

The Christmas Journey



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Gens du V

A French Farce

Having bought recently a mountain retreat in southern Spain we decided to spend our first Christmas there away from the family. An alternative Christmas, that's what we'd have.

Our Christmas Journey began at 5am. It was an uncharacteristically bitter Dorset morning and the car shivered under a thick layer of frost so we kept the engine running while we packed it full to the brim. No trace of the sat nav disks for France and Spain Joe had recently purchased and put somewhere safe. Luckily we had map books and were reasonably familiar with the route.

Something was wrong with the demister as after 25 minutes the windscreen stubbornly remained virginal white, apart from two small patches. You know how you sometimes get a warning feeling in the pit of your stomach? Could we get by without it? Should we see if we can get it fixed? We were cutting it a bit fine if we wanted to catch the ferry. Over-reacting? Maybe. Still, we felt secure in the knowledge that we were covered by Mercedes' Mobilo if we were to break down anywhere in Europe.

The car had only done 35,000 miles but during our last trip to Spain the cruise control had stopped working and the driver's heated seat element did its best to melt the leather. More worryingly, there was a clunk on take-up of the automatic transmission. So on our return to England a month previously, we had had a major service. The clunk was a worn gearbox mount which had to be ordered specially from the Fatherland. After the service the seat belt bleeper started bleeping - 13 bleeps, 13 times whenever we stopped and started again, so back again to the dealership. Thank goodness for the warranty.

It was rather a slow half-hour trip to the dealership and they, obligingly, saw us as soon as they could. However, I didn't understand when they said they had "cleared the problem" but that we would need a dealership 'over there' to look at it. They gave us a printout showing an F for fault on the electronics that managed the demister.

Joe's electric seat stopped working once we'd arrived at Dover but he managed to get it working again by grubbing around underneath it. The screen began to mist up but we tried not to get disheartened, after all, we were heading off to our sunny paradise!

We continued our journey through from Boulogne in the dark. I don't remember how many miles to Paris, it could have been around 200, nor do I remember passing any filling stations, but certainly there weren't any for the last 100 miles. The amber fuel warning light was on as we approached the northern outskirts of the city, around 9.30pm.

We went past two garages which were closed, but weren't too concerned, after all, this was Paris and there would be plenty more!

We aimed for the A86 to take us straight down through the centre and out to the south west. But our passage was dramatically curtailed when the next sign was obliterated with black tape and the road closed with no diversion offered. Although we didn't have the CD's the sat nav screen still gave us the direction we were headed. We tried to run parallel to the A86, but with each kilometre the fuel situation became more desperate and we eventually abandoned getting out of Paris in favour of finding fuel. Joe took over driving as things became a little heated.

Traversing busy junctions, intersections, underpasses and bridges, passing sparkingly festive boulevards all ready for Christmas with their enticing boutiques and evening revellers, up dimly lit alleyways, across the area west of Paris Joe drove until this road also came to an end in a gloomy industrial area with a '*passage interdit*' sign. Oh what the hell, he groaned as, too weary to turn back, he propelled us through a narrowing little street bordered by metal sheets. Within seconds a blue light flashed behind us and as we got to a clearing and stopped we were immediately surrounded by three uniformed *gendarmes*. I believe the expression is 'tooled-up'. What on earth was this place? One appeared at my side and two at Joe's. Winnie, our little dog who hadn't had a wee since the ferry was now showing signs of desperation; bared her teeth and snarled. The one closest to Joe shouted unintelligibly, all the while waving his left hand to presumably amplify what he was saying while his right one gripped his machine gun.

"*Nous n'avons plus d'essence*" Joe explained in a by-now rather desperate voice, repeating it while pointing to the fuel gauge. More arm waving, then Joe asked where the nearest filling station was, repeating this twice more before it resulted in a group discussion and more group arm waving. Our 'crime' seemed much too minor to have caused such a palaver; were they going to give us a ticket or arrest us? Maybe we convinced them we were not terrorists. Following a long awkward silence, Joe drove off, hesitantly at first and when they made no attempt to stop us, we gathered speed, knocking over a bollard in our anxiety to get away, turning left and then right as they had directed. No filling station. No car chase.

However, there were some people waiting for a bus and the French drummed into me at college in the 1960's came to the fore. We were directed to a closed Esso garage and drove on with a rising sense of panic. Finally, we became stuck in a purpose-built satellite district called *La Défense*, a sort of space-age place with high-rise rounded buildings and steep pavements. Round and round *La Défense* we went. Why oh why do map books always have folds bisecting exactly where you need to look?

