

6 July, 2003

Dear everyone,

I've got a lot to cover in this letter so get comfortable! It's going to be fun.

I expected that I would now be writing to you from a city other than Denver but we are still here. Those of you with long memories will recall that part of the reason we came here was to see the country but we have been here for eight years now!

Employment, or lack thereof

Lan has become quite tired of her job at American Express. While some of the people appreciate Lan's technical skills and her general fun-to-be-with factor, others have been difficult to work with. There was good news in January when her boss was fired!

Therefore, for professional and sightseeing reasons, Lan has been applying for jobs in various cities on the East Coast for almost two years but has nothing to show for it.

However, circumstances have forced another change of plans as I lost my job in late-March. I knew that business was quiet but thought I had another month before I needed to worry. It was quite a shock. Another person was "let go" the day before me.

I had been at Premier Data for a little over three years which is lucky as that time period seems to be a threshold for companies to separate those with experience and those that don't. I spent most of my time working with something called "ColdFusion" and so that is the key word I'm searching for across the various employment web sites. I've done a bit of "ASP" and "Java" but I really can't apply for any jobs where either is the main requirement.

There are few jobs in Denver so I was applying for jobs in Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC. I am ineligible for perhaps half the jobs in Washington as they require government security clearance, for which a precondition is generally US citizenship. Initially I thought that I would move first, leaving Lan to sell up and follow me.

I've largely given up on that idea—it is a big risk if I move but Lan can't get a job in the same city and we already know there are few out there for her. Her job pays a lot more than mine does, so if anyone is out of work it is better to be me. There now seem to be more jobs here than there were in March and April so there is some hope.

Since the decision to be unemployed was made for me by my employer, I am able to collect a government unemployment payment though it took 5 weeks to start. Unemployment "insurance" here is different to the unemployment "benefit" in Australia—employers pay taxes based on the amount they pay in wages and so the amount you get is determined by how much you previously earned. It doesn't matter if Lan earns a million dollars a year or nothing but it lasts for a maximum of one year.

Although I have no paid work, I have plenty to do. We made the decision to repaint our place in January but when I started looking, I was amazed how bad it was. There was wallpaper under the paint; the walls, ceilings, doors and door frames were all a revolting cigarette-stained beige, there were cracks in some corners and the sea-grass matting that covered one wall of our bedroom was full of dust and rotting. I don't know how I've lived here for five years and never noticed. I think being male may have something to do with it. Although I started in January, the pace picked up once I could devote all day, every day to it.

I seem to spend a full day per week looking for jobs, all on the internet and all except one application has been by email or through a web site.

Everyone in IT (Information Technology) needs a lot of acronyms on their resume and I don't have nearly enough so I've been teaching myself some new software. I recently added "LAMP" which stands for Linux/Apache/mySQL/PHP, a useful set of tools to build web sites and all the components are open-source i.e. free, though the proponents of the movement want you to think in terms of "free speech" rather than "free beer".

As a demonstration, I rebuilt our web site and you can see it at www.sweetAndSour.org. Check it out. Although it looks much like the old one at geocities.com, it is far more sophisticated behind the scenes. As soon as this newsletter is done, I'll be attempting to plug the biggest hole on my resume which is Microsoft's ".net". I have exactly 60 days to do it since the trial version of Visual Studio I bought will shut itself down after that.

In the last week I've spent a lot of time working on our car which recently passed 150,000 miles/240,000km. I wasn't expecting it to pass the emissions test but it did so we still have the dear thing. While I was testing the new muffler I installed, the water pump failed so I had to undo the work I did replacing the timing belt to get to it.

I © New York

Lan tuned into a fund-raising auction for one of our local public TV stations and picked up a 3-night/4-day package to go to New York, a place we have wanted to visit for a long time and particularly since the terror attacks.

