

June

Image

Lille

So our first stop is Lille. Apparently it comes from “l’île”, french for “the island”, which is weird because it’s not an island.

While we’re talking Lille facts, here are a few more:

- it’s where the Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG) vaccine was discovered
- until recent times its main industries were mining and textile manufacture
- Lille is twinned with Leeds in the UK
- like the rest of France, Lille still has a C&A

I thought it might be nice to sign off with the unofficial song of Lille, a lullaby called P’tit Quinquin:

“Sleep, my little child,
My little chick, my plump grape,
You will cause me grief
If you don’t sleep until tomorrow.”

Tom

Image

Walking in Scarpe-Escaut

Over the last few days we've been walking through the Scarpe-Escaut national park.

We've seen forests, farmland and surprisingly pleasing mining slag heaps that dot the landscape. It's amazing to see all the plants and trees growing out of these massive piles of rock.

And you get an excellent view from the top.

Along the way we also saw:

- a mine-shaft winding tower.
- an old tower which used to pump water out of the mines.
- loads of logs, piled to the side of the paths, some with their own QR codes.

Near the end of one walk we met a lovely man who ran a sandwich shop in the town of Beuvrages. When we told him about our trip, he gave us water and snacks for free. What a gent.

We reckon we've walked about 40 miles so far - 10 by mistake. Oops.

Tom

July

Image

History of Scarpe-Escaut

The Scarpe and Escaut rivers name the area and also frame it, running along the top two of its edges, the former through Saint-Amand-Les-Eaux.

Mining was the main industry from the 1700s right up until the 1960s and you feel it walking through.

The slag heaps around Sabatier still remain but now as part of the landscape, not just piled on top.

The forests you walk through are apparently new, the Germans having levelled the last one to fuel their armies in World War One.

Through English eyes, terrace houses in the local towns remind you of those in the north of England.

It all just makes you think of what happened here and how lucky you are to see it now.

Tom

Quesnoy, sort of like quinoa

On Saturday we walked from Valenciennes to Le Quesnoy.

We quickly realised that pronouncing Quesnoy was beyond our rusty French.

The tourist information in Valenciennes said “kays-noi” but nobody else did.

The Internet says it’s “kay-nwah”, a bit like quinoa and at least as difficult to say.

Anyway, we ended up staying north of Le Quesnoy in Frasnoy.

We fucked up saying that too.

Image

Maroilles

Yesterday we walked around 20 kilometres from Frasnoy to Maroilles in the Avesnois natural regional park.

Our feet are sore so we're having a rest day in Maroilles, a town famous for its delicious cheese. Clever us.

We've been repeatedly calling Maroilles 'Cheesy Town', sung to the tune of 'Funky Town'. We expect this will continue to endear us to the locals until we leave.

Roz

Image

5 things we're glad we brought

Dr Bronner's soap (baby unscented)

We've used Dr Bronner's soap a lot already - mainly for washing clothes and dishes. I've used the almond-scented one before but I reckon the baby one's better because you don't walk around smelling like a Bakewell tart after every clothes wash.

Thermarest pillow

All the camping shop nerds told us the Thermarest compressible pillow was definitely the thing. It's filled with memory foam cutoffs, which expand when you unpack the pillow. It felt a bit flimsy in the shop but the ones we bought online have been excellent so far. The Thermarest mattresses are great too.

MSR tent

Our beloved tent was a bit pricey but it's been excellent. Super-light, super-easy to put up, roomy and very handsome.

Phones

We don't get charged for data roaming in the EU any more (for now) so we've used our phones for loads of stuff, including:

- navigating using Google Maps and Galileo
- transferring money
- booking campsites
- updating our blog
- staying in touch with people back home

We're completely dependent on them.

Tom's Trangia stove

I've never seen Tom look at anyone, or anything, the way he looks at his Trangia stove.

Other excellent things include the:

- Swiss Army knife
- Compeed blister plasters
- bite and sting cream
- tourist information maps
- hand sanitiser

Image

Felleries

Felleries is a small town in the east of the Avenois national park area.

We passed through quite a few of these kinds of towns but had such a good time in Felleries we thought it was worth writing about.

The eco museum

Felleries is one of a few towns in the area with an 'eco museum' to give visitors an idea of the crafts they're known for.

Felleries is famous for woodworking and its museum is both excellent and amazing value. For just 4 euros you get a:

- walk round the museum to see the history
- demonstration of the watermill grinding wheat into flour
- bit where you have to guess types of wood by smell alone
- demonstration of wood-turning on a lathe

Image

The water mill

The mill's dam had 3 gates in it. 1 to control the main flow of the river and 2 more for the waterwheels in the mill.

When either of these gates was opened, water flooded onto the corresponding wheel. The water pressure pushed the wheel round.

A shaft connected to the axle of the waterwheel turns a millstone against another static one. Grain is fed in between and the resulting flour falls out into sacks.

