Vive la difference.

It’s nearly two years since the wanderings ceased and we began a more normal life. We took jobs that our parents understood. We had an address (albeit a caravan), we took our place on the voter’s role.

Two years of itchy feet.

Our Welsh tour, and this year’s tour of the north did little to assuage that itch.

We’ve seen more of Cornwall than ever before, often camping within walking distance of home.

It has been wonderful. But it’s all on our little island, and while Britain has an exciting and varied landscape, it’s one we’re familiar with. It’s a language that we’re pretty good at. It doesn’t involve much thought.

Bring on September. Bring on our nearest neighbour. Brittany is one and a half times the size of Wales, as Celtic as anywhere, yet just a ferry ride from home.

Amorique.

After work on Friday, a quick shower, we gather a few scraps of clothes, and we’re off.

Two an a half hours to Plymouth and there are our friends Dominic and Lizzy, queuing for the ferry on their bikes. They’re getting a thorough examination from customs, I suspect Dominic said something that would amuse you and I but that the officer took offence to.

It’s easy driving onto the ferry. None of that terrifying reversing up 33% incline ramps that the Greeks and Italians inflict on you.

At the bar the staff are all smiles, catching the queuing customers’ eyes and letting them know with a glance that their beer would be with them soon.

After banter with our friends we retire to our cabin. Tired. Aching for sleep, but excited too. We have a porthole! We’ve never had that before. Other than that the cabin could have come from the same box as the several we’ve used overnight between Greece and Italy.

Dawn breaks over the water. A damp sky mutes the colours, but there is Roscoff, as pretty as any port, and on the quay the Saturday morning brocante sellers are setting up their stalls.

We know and love the town, but we’ll save a pause there for our return next weekend. Instead we’re bound for the road west, ready to absorb the differences that make travel so rewarding and educational.

On the outskirts of town every field is productive. Artichokes in various stages of readiness are the common crop. The edges are fringed with a few remaining sunflowers, looking sad with their bowed and browning heads.

The first impression of France is usually one of space. Big, detached houses built on big plots with gardens so different from ours. As we leave town the fields open out. Massive fields, bordered by dense wooded boundaries. And there’s no one in sight. Just a few cars on the big, smooth roads, but hardly a soul abroad.

Saturday morning. Where is everyone?

A littoral tour.

We’ll hug the coast for this drive.

At the first stop in Ruscumunoc (sounds like a Brêton Roscommon, that could be near Botallack, could be a county in Ireland, or even a town in Michegan, US) we gaze out from the most westerly point.

It’s too early to settle, and whilst the aire is spacious and free, there’s nowhere to get the Brêton cidre I’m so looking forward to.

Down the coast at Plougonvelin the aire’s facilities are out of action. No shower, no water, no emptying facilities. Still, it’s only £9 a night for fabulous seafront parking and there’s everything you could want within a 15 minute walk.

Plougonvelin was once a village by the sea. Now the tiny center thrives from the business of the hundreds of smart French holiday homes that surround it while retaining its character in that most French of styles.

That center is largely unchanged, and is still a place to live a more simple life, despite the wealth of those building their palaces on the outskirts.

Perhaps that’s the way it could be at home – the town is for living in, and the holiday homes can sit a little outside. The amount of anti-second homes graffiti suggests that folk feel otherwise.

The changing demographic of the old Frenchman.

The old French were once the kings of smoking. A paille hung from the lip of the old man, threatening to ignite the tobacco stained thatch of his moustaches while he made his small boulle of rough red last the whole of the match on the bar’s TV. The beret. The work jacket. The baggy trousers.

Today outside L’univers, the bar on the church square, the old boys had the decency not to wear lycra, but nonetheless their animated conversation had turned from the match, or politics, to the merits of the suspension on their electric bikes.

Les Pecheurs, the simple seafood restaurant, was our target, but it has closed through ill health, and a peep through the curtains suggested that it wouldn’t be opening again. We’re sorry. Instead Ti Mad Eo served up excellent pizza with good beers for Minty to drown in.