Enough was enough. On our fourth or fifth circumnavigation and after being flashed by a speed camera in a concrete underpass we came across a taxi and the driver if he could take us to the nearest petrol station, to our delight he grinned acceptance. We followed him for about a mile and there it was; I was never so glad to see one. I grappled with the talking fuel pump while Joe paid *M le Taxi* who impressed on him to “*suivez toute gauche, gauche, gauche!*”. Unfortunately that took us back in the same loop. Luckily we found another taxi driver (*M le Taxi 2*) who apologised he could not take us but instead drew us a charming map that bore little resemblance to any of the successive road signs. Emboldened by some fuel in the tank, we drifted on but when all hope seemed lost *M le Taxi 2* miraculously drew up alongside and, with his index finger aloft, beckoned us to follow. It all seems a bit of a haze now but as we careered down a multi-lane carriageway I'm sure I saw *l'Arc de Triomphe* glinting at the far end; maybe I was hallucinating. His index finger again emerged from the gloom of his cab, stabbing the air even more energetically, *gauche, gauche, gauche!* Overwhelmed by gratitude and unable to stop in such a frantic place Joe did what they do in all the movies, he accelerated to draw level with *M le Taxi 2* and thrust a 20 Euro note at him.

From there, it was easy to find our way out and onto the N10. What a surreal episode that had been and we still couldn't quite understand how it had happened, given that we had driven through Paris many times before. Apart from the police, everyone we had run into had been most courteous and kind. Still, I was looking forward to getting out of France as the border at San Sebastian was still a very long way off.

We drove on for another 250 or so miles and eventually stopped for a power nap in the small hours, filling up with diesel at a busy services, *L'Aire de Tours Long Vue*. We sat and munched some 'sandwichs' and drank a half cup of brown liquid, anxious to get under way and arrive in good time to do some food shopping in the last days before Christmas. The engine started, there was a beep and a row of amber warning lights appeared along the dashboard and when Joe tried to move from park to drive it wouldn't budge. The owner's manual suggested an electrical/electronic problem.

In the UK Mobilo undertakes to attend to you within an hour but the last time we had to call upon their services we were stranded on a roundabout for 6 hours (the catalyser of our new E320 got sucked into the engine). On that occasion “the computer was down”. It would be interesting to see what they do for the motorist stranded in the bowels of France, I thought. We braced ourselves for a long wait. It was then about 9.00am.

As Joe dialled Mobilo, he tried to adjust his electric seat to a less hunched-over position but it had stopped working again.

The 0800 call was a long one as there was an extensive checklist to go through on the part of Natalie, who seemed quite laid back about the whole affair. Joe gave her our number because he was on a mobile, “of course, but, oh, wait a moment, the computer has just wiped out all you’ve told me; I’ll have to run through it all again”. She was fixated on the notion that Joe had put in petrol instead of diesel. But he calmly went through the story again.

Natalie phoned back and it was all going reasonably well until we got to the bit when she told us about the Mobilo warranty. “Yes,” she said enthusiastically, you are covered under the Mercedes warranty for three years,” but she said, “the full cover is not available to you, sorry.” Although we had Mobilo breakdown cover for life (this would get us to the nearest dealership), as the car was now over two years old we weren’t covered for hotel, car hire etc while it was fixed. That was it then, finished. We would have to be towed to the nearest Mercedes garage, wherever that was, and await our fate, whatever it was.

Another of those stomach sinking moments, but Joe persevered, asking Natalie a series of ‘what ifs’ that eventually resulted in her just happening to mention that if we’d had the car recently serviced then we would still be fully covered. A look of relief swept across his face, what luck! Natalie then asked for the postcode of the services. “I can give you the coordinates from my sat nav, will that do?” No, it would not. There was little credit left on the mobile, Natalie’s call was costing valuable talk time, the temperature was sub zero, we couldn’t speak the language very well, and she was asking for a postcode.

“What do you mean, we have to find an SOS phone and pay to be towed off?” Natalie had rung back and in her sing-song voice said she had some bad news. “Unfortunately,” she said, “French law is French law and as the trunk road and the services are privately owned Mobilo are not allowed bring a tow truck there”. It was therefore our responsibility to arrange and pay for our own towage. “Get a pick-up truck to take you to a little road somewhere and phone us again. Sorry, I can’t help you further.” I bet she was. The next task was to find an SOS phone and neither Joe nor I had any desire to go traipsing down a busy, icy motorway road to find one.

