

Binliner Tours

The brochure sounded idyllic . . .



had never booked with them. They had an early trip to Normandy, it sounded idyllic - staying in a holiday village, two-person chalets, dinner with wine every night. That might do the trick and restore marital happiness.

Also, Normandy being near, we wouldn't have to spend a night on the bus. They are a similar operation to Bolero, passengers in the bus, bikes in a large trailer. Ideal for getting from A to B without the hassle of carrying your bikes up and down large flights of steps, waiting around at midnight on draughty station platforms full of drug users, BUT a form of endurance test - 23 hours in the same seat? For a person who can't even face an hour's journey to Keighley to see her Mum?

Not the Invisible Man . . .

After we booked we found out we would have to spend the night on the bus after all - this one picked up at 1am in Prestwich. Never mind, I thought, gives us the whole day to get ready, it'll be leisurely. We asked Wolf's friend to drive us down, Wolf can't manage busy roads.

The pickup was on Tesco's carpark - although Tesco's is a 24hr operation, NOT ON A SUNDAY! so we found nothing open, everywhere locked, no shelter. I gave Wolf's friend a tenner for his

By the Spring of 2000 we felt our relationship was worn to shreds, never mind our nerves! Realising if we didn't do something soon it would end in divorce, I seized on the *Binliner* brochure when it fell through the letterbox. We'd had the brochure previous years, but

trouble, and I at least expected he would wait with us in the car till the bus came. Not a bit of it! He's the sort of chap that has his coat on half an hour before he has to leave, arrived early, dropped us off in a freezing gale at 11.15, and went home to his own warm hearth. Thanks mate! Endurance is my middle name. I put on all the spare



clothes I had, topped off with waterproofs and straw hat, and ended up looking like the Invisible Man! Some other people turned up about midnight. Tim and June, said they had been before, and it was wonderful! That was good news. Said they had stayed in a chalet with its own kitchen, bathroom, everything. Huge place all to themselves! The cold didn't seem so bad after that.

Pensioned-off Cyclists . . .

Then the bus arrived, but it didn't come on the carpark, we could just make out its squat shape in the distance. It looked like there was nobody on it, but when we got close, we saw it was full of very small, very old people - their white-crowned heads had turned them into so many ghosts in the dark. It looked like Binliner was where Bolero sidelined cyclists too old for its image - or do cyclists shrink over the years from being out so much in the wet?

I definitely needed a toilet, but didn't like to ask the driver to find one - just hoped he would stop before long. Not to worry, the bus wasn't capable of travelling for more than two hours without a serious rest

The brochure described it as '*a 1986 Mercedes, the original seating removed and replaced with full-size coach seats. Not quite the comfort of Bolero, but just right for our operation. Apart from regular maintenance checks, day to day inspections are carried out by the driver to correct any faults that may develop.*'



Like estate agent speak, the truth lay in the omission - for instance, it would be natural to assume that the replacement seats were newer than the bus - but you would be wrong. They were a good deal older, in fact I recognised them, or some very like them, from my teenage years - surely those were original teddy-boy knife slashes in the upholstery? There was a very unpleasant smell coming from the ashtrays fitted in the back of the seat in front - pulling one open, I found it crammed full of fag ends - which I was sure had been there since the 1950s! That smell could have been bottled and sold at a premium.

Not quite the comfort of Bolero . . .

Only one side of the bus held double seats, the others were single. Good thing it was not by any means full - I would not have liked to travel any distance in one of those extremely small spaces. In all there were ten of us on board - Wolf, me, Tim and June, another two couples - the driver (Fat Colin) and Esmerelda his mother in

law. Just what her role was in this we were not sure, but had a pretty good idea by the end of the trip.

In the back, where we were sitting, the thick plate glass windows rattled loudly in their moorings, their original rubber seals long since perished, the putty someone had used as a replacement not doing a very good job. Air was whistling up through the seats, coming through cracks in the chassis and I regretted stowing our spare clothing in the trailer - could have done with some of it to plug the gaps. We realised before long that all this extra air was a good thing, as there was a strong smell of exhaust fumes.

The phrase '*not quite the comfort of Bolero*' came to mind. I have never found Bolero particularly comfortable - new, yes, well-upholstered, yes, but I find their buses overstuffed and hate every minute. At least here you had space to move about and weren't suffering death by moquette. After all, I reasoned, back in the fifties and sixties I had travelled the length and breadth of England in buses like this, and enjoyed every minute. I resolved to do just that.

