

Monday 5th June 2017

Dear Customer,

Well here I am in the South of France. Bite count as I write this, approximately 22. Not all mosquitoes I don't think. Indeed, I'm not sure what any of them are. I have: small, raging ones; big, raging ones; clusters of small red dots; one big double bite on my back and an itchy triple bite behind my knee. This despite me being extremely careful. Today I doused myself in apple cider vinegar and only smell like vinaigrette until it dries, or a pickled onion. My friend has just one small bite on her ankle and while she is out in the garden on the sunbed I am now consigned to the porch. I managed to get onto the internet on my phone last night and spent 5 hours googling daytime biting insects. It kept bringing up the Tiger mosquito, new to these parts, carrier of Dengue Fever and if you spot one you have to call the authorities. I googled double bites and it brought up 'arachnids'. I stopped short of opening up the pictures, 'identify your bite'.

For days before leaving the UK I became obsessed with the weather forecasts. BBC Weather showed 'sun, sun, sun' but on Meteo France the French site, it drilled down and showed where the record-breaking temperatures were and at what time they would explode into violent storms and torrential rain. But their forecasts changed every hour, so my plans had to. My friend said we should just take it as it comes. I didn't like the sound of that.

My car had been in the garage – they were repairing the things they broke several weeks earlier when I took it to them. I asked them to make sure they replaced the windscreen wipers and checked the air conditioning at the same time. I collected my friend from Newcastle on the Sunday morning, adding 3 hours to the journey. We had a good trip as far as the Dartford Tunnel but it was obvious we would miss the train I'd booked, no longer any rush we pulled off the motorway into the Kent / Sussex countryside to do the rest of the journey to Folkestone. I rang Eurotunnel to say we wouldn't be on the train and they said just to just turn up anyway as there were three hours of delays.

It was a glorious evening and looking for somewhere to stop for a picnic I saw signs for Sissinghurst. Perfect. It was about 7.30pm, the gates were still open and we drove to the car park. It was delightful, it was empty, there were benches to eat on, the birds were singing and the mellow sunlight was filtering through the trees. A man walked past said he hoped we were having a nice picnic and warned us that the gates closed at 8pm. I thanked him and he walked on. Half an hour later we packed up to leave, drove to the exit. It was 7.59pm, the gates were locked. We were locked in. I suggested we sat there and waited as eventually someone would come in or out. We waited and waited but no one came, We checked to see if we could go across the fields but all those gates were locked too. We drove back to where the house was and tried driving down all the farm tracks to see if there was another secret way out. I went on foot to explore. What a privilege, all alone at Sissinghurst it was stunning in the gardens and grounds I forgot my mission – to find a way out. I couldn't bear to go and find the man and ask him to let us out. Eventually my friend found a cottage, knocked and we were given the code. Phew, we were out.

We arrived at the terminal and the ticket machine tried to charge me another £65 so I went in and managed to persuade them to let me off. I heard the lady mentioning the delays were due to a problem with the double decker carriage. I tried to have a conversation with her - I wanted to know exactly what was wrong with the double decker carriage but she was evasive, said she'd just come on shift. It was 10pm, we were given our new slot, 2.48am. A violent storm started as we sat in the car park, I put my wipers on – they hadn't replaced the blades. We would try and do some of the motorway journey in the night, try and do a few hours. Eventually it was time to board, I went put my headlights on but nothing happened. I had no headlights and was going to be tipped onto the French autoroute at the other side. I cursed the garage, we only had little side-lights. We boarded, we set off. The train was really squeaking. I went upstairs to find the toilet. There were no cars on the upper deck. We were on the faulty carriage.

Anyway, thankfully we came out the tunnel at the other and I drove very slowly on sidelights to the first 'aire', a pull-in with toilets and showers for drivers. I was exhausted by now, couldn't go further with no lights so tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep but I really, really needed to before embarking on the mammoth drive to the south. The sun started to come up. I put my coat over my head then, just starting to doze off a little, a loud, repetitive thudding started. It vibrated the car and went on and on and on. I took the coat off my head and saw a small boy walking up and down past us bouncing a football. It was 5am, everyone was sleeping. There were motorhomes next to us. I got out the car. He was an English boy, his parents were just sitting in their car. I leapt out the back seat, got into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut and drove to the other end of the car park. It was hopeless, it was 24 degrees already, I wouldn't sleep, it was light enough to drive so we set off. I couldn't cope with the autoroute, too tired for that level of concentration, so it had to be cross-country. We passed endless war cemeteries, it got hotter and hotter and hotter. We drove all day, me doing all the driving as I can't be a passenger. My head was thumping. We drove through Epernay, the light and heat were getting to me. Then for hours we crossed east, there was not a solitary tree on the roadside, no shade just the open fields of the Champagne region. Even with the air conditioning on it was unbearable, I could feel a migraine coming quickly. My friend looked at the map. 'Is that all we've done, is that it?' – we'd only done an inch of a 2ft map. 'No it's ok, we're quite a way down' she said. We weren't, she was confusing Laon with Lyon.

At about 5pm we found a lake with parking, it was quiet. She bedded me down on the back seat to try and sleep but my migraine was now extremely bad and I was vomiting. It was like a furnace in the car but opening the windows let in the mosquitoes, the car was full of them buzzing and harmonising round my head. At about 10pm and still with the migraine we had to set off again as we needed air. It was dark, I drove, she slept. I didn't know where we were but we seemed to be climbing. There were no more villages. 'My God' I thought, 'we are starting to climb into the Alps'. My friend was asleep. After hours of climbing and winding eventually we hit a small town and I pulled up the car and slept until morning light.

At 5.30am we set off again. The country side was stunning, we were indeed in the foothills of the Alps. We made our way back west towards Dijon. I still didn't want to go on the autoroute, I was finding the car very sluggish on acceleration, I didn't trust it, and Lyon to Marseille is full of lorries. We identified a road heading south to the east of Lyon so took that. Things were going fine, we had a nice run then we got onto a seemingly new autoroute.

There was no hard shoulder, I didn't like that. It was getting very hot again outside. We were climbing again then were plunged through a dark mountain tunnel – with no headlights. Suddenly we were surrounded by snow-capped mountains and taken through more tunnels. It was the heading into the unknown, not knowing what was coming up next. Eventually the road dropped back to single carriage and the signposts started to say Sisteron. I thought we were through the worst and would descend down into Provence but the road was blocked and the diversion sent us up the hairpin bends back into the mountains. I was so relieved when it was over and we did start to come down and finally through the Provençal towns of Sisteron and Manosque and down to the Riviera. The journey was hell but my God, France is beautiful, and the imprint of those landscapes will linger and cheer my soul for far longer than the memory of the horrible car journey.

It is hot. Myfa is enjoying swimming in the Med. We are chilling. I am now off to find an internet café to send this to you.

Sorry unable to do recipes this week. I will be homesick on Thursday, missing David Dimbleby and the swingometer ! I hope you are well and send my best wishes,

Isobel