As luck would have it a police van pulled up with three young *gendarmes*. I explained our little problem to the least severe looking one and asked him where the nearest SOS phone was, luckily it was inside the services. *M. Gendarme* then wished us “*au revoir et bonne chance*”. How nice, and within about half an hour a newish tow truck arrived driven by someone to whom we both took an instant dislike. He said he would be taking us to the Mercedes dealership and I said no thanks, we only need to get to the nearest village but the price remained the same; 132 Euros. Ironically this village was called Monnaie and money was something we were getting short of! We needed to find a cashpoint.

What followed took our breath away. The difficulty was the ML's whole electronic system had packed up, the brake warning light was on, it was locked in park so the wheels wouldn't rotate. Joe alternated between the desire to look away and the desire to monitor what was being done as the driver chained up, levered and struggled to drag the protesting vehicle onto the tow truck, totally impervious to the squealing tyres, the potential damage to the ABS and the sophisticated traction control equipment. What could we do? Worse was to come.

After a ride lasting all of five minutes, we pulled in to a car park adjacent to his garage. Out came someone who looked like one of those garden gnomes my grandmother used to have, all ruddy complexion and bobble hat. We faced the grim prospect of watching the ML being dragged down the ramp as the driver had already committed an act of crass stupidity by pulling right up right behind another car so once they got the frozen ML part-way down, he couldn't now move the truck forward and free the ML's back wheels. So on they struggled, jacking it up here and there at some obscene angles. Of course we stood by and sort of smiled, not able to verbally criticise their valiant attempts in case they maliciously wounded the car.

After about an hour the ML was dumped where they had dragged it. By now it was 10.30 in the morning and Joe got back on to Mobilo. The operator said, "oh yes, you put the wrong fuel in your car" before proceeding through the whole checklist again. All went silent for a couple of hours. Ringing again, we were finally transferred to Craig of the European Section who said "OK sir, we've contacted the nearest dealership and I'll let you know the estimated time of arrival".

We had to turn on the engine every hour or so because it was so cold. Craig called again at 2.30, "the dealership is in Tours, about 75km away so it will only take about 2½ hours to get to you". I wanted to ram his 'abouts' down his throat. It was very cold and Joe went walkabout; from time to time I caught sight of him wandering up and down Monnaie main street. The phone rang to say that the buyer who was due to exchange contracts on a property we were selling had backed out. I cried uselessly. Winnie and I peed behind a tree and I spent a further 5 minutes scraping mud off my boots.

At about 4.00pm Craig had some more "good news", the engineer was coming ahead of the tow truck. I couldn't understand why that was good news because if he couldn't fix it then we would have to wait a further few hours for the tow truck - the dealership closed at 7.00pm.

Two hours later, at just before 6.00pm a tow truck arrived.

Inside was a vacant looking driver and a short grey haired man with an irritating rictus grin (and even more irritating mannerisms) who continued to jabber away in quasi-English while his companion fitted the front wheels with roller contraptions. We had been in the car park for seven and a half hours.

I sat inside the car with Winnie and the next thing I saw was the little man, I think I will call him Stumpy, coming towards me brandishing a large screwdriver in his right hand and a smaller one in his left. Joe stared dully through the window as Stumpy proceeded to dig around under the gear lever, eventually prising off the cover and the plate below. He then, with suitable commentary to anyone who was listening (certainly his companion seemed transfixed by the imparting of such valuable information) proceeded to ram the large screwdriver into the gearbox gate, jabbing around until he felt the right spot, with a triumphant, “Ah ha, you see, zis is how I make it go vroom up there, see whet I do? Zis is always works, see? Car bonne please now.” But even though I pointed out the array of amber lights still twinkling on the dashboard, he still invited Joe to try out the gearbox, as if it was all sorted. Joe obediently moved the knob down and back up to park upon which Stumpy cried out with alarm – it was stuck in park again. Then for some reason his shoulders shook with mirth. It was obvious he wasn’t a Mercedes mechanic.

He then tried a few more times but his luck, or skill, deserted him until about the 20th try, during which time he went, at intervals, off to annoy his companion with what I presumed was more light-hearted banter. Getting the car up the ramp was a lengthy pantomime, especially when they realised that the rollers fitted to the wheels made it too wide for the flatbed. They had a serious discussion about whether they should be getting the other lorry but presumably decided against it. They dragged the ML back off, unhooked the rollers and had just begun to drag it back up when Joe pointed out that the reason it was going off at a tangent was because the steering was locked and if someone didn’t do something about it soon the car would disappear over the side of the lorry. He threw them the keys which unlocked the steering but had to ask them to please wind the window part way down in case it locked itself. At least it wasn’t raining.

