

A short story of 5 Britannia members and their trip to France as Table Tennis ambassadors... Sylvain Floury (driver and tour guide), Martin Tomes (also went last year), Miriam Hetzel, Nigel Page, Chris Reeves-Croft, plus enough luggage to fill a small van.

Wherever a (number) appears, there should be photos embedded in the text, only as this involved too much effort, they are now linked to separately below this report....

Friday 15th June

The players struggle out of their respective beds at 3 in the morning (or "stupid o'clock") and assemble at Martin's house for the pleasant drive to the airport for an 08:05 flight. Not much sleep in the bank, perfect start for a weekend that most olympic athletes would find tiring. Pity we aren't any kind of athletes.

At Gatwick, nobody has argued with anything yet. A good start. On the flight, Miriam reads out the entire problem page in her free copy of The Sun for the benefit of Sylvain and Martin, plus at least one row of seats in front (hilarious) before the 3 prepare like champions for the day ahead (1).

In Nantes, once the hire car is secured and loaded, Sylvain takes us off to spend the day sightseeing, as the first tournament isn't until the evening. On the riverfront, where shipyards used to be, there is a large complex for Les Machines de L'Ile, a collection of magnificent mechanical and hydraulic animal structures that can be ridden, prodded and oooed at, including the magnificent Elephant (2). Well worth a visit.

After eating Galettes (filled wheat pancakes, delicious) at a local restaurant, it is around the town at the cathedral, castle and squares. Who would have thought Nigel had such an interest in fountains, spires and organs? (3)

The evening tournament is in Thouare sur Loire, not far away. It is a singles hardbat event, so our occasional practice at the Dome has come in useful after all. 43 players, 6 hours with a half-time banquet (not kidding) with meats, breads, cheeses, fruit, dips, wines and punch. As ambassadors for Britannia, we arrive properly equipped and attired (4) including 6 litres of scrumpy, and meet up with Matthieu, Sylvain's TT buddy.

At the end of a great event, where the players mostly wore hats or wigs (5) we've done better than average, and get presented with the medal of the town for, well, being English or German, and friendly. Fantastic.

We get ready to leave about 1 am, so technically, it's tomorrow.

Saturday 16th June

It is an hour's drive to Avrille, near Angers, where Sylvain's parents live. Sylvain has hired a 7 seater, as Matthieu is joining us to make us 6, but these vehicles are designed for 7 people with no luggage, not 6 with far too much. The solution? To pretend Miriam is a small bag and pack her into the boot.

We sneak into the house, get sorted and to sleep at about 02:30.

Getting up too few hours later, we eat and walk to the venue, a local school sports complex. You see, in France, good sports complexes are built by local authorities, for school use then out of hours by clubs and community groups for all sports. Everywhere - what a nice idea. We are joined by 3 more of Sylvain's mates, from Le Mans. They are friendly, effusive and talented, and now we are 9. The tournament starts at noon (6), it has 3 player teams, 18 of them, and after each match the winning team buys alcoholic or soft drinks for the losers. It is handicapped, which is just as well as there are some very tasty players, as well as many juniors.

The teams are Matthieu, Sylvain and Chris (7), Miriam, Martin and Nigel (8), plus of course, the Le Mans lads who are playing a 12 hour tournament in scuba shirt, swimming cap and goggles. Why not? One of the

highlights of the afternoon is the France v Australia world cup game (we are now all French), watching the reaction to two penalties and a French win, and getting back to the table tennis, Martin squeezes a win over the highest ranked player in the event (for the 2nd year, "Martin est mon Bete Noir" he wept) and overall the travelling teams finish in the top half, but Le Mans win and claim the main prizes of wine and toys, whilst everyone else gets local produce - redcurrants (last year it was white asparagus and shallots). So to recap, we've had bugger all sleep for 2 nights, travelled a lot, it is hot and we've played 18 hours table tennis, drinking wine and beer. Tired, us?!! Oh, and it is already tomorrow.

Sunday 17th June

Back to base about 1:30 am, and being so tired, we naturally sit in the garden and drink more. On the way back a small cat followed us and seems to like where we are. Bed about 2:30 again, the Le Mans lads camping in the garden.

After some kip, we assemble in the garden for breakfast. The cat that followed us back last night spent the night trying to get in the tents, so the campers are almost as tired as we are, and have to hurry off. Chris has to be back at work on Monday so must travel today, and after deliberations (can we go back to bed or should we go sightseeing again) we pile into the car and to Angers to drop Chris at the station.

Angers has a large medieval castle, seat of a few kings in days gone by, and it exhibits a massive tapestry (9) which depicts the struggle of good against evil, the godly against the great unwashed, the French against the English and the ravages of time against beautifully woven coloured woollen cloth. There are other striking buildings to view before we return to base and eat, then grab some welcome shuteye before we settle down to drink and watch Germany v Mexico (we are now all German, but Mexico play very well).

After a skinfull we get to bed.

As a footnote, Chris endures flight delays and no trains to Ipswich from London on a Sunday, nightmare journey, gets home 14 hours after setting off for a 1 hour flight.

Monday 18th June

In hindsight, it is optimistic to drink a lot and not expect a lot of snoring in shared rooms, so it's a bit of zombie fest in the morning. We pack, say farewells to Sylvain's most hospitable parents and hit the road back to Nantes airport. We are early, so we head to a local supermarket and spend about 50 euros on cheese, which is added to the suitcases which already contain pre-ordered wines and spirits. At the airport we check in and find we are delayed, which stretches and stretches, but we get back to Gatwick eventually, to collect our frankly smelly baggage in time for rush hour on the M25. We get back to Ipswich in time for the last 20 minutes of the England v Tunisia game and flake out. It's a "good" tired though, worth every penny and minute. Vive la France!

Then back to work on Tuesday.....