

# TIGHT RIGHT – LOOSE LEFT

## Driving in Europe is a breeze!

Written by Delwyn Sinclair



Who would have thought? Selling self-drive holidays to Europe for more than 20 years and I'd never actually done it myself. Instead, I lived and learned through my customers' stories and feedback to become what new customers call an 'expert' and what regular customers call 'friendly' I expect.

Well that changed recently when my 17 year old visited France on a one year exchange and it was vitally necessary for Mum to visit. And because I just couldn't say no to my 14 year old – it became a girl's road trip.

Little did my kids know it had been 18 years since I last drove on the "right" side of the road. Instead I feigned positive. And let's face it, I have thousands of customers of all ages that have managed it without injury, so really there was no excuse. The time had come for me to walk the talk.

So after a few days in Paris visiting friends, I was dropped off at our Paris Orly Airport location. A sensible option for two reasons:

1. I was heading south
2. To collect in central Paris was just too much of a challenge – especially when neither of my daughters have drivers licences, so there was no Plan B if I failed.

You'd think I would have taken my own advice and booked early enough to get an automatic, but no, I was a last minute customer so a manual car it was. I've told hundreds of customers over the years not to worry, it's not that hard to drive a manual on the other side of the road. Guess what? I was right! Yes, an automatic would have made it easier, but to be honest the manual kept me busy and super focussed – perhaps more focussed on the art of driving and away from any distractions. We won't mention the few times I stalled. The kids were so embarrassed, but that's nothing new.

An even better decision was having my 17 year old with me from the beginning. I may know a lot of stuff, but my brain still struggles with all things digital, so when it came to programming the GPS – which is actually quite simple I realised on the final day without her – it was just too much for me. My priority was keeping us all alive and on the right track, whilst still remembering to breathe. Hence, my eldest daughter was shown through the GPS system once by an Orly location employee and subsequently nailed it every time, including stops en route to destinations, car parking areas, fuel stations and more. Most important for Day 1, when you only receive 10 litres of fuel in your vehicle,

she got us to a fuel station within the first 10 minutes then onto the motorway south to Beaune which was to be our first stop.

I gave my navigator three jobs. To programme the GPS as previously explained, ensure I was always on the correct side of the road and to always say “tight right, loose left” when I was at an intersection prior to turning. It’s when you turn corners that you revert to habit if you are not fully focussed.

My back seat passenger received one job – stay quiet for the first few days so there were no unnecessary distractions. This is no easy task for said back seat passenger but thankfully they both performed their duties well.

I have to admit, my palms were quite sweaty and I did say a quick prayer before I set off. Three hours later, my palms were still sweaty and I said a very long prayer of thanks. We had arrived safely! Driving to the supermarket for some snacks on arrival was pushing it however, so to get some exercise after all that sitting (sounded completely plausible to the kids) we parked the car at the hotel and walked. Pity we didn’t have the GPS with us as we got lost, but thanks to Google Maps on my phone we eventually found our way and stocked up on the essentials.

Coming from winter, essentials included delicious summer fruit and all things French, which of course included numerous varieties of cheese which, incidentally, was incredibly cheap. My favourite French cheese sets me back \$15 at home – well it cost me less than 2euros. Needless to say we ate a lot of cheese the first few days! And bread. And olives. And those gorgeous red, orange, yellow and green mini tomatoes. Yum!



Beaune was lovely to explore early the next morning, especially when we came across a small market with the most delicious cherries, apricots and more olives. After a number of photos that had to be just so to meet teenager Instagram requirements we returned to the hotel, checked out and explored the area around Beaune. One word: stunning.

We even parked up inside a vineyard at the end of a row of grapes for a picnic. Thankfully the man driving the tractor let us be, in our little world of fabulousness.



Our next stop was recommended to me by a French friend, via a family member he called for advice when I explained I hadn't booked anything after our first night in Beaune. He thought I was slightly mad, after all it was July and places were full to overflowing with people on their summer holidays. But, as I knew from past customers, places inland still have availability as the majority head to the beach (or as the French say, the seaside). And after all, I had [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com) and a car – I couldn't go wrong!

Le Puy en Velay was the recommendation and while it was quite a drive, it was worth it. What a treat. We spent the late afternoon and evening exploring the old town by foot, including the Notre-Dame de France statue high on a hill overlooking the town. The views were incredible. Later that evening as darkness fell, "Puy de Lumieres", an incredible light-show on 6 emblematic monuments of the city, took centre stage. As one finished, you walked to the next monument for its show, and on and on. We only watched two shows, but they were quite fabulous.



Next stop, Uzes. A highlight of our holiday. We arrived the day before Bastille Day and booked ourselves into a Chateau less than 5mins from town and just down the road (and a very narrow one at that) from the Haribo museum.



Bastille Day consisted of a fabulous lunch at Le Tracteur (photo of our dessert to the right), just 8kms from Uzes, after a morning spent at Pont du Gard. After a lovely afternoon swim at the Chateau we ventured into Uzes for a quick dinner before returning to the Chateau to watch the Bastille Day fireworks.



