

Marie Foley

In the year of Our Lord 1986, on the 15th day of the month of April, a motley crew assembled outside the hallowed halls of higher education — the Geography Department. Here we were given our last-minute instructions for the journey that lay ahead.

From here we boarded our luxury coach (a matchbox on wheels) to travel to the famous seaport of Ringaskiddy. As we approached the harbour, you can imagine our dismay in discovering that we would have to row to Roscof. Our accommodation consisted of 'Pullman (read poor man) Seats'. After the initial shock and novelty of our accommodation had worn off we wandered the ship in search of what it had to offer.

We soon discovered there was little on the ship to merit our attention except the bar. Here we sat ourselves strategically and awaited for the bar to open. After we had satiated our thirst, we retired to the communal cabin for a sound night's sleep. Alas, this was not to be, for the still of the night was broken by the intermittent retching sounds of our seasick companions. The rising of the sun and living dead (e.g. the afore-mentioned seasick companions) soon brought the ship to life. The rest of the voyage was just plain sailing.

After docking at the beach-head of Roscof we were met with the first sunshine that many had seen in over a year. From Roscof we proceeded slowly through bocage landscape with its dense rural settlement patterns. Scattered throughout the countryside were box-like houses with steep roofs and shuttered windows, a characteristic of the Breton landscape.

We arrived that evening in the city of Quimper for a two-night stay in the Hotel Celtic. Quimper is a beautiful city stretched out along the banks of the River Odet. We soon settled in and feasted ourselves upon the local gastronomic delight of poule et frites.

After our meal we headed off to experience the French night life of Quimper, which is practically non-existent. Luckily, we discovered a publican sympathetic to our plight and after draining his kegs we embarked on the journey back to the Hotel Celtic. Here we joyfully fell into our beds and into a comatose state.

At reveille the next morning, the casualties of the night before stumbled into the dining room. After breakfast we met Professor Pierre Flatres at the Quimper railway station. Professor Flatres is the leading authority on the geography of the Brittany region. For two days he escorted the group around Quimper and its surrounding environs. It was both a humorous and informative tour.

We left Professor Flatres at the train station in Rennes, where he was presented with a bottle of Uisce Beatha in appreciation of his tour of Quimper. After leaving Professor Flatres, we toured the city centre of Rennes. Rennes is a unique and beautiful city that consists of Roman, Medieval, Renaissance and modern architecture.

After our tour around the city centre we drove to the Auberge de Jeunesse (youth hostel). With our unpacking finished we proceeded to the dining room for the sumptuous feast that awaited us. That evening we drove into Rennes to partake in either ice-skating or, for those of a less adventurous nature, a sampling of the local brew.

The following day the group was split up into elite surveillance units to examine and study Rennes; its surrounding areas with particular reference to economic, social, industrial, residential and commercial land uses.

Later that evening each group discussed their various impressions and experiences of the day. Conversation was loquacious due to the fact that tongues were loosened by liberal quantities of burgundy, courtesy of the Geography Department. There is indeed truth in the saying 'In vino veritas'. We retired early that night as the highlight of the field-week lay ahead — Gay Paris.

We set off at 7.30 a.m., Irish time (read 8 a.m.) for the long journey ahead. Thanks to the excellent ability of our driver, Cathal, we were able to get into the centre of Paris — no easy feat in a right-hand drive bus.

First on the agenda was the Centre Pompidou and a rendezvous with Ms. Fidelma Mullane, an Irish geographer studying for a Ph.D. in the Sorbonne. We were taken through some of the oldest residential areas of the city to sample its racial and social mix, its commercial vibrancy and the renovation projects in the area. After a lunch of Jewish-Moroccan-cocher kebabs, or MacDonalds, we met in the sub-planning office of Les Halles.

Les Halles was the previous location of the old vegetable market. At its commercial peak, Les Halles handled one-fifth of the entire French vegetable trade. It has since been relocated in the outskirts of Paris. We were given a tour of the subterranean development of Les Halles. It consists of two intersecting highways, a major Metro station, public swimming pool, theatres, meeting halls, shops, and a civic centre.

After this, liberation ensued and again the group split up to tour Paris in their own unique fashion. Our bus met the group outside Notre Dame Cathedral for the long journey to Rennes. In true geographical style we returned along the scenic route. This particular route included Orly International Airport with a passing glance of Air France's Concorde. We arrived at the Auberge tired, but pleased with our brief experience of Paris.

After a much-needed sleep of four hours we perked up for the final day. Our last academic stop was at the University of Rennes. Here we were lectured by Dr. Remy Allain on the historical, social, and economic aspects of Brittany, with particular emphasis on Rennes.

When our lecture was finished we made our way slowly to Roscof stopping to view the tourist attractions of Mont St. Michel, St. Malo, and Morlaix. On arriving at Roscof we were happy to be returning to Cork, but somewhat sad about leaving.

As the Brittany coastline receded in the distance we felt satisfied that we had done our best to baffle the Bretons and, at the same time, learn a great deal about the general geography of Brittany. The return journey was uneventful but nonetheless enjoyable. And great was the joy in the hearts of some upon sighting the rugged coastline of our native land. On behalf of the 1986 Brittany field group I would like to thank Professor W. J. Smyth and Dr. Kevin Hourihan for tolerating and educating the rag-tag crew that accompanied them on their adventure to the great unknown of Brittany and beyond.