Real estate prices and by extension, hotel prices, are unbelievable! The business-class hotel that came with the package would have cost US\$269 per night if we were to pay for it ourselves. Fortunately we didn't and the flights were not fixed so we were able to extend it to a week by arranging our own hotel for 3 nights. We booked a "budget" hotel for "just" \$129 per night but Lan thought it too smelly and I found it too noisy so we stayed the last two nights in a hotel that was \$139 per night but with various taxes it came to \$158 per night! Quite surprising really as New York real estate used to be a bargain-in 1625, the Dutch bought the whole Manhattan Island from the local native Americans for goods worth 60 guilders, or roughly \$24. The new town was called New Amsterdam.

In 1664, English warships sailed into the harbor and Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor, surrendered the settlement without a fight. The Dutch regained the colony a few years later but then gave it to England under the terms of a peace treaty, swapping it for spice-growing islands in what is now Indonesia. The English renamed the colony New York. In January 1785, shortly after America gained its independence, New York City became the temporary capital and George Washington was inaugurated there as the nation's first President in April 1789.

Aside from hotel prices, New York was fabulous. We didn't plan what to see and we didn't need to. There is so much to do and everything is so close. The best value in town is the weekly "Metro" card that allows you to hop on an off the excellent subway and bus system as often as you wish

As a tourist, it is essential to see the *Statue of Liberty* but security precautions got in the way. Before boarding the ferry, we had to go through metal detectors and bag searches similar to those at the airport. The ferry took us to the island where the statue stands but you can no longer go inside the statue or the museum at its base. I thought it was a bit rude that they didn't make this clear before we bought our tickets. I also thought it senseless since we had already been searched and if I wanted to blow up the statue, I'd come along at 2am in my own boat rather than take the public ferry. We walked around it twice in the late-October cold and headed back to the wharf for the warmth of the next ferry.



You already know what the Statue of Liberty looks like so there is no point in showing another standard view. This is an artist's impression of it as it might look if the Taliban had defeated America rather than the other way around. The real one was designed by Mr. Eiffel who later did a tower in Paris.

The disappointment at the statue was made up by the visit to the former immigration processing facility at nearby *Ellis Island*. Between 1892 and 1954, 12 million people, mainly from Europe, began their new lives in America right here. For those fleeing oppressive governments, it must have been a tremendous thrill to see the Statue of Liberty as a reminder of their new freedom. New immigrants were interviewed to verify their identity and checked for various diseases. Entry was not automatic. Today you must get a visa before leaving and the airlines won't allow you to board the plane if you do not have the necessary paperwork. It seems in those days, a family might arrive from some poverty-stricken area in Europe, only to have grandfather sent back home because he failed the health test. The shipping companies did some preliminary checking at the port in Europe but in an era before passports and visas they could only reject the most obvious.

Not surprisingly, new immigrants tended to settle in areas of New York where there were already established communities from their home countries. The pattern tended to be that the most recent and poorest arrivals would go to lower (south) Manhattan and then move further uptown and into the wider city as they became more established and integrated. In most cases, the community eventually became so dispersed as to be unrecognizable. There is no longer a German area of Manhattan and *Little Italy* is now just a few streets catering to tourists. On the other hand, Chinatown is enormous and growing. While some probably feel threatened that the Chinese are consuming adjacent neighborhoods, I saw it more as an inability to integrate and therefore an indication of failure.

We did a walking tour run by the *Tenement Museum* on the "Lower East Side". Tenements were buildings of cheap rental accommodation for new migrants. Large extended families crammed into one or two rooms, often with no natural light. To improve conditions, an 1867 law stipulated that a toilet must be provided for every 20 people. As you can imagine, it was almost impossible to stay clean and disease was common.

The *Guggenheim Museum*, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is world-famous for its unusual building¹ with a cork-screw interior. However, the art in the museum was modern and with one exception, to my eyes, completely worthless. That exception was a huge white piece with a single black line running across the middle of it. At first it appeared to be abstract art but on closer inspection it was a photograph taken near to the ground of a snow-covered beach in Iceland, a narrow strip of dark ocean then overcast sky above. Brilliant.

We did an excellent boat trip around the island (it is much longer than I imagined) and then looked over the aircraft carrier *Intrepid* which is docked as a permanent museum. Various aircraft are arranged on the flight deck and the hangar below is crammed with naval history.