Job done, they made off toward the cab. The ML was sitting pretty on the flatbed, 5ft in the air, in neutral, key in ignition, window open, but they had neglected to the brake on. “What about the foot brake, *la freine de pied*” Joe shouted out, and with a look that was neither apology nor contrition the driver clambered up and put the brake on.

“How will we all fit in the cab?” Joe whispered as we eventually moved off towards the lorry. True, it was a little cramped but that question was soon answered by Stumpy getting in next to the driver and positioning himself behind us on a tiny ledge.

I fervently hoped he was sitting on something hard and very sharp. He smelled fragrant and wore a pair of hand-made shoes, a little odd given the rough old outfit he seemed to be in charge of.

We lurched off and as we approached the trunk road there was an awful smell. It was the stench of burned out clutch from a lorry that had just passed. Stumpy and his companion discussed this at length, concluding that it probably had a problem with its “freines”. We passed a sign that said Tours 15km; Craig had said Tours was “about 75km” away. Sitting next to Stumpy, I became engaged in a series of meaningless conversations in broken Franglais which made little sense to me and served no purpose other than presumably his pride in being able to listen to himself conversing fluently in English.

The acrid smell obstinately lingered but did not seem to concern our fellow travellers and it was only when we stopped at the next busy junction and the driver of the car behind rushed up and addressed our companions in an excited voice that Joe said “that smell’s us; we’re on fire!”. All along the fumes had been coming from the tow truck, and now from our vantage point we could see billows of smoke enveloping the ML. It was a dangerous junction - presumably this is why Stumpy and driver did not stop and investigate further, but they remained deep in discussion while they clambered back into the cab. Joe and I had a half-hearted conversation about whether we would be covered for total loss.

We lunged forward and with the attendant grey fog kept going for another few kilometres while Stumpy pointed out various scenes of interest including the nearby airfield; the fact that he had visited Spain once and wasn’t it chilly for this time of the year. Didn’t he take anything seriously, I wondered. It was, by then about seven pm; the dealership would be closed. We very weary and almost resigned to being dumped in the car park and being in the car for a second night. It was desperately cold. Hurry, hurry, please! I screamed inside. But hurry was not on the agenda.

By now I was surprised that the driver could see anything at all, as the smoke was curling round the vehicle like plumes of grey net curtaining. I said to Joe, “this should wipe that bloody smile off his face”. Spying a car wash, our driver veered sharp right without pausing to brake or indicate, the vehicle mounted a kerb rather too fast, the ML gave a shudder (I couldn’t see at that time whether it was still on the back) and we pulled up with a start. They got out and disappeared through the haze, returning with buckets of soapy water - surely they weren’t going to wash it as well?

Luckily, I think at this point Stumpy’s repertoire of English finally deserted him as “merde alors” and other choice words took over.

The water obviously did some good, although the smoke continued to leech out, as we drove off into the dense evening traffic. The smoke intensified. Within a few short kilometres we were on an industrial estate and could see the Mercedes sign, next to a huge sign that said 'L'Incroyable'. Yes, the whole thing was incredible, like something from a parallel universe.

Luckily the dealership was still open. It had taken nearly 9 hours to transport us the short hop to Tours! We were met by a phlegmatic young man called Jérôme. We just wanted someone to look at the vehicle there and then, press a button and get it all working again. In reality, the ML was dumped outside in the dark, in neutral, key in ignition, with window half open and all our laptops and valuables inside. Jérôme reassured us that the compound would be locked but we countered rather defiantly that unless they could guarantee the safety of its contents we would have to spend the night in it.

We were obviously looking a bit ragged by then so I guess Jérôme had a change of heart. We watched Stumpy and co push the ML into the safety of the workshop. What was wrong with the car? How long would it take to be fixed? If they did take it into the workshop and lock it, would we be covered to stay in a hotel; would it take a dog? Mobilo said we could only have a hire car for five days. What would we do? A greasy, grey haired, mucky, stubbly man with stained Mercedes overalls and a pair of filthy glasses with the right lens cracked right across his field of vision, plugged in a machine and got a printout. As the paper spewed out, there were Fs on most of the checked items. Jérôme said words that sounded like "catastrophe" and "électrique" and "faileur".

Jérôme pointed out that we weren't covered by Mobilo but luckily, Joe produced the service book with that vital little stamp on it. He said he would find us a hotel, get us a taxi, and they would start on the car first thing in the morning. A huge man who reeked of cigarettes and had hair like Elvis came in to collect his car and, overhearing, offered to translate but somehow or other by that time we had managed. Jérôme confessed to him that he had never seen anything like it before.

