

Down on the farm, en famille

Five Corkonians, five French farms, five days. What could possibly go wrong, wonders **Esther N McCarthy**

IT'S 2am and I'm six metres above ground, in a tree, surrounded by nature, answering a call of nature. I'm doing a number one in the sawdust compost dry toilet. A oui, oui, if you will.

I pause before ducking back into the treehouse. Through my canopy, the sky is blasted with stars, no fake light to detract from their glitter. The silence is a living thing, the night breathes along with me, the absence of traffic and electricity and, well solid ground, makes for a few mindful minutes before I sneak back into the cabane dans les arbres. This road trip is different to any other family holiday we've been on — we're inland the whole time. Being married to a surfer and having spawned half sons/half merboys, means we've never had a break with no point break. We travel from Roscoff across the Loire-Atlantique region through the Pay de la Loire on the wonderful west coast of France, staying in farms of various styles, eating local food, getting a glimpse of what could be the coolest travel trend yet: agritourism. Milk the goat, eat the cheese, buy the soap.

DAY 1

We arrive in Roscoff raring to go, our first night's accommodation is to be in Cabane Anna, the aforementioned treehouse at Brin de Chevette. The mini merboys, age 10, seven and four, are beyond excited at the prospect of staying in a treehouse. We stop off to have lunch at Ferme Auberge La Touche, a charming, achingly authentic inn. The menu is in French, and sometimes ignorance is bliss, I decide after Google Translate confirms we ate foamed liver and candied duck gizzards. A rooster crows at the ivy-clad window. The boys look at the wholesome food, served with giant glasses of freshly squeezed cloudy apple jus. "Er, are there any chick-

en nuggets?" asks merboy no 2. "Only on that fella there," says 1, pointing my fork at Mr Cock-a-doodledoo. "Now eat up."

We arrive at Brin de Chevette and the boys are driven to the tree house in the back of an electric cart. It's gorgeous inside, like Tinkerbell's holiday home, with thoughtful touches like candles and board games. We hang out on our balcony, play on the swing and go pet the friendly goats. Using my school French, eyebrow wiggles and charades, we discover the family make soap from the goats' milk. In the morning, we find hampers at the bottom of our tree and haul them up using the pulley. We feast on sticky local honey, crunchy bread, apricots, peaches, hot chocolate and croissants.

- Where to eat: fermeaubergelatouche@wanadoo.fr
- Where to stay: www.brindechevette.com

DAY 2

We hit the road for Guenrouet and discover an outdoor heated public pool, Piscine Alexandre Braud, on the edge of the town at Vallons-de-l'Erdre. I'm just old enough to remember the Lee baths, and to mourn them. It's C12 for the family, with two diving boards, swimming lanes and lifeguards.

The merboys are ecstatic. And starving. We stop at Ecluse de la Tindiere, a bucolic little "gite & terrasse gourmand", on the edge of a canal that stretches from Nantes to Brest. We eat platters of salad, chorizo, cheeses, pickles, and a wonderfully unexpected soft boiled egg, all sourced within walking distance. Even the beer is local, made from hops grown along the river banks.

We go mad and order ice cream. Five mouths, five flavours... cherry, chocolate, vanilla, caramel, rum. That's the nicest ice cream I ever had, says our 10-year-old. Not a gizzard in sight.

We arrive at Les Pensions de la Baraque for our stay in Chalet Sitelle, a cute round wooden cabin, overlooking a field with a huge bull and two slightly smaller brown cows. The five of us on one mattress is fun, in theory. Perhaps French children are blessed with innate night manners but mine were cursed by a mermaid's kiss to turn into starfish every night, so the family legend goes. It's been a long time since we all slept in the one bed, and to be fair, four of us have a grand kip altogether. Guess who didn't? Hint: it's the one who doesn't snore or sleep talk about Spiderman or have a penis.

We pick up perfect pizza from Au P'tit Marche de Nadege (€7.50 for a chorizo 27cm pizza) and eat it by a different stretch of the canal. We worry about a duck with a fish hook in its beak.

"La canard avez un crochet dans la bouche!" I say to a father and son on their boat nearby. The son shrugs. "Err, can we aidez it?" I ask. He shrugs, again, in a very French way.