Smell my wood

We got to have a go at a game where you had to guess types of wood by smelling them.

We guessed 3 out of 10 which sounds rubbish but we were told it was quite good. It was clearly rubbish though.

Wood-turning

The wood-turning demonstration was amazing. Using only a lathe and a bandsaw, our guide and resident wood-turning expert, started with a bit of branch and ended up with a wooden mushroom in just a few minutes.

You also get to take the result away with you.

Image

The campsite

A brilliant lady named Sylvie runs the municipal campsite where we stayed. When we checked in she explained what made it so cool.

It used to be a train station

Opposite the campsite reception is this building that used to be the ticket hall of a train station.

The tracks are long gone so you have to visualise what it used to look like but you can still make out the edge of the platform. It also turns out the campsite's reception building used to be a shelter for passengers.

Sylvie said the ghost of the train sometimes passes through late at night...

There are sculptures all around

A local artist created sculptures for the campsite which you can see around the grounds.

Jenny the elephant

There's a sculpture of local celebrity Jenny the elephant (blog post on this soon) near the entrance.

Image

The sculpture is made of wicker and iron, among other things and took hours of work to complete.

The lost head

On the way out we heard the village is about to close for a few days to stage a show called “To lose your head” comprising 10 performances and asking the audience to find the missing head of a murder victim.

Amazing... what a place! We were sad to leave.

Tom

Image

France to Belgium

Trélon to Chimay

We crossed the border from France to Belgium a couple of days ago while we were walking from Trélon (famous for its glass-making) to Chimay (famous for its Trappist beer).

Crossing the border

The thing about crossing the border was that it wasn't really a thing. No checkpoint. Not even a sign saying we were leaving France or entering Belgium. We were a bit disappointed by the lack of ceremony but really struck by how:

- strict the English border is by comparison
- Europe feels like much more of a single unit when you don't make a big deal about moving between countries

Nismes

In other news, we're now in Nismes and it's delightful. After 2 big walks in a row, it's a lovely place to take a rest day and recover.

There's an excellent park where you can play with kinetic water sculpture things.

And the hotel we're staying in is great too. The owner collects everything from tea strainers to toilet roll.

Nismes was only meant to be a stopover but it's turned out to be a surprise treat. That's been one of the great things about walking. A lot of the best stuff happens in between the places we plan to visit.

Image

The River Meuse

Since our last post, we've been camping 20 yards from a Bastille Day disco, hiking 23 kilometres in 1 day (our longest yet with packs on) and walking alongside the River Meuse.

The Meuse flows north, leaving France just after the town of Givet, and goes all the way to the North Sea through Belgium and the Netherlands.

We've been walking against the tide from Fumay to Monthermé in France. We've just started walking along the River Semois which we'll follow into the Belgian Ardennes and, ultimately, Bouillon.

Walking the Meuse

Walking along the Meuse is easy thanks to a path called 'the green route' which runs alongside it.

As you walk the path you see how important to the area the river is. Apart from all the people fishing from its banks, it's also a route for small boats. Locks appear regularly so you often find yourself watching as the boats go through.

From what we saw, the locals are looking to make even more use of the river. At almost every major town we passed a dam was being built, we assumed to provide electricity from the tidal power.

Fumay

Our first river town was Fumay. Like other towns along the Meuse, it sits in the loop of the river, like an island.

The land on one side of the river in Fumay is quite steep, so it towers over you. Together with the river it makes a beautiful view.

The other thing we noticed at Fumay was slate. They've got tons of it. You see it in the hills and in all the buildings. For a grey(ish) stone, it's full of colour and really adds to find the beauty of the area.

We need to talk about Revin

Revin is south of Fumay and our second river stop. The first thing we noticed about it was its petanque club. The club is on the town's west side and its many pitches spread along the bank.

But our main memory of Revin is of camping there.

We were given a pitch between a sewer opening and the ping-pong tables. That was OK actually but on returning from a walk around town, we realised a festival was being set up with a stage 20 yards from our tent.

It took a while to shake all the euro-pop and French disco from our dreams.

Monthermé

The walk between Revin and Monthermé (the next town) ended up being 23 kilometres and it taught us a valuable lesson.

The beauty of walking the Meuse is the lack of any up or down to it. The river is always the lowest point and the flattest. But all the lovely winding loops mean you end up walking a long way to make progress in any direction.

I'd like to say something nice about Monthermé, and it looked lovely walking through it, but we'd come a long way and our minds were more focused on blisters and bed.

Just one more thing

Oh yeah, and along the way we saw a church that looked just like a cyberman.

We've just started on the Semois so more on that to come.

Image

Snoop Dogg in the forest

This is for the trees.

This is for the rustlers.

This is for the rustlers.

Now back to the trees.

Freeze.

Eat cheese.

Now let's look at some more of those trees.