No one appeared . . .

At the next pickup no one appeared and Fat Colin informed us that we now had the full complement of passengers, the rest having failed to turn up. I found this odd, but Wolf said that they probably saw the bus and decided to cut their losses. Talk on board was that Binliner was on the downhill slide - many regular runs had been cut back, and new ones started. That figured, said Wolf, no one would come twice.

Our first run-in with Fat Colin came when we pulled in at Portsmouth for the morning ferry. We got out to stretch our legs and get some breakfast, and when we came back, pulled up alongside was a scruffy old hippy van - a kind of garden shed built onto a lorry chassis. It looked like it had evolved over the years with extra rooms added on. Its curtains were ragged and filthy and it had a general air of dilapidation.

Seeing Fat Colin beaming at us, I jerked a thumb at the trailer and said, "*Must have felt at home next to us*".

It was clear by the change of expression that he did not like this at all. He gave me a nasty look, and informed me that the last person to say that found themselves walking home. I thought he was just jumping to the defence of his bus, but as the trip progressed it became clear that he suffered from the delusion that there really was nothing wrong with it, and he needed neither prompt nor provocation to sing its praises. Because we were on it, we were assumed to share this delusion.



It felt at home . . .

A new, modern bus . .

On the way up the ramp to board the ferry, a new, modern bus ahead of us failed to make the gradient and started slipping back. Fat Colin's joy knew no bounds. He almost bounced off his seat jeering at the driver, and turning round to look at us to

see if we were cheering him on.

We weren't quite into the spirit of the thing at that point, having been through a sleepless night, but by the end of the trip, he had us where he wanted, if that meant we spent all our time praying that it would get us home before finally disintegrating into its component parts.



we rattled into the car park

One big party . . .

We rattled into the hotel car park in the late afternoon and were shown into separate apartments, opening off both sides of a walkway connected to the main building. They weren't little homes as described by Tim and June, but they

were comfortable enough. There was a main room with two beds and sliding windows opening into the grounds. The toilet, shower and washroom were on the same level, and a small flight of stairs led to an attic room with another three beds. Ample room for two.

We all met in the bar at seven, to find that Fat Colin intended to treat this as one big party. All of us were seated at one table, and Colin wanted us to sit next to different people every night - to 'mingle' he said, but really so that he could monopolise the conversation. I told him I had come on this holiday with my husband, and we would be sitting together every night. Everyone else followed our lead, and that was the end of that.

Pushing the boat out . . .

That was the night Fat Colin outlined his 'drinking plan' for the week. We should have known he 'doth protest too much'. It went something like this

"Now I like a drink as much as the next man. Anyone who says he doesn't drink is a liar. But I drink to a plan. If I'm not taking you out next day, I push the boat out. If I'm taking you out for half the day, I drink in moderation. But the night before I take you home, you won't see me touch a drop. No," here he made a gesture, as if pushing temptation (or a bottle) away from him, *"your safety is more important to me than anything".*

He then proceeded to push out several boats, as he did on each and every night, including the night before our departure. Someone asked about the 'excursions' giving him an excuse to sing his own praises,

"People tell me I'm too good, providing these free excursions. 'You ought to charge for this', they say. But I say 'no, I'm here, I've got the bus, I'm not doing anything, why shouldn't I take you out?'"

Why indeed. We were to find out why there was no charge for these excursions.

The fount of all knowledge . . .

Fat Colin gave the impression he was the fount of all knowledge, and as he made this trip regularly, we did not doubt his grasp of local geography, assuming him to be an authority on the area. He

was not a man to distance himself from his customers, indeed, he positively *invited* our queries, giving the impression his day would be ruined if he were not asked at least ten questions.

Accordingly, next morning, we asked him how far it was to the nearest large town, Coutances, "*Only 8 miles*" he said, "*you'll soon do it*".



chickens roasting in the street, Agon

First we called in at the little fishing village of Agon, a couple of miles down the coast, and were searching for somewhere to buy maps when who should pop up but Colin and Esmerelda, happy to help.

"*Funny,*" I said to Wolf, "*do you think he is following us around in the hope we will need to ask something?*" But it was Esmerelda found the bookshop. Fat Colin was pointing in entirely the wrong direction.