Outside, we waited for the taxi in sub zero temperatures, getting out at the Novotel, a few blocks away, and with a "douze, s'il vous plaît" he was gone. The hotel didn't lift one eyebrow at the appearance of Winnie, and we made for room 424. I had grabbed from the car a tin of food for Winnie and had to use a pair of sharp scissors to scrape out the meat, cutting myself in the process, but luckily I had packed some plasters. Resigned to the fact that we would never be reimbursed for all our expenses, especially dinner, we made up our minds to enjoy whatever gastronomic treat was put in front of us. The flow of blood all but stopped as we went down to dinner.

The taxi came at 11, “*huit Euros cinquante*” M le taxi announced as we alighted, glad to be away from the hideously loud music that was coming from his superior sound system. We sat in the showroom of the dealership while people came and went. Also waiting was a rather unfriendly housewife who became best mates when she heard about our car. “Ooh là là!” she said, waving her hands in the air and looking heavenward; she too had had nothing but trouble with her Mercedes. I wouldn’t have liked to see her when she was angry. On the coffee table in front of us was a postcard and I laughed out loud when I saw what was written on its glossy surface,

‘*Nous avons pensé à tout. Tout est prêt pour vos vacances! Et votre Mercedes?*’

‘We have thought of everything. Everything is ready for your holidays. And your Mercedes?’

Madame laughed. I kept it as a souvenir.

The dealership would be closed for an hour at lunchtime so we were told politely we had to vacate. There was a bitter wind and I did wonder what we could find to do on an industrial estate. The girl at reception made frequent references to “*macdoze*”, so she was sure we would be all right. No idea. On we walked and Macdoze turned out to be McDonalds but we didn’t go in. Instead we came across an uninviting looking Chino-Vietnamese restaurant packed out largely with people from the huge industrial estate enjoying their pre-Christmas lunches. We had to wait until a table was vacant, jostling with illuminated party hats, grey suits, giggling groups of girls and the odd backpacker. The meal was great. Weren’t we lucky finding such a place?

The car was ready at 4.30. Jérôme got hold of all our receipts, taxi, (24€ including tips) and hotel (230€), promising that once he had collated it, he would send a cheque to us in Spain. So kind, we gushed; did that mean they would also be paying for our evening meal and the two half bottles of wine we sampled?

Let’s not get too sentimental about this; after all, we were inconvenienced greatly by this event, losing two full days and one night of travel time into the bargain. God knows what Stumpy finally charged. Not our problem I thought as we said our goodbyes and leapt into the nice clean car.

Unfortunately Joe’s seat was stuck again so the mechanic had to fiddle around under the seat to get it working but unfortunately, it rocked like an old cinema seat. M. le Mechanic shrugged. We shook our heads in resignation.

We got back on to the trunk road without difficulty and sped down through the rest of *la Belle France* in very wintry conditions without a working demister.

The temperature lowering to -3.5 degrees, we drove past probably the same sleeping customs officer at the Spanish border that we had seen some months before.

As we neared Madrid in heavy snow an old, rather nondescript car started to follow us, drawing level, pulling back, then accelerating to travel alongside us. He was certainly playing some sort of a game. There was just enough of a similarity with the way we were robbed in Madrid earlier (they took Joe's gold watch) that year so, without a second thought, Joe put his foot down on the snowy highway and, thanks to our still functioning traction control, we were able to safely reach 80, then 100 mph which left the potential thief way behind. What would we have said to the police? Someone was after us? It would have sounded a bit hollow.

With a bit of fiddling, the driver's seat could sometimes be adjusted but the stress remained. I lost my glasses between the last two *peajes* in Spain. They were nowhere to be found and the only explanation I can think of is that I threw them out, along with my 12€, into the cash bucket. They weren't the only things that were lost. When we finally drove up our locked gates our Spanish keys were nowhere to be found. And, once we had unpacked, despite a strip search of the car we never found glasses or keys.

When we left Dorset bound for Spain I really thought it would be a journey to remember, and indeed it was. But by the time we got onto home territory east of Málaga we were too weary to stop at the beckoning supermarket to buy our festive fare, deciding instead to go the whole hog and make it a really alternative Christmas. And the macaroni cheese and beans we had for Christmas lunch seemed a fitting end to such an adventure.

I have made many references to 'luck' in this story and, indeed, we felt very lucky at many times during our Christmas Journey when something went right, that was only against a background of what seemed like extraordinary bad luck. Luck is usually having something happen that makes you at least feel better off than you were before. But what is the right word for a series of things that go inexplicably wrong and the by-chance happenings that only serve to bring you back to exactly where you started from in the first place, no further forward, poorer and more exhausted for the experience? No, I don't know either. Damage limitation luck perhaps?

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