

Trip to Le Touquet September 2008

This was a trip which, after teetering on the edge of disaster a couple of times, eventually turned out a great success. When we heard how serious the Channel Tunnel fire was, and how difficult it would be to get to the ferry, we were on the point of abandoning the trip before we'd started.

John Rees called a meeting for 8.15 on the morning we were due to depart, and everyone thought that there would just be a formal decision to abandon the trip. A few minutes earlier, however, Colin had had a brilliant idea. Why not fly from Lydd in Kent direct to Le Touquet? By the time we'd all assembled at John's at 8.30 it was all set up – we could charter a plane from Lyddair on Saturday morning, returning on Monday afternoon. The cost was acceptable. It would get us to Le Touquet just in time to play as arranged. Those of us who were nervous about flying swallowed hard, but in the end all eleven decided to go.

Early the next morning we drove to Lydd (near Dungeness). It calls itself 'Ashford London Airport', but it's tiny. Our 16 seater Trislander plane was the biggest there. It was a bit tatty, but at least it had three engines to keep it in the air. John was allowed to sit in the front with the pilot, and the rest of us sat in pairs behind them – the plane was only about four feet across. As we sped down the runway and left the ground, Jean was heard to mutter 'Oh s***'. The flight was amazing, only 17 minutes in the air and a thousand feet or so up, then over the French coast and straight down to Le Touquet. As soon as we'd landed and stepped out (Jean saying 'nothing to it'), we took our bags direct from the back of the plane, walked a few yards to the terminal, straight through and out into France – no baggage or passport checks at all – then it was a five minute taxi ride to our hotel, Les Embruns. This was perfectly positioned - a couple of minutes from the beach, on the edge of the main shopping centre, and ten minutes walk from the boules piste.

The tournament was due to start at 2.30, so we had only half an hour to unpack before we set out to look for the piste. There were a few nervous moments when we couldn't find it at the expected square, but it was just round the corner, and there was a bar called 'Le Fireman' across the road from it, with outside seating. So we settled down with our glasses of Pelforth to wait for the action.

When we'd planned the trip, Ava, the only one of us prepared to admit to speaking a little French, had been put in touch with a Monsieur Zeste, who was supposed to be the president of the Le Touquet Boules Club. It turned out that he used to be the President, but no longer was. From the gesticulations of some of the French players who started to turn up, it seemed as if we may not have been expected. Soon, however, it became clear that we were, and we gradually began to understand what was going on, helped particularly by the appearance of a young lady who was the 'official' translator.

By about 3 o'clock about thirty French players had turned up. We were asked to supply a list of names, and 2 euros per person. Everyone was

given a number, and things were arranged so that everyone played three games, a mixture of doubles and triples, each game with different partners.

Perhaps because this was France, things didn't get underway until about 3.30, and then went on until about 6.30. It was great fun, and because we knew the rules, it didn't matter that most of us spoke little or no French. Our hosts were extremely friendly, and we played well, once we'd got used to the piste, which was basically a hard level surface of compacted sand with a pretty smooth surface, apart from some dust and a few small stones. Boules rolled great distances unless thrown very gently or with lots of back spin. Many of the French players were really good shooters. The piste was large – as large as the whole car park at Brickendon, and no ropes were used, people throwing the coche wherever they wanted as long as it didn't interfere with a game already in progress. Scores were kept (or occasionally lost) in people's heads.

There was a certain amount of traffic to and from Le Fireman. One of the French players, Pierrot, who appeared to live there, took a great shine to Dave, and proudly showed him his coq, which was apparently a trophy previously won in a match against les Anglais. Unfortunately even Ava couldn't understand a word he was saying, so Dave will never know the depths of his affection.

At the end scores were added up, and prizes were awarded for the best aggregate scores over all three games, and over the best two of a player's three games. Peter won 7 euros and a cup for the top score over two games, and Audrey won 2 euros for the 5th best score over two games. Of course the quality of a person's partner was an important factor, and Peter's victory was mostly due to the shooting powers of his partners in the doubles games he played.

We all went to a restaurant for our evening meal, and it was pretty good, except for the French version of Welsh Rarebit, which consisted of about an inch of melted cheese on top of an untoasted slice of white bread.

On Sunday morning a little preliminary scouting around the shops was done, and then most people had lunch and went to the beach. Ava, Peter and Jean, however, decided to take up the invitation of the French boulistes and play for fun, rather than money, in the afternoon. They went back to Le Fireman for a few preliminary drinks. Soon about 20 French people turned up and play started. It was very much like a Brickendon session, putting in a boule each, chucking them up and sorting the players out into doubles and triples. It was so enjoyable that Jean didn't want to stop. She won all the games she played in. Ava was pointing brilliantly, but stopped after a couple of matches to sit on a bench and drink and watch.

Afterwards the three English players went for a few drinks with some of the French boulistes. There was considerable drama, when a chap (not a player) who had bought us drinks, couldn't pay his bill (and apparently a large number of previous bills) resulting in the police being summoned

and him being led away – not before he'd sworn eternal friendship with us.

Jean, Peter and Ava ate at Le Fireman, while in the town centre the others had a slap-up meal at 'Jean's Café'. The evening finished with a drinks reception on the top-floor terrace of Ava and Peter's bedroom – but by then it was too cold to linger. I should add here that the weather was great throughout the trip – sunshine all the way.

On Monday morning there was a market, and shopping began in earnest. While some showed remarkable restraint, others (i.e. Ava) tried to buy up the whole of Le Touquet. By then the thought of playing boules had given way to general slouching about, drinking and eating.

We all met back at the hotel where Ava was presented with a couple of bottles of wine and thanks from all for booking the hotel, contacting the boules club and just general help with French. Her last job was to arrange for taxis to take us to the airport. The flight back was just as quick and stress-free as going out for those who could forget that it felt (and sounded) as if we were on a 20 year old mini-bus with wings.

I for one would love to go on such a trip again – I think most others felt the same way.