in English and partly in French. (I know from experience that French people, once they realize that you are not English, but Irish, will happily speak to you in quite fluent English.) I am then shown to the dormitory and the washroom. I take advantage of the latter to wash myself and some clothes. Afterwards I dine on bread, cheese and biscuits, write my diary and scribble a message on a postcard to my parents at home in Dublin.

Today's journey south-eastwards towards the Loire Valley passes through some pleasant countryside, but is relatively uneventful. I travel on main roads, on which I encounter little traffic, and minor routes, passing through Laval (a large, uninteresting town), Meslay-du-Maine, Grez, Bierné, Châteauneuf-sur-Sarthe and other villages, on my way to Saumur. The day starts fine but in the afternoon it begins to lash rain.

I have been in the Loire Valley before, just the previous year; I had hitch-hiked my way there from Paris and, when I arrived, it was pouring rain. Having looked forward so much to seeing this region, with its châteaux, rich historical legacy and its famous

fine wines, I was bitterly disappointed by what I saw in the damp, gloomy conditions. I am now hoping that I can see a little more of the region in better circumstances and form a more favourable opinion.

In the evening I stop briefly in the village of Etriché for a bite to eat and press on towards Saumur, a town that I had not visited the previous year. I cycle through Seiches and Bauné, passing large fields full of huge sunflowers, colourful farmhouses and fields of hay. Just before Mazé, I stop to admire the fine château of Montgeoffroy, which is situated just off the road.

At last the weather improves and I cross the River Loire at Les Rosiers and continue along the south bank, where I cycle through small villages and pass several châteaux. I finally reach Saumur by ten o'clock. I am directed to the youth hostel, which is situated on an island in the river; it offers a spectacular view of the local château, which is now illuminated. The hostel is huge – it is more like a hotel. Fortunately there is a bed for me and the young lady at the desk brings me upstairs to a small dormitory. After I wash, I sit down to relax and write my diary, while some lads chat in an dialect of a language that I presume must be Italian. Some noisy Germans arrive later and take the remaining beds.

This morning there is more gloomy weather. Feeling a little lazy, I rise at eight, eat breakfast and leave at nine. I cycle through the town, noting the fine old buildings and leave. Skirting the south bank of the river, I follow the main road and pass caves in the tall white cliffs that line the road. A plethora of signs invite the tourist to visit illuminated caves or various museums, one of which is devoted to mushrooms. Neither the caves nor the mushrooms tempt me. At Candes St Martin I stop to look at a fine old church, then turn on to a pleasant minor road that has less traffic and advertisements. At last the Loire Valley begins to look more enticing, especially as the weather begins to improve. Warm by now, I stop to remove my jumper and admire the scenery.

At Azay-le-Rideau I look around for a restaurant, but as they are all rather expensive, I return to a village on the other side of the River Indre where there is a small, empty restaurant offering a meal for 30 francs. For this modest sum I eat a dish of *crudités* with bread, a main course of pork with a mountain of *pommes frites* (chips), then cheese with more bread, and finally I finish with a dessert that consists of a large bowl of fruit, of which I can eat as much as I like.

Feeling full and rather drowsy, I leave and continue along the minor road to Montbazou, just south of Tours. By now, the Loire Valley is far behind. It now becomes hotter, and I have to remove some layers of clothing. I stop at Esvres, a sleepy village, to do some shopping: food and a couple of maps. One of the maps is more expensive than the other; the elderly lady in the shop thinks that there must be a mistake and charges me the same amount as the other. I leave quickly before she discovers *her* mistake.

After the village of Truyes, I take a narrow country road that serves as a short cut to St Aignan. Here, although the scenery is simple – just fields and farm houses basking in brilliant sunshine – it is heavenly. Despite the sound of tractors in the fields that are being used to harvest the hay, it is blissfully tranquil. I pass fields of wilting sunflowers, some with their heads gone, and large orchards. At one of the latter, I spy three apples that have fallen from one of the trees and help myself to them as there is nobody around. This unspoilt area provides quite a contrast to the tourism and modern eyesores (such as electricity pylons) that blight the popular Loire region.