All the shops were shut . . .

Coutances turned out to be 15 miles. A heavy rainstorm began as we were struggling up the hill into the town, and all the shops were

shut. We thought it odd that Colin had not mentioned Monday was early closing day. The Cathedral being colder and damper than the rain outside, there was nothing for it but to spend the afternoon sheltering in a doorway, looking at things we could not buy. Far from regretting listening to Fat Colin, we found this a valuable lesson, for now we knew that, like Manuel, he knew ‘nersing’.

Suddenly the rain stopped, and we went looking for something to eat. It was then we discovered the delights of Normandy crêpes. They make them in two versions, savoury and sweet. The savoury are more properly called ‘galettes’ and are made with buckwheat - something of an acquired taste. It is not a cereal at all, but the seed of a plant related to docks. The seed covering is dark brown or black, and when included produces the dark flour known as ‘*blé noir*’. We ate both kinds and found them excellent.

After a stroll round the park, to let the food settle, we struck out cross country instead of taking the direct route back. First, though, we stopped to admire this flourishing wisteria. Wish we could grow it like that!



The lanes were empty of traffic and lined with white comfrey, which I hadn't seen in England, so I took some roots back with me. We spotted a strange-looking tower, tall and thin, and went to

investigate. It turned out to be a village church, and we toured the graveyard as we always do. The French graves are so pretty, and



the people take such trouble with them. We were surprised to find a château hiding behind the churchyard and went to explore it, returning to base for the evening meal.

The brochure had spoken of ‘five course meals’ which concerned me, as I am not a heavy eater - little and often - but not ‘one meal a day, and it lasts all day’ as my husband describes it. I need not have worried, what happened was that they just brought the food a bit at a time and

spun it out, which is very annoying when all you want is a good plateful.

“*Oh goody,*” I said, as a dish of what looked like onion rings appeared. But it was squid, and so chewy they might have been deepfried rubber bands.

Second day - first attempt on Mont St Michel

Fat Colin’s Trips were two in number - one to Mont St Michel, another to the landing beaches and Bayeux Tapestry. As it was too far to cycle to the Mont and back in a day, Fat Colin would take us halfway in the bus, we would cycle the rest, see the Mont and he would be in the car park at 4pm to take us back.

Getting back in the bus served to remind us how far home was. As we rattled off through the villages, the smell in the back was noticeably worse. Wolf said it was obvious the exhaust was knackered.

A tremendous bang . . .

Just before we arrived at the drop off point there was a tremendous ‘bang!’ We limped the rest of the way, and pulled into a sandy lay-by. Standing up, Fat Colin made a speech, which sounded so well rehearsed I was convinced he made it often.

"Now I'm just going to get out and look at the damage," he said, "and if it's a minor job, I'll repair it here and be at the Mont to pick you up at 4 as arranged. If, however, it's as bad as I think, your best bet is to turn round now and head for home".



pulling into the layby

He got off, closely followed by the men, who couldn't pass up a chance to see this. It was the second option. Bad. Ernest from Scunthorpe pointed out that we had passed what looked like a well equipped garage on the way down the hill, and offered to go and ask someone to come out. Fat Colin declined, explaining that he had everything necessary to effect repairs himself, and didn't mind passing the time in that fashion. The phrase *'day to day inspections by the driver'* floated into my mind, and I could see Wolfram grinning.

Little lost groups . . .

"He daren't take that heap of junk to a garage," Wolf said as we moved off, *"If he did, he'd be off the road and the bus confiscated,*

like as not". It was lucky I never go anywhere without maps, they may be expensive, but I regard them as essential. The others were not blessed with such foresight, and although they were all much faster than we were, due to Wolf's sight and my weight, we kept coming across little lost groups of them. That was until we left the main coastal route and struck inland through byways, along tiny country lanes through quiet, peaceful countryside dotted with apple orchards, where we saw hardly a soul except pretty, brown-spotted cows and curious sheep.

Once, heading uphill to a T-junction, we saw Fat Colin's bus pass the top of the road, and thanked our protective gods that we were too far back for him to see us. By now we were beginning to feel the less we saw of him the better.

We arrived at the large and prosperous seaside town of Granville and stopped on the promenade for a rest. We bought bread, cheese, pâté and fruit in Granville, but did not want to eat there.



