

Post



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On top of La Rhune - May 21, 2025

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SUMMARY

Happy to be with car, we headed out for the day. First stop, Ascain, for the Post Office and great pastries. Took the Petit Train de La Rhune (cog railway) up the mountain where we enjoyed a picnic lunch, some fabulous views and nice hiking. After descending we visited a couple of small towns with the official French government designation of Most Beautiful Villages: Sare (meh), then Ainhoa which we found to be charming and quite picturesque. Back to our hotel for some downtime (and blogging) before cabbing into town for an excellent dinner at l'Essentiel restaurant. - Karen

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DETAIL

Yesterday was our train from Lourdes and today we're on another train (hopefully). If we can, we'll be taking a cog rail up La Rhune, the tall mountain that we see in the distance from our hotel. Given when we have to return our rental car we can't use our current tickets. We ask the lady at our hotel's front desk if she'll call and get our tickets changed. She's happy to but they say we need to email to request the change, which we do.

After coffee at the hotel we hop in our car and head out. First stop is a little town nearby to mail a postcard. I head to the post office while the rest of the gang goes to a local boulangerie for some pain raisin and pain au chocolat. At the post office the door seems locked (despite being past 9 am). Another customer shows up and also has no luck. Thankfully a young lady walks up behind us and says we have to ring the bell. Ah, yes. Here post offices are also banks, so they control the lock on the door from inside. Our pain raisin is fresh out of the oven and heavenly.

Being new, our rental car smells of burning clutch. It couldn't be my inexperienced manual driving, could it? We drive on and head to the cog train. The parking lot is almost full but we find a place. At the ticket window we explain that we need to change our ticket to today, is that possible. Consternation. Say what? You can't use your original tickets?? This would obviously be more convenient for the ticket lady. No, we can't change our tickets. Did we buy them online? Yes, we did. Ah, two strikes. Stupid Americans. OK, maybe. Go wait over there and they'll see what might be possible. We must be punished. In the end we get tickets for the train in 40 minutes. We thank her profusely.

We wait with lots of other people (no English speakers that we can hear) and many dogs. Some are friendly (the dogs) and some bark at all the other dogs. The owners are oblivious. Finally we're able to board the train, into our assigned seats. It's a cog railway due to the steepness of the incline. The cars and track are quite old and the seats are made of lots of lacquered wooden slats that extend the width of the car's interior. The uphill facing seats are normal, but the downhill facing seats are more bucket-like. Apparently you'd slide off otherwise.

It's cool at ground level and even cooler the further we go up. We'll be at 3,000' at the top. We see horses still losing their winter coats and young colts staying close to their mothers (where the milk comes from). There are quite a few flowers, like foxglove, on tall stalks, and other, smaller flowers, more capable of enduring the harsh conditions. At the top we amble out of the train and hike the many steep stairs further up to the summit. It's a good view and we can see the golf course of our hotel, Saint-Jean-de-Luz and the Atlantic beyond. We can see a ways up the coast, maybe to Biarritz and maybe even further. Looking south (just over the wall, supposedly) we see Spain.

It's sunny which helps offset the cool air. We find a table, buy a couple of beers and break out our picnic lunch (leftover cheese, the sandwich we didn't eat yesterday and chips). Good lunch. Eventually we head out to explore. Our tickets have an exact time we will head up the mountain and an exact time (2.5 hours later) we'll head back down. Being at the top of the mountain we can see off in the distance where other passengers are exploring the limits of the rocky plateau. It's a rugged beauty and harsh living conditions for the animals brave enough to come up here. There are huge rock outcroppings that have been carved by 1000s of years of high winds. They're striking to look at.

Well below us (but somewhere we could get to if we really wanted to) we see words. They're composed of arranged, flat white-ish rocks. From the few horses and sheep we see nearby we can tell each letter is maybe 5' tall or more. They're designed to be read from way up here. Their important message are along the lines of "Sophie" and "Claude". I guess as hard as they are to 'write' the authors are trite with their messages. As we walk, the clouds surround the radio tower on top of the mountain and the viewing platform. We sit outside at one of the two rustic cafés and have thick hot chocolate. We pass the time til our ride down.

Back in our car we drive on, in search of what we call "PBVs" (Plus Beaux Villages). These are supposedly the most beautiful villages of France. It's an official designation given out following strict judging rules by a formal organization (of course it is, this is France). We drive through Sare, which is nice. At one roundabout we note that if we'd taken the wrong exit we'd be in Spain, something we're not allowed to do in this rental car.