When I reach the village of Luzillé I get slightly lost and an elderly *monsieur le curé* (the parish priest), dressed in a grey suit and clerical collar, gives me directions. He compliments me on my French and is delighted to learn that I am from Ireland, as he has Irish ancestors; he tells me that his surname begins with 'Mac'. He passionately expresses his condemnation of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, which, he says, have upset many people here in France. Astonished to discover that I am bound for Venice, he wishes me *bon voyage* and shakes hands with me when we part.

I continue my journey across this lovely region with some damp washing hanging from the back of the bicycle and, in a forest a short distance from Céré-la-Ronde I stop for a rest and a bite to eat at about seven o'clock. Walking about to avoid a host of spiders, ants and other insects, I eat some bread, cheese, the last of my biscuits and one of the apples that I pinched earlier. It is a little tart, but quite good. After chatting to some men who have been working in the forest, I leave. Slightly alarmed by the distance that I need to travel to reach the youth hostel in Vierzon, I now take off at full speed.

Despite my hurry, I am still able to wallow in the beauty of this stretch of countryside, now bathed in the evening light. Outside the houses, people sit at tables, eating their evening meals. I am discovering that cycling at this time of the day is very pleasing, for it is cooler and more comfortable.

At last I reach St Aignan (not a particularly interesting town, I notice) and take a better road, which follows the river Cher, to Vierzon. Although a little busier than the narrow country lanes that I have been using, there is not too much traffic. However, by the time I reach the village of la-Chapelle-Montmartin, I realize that I have travelled far enough: by now it is ten o'clock and getting dark – the red sky is quickly fading. I stop at a bar and ask where I can sleep the night. I am advised to go to the next village, St Julien-sur-Cher, just three kilometres away, where there is a hotel. When I arrive, I am told that it is full. I cross the river to Villefranche-sur-Cher, try two hotels but am told that they are also full. I make an attempt to cycle to the nearby town, Romorantin-Lanthenay, but as it is too late and too dark, I return to Villefranche, wondering what I can do. While I am considering sleeping on a stone bench by the side of the road, a young man sitting at the door of the second hotel I have tried, jumps up on seeing me and asks me if I am looking for a room – it turns out that there is a vacant bedroom after all. Delighted, I accept his offer and am brought upstairs to a rather old-fashioned but comfortable room with a double bed and a wash-hand basin.

The next place of interest to me is Beaune, which is quite a distance from here; I have no idea of how long it will take me to get there. I will have to spend the day pedalling, just getting myself from A to B, and seeing little of interest.

I leave the hotel at nine in the morning, belt along the main road by the river to Châtres-sur-Cher, turn north-eastwards and continue my journey along a straight road, passing trees, a few orchards and brambles full of ripe blackberries. I do not steal any apples this morning, but sample some of the blackberries, which are quite tasty.

Later the road cuts through forests as I make my way at good speed to Theillay, Nançay and Ménétréol-sur-Sauldre, where I stop for lunch. I find a little restaurant with a *menu* for 35 francs. The woman in charge conducts me to a plain wooden table, places a sheet of white paper on it, arranges the cutlery and puts a glass directly in front of me. When she leaves, I move the glass a little to the right, where I would normally put it. She returns with a carafe of red wine, and glares at the glass. She picks it up, unceremoniously slams it down in its original position and splashes some

wine into it. I taste it; *Château Plonque*, I conclude. An enormous repast is served: *crudités* and bread, *coq-au-vin* (chicken cooked in wine) with chips, cheese and more bread, and a dessert consisting of a peach and an apple.

Stuffed, I continue my journey and cycle to Aubigny-sur-Nère. There is a hostel here, but I carry on as it is far too early to stop. Now the terrain becomes hilly and, as a result, cycling becomes more strenuous. The scenery is not very interesting in this region. I stop in Cosne-sur-Loire for a short break, but finding nowhere to eat, I go on. Now the road becomes even more hilly; more often than not, I must walk up the hills and freewheel down them.

I stop, exhausted, at the picturesque village of Donzy, where – thank goodness – I find a baker's shop that is still open. I buy some bread and a can of shandy, then sit on a bridge overlooking the River Nohain and eat a picnic supper of the bread and some cheese, which I have brought in my bag. There are a couple of hotels here, one closed and the other too expensive.