We cycled on into the countryside, then near the village of Lingreville saw a sign at the end of a farm track 'Farm-bottled cider'. Wow! We could not miss that. Leaning our bikes against a

wall we walked up to the farm. Although there were only two of us, and we did not want a big order, the farmer did not mind at all drawing back the heavy door of his shed and showing his wares! It was stacked floor to roof with cider, sweet and dry. We bought three bottles of each and ate our lunch in a handy church yard. I have always found these the best places to eat - flat-topped tombs to sit on, grass and flowers and heavenly peace! That cider was the best I ever tasted.

A special kind of spanner . . .

At the pre-dinner gathering, Fat Colin was eager to give us a blow by blow account of his day.

"Lucky you set off back," he said, "I fixed the exhaust by cutting a piece off the end and fitting it to the middle, but when I set off back a tyre blew. I had to nurse her back here on three legs. I'm afraid tomorrow's trip to the landing beaches is off, I'm going to have to spend all day repairing her."

Someone asked, surely he had a spare? Why hadn't he fitted it? Seemed he had been unable to remove the wheel. We exchanged glances. We knew what that meant. Nuts rusted on. Regularly maintained obviously meant 'frequently breaks down'. The thing was ONLY maintained when something went wrong. Which it did on a daily basis. Now we knew why he spent the week there. It was the only guarantee the bus would be there to take us back.

"It needs a special kind of spanner," he told us, "I've got the bar staff on red alert, Francois's very good, I'm sure he'll come up with something before long"

Ernest risked his wrath by asking if Colin didn't have some kind of policy that meant he could get a mechanic out to fix it.

"It would take a very special kind of mechanic to fix my bus," he beamed. I'm afraid I couldn't resist it.

"Yes, he would have to be a Time Traveller, wouldn't he?" I said.

With a furious glint in his eye, but feeling he should join in the general merriment, he restricted himself to telling us again, as he had told us many times, that his bus was superior to these newfangled coaches because it was 'paid for'.

How many people own their own bus? . . .

“How many people can say they own their bus?” he was fond of asking, *“Their bank owns it, I own mine. Come back and criticise me when you can say the same, I say.”* He glared around at us as if expecting someone to disagree with him.

These pre-dinner gatherings were getting less well attended, and it was noticeable that we were all arriving at them later and later. This did not work with Colin, he insisted on a ten minute chat to bring us up to date with the bus’s progress before we went in to dinner. The ten minutes started from the time the last one arrived, so there was no getting out of it, other than being extremely rude, and that day was coming dangerously close.

We were getting a little tired of the food by this time, though of course better than anything you would get in a similar establishment in England, it was by no means the ‘wonderful culinary experience’ which Colin had described in his brochure. The steak that night was so tough that not many of us had the teeth for it - except Fat Colin, who declared it delicious, and cleaned up everyone’s plates.

Reflected in the price . . .

Wolf, enraged at Colin’s insistence that the steak was *‘the tenderest he had eaten, and he would like to know where WE all ate back home that we were so choosy.....’* asked him if he had donated his old tyre for the meal.

Feeling the tide was turning against him, Fat Colin fell silent, turning to the wine for consolation. This came free with the meal, and was no doubt reflected in the price of our accommodation.

Later, Wolf and I went in search of aspirin for my headache, and were directed to the bar, as the only place still open. There was Fat Colin, drinking alone. In spite of our recent sarcasm, his face lit up to see us, but quickly extinguished itself when he realised we were not there to drink.

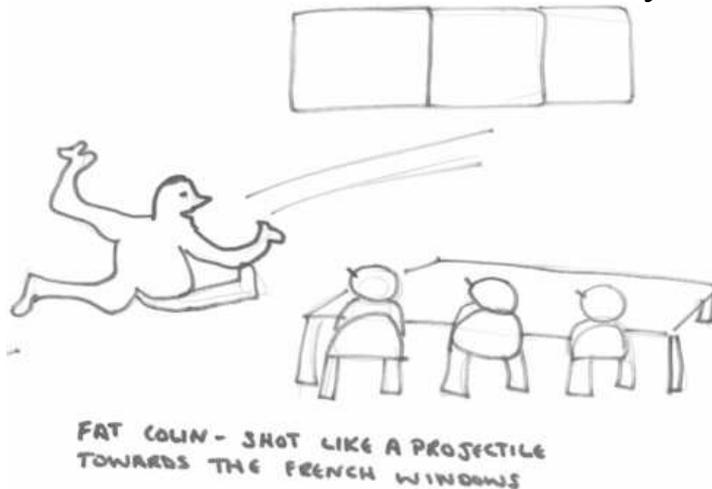
Day 3, it rains

Not good company . . .