"Sure, he'll be eating its gizzards tomorrow, he cares not for beaks," says husband. We look mournfully on as the duck shakes its tail feather, and most probably its head at us.

- Where to eat: www.etapecanalgi-teclusedelatindiere.com

- Where to stay: www.guenrouet.fr/les-pensions-de-la-baraque

- Where to swim: www.vallonsdelerdre.fr

DAY 3

After a marvellous breakfast of all local produce, including Brocéliande coffee, roasted and ground in Gourin and homemade plum jam for the buns from Vendée, we set off for our next farm at Domaine du Vigneau. This is three hours away so we stop at Calin Ca-anes where we book donkey rides for the kids after a gorgeous lunch. We're greeted by Thifan,



Christine and Jean-Francois, the family who run this very funky spot. There's retro records for placemats, little trampolines and slides for kids and menus bursting with innovation, using all local ingredients. Thifan points across the road to show where they picked the salad and Christine picked the grapes that made our wine. We arrive at Le Champ St Pere where Lulu the hand-reared lamb is prancing around while farmer Alain leads us past alpacas, goats, donkeys, beehives, rabbits, and geese, to an impressive safari tent.

It's got wicker dressing tables, comfy full-size beds and gas lamps. Surrounded by natural forest and a large garden area, we hit the sliotar around until Geraldine and Alain arrive wheeling a cart of food. After entrees of wedges of cheeses, sweet melon balls, garlic bread, hams and cured meats, the main is a fish stew with potatoes, mackerel, mussels and smoked haddock. Geraldine's homemade peach tart finishes us off. All washed down with local organic reds and whites. "It's not alcohol, it's wine," explains Alain, glugging our glasses full to the brim.

- Where to eat: www.calins-ca-anes.fr

- Where to stay: www.ledomaineduvigneau.fr/

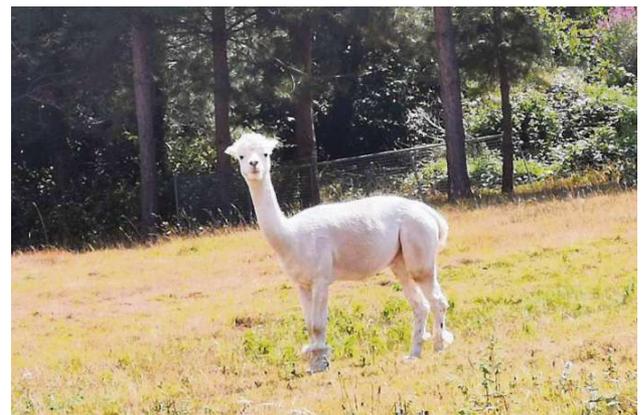
DAY 4

After a fascinating tour of their soap kitchen (secret ingredient, alpaca hair, who knew?) we head for Ferme du Marais Poitevin. We can't spend time in France without getting our crepe on so we stop at the Creperie du Moulin for a chocolate and cream fest along with a Moulin cocktail for me. It's hair of the dog time after Alain's slightly misleading wine talk.

We arrive to Sainte Christine just in time for a guided boat tour of the marshes with the entertaining Kevin and Mauve. We paddle down the marshy river, shaded by ash and poplar trees as our guides pluck crayfish out of the knotted bank (then nonchalantly snap the heads off — it's against the law to replace them alive, they're a pest), they point out kingfishers and sleek beavers and tell us the history and the role of the river had for generations of farmers here. We return to Ferme du Marais Poitevin for totally different night of accommodation. A working farm, this is at the high end of rural living. There is camping available but we opt for a night in the farm house, there's a heated pool, ensuite rooms and wifi. There's a fun vibe with a real emphasis on eco responsibility. We take the farm tour with Kevin and



The treehouse, Cabane Anna, was the accommodation at Brin de Chevette, Val-lons de l'Erdre, France; below, an alpaca whose hair is used in the soap made by Alain and Geraldine at Domaine du Vigneau, Le Champ St Pere, France.