Somewhat refreshed, I leave and continue my journey, albeit rather reluctantly. The next village, Menou, offers no accommodation. However, there is a fine old church and a large château (which probably contains plenty of bedrooms). Using the last of my energy, I struggle along the very hilly road to the small town of Varzy, where I find a couple of hotels. The first one is closed and the second is full. I am directed up a steep road to a café, which has rooms. After a little confusion I find it and – mercifully – the lady in the bar smilingly informs me that she has a room for me. It is a little primitive, but it is neat and comfortable. For 50 francs I gratefully accept it and set about having a much-needed shower.

A welcome burst of sunshine greets me when I open the shutters this morning. I study my map; realizing that there will be more hills to negotiate today, I decide not to overdo things and take my time, even though I have a long way to go.

Having paid the bill and bought some pâté in the town centre, I set off along a narrow country road towards Parigny-la-Rose and Chevannes-Changy. The uneven road tumbles up and down hills and offers me tantalizing views of the surrounding countryside. It is good to be out on such a fine, fresh morning. The first of the two villages is very rustic, old and tumbledown, but it is picturesque. I cycle on, then stop in the middle of nowhere for my simple breakfast of bread, pâté and an apple.

I continue on a main road after Chevannes-Changy; thankfully there is very little traffic. Although it is a Monday, the villages are sleepy and there are few people about. Flowers and blackberries grow by the roadside and I pass by some more orchards.

Miraculously, the road is quite flat and I make good progress. However, after the village of Moraches, the hills reappear; I dismount and walk up them and freewheel down the other sides. As it is too early for lunch when I arrive in the small town of Corbigny, I carry on and stop in Cervon, a tiny village, and eat an indifferent, cheap lunch in a grubby hotel.

Back on the road, I stop to pick a bagful of large, delicious blackberries and put them in one of my panniers. Later I spy apple and plum trees growing near a house, but I desist from helping myself. The countryside here is very pleasing; butterflies dance among the flowers and crickets can be heard in the tall grass. I reach Montsauche by 5.30 p.m.; as I am not particularly hungry, I decide to push on towards the bigger town of Saulieu, passing through the Parc Régionale du Morvan, most of which seems to be forest. I now encounter more traffic and signs of tourism: caravans,

tents and attractions. I pass mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes, and stop to eat a picnic supper of bread, pâté and the blackberries that I have picked.

Saulieu comes as a pleasant surprise: a lovely, quaint town. I find a one-star hotel that has a bed for me, wash myself and some clothes, and amble outside to take a look around. The old grey stone buildings, with white shutters and unevenly-tiled roofs huddle together drunkenly on either side of the twisting narrow streets. Brightly coloured flowers are arranged on windowsills and the windows are wide open. The mellow evening light bathes everything in a magical glow, and I am reminded of a record of songs from Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* that I listened to as a child: the cover depicted an old-world town with tipsy buildings not unlike the ones I see here. I wander around, admiring the squares (one has a stone fountain in it) and the fine old basilica. I promise myself to take some photos tomorrow.

This morning, as the weather is gloomy, I decide that conditions are too poor for taking photos. After a hasty breakfast in my room, I change some money in the bank and hit off towards Beaune, which I hope to reach today. At first I take the main road, then turn off eastwards along a quieter road. As most of it heads downhill, I make good speed. With the cool morning air rushing past, I only just about feel comfortable in my thick jumper.

I soon pass over the Autoroute de Soleil and, skirting the picturesque Canal de Bourgogne, with a single line of tall trees on either side, I approach Pouilly. As it is too early for lunch here, I continue. Following the canal, I pass through picturesque Créancy, with the château and village of Châteauneuf in the distance, then the quaint village of Vandenesse-en-Auxois. I stop at Pont-d'Ouche, where I spy a restaurant in a small, cheap hotel. The sun comes out briefly and I pause to admire the canal. Barges and pleasure-boats slowly float along and elderly Frenchmen sit on the banks, fishing.