I’m not good company in a morning, I hate the world indiscriminately until I’ve got some good hot black coffee under

my belt, and that was not possible in this place. I don't know when they made the coffee, possibly the night before, as we were always in early and it was always lukewarm and stale, sitting in big vacuum flasks on a white-spread table. This above anything made me miserable. The hotel was in an isolated spot and there were no signs of habitation around, just miles of flat road one side, miles of flat coast the other. Nowhere to go out and buy coffee.

By Day 3 I had had enough of Colin and suggested to Wolf that we sit at another table instead of with the group. Unfortunately my back was to them, so I missed the start of what occurred next. All I knew was that Fat Colin suddenly shot past us like a



projectile, sprinted the length of the room, wrenched open the French windows and disappeared into some bushes. I thought he had spotted someone with the right size spanner, but no, the bushes parted, and there he was heaving up in them. When he

returned, white-faced, he and Esmerelda disappeared to their quarters, leaving some very grim faces at the breakfast table.

Nothing like Bolero . . .

Now the troops were definitely on the brink of mutiny. None of us had voiced our fears or opinions to the others up to this stage, but we were all seriously worried. Bert from Newcastle spoke first.

“When ah saw that bus,” he said, *“ah thowt worrisit? Ah said to im, it’s nuth’n like Bolerooa mon! Yer knooa worri said? E said, ‘did anyone tellyer tharrit wor?’ Ah said, ‘nooa, tha diden’. Then he said, ‘ah tooald ya it worra 1986 Mercedes’ an ah said, ‘aye, but tha diden tell us it wor carbon dated.’”*

Ernest and his wife Muriel were all for reporting him to the Cyclists’ Touring Club when we got back - why, what had they got to do with it? I asked.

“Didn’t you know?” Muriel said, “he goes round to CTC events advertising his business. I’m going to get that stopped! It’s sheer misrepresentation what he’s doing”.

Not telling lies . . .

In spite of the way the holiday was going, or perhaps because of it, (it was, after all, excellent comic material) I had by this time a soft spot for Fat Colin. I pointed out that he had not actually told any lies, the bus was what he said it was, a 1986 Mercedes, and that the accommodation was up to scratch. I said he wasn’t an out and out conman, if he was he wouldn’t be sitting with us every night trying to get us to believe in his delusions, he would be much more hardfaced about everything. I said he was as much a victim as we were. This drew some hostile glances.

“Look,” I said, “the guy is desperately lonely, he has no friends, an unhappy home life and an alcohol problem. The mother in law is here to keep an eye on him”.

“Do you know him personally?” Muriel asked, as though all this wasn’t shriekingly obvious. I shook my head. “Well, I’m not sorry for him,” she said, “I’m beginning to wonder what that insurance policy we paid for is worth. Probably nothing. I’m seriously worried whether he can get us home.”

That was certainly something I hadn’t thought of.

Tim and June sat and said nothing. Perhaps they were ashamed. They had been with Fat Colin before. What kind of idiots would book for a return match.

A press statement . . .

Later, Esmerelda issued a statement purporting to explain what happened at breakfast. Colin, it seemed, had a nosebleed in the night and swallowed a lot of blood. This was the red stuff he was sicking up in the bushes. Definitely not a surfeit of wine. Oddly, the fact that they issued a coverup I found more worrying than the occurrence itself. It was like Fat Colin having a press office.

As it was raining heavily, Wolf and I made our way to the sports hall for the morning, to play table tennis. How do you play table tennis with a blind person? Well, you have to have the table right in the middle of the floor with a good deal of space around it,

and you have to be prepared to run a long way fetching the ball. However it's worth it to see the grin on his face as he whams the ball way out of reach, and all that running and bending is good for the figure.

After a while I went to the toilet and when I came back Wolf had found his way into a cupboard where the archery equipment was kept. We fully explored all the possibilities of that, made a lot of holes in the woodwork, and returned to the main building to find Fat Colin had recovered enough to arrange lunch. We declined, having had enough of mechanical bulletins.

A bracing walk . . .