Peta Mathias was who we were to meet bright and early the next day. I booked the three of us into one of her half day cooking classes. [www.petamathias.com/uzes-1](http://www.petamathias.com/uzes-1)

Peta took us through the Uzes Saturday market buying up quantities of olives, fish, cherries, wine, bread, cheese and much more. We visited her favourite stalls and sampled many of the items before agreeing they were up to standard. My 14 year old thought that was just the plan, especially when we got to the wine stand. Having to explain you don't drink wine like water made it quite obvious that she was a novice at the art of wine drinking, but more than willing to learn it seems!

A few hours later, after much instruction by Peta and learning by her students, we all enjoyed a 5 course lunch in her Uzès home, then upstairs for a group photo before going on our merry way. The remainder of the day for us included a quick drive to Nîmes, a tour of the Haribo factory as we approached home, then a late afternoon swim.



Up bright and early the next morning, and while the lovely seaside town of Cassis was the destination, we took the very very long way. I was desperate to catch a glimpse of iconic villages like Gordes and Roussillon that seem to grace the cover of almost every French travel brochure or website – including inside my own brochures over the years. We drove through numerous little villages that we would have loved to have stopped at, and tinkered about in, but due to time restraints we limited ourselves to just one stop at the Lavender Museum in Coustellet. A 2-hour rendezvous by my 17 year old, with an exchange student she met on a tour of Europe the month prior, just outside the town of Apt provided enough time for a fuel station search, quick bite to eat then a whistle stop visit to the gorgeous village of Roussillon. A few photos in a field of lavender then back to collect the navigator. The highlight of her 2-hours? She ate frogs legs for lunch!



The Luberon and surrounding regions deserve a minimum of a week, and a week it will get from me next time – including a villa with a pool and nice easy day trips starting early in the morning before all the tourists converge and take up every available inch of space.

The late afternoon drive into Cassis was a treat and while it took four attempts to find our centrally located hotel (the streets were blocked to allow the many holidaymakers to walk in peace), we finally showed the police our booking confirmation and they waived us through. But crikey, the parking on offer, under the hotel, required a team effort to enter/exit. Yes I knew I had full insurance with no excess, but I also knew there would be photos sent back home and I'd never live it down!

My thoughts on Cassis? Honestly, it was lovely, but it was full to over-flowing and I was happy to leave the next day. I think it would be nicer to go in June or September, outside the typical summer holiday period.

The next week was filled with more driving, eating and exploring. We visited Sete, Aigues Mortes, Carcassonne, Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Nantes before leaving my 17 year old behind with her final host family and returning the car to Paris Orly Airport. All without a scratch!

I lost track of how much I spent on toll roads, although I paid for them all on my Visa credit and debit cards so if I really wanted to know I could look it up. But truthfully, I don't want to know. It was a necessity for the distance we needed to cover in such a short space of time.

We ended up driving over 3,000kms in just 15 days. Mad? Yes, absolutely. Next time I will pick four different regions and stay a week in each in a villa with a pool and just do morning trips, with the afternoon left for lazy lunches, swimming and relaxing. I completely missed the Lot region, so that will be top of my list next time, as well as the Luberon. I'll also try to stay off the motorways – necessary for this trip, but desperately boring. Plus I might include a touch of either Spain or Italy.

### **Here are a few handy self-drive tips:**

- if you remember nothing else, remember this. The best way to ensure you have programmed your GPS correctly is to insert the zip code of the city or town into the City field. So, rather than entering 'Bordeaux', if your hotel address reads "33520 Bordeaux" enter "33520" in the City field. There are often two or more streets with the same name in some large cities so this ensures you are going to the right area of the city and therefore the right street!
- always place your toll card in the same place. This saves having to ask the cars behind you to reverse so you can do the same, in order to search under, inside and around every seat, purse and bag inside the car!
- filling up with fuel at self-service supermarket stops is a good idea as the fuel can be a lot cheaper, BUT as soon as you swipe your credit card it freezes the maximum amount the pump will provide (eg. about eur120) and it takes 4-5 days for that to come off and the actual charge to appear.
- within the booking conditions of some hotels, you think you're prepaying for the hotel but you're actually allowing the hotel to freeze the cost of the booking on your credit card as a deposit, then when you check-out they charge you separately. It can take up to 2 weeks to unfreeze the funds initially taken. Very sneaky and downright inconvenient when you are using a debit card and don't have unlimited funds.
- if your goal is to see as much of Europe as possible, just remember that you might see it but you won't remember it. It's only when you stay in a place for 2-3 nights and get out and walk and interact with the locals that you build memories that last forever.
- there are a LOT of roundabouts throughout France. Remember, you go anti-clockwise.
- if you want to visit some of the most beautiful villages in France, and there are a lot of them, look here: <http://www.les-plus-beaux-villages-de-france.org/en/>

Thanks for reading! *Delwyn*