A large and rather stodgy meal costs me 27.50 francs: a starter of eggs mayonnaise, then *charcuteries* (cooked meats), then chicken, then chips (the so-called *légumes* or vegetables), then cheese and finally fruit. As I am hungry, I make short work of it all.

Afterwards, I set off eastwards again and find myself climbing uphill. As the going is tough, I eventually give in, and, feeling drowsy, lie down on a stone wall and have a welcome siesta. Sometime later I wake feeling groggy and continue my upward journey. Finally I reach the summit and go hurtling down the other side of the hill. The cool rush of air wakes me up.

Now the scenery is really dramatic – it is almost alpine. In the distance, beyond the hills and valleys, I can see white cliffs on the sides of mountains. The village of Bouilland, which I pass through, is quaint and a little dilapidated.

Following the River Rhoin, I continue downhill to Beaune, passing through the interesting old village of Savigny-les-Beaune. Here I begin to see what I have expected to see in this region: vineyards and their accompanying signs inviting the tourist to free tasting of the local Burgundian wines. They look very inviting but the practicalities of carrying a bottle – or bottles – of wine on the back of a bicycle, in panniers that are already full, are somewhat daunting.

Leaving behind the mountains at last, I cycle against the wind along the plain to the walled city of Beaune, whose ugly suburbs now begin to appear. This is the town that I had missed last year; I had been looking forward to seeing the Flemish buildings with colourful roofs that I had seen illustrated in books.

I finally reach the city centre, now full of tourists and traffic, hop off the bike and amble around. At first I am disappointed, for the buildings do not seem as colourful as



I have imagined them to be. However, I quickly realize that I need to explore the warren of narrow back streets around the town centre in order to appreciate the place to the full. Following signposts, I make my way to the cathedral, which I find interesting outside but rather dull inside. The cloisters, however, are very pretty. Around the corner is the Hôtel des Ducs, a small building, which I stop to admire.

I then make my way to the most famous landmark: the astonishing Hôtel-Dieu, which I now realize is the best-known old building here that has coloured roof tiles. I decide to look at it more carefully later. As I find myself right beside the tourist office, I go inside and make enquiries about cheap accommodation. Armed with a brochure, I set off to find the cheapest hotel on the list, and end up at the street where I entered the city. Luckily they have a room for only 45 francs. I bring my bicycle around to a back yard, pay for the room and am brought upstairs. Like most of the hotels I have encountered so far, the reception area promises much, but the rest of the building contains dark corridors, creaking floorboards and rooms of differing sizes and sorts.

Still drowsy after my heavy lunch, I throw myself down on the bed and rest. At about six I bestir myself, eat two tiny apples that I have pinched on the way here, drink a glass of water and set off to walk around the town. I buy some postcards and head for the Hôtel-Dieu, stopping now and then to look around.



Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune

By now the Hôtel-Dieu is closed but it is thrilling to admire this wonderful Burgundian building with its outstanding tiled roofs and ornate dormer windows. A charitable alms-house, it was founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of

Burgundy. Built and decorated by Flemish and French masons, painters and glass cutters, the hospice was consecrated in 1452. At around the same time, Rolin established the *Sœurs hospitalières de Beaune* religious order. Looking at the front of the building now from the street, I admire the tall, steep black roof and its spire. I then walk through an archway to the central courtyard, with its well, cobblestones, outstanding architecture and the famous tiled roofs with their geometric patterns in various colours. I am enchanted by what I see and stand here, lost in admiration, for some considerable time. As the tourists have long gone, I have the place to myself.

I wander to the back of the complex, where I find an enchanting garden in which there is a covered walkway bedecked with vines. I pick a grape and pop it into my mouth, but spit it out – it is sour. I leave and spend an agreeable evening ambling around the streets, examining and photographing the buildings. By now the sky has cleared and the sun is setting, its rays splashing patches of mellow light on the roofs of the fine old buildings.



Town centre, Beaune

Satisfied that I have seen the town to my satisfaction, I make my way to a self-service restaurant for a snack as I am feeling a little peckish by now. I ask for a salad and bread roll, but due to a misunderstanding, it turns out that my order includes a plate of sausages and chips.

I finally return to my humble lodgings, where I write my diary and the postcards. It has been well worth the long, tiring journey to get here.