At the *Intrepid* floating museum. Lan appears to be saluting to match the military theme but she is just brushing her hair away from her face. Though not carrier-based, an SR-71 spy plane can be seen on the deck.



Lan demonstrates a replica of a one-man submarine powered by a hand-cranked propeller. In 1776, in the first known submarine attack, the *Turtle* tried but failed to sink a British warship blockading New York Harbor during the Revolutionary War.

Lan had trouble with one of her knees and by the time we got to the *Whitney Museum* she could hardly walk so we borrowed one of the museums wheelchairs. It is amazing how people get out of your way when you are in a wheelchair! By the time we left she was feeling a lot better and I had to tell her to limp on her way out so it looked like she needed it. The Whitney was full of interesting pictures, made so much more enjoyable by the (free) electronic guide. It looks like a telephone handset and selected pictures are numbered so you punch in the number and hear the story. Unlike a guided tour, you can always see what it is you are hearing about and best of all, if you speak Japanese or German or whatever, the staff just punch a few buttons to reprogram it for your language. A similar system was used at the *Museum Of Modern Art* where there was some quite interesting material.

No discussion of New York is complete without references to tall buildings. The guidebook mentioned that there would be a long wait if tried to get up the *Empire State Building* during the day so we went there at night for an excellent panorama of city lights. There are historical photos of the building at the observation level including one of a horse peeking out of the elevator!

At that time it was just over a year since the *World Trade Center* towers had been brought down and remarkably, the cleanup was complete. We wanted to see the hole at "Ground Zero" but found that construction work was underway to build a walkway along the edge so it was fenced off and we couldn't see in. We were disappointed not to be able to get closer but as we left, we found an unexpected memorial to all those that lost their lives that fateful day. A huge tree had shielded nearby St. Paul's church from the flying debris as the towers collapsed so it was virtually undamaged. A fence with vertical iron bars surrounds the block and every available space was covered with a homemade memorial or "Missing" poster. It was very moving because it was created spontaneously by those closest to the missing rather than manufactured by a committee. The church housed an exhibition as it had been a base for those responding to the emergency and then those picking through the rubble. The photo that sticks in my mind was a pair of civilian shoes on top of two of the iron bars of the fence—the owner was one of the rescuers that had raced to the scene and changed into work gear but then never returned. Very sad.

I intended to visit both the Police and Fire Department Museums since they both suffered

so terribly that day but I left it until our last day only to find they are closed on Mondays. There was a caretaker at the Police Museum and we chatted briefly to him about his experiences.



Completed in 1902, the elegant 21-storey *Flatiron* building is shaped like tall slice of cake. Like all tall buildings now, it has a steel frame. I've read that "the building created unusual eddies in the wind which would cause women's skirts to fly around as they walked on 23rd street. This attracted throngs of young men who gathered to view the barelegged spectacle." It was calm the day we visited.

We went looking for the spot where John Lennon was killed but couldn't find it. I knew that the Dakota Building was on 72nd Street but incorrectly believed it was on the eastern side of Central Park.



At the lake in Central Park.

Grand Central Station has been extensively renovated so we went to look at the building but were surprised and delighted to see a stirring exhibition of photographs called *A day in the life of Africa*² in of its side rooms.

We wandered around low-rise Greenwich Village and took a short cable car ride to Roosevelt Island. One night we saw a Broadway show, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, which was fun but expensive. We got our tickets at half price from the booth in Times Square but at US\$48 each, I wonder who pays full price.

The Netherlands and France

In a move designed to capture the attention of those who consider "on sale" to be the most exciting phrase in the English language, United Airlines slashed fares to Europe to \$505 late last year. It worked for Lan and we booked tickets to Paris for a 2½ week trip leaving late-November. In fact, in a move signaling utter desperation, we could have flown for \$258 had we waited.

¹ http://www.guggenheim.com/the_building.html

² <http://www.ditlafrica.com>

The flight on a 777 from Washington to Paris was extremely uncomfortable—the Boeing employee who came up with the 2-5-2 seating arrangement across the plane instead of 3-3-3 should be fired and 79cm/31" seat spacing is way too tight for a long haul flight. However, we did have the lovely *Dominique* as our chief flight attendant. I never did get to see her but she had a gorgeous, sexy French accent that made me hang on every word of the safety presentation. I was hoping that the in-flight movies would be canceled and she would read us a story instead.