The first van night abroad in nearly two years brought lashing rain and strong winds – a perfect rocking for tired Cornish Wanderers. It may be a short trip – but we’re back on the road. It’s a good job we have work to return to – that long road south is calling, and without our small responsabilities it’d be hard to resist.

Camaret sur Mer.

After a short stop at the pretty medieval trading port of Le Faou we keep heading west to Camaret sur Mer. It’s an artists’s colony, a fishing port and now, above all, a holiday destination.

Arriving on the 4th of September it’s fair time, and unlike the British shops who’d capitalise on the extra trade, the French take the opportunity to close for a few days and take a rest after the summer rush. Fortunately the excellent Crêperie de la Marine felt no need to rest and served us with fine galletes and jugs of cidre.

The marine graveyard here once held scores of abandoned boats, an eerie reminder of the sardine and lobster trade that once made this town buzz. Now only five remain. These photos are from a previous visit in 2014.

On my birthday heavy showers are driven on strong gusts of wind, but our walk to the Plage de Pen Hat was largely dry. Here swimming is prohibited year round, and while the sea looked tempting, it looked dangerous too.

The beach is overlooked by the ruins a the manor house built for the self styled poet Saint Pol Roux where he lived until it was invaded, looted and then occupied, by the Germans in 1940. In a final insult it was bombed by allied forces in 1944, just days before the liberation of Camaret.

This magnificent peninsula soars and drops before us. There are islands (Ouessant) way off to the north west and the natural drama is palpable. I’m forced to admit that there’s more Cornwall here than in Cornwall. I want to take this very slowly, to absorb every landmark and sample every cidre, but time marches on and we have to rest as well as see.

A simple lunch of baguette, Le President, saucisson sec and Le Petit Brêton cheese.

It’s exhausting breaking the pattern of work, we’ve slept like the dead for two nights, and now a siesta is tempting too.

Birthday dinner.

We’d planned a trip to Les Viviers de Terenez, we had a quiet lunch there for a previous coming of age, but Les Viviers closes on Mondays (and several other days, it’s France after all).

There’s nothing for it then. La Marine Crêperie it has to be.

La Marine is a happy place. Le Maître and his team pump up the volume just before service and finish their prep in a frenzy accompanied by French folk rock band La Rue Kétanou. When several customers moan about how loud it is they’re told to hang on, it’ll only be for a few minutes. Sure enough, before it’s time to place our orders, order is restored.

Bowls of cidre. lambig (Brittany seems to have created a term for its distilled apple hooch, unfortunately it doesn’t have the same ring as Normandy’s well established calvados) and excellent crêpes. We rolled home to the van sated and only about £30 lighter.

Which crêpe? There are many combinations to try, but my advice is Go for Le Complet with an egg every time.

Are the French happier?

We stereotype the French as a surly bunch, particularly those in hospitality, but I’m beginning to question this. I think the French have had an injection of enthusiasm, while Britain’s gradual slide towards third world status must be dragging our national psyche down too. It’s not just the “bonjour” from passers-by, it feels as though everyone has been briefed to smile and be helpful.

Abbey of Saint Gwenolé.

Twelve years ago, unguided, unhindered, by Google Maps, we came this way and happened upon the Abbey of St Gwenolé.

It was the second time I’d visited a modern abbey, and the second time I’d been utterly absorbed by the apparent simple beauty.

Yesterday we visited again.

Often in ancient religious buildings the floor will be an extravagant work of art, created, repaired, and amended over ages. Here the public walk on unadorned coir, while the monks float over sycamore that butts seamlessly to a slightly raised dais of granite, on which a basic granite alter sits.

The strips of wood that make the ceiling are the same as the public pews. Side benches are not just benches, each has a cast frame, a single hand hewn seat.

The organ frames the east lights perfectly. The sides are lit by high heavy 50s modern stained glass.

This place has been considered perfectly. Built with precision. Then unaltered.