As we got up to leave the bar, we noticed Ernest and Muriel walking past the windows. It was still absolutely heaving it down, and we couldn't believe anyone would be mad enough to go out in it.

*"Didn't you tell **them** about lunch?"* I asked Colin, preparing myself to run after them.

"Yes, but they said they would rather get lunch in Agon," he replied.

"They're not walking there!" I said. It was at least two miles.

"Apparently," shrugged Colin.

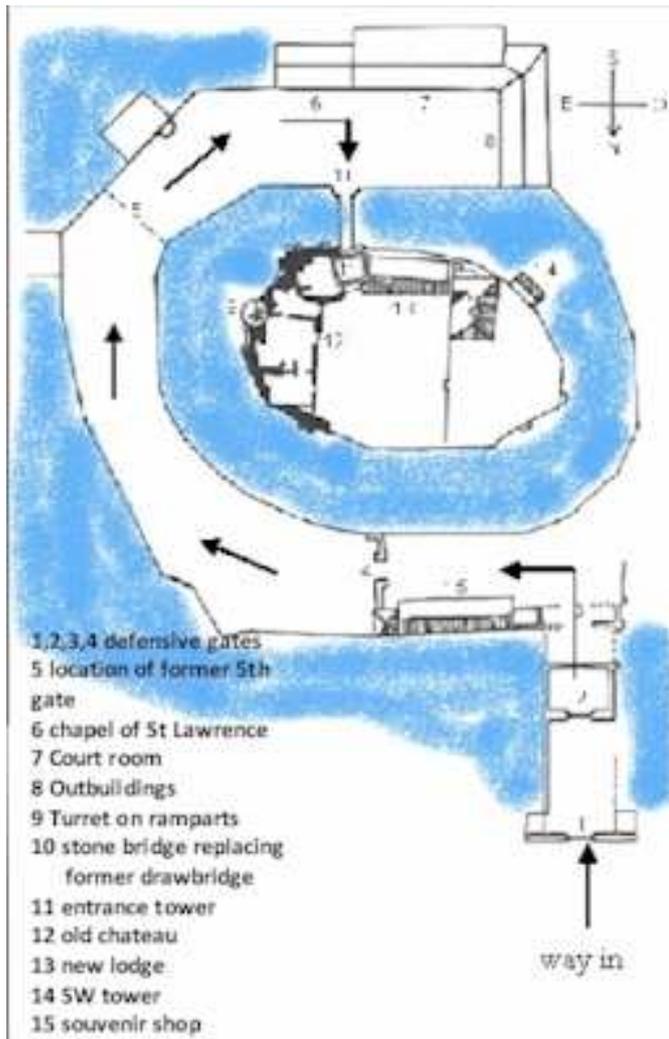
"They must be some of those 'fixed' people." said Wolfram, *"have to have their meals on time"*.

And we both knew why they didn't want lunch here. Same reason we were going to our room to eat the health food crunch, nuts, dates and rice crackers we had packed for the journey and not entirely eaten, rather than endure any more of Fat Colin's conversation.

The castle with two moats . . .

The weather brightened up after lunch, and we decided to explore to the north and see what lay there. I had a good map and we could drift anywhere along the lanes without getting lost, and if you follow your nose you never know what you may find! We found an intriguing chateau called Pirou, with an unusual moat system. It has an outer moat, once over that and inside the defensive walls

you must walk two-thirds of the way round before crossing the inner moat to the old château and other buildings.



According to a handout, this château had been ‘lost’ until recently, so thickly covered in ivy that no one knew what was underneath. There is much conjecture regarding the heavy fortifications and it is thought that it was first built when people went in fear of Viking invasions. A legend says that since they could not breach the defences, the Vikings decided to blockade the castle and starve the people out. After many months had passed, they noticed that a deathly silence reigned in the castle. They scaled the walls and met with

no resistance, but the only person they found inside was one bed-ridden old man. They promised to spare his life if he told them where the Lord of Pirou, his family and troops had gone.