Our first stop was *Amsterdam* and we could have flown there but where is the fun in that when you can go by rail? The *Thalys* trains run at up to 300km/h or 200 mph! Flying at ground level. It was extremely impressive—so smooth you don't really have a sensation of speed and you get a view. The *TGV* train we were later to catch from Paris to Lyon was somewhat noisier and rougher making you feel like you are moving very, very fast, all the more so because it was dark.

Amsterdam is a fabulous city but we probably would not have made the detour were not for a wonderful family that lives in nearby Hilversum. Lan met Dorien in a refugee camp in Singapore in 1981 where she was teaching English and French. Dorien's husband Jaap was there on a temporary assignment with a Dutch bank and at

that time they had two small children.

With its extensive canal network, Amsterdam is sometimes called the *Venice of the North* though strangely, I've never heard Venice described as the *Amsterdam of the South*. Anyway, we visited in 1994 and I enjoyed the canal tour so much then that I was keen to do it again. The city is just as beautiful as I remembered.

Jaap took us for a drive and we stopped at *Muiden Castle*. It is a classic small castle with towers, a moat and a strategic position at the mouth of the River Vecht which was the trade route to Utrecht and key to the defense of Amsterdam. This structure dates from 1370

The tour included a room of armor and weapons from the Middle Ages. Two items were particularly interesting. One was suit of armor that weighed 70 kg/150 lbs. which would protect its wearer but severely limit his mobility. The other was stone balls, perhaps 40 cm/16" in diameter. I thought they were to be fired from a primitive cannon but they were to be rolled down steps as enemy soldiers climb up to attack.



Muiden Castle — picture reproduced with kind permission of Laurence Delderfield. Check out his stunning photography at www.delderfield.nl



With *Quinta*, our favorite 4-legged friend at Jaap and Dorien's house. Note the security blanket.

I normally don't like domestic animals in general and dogs in particular but *Quinta* was indeed special.

Dorien produced a wonderful dinner to which the now-adult children came with their husband and girlfriend. So much fun!

In conversation, we discovered that English-language films are generally not subtitled into the local European language but dubbed. Famous actors use the same foreign voice actor for every film so that European audiences associate a voice with a particular actor. The Tom Hanks you hear in Italy is not the Tom Hanks you hear in France or Germany. Indeed, it is not Tom Hanks.

Unfortunately we couldn't stay in Amsterdam long but we will definitely be back. I can even imagine living in Amsterdam which is not impossible since I have a British (i.e. E.U.) passport and almost everyone speaks English (and probably French and German as well). The Dutch are amazing.

The main focus of this trip was France. As you probably know, Lan speaks quite good French so we had no language barrier. When planning, I failed to grasp how small France is—at 547,030 km², it is close to the combined areas of Colorado and Wyoming, or about two-thirds the size of New South Wales—so we were able to see much more than I dared hope. Since it was winter, I was concerned about the limited daylight hours and cold weather so I wanted to be as far south as possible. Denver is about as far north as Madrid; the US-Canadian border is roughly level with Paris. I thought we *might* get to see some chateaux around Tours.

We stayed a few days in a village near *Lyon* with the family of Fabienne, a girl we met in Australia when she was an *au pair* with one of Lan's friends. They were very kind to us as we used their house to explore the surrounding area.

Though we probably could have done the trip by train and bus, we decided to rent a car to give us greater flexibility. I booked a Renault *Twingo*, a



car I've admired for years but never actually seen. It was a blast! Just 3.43m/135" long with ABS, central locking, 1150cc, 55kW/75hp, easy cruising at 130kmh/80mph. Available with leather and a huge sunroof. So cute! If they were sold in America, I'd buy one without hesitation.



Le Twingo fantastique! It is said that *The French copy nobody ... and nobody copies the French!* In this case, that's a pity. I wasn't keen on the metallic dark-olive color though.