It is a deeply calming experience of its own right, but to be there, as we were yesterday, for Nones, the afternoon prayers, was spiritual.

Cap de la Chèvre.

Staying on aires and campsites is all very well, it’s easy, but it’s not the wild vanlife we loved for so long and crave still.

We wound south down the tiny lanes from pretty Crozon for half an hour to reach the wind ripped headland of Cap de la Chèvre. Think Lizard Peninsular, without the village, and with higher cliffs.

There’s a naval watchtower that lends a sinister edge, and miles of scrub, appropriately punctuated with goat willow wherever there’s a dip deep enough to give a hint of shelter.

The trod to the side of the road suggests that in the season this is a route that’s busy with both walkers, and cars bringing more walkers, but today there’s hardly a person, save 15 or so other vans hunkered down for the night.

It’s wild. It’s beautiful. It’s home, for now.

The wind dropped a little, the rain only lashed a few times, and we slept, and slept again.

Prices.

Last time I was in Paris I was shocked at how expensive everything seemed. It was five years ago and Polly and I took a few days in the capital to visit my college friend Tantely. Eating out was especially painful.

This week at the supermarket, in the cafés, the restaurants and bars I’m pleasantly surprised at every bill. We haven’t bought fuel yet, but at 1.72 Euro a litre, diesel is a wallet swelling 35p cheaper than at home. If 35p doesn’t sound much to you let’s extrapolate - that equates to over £25 a tank.

Perhaps that’s why they’re smiling – they’re laughing at Jonny English and his need for sovereignty from the Union right before external threats ensured the Union became the best gig in town.

Chateaulin and Le Bistronome.

Let’s leave the coast for a while and sample inland Brittany.

Past Le Menez Hom, the big moorland hill that dominates the area and was worshipped by the ancients just as its equivalent in West Penwith. It even has a quoit.

Chateaulin will be our biggest town for this tour, but it’s no bigger than Penzance.

There’ll be luxury at the big Camping de Rodaven. Hot showers, flush toilets. All this feels good after our brief sample of the wild.

The walk along the river to town feels so French.

The rain that drenched us feels so Cornish.

After checking out three options for dinner the choice was easy. It had to be Le Bistronome.

Le Bistronome. The opposite side of the river from us, but still only 10 minutes walk.

A wine cellar stocking fabulous regional drinks. Whiskies finished in brandy casks. Six times distilled vodka. Pastis from here, there and everywhere. New spirits that experiment with botanicals in ways that have yet to earn names. And fabulous, simple food.

Minty’s Croque Madame was a hearty meal. My tartiflette with local meats sent the cholesterol soaring, but tasted great. I asked where my cidre was from. “My friend’s farm 5km towards the monastery you so loved.” Our pastis, his favourite, was from the nearby Isle de Rey.

The team was again so jolly, so engaging. It wasn’t cheap. But it was a treat that we’re likely to come back for. When we left the boss told us the evening was only then starting. We believed it, but our early morning routine sees us in bed by dusk most nights.

Saint Trégonnec.

We pulled into the excellent aire in the pretty village of Saint Trégonnic and marvelled again at the generosity, or forethought, of the excellent facilities. Generous spaces for 18 vans, defined by long established hedges. Water and toilet emptying facilities. Good toilets nearby.

Why is most of England so backward in this regard? Such facilities don’t have to be free, even those charging £10 a night are well used across Europe. Instead, at home, public toilets are becoming as rare as generous spirit. And signs in pubs and cafes warn against anyone other than customers using their facilities. Grrrr.

This delightful village is dominated by its fabulous church, but first call for us was the bakery.

The French Bakery.

Britain has some extremely good artisan bakeries and I applaud their efforts at educating the people around them about just what an exciting product bread can be. Meanwhile most of us buy packaged pulp from the supermarket because often there’s little other choice in town.

In France every village has a baker, and nearly every one is an adventure. Varieties compete to create ever more mouth tearing crusts. As a lad it would take me a few days before I was comfortable eating the baguettes of La famille Iva.

