“Kerry musings”  
David Archer  

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Kerry musings
David Archer

En Septembre, nous sommes allés en France, pour nos vacances. As ever, we took a selection from the 1970s Institut Géographique National maps that we use for holidays, plus a 2006 IGN 1:250,000 road atlas received last Christmas.

In the early 1970s, when I first drove in France, it was very enjoyable, and still a little scary. One had to be aware that travelling at 90 kmh on a main road, did not stop someone (usually four times my age) from pottering out of a side road and claiming their priorité a droite. An almost complete absence of white line markings at road junctions, and poor signage increased the thrill and ‘where did he come from’ element of motoring. One had faith in a GB sticker and large, clear, foreign number plates. Today, all the crumbling plaster with washed out writing on gable walls has vanished. The smell is not the same, and driving is a synch. So easy. Wide open roads, little traffic and nice clear signs, which the French obey. No challenge at all. Might as well be at home. To counteract the ‘improvements’, I try to provide my own element of surprise, make things a little tricky and inject some fun into the driving. Here, maps come to the rescue.

Over the years, as our maps became dated, we started to get hiccups when navigating, and then burps, but never chronic indigestion. So an atlas with motorways, by-passes and major new roads should have been welcome, except that it takes the fun out of things. A foreign country should be different, keep one slightly tense and always alert for the unexpected, especially when driving. Using thirty year old maps maintains the challenge of driving in France. Quick, instant decisions are needed when the road is about to turn into a motorway, or when a four-lane highway appears from nowhere. Expecting to dawdle through a town, you are instantly on a peripherique, going in the wrong direction, with a totally useless map as guide. Wonderful. Just like the old days, and with the 2006 atlas safely out of reach, in the boot.

At home, au Pays de Galles et en Angleterre, I seldom drive an unknown route by myself, but if I do, I have a crib sheet on the passenger’s seat; nice big writing with road numbers to follow, and towns in smaller script. Ten minutes work from an OS atlas the evening before. Not so easy in France, regardless of the dates of mapping used. Except for the blue motorway signs (well, most of them), no road numbers appear at roundabouts or major roads junctions. In order to remain alive, it is essential that you know which town you are heading for. As far as I can see, even this varies, as a town either before or after the one of your choice might be the main one on the signpost. Oh, to know that the turning on the left is the N148 to Fontenay le Comte, and not just Niort. A teeny-weeny little number after a town would be nice. In Britain, at complicated intersections, if one is confronted with a less than useful sign, one always has a second chance, by spotting the wanted road number. Not so in France. No numbers at big intersections.

The IGN and Michelin maps all show roads numbers, so why don’t the road signs? Perhaps it is because the road numbers are all over the place (i.e. not as organised as at home. See www.geocities.com/marcelmonterie/f.htm). Hereabouts, the A458 goes from Welshpool to Shrewsbury, crossing both a county and national boundary on the way. One might expect the French D35 to go from X to Y. Not so. Road numbers frequently change when they cross a département boundary, as every département has its own system and numbers are repeated.
They almost certainly change when one is on the smallest of roads and needs a good strong number to drive by. Sometimes it is easy, as the D135 becomes the D735, but frequently the D64 becomes the D8 and reverts to the D64 in a few kilometres, when one wiggles across the boundary again. Imagine our ‘B’ road numbers changing when crossing from one county to another. Just as the French appear never to pronounce the last third of many words, so, when navigating, it is easiest not to take any notice of the beginning of road numbers. The head of a number is merely symbolic, not informative.

Perhaps it is a hangover from my early years of driving sur le continent, when everything was an adventure and the minor roads saw fewer British cars, but I still like to feel that we are explorers, finding our own way, by ourselves. At a junction, the *Toutes Directions* instruction must be avoided at all costs, even though it is where you want to go. The feel of the country cannot be experienced by following these signs. Too easy. Taking the turning either side of the ‘correct’ one leads to wonderful backstreets in strange towns, (where a 1:25,000 comes into its own, if you happen to have one). However, with the trusty *carte*, one soon rejoins the main road, without the shame of having followed the herd. Un navigateur is essential on a long cross-country drive. Motorways should be avoided as being far too easy. A navigator to interpret the maps, preferably an old 1:250,000 and 1:100,000 simultaneously. We always take a complete set of the later maps for the route, as when driving in an unknown countryside, the 1:100,000 *Série Verte*, good old metric half-inch, is by far the best map for driving on, even late 1970s versions. All grades of road are shown and numbered, down to F, G, H and unclassified. The atlas is useless, dropping minor road numbers to keep the map uncluttered. During the early 1970s, we initially used a set of Shell *Cartoguides*. Very small scale maps with places of interest noted. One map was especially useful, as it introduced us to *des routes parallèles* – good parallel roads away from the main roads. Look at any French map and these parallel routes stand out beautifully (except on the atlas). Big thick red national routes, and a fine yellow D road running parallel. With even less traffic on them, excellent for driving at 90 kmh, and one passes through small towns and villages, seeing French life, in the absence of heavy traffic.

This year, I decided that French maps are easier to handle than ours. Why? Because they do not have card covers. So why do the OS? The outer surfaces of integral covers bear the creases and dirt, as do card covers, but card makes no difference to the damage caused by continual opening and re-folding of the map during use. Having not pursued the 1:50,000 integral cover experiment of the late 1970s, and having dropped the Pathfinders, all OS maps now have card covers – which I have previously come out in favour of. But having used the French ones recently, I would be quite happy if the OS changed to them. Saddened, but not upset. On one walk, I realised that no matter how confident I am of the path, I prefer to carry a map in my hand, usually closed. And as I like to keep looking at it, I am forever opening it. So, what is the correct thing to do? What do real walkers do (assuming they need a map)? Open for quick reference or closed for protection against the elements? My instinct is that whatever they do, they do not have it folded open in a plastic case, slung around their necks. This is something that I could never bring myself to do, just as when younger, one never sat on the tube and never drank lager. I must look in the SAS manual to see what is considered good practice – probably to have the route tattooed on the forearm and removed by skin graft afterwards. Too drastic for a Sunday afternoon walk to the teashop in Montgomery.