Once we were away on our own, our first stop was *Orange*, a city that in Roman times had 80,000 residents justifying the construction of a fine theater. There was an impromptu demonstration of the acoustics when an uninhibited tourist took the stage and burst into song! A statue of Caesar looks down on the audience from a niche near the top of the wall to remind patrons who is in charge. In fact, the Romans lost 80,000 soldiers attempting to capture the area in 105 BC but took it three years later under General Marius. The triumphal arch is the third largest still standing and its well-preserved carvings show the Rome's army and navy vanquishing its enemies.



The Roman Theater in Orange seats 7000 and was built in the last decade BC. It is one of only 3 that retain the wall behind the stage, the others being in Turkey and Syria making them rather less accessible. Events are still held there.



Triumphal Arch completed in 26 AD.

A short distance away is *Vaucluse* where a river surges out of the ground beneath a cliff and then tumbles down the hillside. My parents brought me here in 1983 and I was very keen for Lan to see it too since it is so unusual. It was well above normal flow when we saw it.



Fontaine de Vaucluse.

We did not book hotels figuring that since it was off-season we would have no trouble. We did. Many hotels in tourist areas are closed during winter so we drove to Avignon in the dark, something we both wanted to avoid since navigation is so much harder. The road we took became extremely narrow and twisted as we approached the town, reflecting the fact that it was probably once a goat herding route. We were exhausted by the time we found an open hotel and then a parking space. The final difficulty was stepping in *merde*—what a dog leaves behind, in this case, a large dog—while we were unloading the car. We had to enter the hotel in socks. Disgusting. We saw evidence of irresponsible dog ownership everywhere after that.

It was bitterly cold the following day as indeed it was for the rest of the trip. It was overcast most of the time so many of the photos here are from postcards since ours are dark and lifeless. In any case, I didn't have a helicopter available.

Civil strife in what is now Italy during the 1300s forced the Pope to get out of Rome and take up residence in *Avignon*. A fortified palace was built to house him though there isn't much to see inside. The bridge was far more interesting. As the story goes, a shepherd entered church during mass claiming God had told him to build a bridge over the river. The crowd laughed but someone set a test for him saying that if God had sent him, he would be able to lift a huge stone. He did; the bridge was built. First of timber but then of stone, the bridge opened in 1185 but had to be repaired after every flood. The river finally won in 1669. There is also a nursery song about the bridge.



The bridge at Avignon and Palace of the Popes at right. The land to the left is merely an island.

Nearby is the magnificent *Pont du Gard* aqueduct. Completed about 50 AD it supplied 400 liters/second to the city of Nimes, 40 km/25 miles away. Maintenance ceased in the 4th Century with the fall of Rome and by the 9th Century, lime deposits in the channel blocked

the flow. It is not nearly as long as the one Lan saw in Segovia, Spain but at 49m/160 ft it is taller.



The aqueduct at Pont du Gard.

In nearby *Nimes*, we saw an amphitheater similar to the Coliseum in Rome though on a smaller scale but in much better condition. It is still in use and when we arrived, there was an "International Festival of Denim". Indeed, the town was famous for its sturdy cotton cloth that became known as the fabric of Nimes and since "of" in French is "de" and they don't pronounce the last "s", we get our word "denim". The city also had a Roman temple called the *Square House*—even though it is clearly rectangular—and fine gardens with fountains, channels and small lakes dating from the 18th Century.

At Nimes we stumbled on to the *Hotel Formule 1* which was spotlessly clean, quiet and cheap. Cheap hotels in the US are cheap because they are old and nasty. The people behind this chain have obviously thought hard about what people *really* want in a hotel and then ruthlessly cut out everything else.



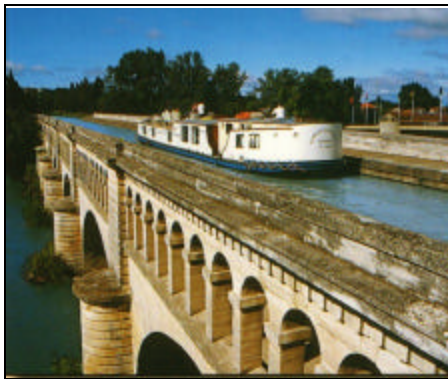
Le hotel automatique. This is the check-in facility at Hotel Formule 1. It looks like an ATM because it takes your credit card, issuing you with a room number and a PIN that you punch into a keypad next to the door. There is no key. A person is at the front desk only from 5-9pm.

