

From pancakes and mince pies to mustard ice cream and hot cross buns: everyday life in and around Entre-deux-Eaux, January – mid-April 2026

Not surprisingly, life in Entre-deux-Eaux has slowly changed over the thirty-six years that we have known it. The church and mairie still stand in the centre, and the church clock still strikes. But the school has closed and the basic loos have been pulled down. The musty shop and bar, which sold everything from fresh food to overalls and wooden sabots, has evolved over the years into a bright restaurant and bar (still with *baguettes* for sale). The last of the four farmers has now retired (though he is now part of the newly-elected municipal council, with another ex-farmer, Duhaut, as mayor). A couple of days ago, the death was announced of ex-farmer Vozelle, whose cows would be driven home with curses late at night for milking and whose geese and ducks treated the road as their farmyard. Alas we no longer watch the cows amble past morning and evening, as the cattle are now reared for meat not milk. But Entre-deux-Eaux remains a farming community, the strong odours of muck spraying persist and enormous tractors and farm machines race up and down the road between the fields and cattle hangar.

We were reminded of farming issues before we got back to the village after Christmas and New Year in the UK. We crossed back (now always by tunnel rather than ferry) on the day that French farmers in tractors were blocking roads around the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe in protest against the EU trade deal with South American (Mercosur) countries that they felt would create unfair competition. Not that we had been planning to visit the Eiffel Tower that day; we intended to spend the afternoon and night in the northern former mining town of Lens where there was an exhibition at the Louvre-Lens art museum that we wanted to see. We parked behind the Hotel Louvre-Lens (an attractively converted row of former miners' cottages) and climbed up the snow-covered spoil heap towards the gallery, but were stopped by a charming group of young farmers whose protest took the form of cooking and handing out food to demonstrate to visitors the quality of their local products and the threats those products faced. Their pancakes were superb, and would surely have melted Macron's heart had the farmers plied him with them.

Wiping our mouths, we entered the atrium of the airy glass museum, and saw a huge bulldozer of delicate intricacy, which heralded the *Gothiques*

exhibition. Belgian artist Wim Delvoye had laser-cut steel into lace-like shapes of gothic cathedral components to form his gothic bulldozer. The rest of the exhibition was interesting in what it showed of the early gothic development in the north of France, but felt limited in its scope.

The hotel was comfortable and we considered staying an extra night, given the wind and rain conditions forecast. But it was as well that we drove home the next day, Friday, as we woke on Saturday to thick white snow in the fields and along our road. It would have been an effort to dig our way into the barn to park and unload the car. We later learned that at some stage in the fog and rain we must have passed Roger and Dorinda as they drove back to the UK after a short break in the Vosges.

On Sunday, we put on our walking boots and walked down the snowy road to the village hall for the New Year lunch that the commune offers to its elders. John's hearing and tinnitus managed to put up with the noise through nibbles and starter. As the accordion music and singer got louder for the dancing, annoyingly accompanied by castanet man, John took a stroll outside. He returned for the venison main course, before reaching the end of his endurance and walking home through the fast-melting snow. As the meal and dancing progressed, non-dancers were wrapping up leftovers for their cats or chickens, so Helen felt no compunction about wrapping up cheese and some dessert for John (though drew a line at the messier chocolate mousse).

Festive food continued through January. We entertained our neighbours to some traditional English Christmas delicacies. It was a shame that Maïté does not like cinnamon as both Christmas cake and mince pies contain small quantities. Fortunately Helen had also brought back an assortment of pastries for her Brain Exercise group, so she broached the Viennese Whirls. Ghislaine, however, seemed happy with mince pies in the midst of our weekly English conversation practice and we later enjoyed *galette des rois* and *crémant* at her house. Our remaining goodies (including Battenburg cake) were appreciated by the Brain Exercise group, after they had solved biscuit shapes, snowman shapes, festive menu choices, months of the year, translated some *Franglais*, solved some logic problems and attempted a crossword around animals beginning with O (Helen wasn't the only one who had never heard of an *ornithorynque*).

