

B40 WE ARE IN BELGIUM...WE THINK

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011

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No, the title isn't a play on that old movie, "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium," but not far from it. The ferry ride from Dover to Calais takes only one hour, barely enough time for a beer and a nap. We bounced down the ramp and set our wheels on French soil again...we think. Unlike 50+ years ago, there was no border guard to greet or stop us; no Carnet de Passage to stamp; no passport to approve. Just point the MG's nose toward land and follow it.

We kept our eye out for the traditional border barriers between France and Belgium, expecting to show, at least, our driver's license. Once again, nothing. Not even a change in road surface to show we'd crossed into the land of beer and gaufrets. Finally we zoomed by a sign on the autoroute. In English it read, "You're in Flemish country." We had no idea that the European Union had gone so far as to strip a country of its border identity. First the Euro, now this.



We arrived in time for dinner at the home of my second cousins, Any and Jean Francois Dardenne. Although we hadn't seen them in twenty-three years, e-mail and Christmas cards have kept us in contact and photos have reduced the shock of the aging process.



A retired teacher, Jean Francois applied his skills in the primary grades. Over ten years ago they acquired a run down farm abandoned for three years. The previous owner found an unspent WWI mortar shell on his property. While trying to salvage the metal, it exploded claiming his life after two days of suffering. His wife and children tried to carry on but finally had to leave the property.

Any, Jean Francois and their twin daughters threw their efforts into making the derelict house and barn buildings into a livable home.



For years Jean Francois attended night classes to develop non-native skills in woodworking, mortar mixing, bricklaying, tile setting and anything else to do with reclaiming buildings almost beyond repair.



Over time he acquired power tools to help him do professional quality cabinetry. This is just one example of the furniture he has created with his own hands.



His wife, Any, also retired from an important role in preparing young women for physical fitness at the high school level. She objected to this picture of her in the kitchen because she prefers to be found in her vegetable or flower gardens. Our visit was the reason she was driven to the kitchen and we can attest she is no slouch at preparing a delicious meal.



Their girls have long left the homestead giving Any and Jean Francois the freedom to do what they want when they want. One of those is maintaining beehives. They remove the honey and sell it. They even use solar power to melt the beeswax into bricks for sale to cosmetic makers.



Years ago they responded to the government's desire to lure tourists to the Belgian countryside by giving financial encouragement to the development of Gites. This is typically a self-serve apartment with multiple bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and living area that is available for rent by the week...very popular in the south of France and catching on elsewhere.



Jean Francois and Any did all the work to reclaim this area from an almost ruin to a very comfortable apartment. This was also our home for the next few days.



As a form of compensation I promised to put their website in this blog. It has the information and pictures so please do us a favor and click on:

<http://www.gite-saintyvon.com>

Don't know if you'll get a discount by mentioning our names but what the hell, give it a try.



They were our tour guides for the city of Ypres; a place known as Leper in Flemish and Wipers by British and American troops in WWI. The town is startling to the eye because it appears to be new and old at the same time.



The walled city of Ypres was virtually destroyed in World War One even though never occupied by the Germans. Following the war the British and American governments, goaded by Winston Churchill, decided to rebuild the town exactly as it appeared before the devastation. It explains why buildings, only ninety years old, appear as if built in the 16th and 17th centuries.



The town hall contains government offices and provides a place for visiting music groups. It also houses a very thorough museum dedicated to the war that took place at its front door. Perhaps we know it best because of the poem, "In Flanders Fields." Today's lush, rolling green landscape hides the horror of a war that turned those fields into a moonscape for miles around but under that soil lies tons of unexploded armament and thousands of soldiers and horses whose final resting place is unknown.



A monument, placed at the entry of the walled city, honors the 54,000 men who perished in those fields but whose bodies were never found. Another monument not three miles from Any and Jean Francois' farm contains the individual names, rank and company of another 11,000.

Recently a neighboring farmer plowed up the skeleton of a British soldier buried in a shallow grave dug where he fell. When this happens a special group comes to identify the remains and searches for others possibly buried nearby. This one had his dog tags and a small alcoholic drink bottle distributed to soldiers, perhaps to get their courage up before battle.



When I asked Jean Francois what happens when a soldier is identified he said, "They locate his name on the monument and erase it." So far they have only 64,999 names left to delete.

Next we meet our other Belgian relatives including one that bears my very own name.

Goodnight from Belgium.
Louise and Ray