In Ainhoa we park and walk around. They're redoing the main street, which we're sure will be lovely when done but it's a pain now to get around. We bop into a shop for wine and foie gras and enjoy some samples. Our host owns the farm and 4,000 geese. His accent and subject matter test the limits of our ability to understand French. Mostly we nod. Our credit cards, though, are sufficient to buy some of both, for later. On the way out of town the GPS says to go this way and the road signs ('local residents only') say the opposite. We go with the GPS.

Back at our hotel we park next to one of many small sports cars newly there that are obviously involved in some sort of road rally (knowable by their decals). A British gentleman has his car's 'bonnet' open and is tweaking or checking something. He explains how things work: each car leaves at 1 minute increments, on a defined route. There's a checkpoint every 10 km or so. If you're 1 second late you get one point deducted. If you're there one second early you get TWO points deducted, and so on. Step one is this evening: go to the bar and get pissed. Apparently the drivers follow all these rules scrupulously, especially that last one. It's loud.

The lady at the front desk arranges a taxi for us into town for our dinner reservation at the restaurant L'Essentiel. The lady at the Front Desk is excited that we're going as she's also going there for her boyfriend's birthday next week. She's not been yet, but has heard good things.

At the restaurant, they're happy to have us, but not until our reservation time. We head back out into the cool, windy and grey evening. We walk along the boardwalk above the beach. Out in the bay, to our surprise, there are many people wind surfing and para-surfing. I see a man wrapped in a blanket and assume he's homeless. On closer inspection it turns out that he is a wind surfer, drying himself off with a towel.

We go for dinner, it is excellent. Our waiter speaks French, but it's not any French we can understand. We ask him where he is from and he says he's from Paris. Given his heavy accent, we are not so sure. The restaurant calls another taxi to get us back to our hotel. All in all a good day, and tomorrow we still have the car, yay!

Photos



At the La Rhune cog railway station we endeavor to change our tickets from tomorrow to today.



We're (eventually) successful and our train finally rolls into the station.



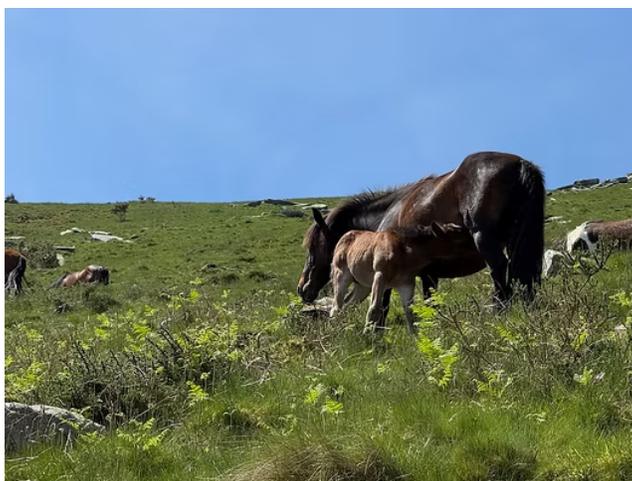
Onboard we're happy to finally be underway.



Three tracks, two for the 'wheels' and one (cogged) to allow the train to claw it's way towards the summit.



Along the way we get some pretty countryside visuals.



We're not the only ones up here. We see horses (some still shedding their winter coats) and some young ones, just recently arrived.



After a while we can see the summit off in the distance.



At the top, from the car, we can see down to Saint-Jean-de-Luz and the Atlantic.



We were happy to have sunshine upon our arrival (in the two and a half hours we were there the summit was socked in a number of times). There's a couple of big sitting/eating areas, a café, and a bar/restaurant.



We got a couple of beers but otherwise ate what we'd brought with us. (We didn't eat the mouldy looking bread on the lower right.)



Looking south we're looking at Spain and a road on which it's possible to simply drive up here. The cog railway makes it seem much more dramatic.



Further afield there's a broad plateau to explore. We have a good bit of time up here so we, too, go to check it all out.



We talk someone into taking our picture, with Spain for our backdrop.



There's a protective building for the horses and a dramatic wind-swept rock.



To our east people have written their names and other things with flat rocks. In the picture are also many sheep and horses so we gather the letters are pretty tall.



Moving on we visit a couple of the Plus Beaux Villages of France (here Ainhoa). They were pretty, but maybe they're prettier in sunshine and blue sky. And the

FARNSNIENTE



Back at our hotel we find we're the starting point for a road rally tomorrow. Lots of British (and other nationality) cars prepped for the morning's starting pistol.



One of the drivers allows us to see inside his car, including this device for ensuring you hit every checkpoint when you're supposed to, hopefully to the second.



In town, while being pelted by a bit of rain and under dark, windy skies, we see lots of wind surfers and parasail-surfers, not caring if they're cold or wet.



Nancy won the prize for getting her fish's bones out in one swift movement. All of the food was delicious.

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