In school we’re taught to order a baguette, but what of a zig zag, a grue, a flute, a module, a plié, perhaps a chapeaux, joco, Parisenne, paneton or pavé, should it be a campagne, cereals, or shall we simply stick to la tradition?

I jotted this list down in the small shop in Saint Trégonnec as the assistant made us two sandwiches. These were just the breads that were still in stock, it was after midday already and many had sold out. The sandwiches (in white flutes) were superb, and even with a generous tarte au pommes for dessert still cost less than £7.

Saint Pol de Leon.

Saint Trégonnec was to have been our base for the night, but I hadn’t seen the sea in nearly 24 hours and I was missing its comfort.

Polly has an appointment at the vets for Friday afternoon in Saint Pol so we headed there a day early to wander the streets in the rain.

For my swim I was alone. Perhaps everyone else knew the heavens were about to open. While it doesn’t matter when you’re splashing about in the water, getting out to rain soaked clothes is a bummer, unless, like yesterday, there are hot showers at the campsite just a hundred metres away.

Thursday 8th September.

For whatever reason we decided to eat in the van.

Because of that we were sitting listening to Evan Davies close his PM programme at 6.00 on Thursday 8th September. We were only half listening when he announced that in the last few seconds the BBC had been advised by the palace that the queen had died.

It has always interested me how so many of the thousands of people I’ve met across the numerous countries we’ve travelled have taken an interest in the queen. She was there for everyone, not just the English, the British, or members of the Commonwealth. It is likely that no other living person earned such respect, not just from followers, but from republicans too.

It’s a moment in time. The death of one among so many billions. The death of one who mattered.

The news knocked us. As I said to the campsite owner this morning, we believed she would go on forever.

That space thing.

France has a population similar to that of the UK, but three times the land mass. Take Scotland out of the equation and the picture is only exaggerated. In France there are 119 persons per km square. In England there are 434!

In France there is space. Oodles and oodles of space.

Huge houses spread across the hillsides overlooking the many islands of the bay. Saint Pol de Leon has now joined its town to its seafront. And yet it looks OK.

Once beyond the centre of a town the terraced house is almost unheard of here. Challenging new architecture sits comfortably among the restored farmsteads of those who still work the land. Here cabbages dominate the autumn crops, there’s a little grazing, but more hobby farming than anything they could live off.

The vernacular stands out, because of the warmth of the stone, the patina of the slate roofs, the smaller windows of old. Somehow all these expensive new homes that were probably labelled as monsters at the time of their building fade comfortably and the scene is one of calm.

Our excellent Camping Trologot was handy for the beach, but a bit far to walk up to the town. In the town there is clearly wealth, and it’s a hotspot for rather tempting restaurants.

We weren’t there to eat though. We needed Polly’s health check at the vet before she’s allowed to travel home. The vet was thorough, she asked lots about Polly’s injury from years ago – and she told me in no uncertain terms what she thought of Brexit. According to her the documents we need from the English vet cost anything from £115 to over £200 depending on what the vet thinks they can get away with. Polly’s were £140.

Last day.

This isn’t travel. It’s just a holiday, and holidays come to an end too fast.

It’s Saturday, and tomorrow morning the ferry will be waiting to take us home.

Roscoff is a charming port town and well worth a few days. We’ve been, and stayed, many times before.

This time there’s no romantic hotel for The Wanderers. Our overnight spot is in the disused station car park among 50 or more other vans. At home you’d fear a knock on the door, and expect an expensive ticket, but here it’s free, we’re welcomed even. Nearly every van will eat at one of the gorgeous restaurants in the town tonight, and many will take there breakfast there too. It makes sense. Doesn’t it?

After a walk to the excellent Jardin Exotique we amble past ever more tempting terraces where crêpes and steak frites are the order of the day. Muscles for me, an interesting and huge Breton sausage for Min. We’ll be back for crêpes and cidre later.

Then an early night. And it’ll all be but a memory.