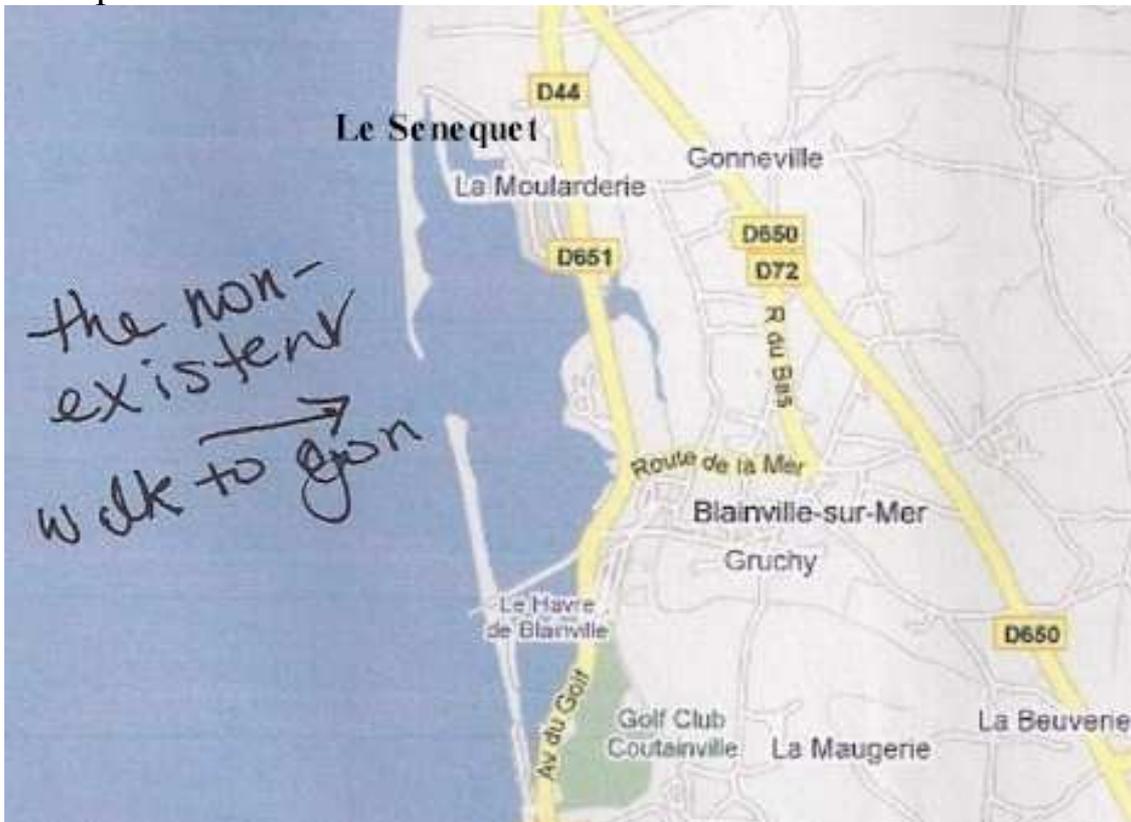
The old man told them that, with the aid of a book of spells, they had all changed into a flock of wild geese, and flown off. The Vikings remembered that the day before they had seen a large flock of geese fly out at dawn from the ramparts. The Vikings burned down the castle and left. Some time later, the geese returned, hoping to find the magic book and reverse the spell, so turning themselves back into humans. Though they searched the ruins, the book had burned in the fire, and they had to remain geese. Since then, the legend goes, they return each spring to search for the book. When they don’t find

it, they fly off again in the autumn.

Determined to have him banned . . .

When we returned to base, we found out that Ernest and Muriel had been misguided enough to ask Fat Colin if it was possible to walk to Agon along the beach.

"Why, certainly!" he told them with a wave of his hand. A glance at a map would have shown him, or them, that this was not so. A narrow spit of land reached out from our village, as did one from Agon, but in between was a good chunk of sea and an inhospitable marsh.



They returned hours later, lunchless, very wet, seething with anger and more determined than ever to have Fat Colin banned from every cycling organisation known to man!

Day 4, The Mont at last

An amazing sight . . .

The bus mended, the rain stopped, no one fancied the landing beaches, so we set out for the Mont again. Instead of getting out halfway and cycling, Fat Colin gave us the option of staying on all

the way. Wolf said this would be a good idea, as our progress is slower than the others, and it would give us more opportunity to look round. I watched with some regret out of the back window as the others got ready to ride. I knew it was a beautiful route along a narrow coastal path, and that the views of the Mont on the approach would be spectacular.