On our return, the farmers had not been the only protesting workers. At this peak epidemic time, GPs were also striking for ten days over fees and controls. Would our pre-booked appointments take place? Everything seemed open and normal at our surgery. Our GP explained that, rather than piling up work for himself later, he was seeing all his routine, pre-booked patients and sending anyone who rang for a last-minute appointment to the hospital's Emergency Department to make a point.

The hospital was running as usual when Helen had a lesion on the top of her head checked by a Hungarian surgeon (interestingly it is one of the sons of the former much-loved president of the E2E Oldies Club who has a job in Hungary recruiting doctors to work in the Vosges) and we spent a while discussing the French and their language. Six weeks later, however, it was unexpected to be wheeled back from the day-surgery theatre by Guillaume, the friendly young waiter at the *Imprimerie* restaurant in 2024. When the restaurant was no longer able to afford the luxury of a second waiter, he had returned to the better paid nursing work. He had noticed the familiar name of Blackmore on the day's list. It was good to hear from him what the other restaurant staff have been doing since *l'Imprimerie* sadly closed at the end of December 2025. Damien the grumpy waiter is training as a heavy goods driver, and Michael is now the chef at *Le 29* in Saint Dié. We had dined at *Le 29* in the past, so it would be interesting to sample Michael's food there, we agreed.

There are disadvantages in having white hair: it shows up both the orange iodine-based disinfectant the hospitals use and the ensuing blood. Helen felt very self-conscious of her pink and orange tints a couple of days later when the E2E club went to the amateur theatre in Saulxures and toyed with the idea of wearing a furry hat throughout. It is always a popular event starting with a meal of smoked ham, potato dauphinoise and salad and a blueberry dessert, with enough aperitif and wine to put the audience in a good mood for a farce, - this year's about an ill-assorted (and stereotyped) walking group getting lost in the mountains. When the actors were wandering down the narrow aisles between the tables pretending to be lost in the dark and patting the occasional diner's bald head (French joke about meeting bats *chauve-souris* and bald (*chauve*) heads) Helen's sutured but fortunately not bald head felt threatened, but all was well.

Between hospital appointments, and after several years of indecision and test drives, we finally sold Bluto, our larger Toyota, to a dealer and bought a new hybrid Honda (as it is also blue, it inherited the name of Bluto, after trying out the unwieldy Bluetwo/Bluetoo). It is our first automatic, which sounds simpler, but the range of settings and options and compulsory warnings seems endlessly complicated. However the all-round camera displays when reversing parking are a boon as we age.

One of new Bluto's first longer drives was over the Col de Sainte Marie to Sélestat where we had booked lunch at a new restaurant, *Acolytes*. As John drove down from the col, an oncoming car flashed us, which is usually a friendly warning of police ahead. There were no police as we rounded a bend, but a newly fallen tree blocking the road. More trees were swaying ominously, destabilised by the strong overnight winds. We cleared the smaller branches, but picked a return route with fewer trees close to the road. (The meal in between was excellent: we learnt a new word *dampfnuddle* for the local dumplings served as a welcoming nibble, and appreciated the unusual celeriac-based dessert. We have returned to *Acolytes* since, though in better weather for wandering round the old streets of timbered houses and historic churches).

Another longer drive was to Basel at the beginning of March to meet Jessica who had been staying in Prague, then Zurich beforehand. We have been using the airport at Basel-Mulhouse for many years, but we have never visited the town itself. All went well with the new car on the drive, but we have been expecting a hefty fine as we missed the slip road at the beginning of the tolled Swiss motorway for which we had not got a permit. One thinks of pharmaceuticals and modern architecture rather than the centuries-old city of Erasmus and Holbein. So we were glad that Jessica had suggested staying for a couple of nights to explore, and were so lucky with glorious sunny weather.