Each room sleeps two in a double bed and a third on a bunk bed above. There is a single 10-n-g sheet folded over instead of two, a small TV and sink. There are shared toilets and showers but before you say "Yuk", let me tell you that they are largely-self cleaning. When you leave the toilet it flushes automatically. There are little jets near the floor that appear to spray disinfectant. Same for the shower but when you step out, the red light indicating "busy" stays on for a time while it runs the exhaust fan hard to clear steam. A hot air blower is mounted high on the wall as a hair dryer..

At the time, one Euro was worth almost exactly one US dollar and we paid 21-26 Euros in different cities meaning we could stay for a week in these for the price of one night in a lousy hotel in New York!

In downtown Nimes we passed a hair salon with the words *Ne pas jaloux* painted boldly on the window. This translates as "Do not be jealous [of someone with a better haircut]" and we found it extremely amusing. Ever since we got married, Lan would say "You just being very jealous" if I offered a compliment or commented on something she had. Now we both use the French version.

Bezier is near the start of the 240 km/150 mile *Canal du Midi*. This colossal engineering achievement enabled bulk cargo to be moved from the Mediterranean to Toulouse and down the Garonne River to Bordeaux on the Atlantic, bypassing the long journey around Spain and Portugal. As Collector of the Salt Tax for Languedoc, Pierre-Paul Riquet amassed a considerable fortune but sank it all into achieving his vision. However, the costs were so great that he had to seek government funds as well. He died just before it was completed in 1681³.



The *Canal du Midi* at Bezier as it passes over the River Orb. This photo is from a postcard as the canal is drained of water during winter. A series of 9 locks is nearby as is a modern innovation: an inclined trough with a moving "dam" at the downhill end that pushes a triangle of water uphill taking floating boats with it.

An incredible massacre took place in Bezier in 1209 as part of the *Albigensian Crusade*⁴. You have probably heard of the crusades against the Muslims in the Holy Land and Spain but this was against fellow-Christians.

The Cathars renounced worldly pleasures believing they came from the Devil and lived an austere, simple life. There were similarities with the movement started slightly later by St. Francis of Assisi. However, they opposed the teachings and authority of the Roman Catholic church. Politically, the Languedoc region where the sect was strongest was outside the control of the French king. The Pope organized a Crusade to rid the region of heretics promising the soldiers an indulgence (forgiveness of their sins) and allowing the French knights to confiscate the lands they conquered.

When the Crusaders arrived in Bezier on July 21st, they demanded that the Cathars be handed over but the local Roman Catholics did not cooperate. On the 22nd, the invaders broke through the town walls and started killing

everyone. When asked by one of the crusaders about the possible killing of Catholics along with the heretic Cathars, the Papal representative is supposed to have replied "*Kill them all! God will recognize His own!*" Between 10,000 and 20,000 died that day, including 6,000 that had sought refuge on church grounds. The Crusade continued on and off until 1255.

Carcassonne is Europe's quintessential fortified city. The defenses reached their current form in the 13th Century: two massive walls with imposing towers shield a large castle within. However, in the 17th Century, the border with Spain moved south making the fortifications redundant.

Legend has it that during a long siege by Charlemagne in the 9th Century, the city was starving and close to surrender. The mayoress had an idea: a pig was fed with the last of the grain and catapulted over the wall. The animal burst on impact, scattering the grain. The attackers concluded that the city must still have plenty of food—so they gave up the siege and went home!



Walled city of Carcassonne.

We visited several small medieval towns including pretty *Sarlat* which is now home to the *fois gras* (goose liver paste) industry. I wasn't keen on the product anyway but now I see that the geese are force-fed, I'm even less interested.