Colin dropped us at a roadhouse a mile or two from the Mont, so we could 'stretch our legs', but I expect he and Esmerelda had some nefarious business of their own in the area. It immediately became apparent that the reason Wolf wanted to stay on the bus was because he had run out of tobacco. This proved unbelievably difficult to get, there being only large hotels at the approach to the pavement going out to the Mont, none of which sold tabac. In the end we had to cycle four miles inland to the nearest town, where things were more normal. An enchanting little crêperie caught my eye, and I was hungry, so we stayed an hour or so over an excellent lunch, and didn't have that much time for the Mont after all.

It was an amazing sight, sticking up out of the sea at the end of



The Mont

the pavement that drove straight as an arrow towards it. It wasn't until we got nearer that we realised it wasn't just a town perched on a rock, that at least half of it was occupied by the massive Abbey. By now the others had arrived, fuming at some wrong directions Fat Colin had given them. They weren't too pleased to be stopped halfway by the Abbey gateway, and they didn't like the entrance fee. I didn't like it either, but as Wolf said, it's not as if we'll ever be here again to think about it, so we should do it while we have the chance. An apt motto for life, really.

We wandered through cold stone passages, looked through openings at stunning views out to sea, and breakneck views back down the rock. We clambered as far up as we were allowed, walked in an incredible garden perched near the highest point, and



...easy to pick out...

bought two golden bees in the gift shop. One for me, one for my daughter.

“One thing about Fat Colin’s bus,” I said to Wolf, as we peered over the rampart, “it’s easy to pick out in the car park”.

Day 5, the Last Day

We felt we got a lot out of the holiday. We had been out in the fresh air every day, we had explored the lanes and found two delightful chateaux. The day of the abortive Mont visit we had



found the farm with the excellent cider.

We had explored the fishing village, seen the major town - even though everything was closed.

Having the morning free, we decided to stay close to home and visit some of the villages we hadn’t seen. We very much liked the look of a crêperie in an old forge not far from the hotel, and planned to have a quick lunch there on the way back. That was before we ran into

the country market in the next town. They had everything, even live crabs writhing in pots. They were not moving when we first walked up, and I asked

'Sont-ils mort, Madame?' - are they dead?

'Mais non, Madame,' she replied, poking them with a stick and making the poor things jump.

Among the many craft stalls was one selling honey and honey products. I bought candles in delicately shaped beeswax, some candle-shaped with a bee and flowers on the sides, others shaped like small elephants. I love ironmongers shops, there was one down a side street, and I bought some useful knives, and pea, bean and gherkin seed to grow back home. We couldn't resist the charcuterie and the boulangerie, and loaded the bikes with bread, cakes and cooked meats, which we ate in a small orchard beneath the cider apple trees, still in flower in May, and I picked roots of rosy red flowered comfrey to add to the collection I am building.



I think the most idyllic picture of the trip!

We were too full to eat at the creperie, but we went in and had superb hot coffee - first of the holiday! - in front of a roaring fire. This used up our remaining francs, and seemed a fitting end to the trip, especially when we got back to Le Senequet and found a hat going round 'for the driver', with everyone donating their loose cash to Fat Colin! Alas our pockets were bare!



The first decent coffee of the trip!

The Full Moon from the beach . . .

I love a Full Moon, and so does Wolf - what self-respecting witch wouldn't? We crossed the sea from Felixstowe to Zeebrugge in '95 on a Full Moon, and ever after have tried to plan our trips to coincide with one. So clever of Colin to arrange this for us! We walked down to the local beach, following the fateful footsteps of Muriel and Ernest on the day they tried to walk to Agon. It was a calm night, and the Moon shone brightly, the water softly lapping the pebbles of the Normandy shore. We gave each other a hug. We were happy.

Soon we were joined by the other guests, chattering apprehensively about our chances of ever reaching home with the bus in one piece!

The Return Journey - "come again soon!" . . .

By this time everyone hated Fat Colin, and it was noticeable that at our many motorway stops no one ever sat with him and Esmerelda. At the last of these, I said to Wolf I was sorry for Colin and that we should go sit with him.

On an impulse, seeing he looked so dejected, I turned to him and thanked him for my holiday. He gave me an incredulous look.

Have you REALLY enjoyed it? he asked, as if he couldn't believe his ears.

Yes, I said, *it was funny*”.

"*Oh well,*" said Esmerelda, who had missed the last remark, "*perhaps we'll be seeing you again.*"

THE END