Left, Kevin the farmer with one of his chickens at Ferme du Marais Poitevin, France; above, a signpost at Ferme du Marais Poitevin where they provide farm tours where children can get up close with the animals.

the boys milk goats, handle geese, scratch pigs and bond with some donkeys.

■ Where to eat: www.vendee-tourisme.com/restaurants/737-creperie-du-moulin.html
 ■ Where to stay: www.lafermedumaraispoitevin.fr

DAY 5

This is where Google Maps and I come to blows as one of us makes a

mistake and we end up going four hours off track. It wasn't a case of 'OK Google' this day, now let's never speak of it again.

A fabulous lunch and dinner helped salvage our last jour in town. Culinary delights at an incredible restaurant by the The Mayenne River prevented full blown meltdown and phone being thrown into said body of water. La Carotte Bistro Creatif, run by Ingrid, is a delight. She creates

menus using local producers and is all about ethical, ecological and environmental dishes that also happen to be delicious. There's a hip, relaxed tone and the kids eat every morsel. We are awfully late arriving to L'Auberge Neuve where Tiphany and Stephane Lecoq run a dairy farm and have also created an impressive refurb of part of the family habitat. The apartment we stay in is full of smart designs (like a sink built

into the toilet cistern to save space), clean lines, fabulous use of colour and textures. Extras like homemade yogurts make it a very cool place to have our last night. We get to say hi to the cows in the morning before we hit Cherbourg.

Au Revoir, Vennes, nous espérons revenir bientôt.

■ Where to eat: www.restaurant-uborddeleau.com and www.lacarotte-bistro.com
 ■ Where to stay: [\[france-mayenne.com\]\(http://france-mayenne.com\)](http://www.gites-de-</p>
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How to get there

■ We sailed on the Pont-Avon with Brittany Ferries. There's a swimming pool cinemas, lots of restaurants and excellent children's entertainment.

There's an MMO (marine mammal observer) on board with binoculars, who points out a school of dolphins to us while we watch the sunset. Magic.

■ www.brittanyferries.ie

TRAVEL DIGEST

CRETE GETAWAY

Crete offers golden sunshine and good beaches that are compatible with an autumn getaway. Travel Escapes suggests flying out on October 16 and staying in the four-star Eliors Mare, where clients can relax on a private Blue Flag sandy beach. Go light with 10kg of hand luggage out of Dublin and the seven-night half-board package is priced from €589. Details on: <http://itaa.ie/2019/06/06/sunny-crete-island-escape/>

KYLIE IN DUBAI

Sunway has sorted out some winter-sun options, with Kylie Minogue and rugby fans all catered for in Dubai this December. There's a chance to take in a concert and the rugby from about €800 with direct flights out of Dublin on Emirates. There's three nights accommodation at the Rove Marina Hotel between December 5 and 7, general admission to the much-hailed Rugby Sevens and entry to the Kylie concert. Call (01) 231 1856 or go to www.sunway.ie

TOURS TO CHINA AND JAPAN

Wendy Wu Tours has joined forces with Cathay Pacific on selected group and private tours to China and Japan based on flights from Dublin and offers an upgrade to business class one-way (Shannon and Cork add-ons are an additional €100). The deal is valid on inbound flights from Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Guilin in China and both Tokyo and Osaka in Japan. Bookings must be made before October 7. Call 01 485 4159 or visit www.wendywutours.ie

SPANISH ADVENTURE

The Travel Department is selling a guided group holiday to Costa de la Luz in Andalusia near the Portuguese border, an area popular for golf, sailing and watersports. The holiday includes trips to Seville, Niebla and La Rabida where one can retrace the steps of Christopher Columbus. Departures are for October and there's a €50 discount for bookings made before Friday next, September 20 (quote the code VP-Sep50). Call 01-6371600.

TENERIFE PACKAGES

Budget Travel is promoting luxury holidays in Tenerife throughout October and prices come in from €479. The introductory price is for a bed and breakfast deal at the four-star El Tope Hotel and an all-inclusive deal is available at the Iberostar Las Dalias hotel from €749. A five-star deal (bed and breakfast) for the Hotel Mediterranean Palace is on sale from €569. Visit www.budgettravel.ie or call 01 435 0024.

Barry Coughlan