After visiting the famous chateaux of the Loire River valley around Tours and Blois in 1983, I could see why the French had a revolution. If I were a peasant toiling in the fields, I'd consider cutting off the heads of those who erected such vulgar displays of wealth. Nevertheless, they are nice to look at, none more so that *Chenonceau*.



Chenonceau. During WW1, the owner converted it to a hospital at his own expense. During WW2, the chateau straddled the border between German-occupied territory and that controlled by the Vichy government so people and goods were smuggled through the building.

Built in the 16th Century, its architecture reflected the new political stability as its features were for decoration rather than defense. It

escaped the Revolution largely unscathed as the owners had been generous to the local people so they were spared, as were the remarkable furniture and tapestries.

We also saw *Villandry* or at least its beautiful gardens, *Azay-le-Rideau* that sits in a lake by a river, the outside of *Ussé* and mighty *Chambord* with its 365 chimneys.

At this point I should comment on eating in France. Since we were on secondary roads most of the time, our first stop of the day was generally at a village *patisserie/boulangerie* (bakery) to get something for breakfast and to take something away for lunch. I can now say with some authority that the best in all of France is in *le Bourgneuf-la Forêt*, a mere speck on the map. After a few mouthfuls of a chocolate/ almond thing, Lan went back in for more!

Sadly, it appears that village life in France is dying, just as it is in small towns across America and Australia. Most of the young people have moved to the big cities with their suburban shopping malls and tract homes making them look like everywhere else. The most picturesque villages will remain as tourist attractions but they will lose, if they haven't already, their workaday authenticity.

I got tired of French drivers that constantly tailgated me, even if I was 20km/h over the speed limit. If I came to a roundabout, I generally went around several times to let them pass. Not long after leaving *le Bourgneuf-la Forêt* we thought we were about to witness a fatal collision. We were driving along at the 90 km/h limit on a road over rolling hills. Someone came up behind doing at least 120 and then swung out to overtake only to find an oncoming car approaching over the crest of the hill. He was able to slam on the brakes and get back behind us but after that he stayed well back and matched our speed. It seemed that the incident had scared the *merde* out of him.

Mont St. Michel rises above the mudflats on a granite outcrop just offshore like a huge ship at sea. The first Christian building on the site was built in 708 and it gradually grew from there along with fortifications and a village at the bottom of the slopes. In fact, the statue of St Michael on top of the steeple is a mere century old. After the Revolution, it was used as a prison for a time. The car park is flooded during very high tides so a sign tells you in French, English and German how long you can stay.



Mont St. Michel.

After the Americans entered World War 2 in December 1941, Hitler grew concerned about an invasion so he ordered the construction of the

³ More: <http://www.canalmidi.com/anglais/indexgb.html>

⁴ More: <http://xenophongroup.com/montjoie/albigens.htm>

Atlantic Wall, a system of 15,000 gun emplacements and obstacles along the coast all the way from Denmark to Spain. Fortunately for the Allies, it was not quite complete for D-Day, the 6th of June 1944, when they surged ashore on the Normandy beaches.

We visited *Omaha Beach* which had been assigned to the Americans. Although they suffered terrible losses, they broke through and were over the beach before noon. I'm often critical of American foreign policy but this was America's finest hour, demonstrating what it means to fight for freedom. I had to fight back tears after reading the inscription on the memorial:

*1st US Infantry Division
No mission too difficult.
No sacrifice too great. Duty first.
Forced Omaha Beach at dawn 6 June*



Memorial on Omaha Beach

The Atlantic Wall failed but establishing a foothold was not going to win the war. The Allies needed to get whole Armies ashore and though there are many excellent French ports, they knew that the Germans would destroy them as they retreated. The Allies would have to build their own.

They chose the nearby fishing village of *Amaranches*. On D-Day, 17 old ships were sunk offshore to provide an immediate breakwater so smaller boats could start unloading. 115 huge concrete barges were towed from England across the Channel and sunk further out to form a solid breakwater 6 km/4 miles long, then prefabricated dock facilities were positioned. Forty ships could unload at once. In the six days after D-Day, 326,000 men, 54,000 vehicles from Jeeps to battle tanks and 110,000 tons of supplies were brought ashore. A small museum explains it well.