We spent the first afternoon in the *Kunstmuseum* enjoying the Holbeins and being introduced to the work of Swiss artists. Next morning, we rode trams to a modern art gallery, the *Fondation Beyeler*, on the outskirts, in an attractive building designed by Renzo Piano, and looking out over fields. In addition to its permanent collection, it had a special exhibition of 80 later works of

Cezanne. The *Münster* and cloisters were a contrast in the afternoon, and we spent a long time outside looking at all the grotesque creatures including elephants sculpted around the east end; it was a shame the crypt was shut so we could not see the frescoes, apart from peering through gaps. The paintings on the red courtyard walls of the *Rathaus*, however, were fully visible and exuberant and there were moving wartime frescoes on the courtyard walls of the State Archives. There was so much we did not see in Basel, but on the last morning, as we visited the *Historisches Museum*, the beautiful hunting and courtly love tapestries, produced around 1490 in Basel, left a lasting impression of skill and delicacy, along with the wealth of the guilds and the Dance of Death.

Back in E2E we could not concoct a programme of visits for Jessica to rival our Basel sightseeing. We took short walks in the woods and round the village (stopping to chat to people sunning themselves in their gardens and having a coffee in the village restaurant/bar), were welcomed by the Sainte Marguerite Friday games group, and walked round Saint Dié, including the outside of the Le Corbusier factory and a riverside cafe. One of our favourite Alsace restaurants, *Chez Guth*, did us proud after a whistle-stop tour of Sélestat, and on the way back to Basel airport at the end of her visit, we stopped for coffee and rolls amid the wine cellars and storks (on their nest on top of the church) of Eguisheim.

We have spent Easter quietly in E2E. As Daniele and Maité were coming round for scrabble and afternoon tea on Maundy Thursday, John cooked a first batch of hot cross buns, experimenting with different spices in deference to Maité's dislike of cinnamon and serving them with butter and orange-lemon-grapefruit-ginger marmalade or Worcesterberry jam. After they left, we did a quick change and drove into Saint Dié. We had decided to eat at *Le 29* and it was only open in the evenings.

Le 29 is a small attractive restaurant on the main street of Saint Dié, with a beautifully painted restful woodland on one side wall. At the back all the cooking operations can be watched through the glass windows and door. We could see Michael, with his head down (still wearing his trademark dark flat cap) concentrating grimly on single-handedly cooking and washing up for that evening's twelve diners. As there were two menus, one with a choice of

courses and one a surprise menu, and the kitchen is small, he had a hard task ahead. Perhaps it was a relief to emerge from his small domaine occasionally to serve his offerings. The surprise menu we chose started with lettuce soup and mustard ice cream, which was delicious. Then we got another surprise — “Look, it’s Guillaume!” exclaimed John who was facing the door. And in came nurse Guillaume, his girl friend, and two friends. It was his first visit too — what a coincidence. We enjoyed the endive with lemon, honey, grapefruit and sauce, and then the tuna, but the main course of venison pie and the coffee and chocolate dessert were disappointing and it felt rather minimal and overpriced compared with our lunch at *Chez Guth* a few weeks earlier. We had a brief chat with Michael before we left and he said he was currently only contracted there until the end of April. We wondered whether he would continue without a sous chef. John later discovered that the two chefs who had been there since March 2025 left at the end of February 2026.

Breakfasts over Easter have put aside the muesli in favour of a second more-traditionally flavoured batch of hot cross buns with sloe and cinnamon jam. One feels a bit too well-fed to want to go out and do some gardening straight after.

As you will know, we usually return to the UK for Easter, but there is no need to be around in school holidays now that Jacob and Farrah are older. And now, right at the end of this newsletter, the most exciting news. We have a very good reason for coming over a bit later than Easter this year. Toby and Rachel are getting married on 2 May after getting engaged last year. So we shall be coming over in a couple of weeks’ time for their wedding (petrol and Trump megalomania permitting).