Image

The River Semois

We stayed in Bouillon yesterday, the last stop on our travels along the Semois river. We started in Monthermé and followed the river through Les Hautes-Rivières, Laforêt and Poupehan (I'll just leave that there) before reaching Bouillon.

Looking back, walking along the Semois was quite a different experience from walking along the Meuse. On the stretch we walked, it was rarely deeper than a few feet and the water was clear enough that you could see everything below the surface.

Because it's so shallow and accessible, people waste no time wading in and enjoying it. Whether it's people fishing knee deep in it, kayaking down it or just kids splashing around, there's always something happening.

Some towns even have their own mini-beaches so local families can spend the morning in the river.

Walking the Semois

Sometimes walking along the Semois was great. There were paths that were made for pedestrians and right next to the river.

At other times the forest ran right up to the river on one side with only a road on the other side.

We've had mixed experiences walking alongside roads so we started investigating the forest paths.

In France, following the Grande Randonnée (GR) routes was pretty straightforward. Whenever we saw a red and white marking we blindly followed it. Along the Semois though, we were seeing red and white GR markings everywhere and in ways inconsistent enough to make us doubt if we were on the right track.

Our favourite example is this terrifying sign telling hikers the route ahead is both a GR route (by having a red and white marking) and one you should never take.

With hindsight, these kinds of paths might be OK for walkers without much baggage and an interest in routes that put you right in the trees. The weight of our packs meant our focus was more on getting somewhere as

quickly as possible and with as little 'up and down' as possible.

Despite all this, following these trails did mean we got to see views like this.

Just one more thing

It turns out France isn't the only country with churches that look like people. Here's one we saw in Bohan, a village we passed through on our second day walking the Semois.

Tom

Broken boots

“What’s that on the side of your boot?” said Roz as we waited for a bus in Bouillon.

It looked like a small crack so I bent my sole to test how bad it was.

“Interesting...” I thought, as the inside of my sole revealed itself to the world.

“Your boots are fucked!” said Roz. She wasn’t wrong.

I originally got my boots from a friend of my brother-in-law who was getting a new pair so kindly offered them to me.

They’ve come walking with me to several countries so it wasn’t a big surprise to find they’d run their course.

Luckily we were headed to Namur then Brussels in a few days, both of which have a few outdoor stores.

A bit of browsing and a quick decision later and I’ve got some new boots.

Here they are, next to the old ones, looking a bit like new soldiers sent to relieve a battalion who've done their tour of duty.

I left my old ones with the rubbish bags at our friends Stu and Sam's flat in Brussels. I think it's fair to say they performed above and beyond what was expected of them and the next time we have a drink in hand I'll be raising it to them.

Cheers!

Tom

Image

Brussels

After around 3 weeks of walking about 350 kilometres, we decided it was time to take a holiday from our holiday so we went to see friends in Brussels for the weekend.

As soon as we were settled, the excellent Sam and Stu took us on “The Tour” and it didn’t disappoint.

The Tour

- Manneken Pis
- Art Deco architecture
- Jazz in the park
- Walking around the streets and flea markets in Sablon
- Tintin museum
- Drinking chocolate
- Eating chocolate
- Drinking beer
- Looking at beer
- Berlaymont building (home of the EU Commission)

We had an excellent time in Brussels. I don’t think our trip would have felt complete without visiting what’s been the

heart of Europe for so long. And with Stu and Sam to show us around, it felt like we got a real sense of what a brilliant city it is. A city that incited Tom to utter the immortal words, “Look at all the doilies!” Unmissable.

Next stop, Strasbourg.

Image

Starting Germany with the Black Forest

We arrived in Germany yesterday after getting a train to Baden Baden (so good they named it twice) from Strasbourg.

To explain, the day before we got a train to Strasbourg to get us into the Alsace region and give us a place from which to enter Germany.

We chose Baden Baden because we thought it would be a good starting place for walking the Black Forest.

For what feels like the second phase of our trip, we're starting by following the Ortenauer wine route to get some experience of walking in the Black Forest and to get further south.

We're still getting used to Germany and all the things that go with starting in a new country. So far so good though. The food, the trails and the views have all been great.

Image

Lying signs

When you're walking everywhere, distances matter. And when you see signs telling you how far it is to your destination, you believe them.

Well, not any more we don't. Not after yesterday's 18-kilometre hike which was supposed to be 12.5 kilometres.

And not after we dutifully followed a series of signs to Oberkirch which stretched our gullibility to breaking point.

We'd see one sign which told us we had 4 kilometres to go, then at least 2 kilometres later, we'd see one saying that we had 5 kilometres to go after all. Cue some colourful language describing what we were going to do with the next duplicitous sign we saw.

Lying signs (sung to the tune of Lyin' Eyes) aside, walking in the Black Forest has been a delight. A bit wiggly and up and down, but the views, paths and people have all been super.