As we drove on to Caen to find the hotel, I reflected on the ferocious battles fought across this area within the lifetime of some still living here.

In the evenings, Lan generally fell asleep early and I would watch TV. Benny Hill reruns needed no translations and I enjoyed French soccer. That evening, the Nantes' goalkeeper Landreau made a sensational save from a penalty shot taken by Brazilian star Ronaldinho playing for Paris.

One of the highlights of the trip was the *Bayeux Tapestry*. I had seen it in 1983 but had no memory of it. It is essentially a 900-year-old cartoon telling the story of how William of Normandy became William the Conqueror at the *Battle of Hastings* in 1066. It is in stunning condition given its age.



Bayeux Tapestry. Here, hapless Harold swears on the relics of saints that he will hand over the crown to William who bailed him out of trouble.

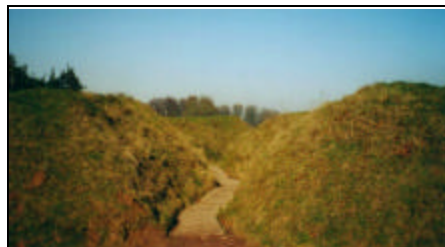
We visited *Amiens* to see the magnificent cathedral and I wanted to visit the site of ghastly WW1 Battle of the Somme where over a million died fighting for very little.



Notre-Dame cathedral at Amiens was completed in 1280 and the peak of the ceiling is 42m/138 ft high. Notre-Dame in Paris could fit inside it twice.



There are 4000 carved figures inside & outside.



Trenches at the site of Battle of the Somme.



The Australian memorial at the Somme.

I've pondered how long we remember a war and concluded as long as survivors are still alive. The Napoleonic Wars changed Europe just as drastically, yet I feel no link with them. The very last survivors of WW1 are dying now and that chapter of history is closing. A hundred years from now, the trenches will be barely distinguishable, the evidence gone.

Guns, germs and steel

I was enormously impressed by Roman achievements two thousand years ago and what stone masons were doing in the 1200s. The Chinese were doing similar things at similar times. I read a book on European exploration and conquest up to 1600 and was astonished to learn that a few hundred Spanish conquistadors defeated the Aztec and Inca empires, each with millions of subjects. There was no Iron Age in Australia or the Americas and in the Americas, only the Maya developed writing. Why didn't the aborigines discover Captain Cook instead of the other way around? The question is important as we might think that Eurasians are smarter than Africans, native Americans and Australian aborigines but that is essentially racist.

Jared Diamond has written a Pulitzer-prize winning book attempting to answer this question and I urge you to read it: *Guns, Germs and Steel: Fates of Human Societies*. He argues it is largely due to the plant and animal species available for domestication and the shape of the continents. Indeed, they are smarter than us. See a summary: www.edge.org/3rd_culture/diamond/diamond_p1.html

Other items of interest

You will hear a lot later this year about the centenary of the Wright brothers' first flight. You probably won't hear that others including a New Zealander⁵ possibly and an American⁶ probably have a better claim on the title but their PR wasn't as good.

We saw the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* about 3 Aboriginal children that were taken from their family. If you are Australian and haven't seen it, make sure you rent a video.

Don't mention the war: Those pesky weapons of mass destruction haven't turned up but the American public doesn't seem to care⁷. I support overthrowing evil dictators but I'm wondering when the US plans to take on Robert Mugabe. Perhaps it was about oil after all. Oh I'm cynical.

Bumper stickers:

- Lord, help me to be the person that my dog thinks I am.
- People who are different change the world; normal people keep it as it is.

Well, this is the end. Depending on the job situation and whether United Airlines is still flying, we *might* be home for Christmas. With love, *Peter* and *Lan*

⁵ <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/Gallery/Pearse/Pearse.html>

⁶ <http://www.unmuseum.org/gustave.htm>

⁷ For something refreshing: "Weapons of Mass Salvation" http://www.economist.com/opinion/displayStory.cfm?story_id=1403544