

Rouen, Reflexia and the Open Road, by Peter Gumbrell

An unplanned road trip around France and Spain made in my Renault 4, December 2008.

In the late autumn of 2008, I was set to return to Rouen for furtherance of my French studies in the Normandy city. I had arranged to do another four weeks' worth of language courses, taking me up to Xmas and with the aim of finding longer term accommodation whilst I was there. I set off once again in my R4, taking the ferry from Newhaven to Dieppe, whereupon I quickly spotted the first other Quatrelle of my trip, a bright orange model that had probably been resprayed and was sitting on the roadside near a petrol station in the town. Over the next few days I was to see a few more around Rouen, during which time my own Reflexia sat in the garden of my host's home being rained on virtually non-stop.

On the first weekend in between my studies, I took the car out with a girl from my college, and we headed to the pretty port of Honfleur on the other side of the estuary from Le Havre, from where we had to cross the impressive Pont de Normandie, once the longest cable-stayed bridge in the world. This followed an incident in which we narrowly avoided a wild boar running out in front of us, further back near the banks of the Seine. Just two days later, however, I was forced to make a sudden decision about the near future, and to change my plans radically. With the college now likely being devoid of any further social activity until the spring, and upon the discovery of a much cheaper language school operating nearby and throughout France, I didn't waste any time in jumping in my R4 and exiting the city for, hopefully, less wet climes further south. Where exactly further south might I have been thinking? Presumably somewhere sensible and within relatively easy reach for an ageing R4 during these treacherous Europe-wide wintry conditions.

Like Madrid.

Yes, forever onwards preferring a spontaneous life full of unexpected surprises, and shunning the obvious to prevent the present situation becoming stale, I believed that driving all the way to central Spain from the northern fringes of France was a perfectly valid plan. Others didn't. But I don't listen to them. In fact, I have developed such absolute faith in the qualities and abilities of my dear Renault 4 that it never crossed my mind what a daft idea this might be.

So it was that on the morning of Tuesday 2nd December 2008, I set off at 8.30am from central Rouen on a road trip halfway across the continent. Exactly how things were going to pan out I wasn't sure. The only immediate objective was to reach Madrid as soon as possible, in order to meet up with a friend who was due to leave the city a few days later. After that, it was anybody's guess. With just a brief check of the tyres, lights, oil and water levels, I bundled all my luggage into Reflexia's boot and set sail southwards on an impromptu adventure.

An hour after leaving Rouen, the miserable and incessant rain that had plagued both the north of France and the rest of England, if not most of Europe during previous weeks, finally cleared as I steered towards Chartres, mapping out a route that would avoid any tolls and therefore make extensive use of often slower, single lane highways. The sun was at first a welcome change, but throughout the day it became an annoyance as my windscreen furred up with small particles reflecting its light and blinding my vision, and I realised that the course I had chosen drove me directly into the sun's beam as it crossed the sky from east to west. Initially, I was aiming south-east

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in the morning towards Chartres, but as the day wore on my trajectory changed to first south and then south-west, tracking the sun's rays in my face and leaving me with a small tan and vitamin D boost by the evening. The only other weather element distracting me was the strong crosswinds that hurtled across the plains and caused some unusual effects when passing lorries. I had driven through strong winds many times in an R4, but never until now had I experienced this phenomenon of so many knocking sounds and trapped air episodes that seemed to threaten to rip a panel off.

I found myself refilling after every 300 kilometres or so, sinking up to thirty euros of Super 98 into the tank on each occasion. My previous R4 forays into France, Belgium and the Netherlands have taught me that the standard Euro 95 version of unleaded, whilst perfectly adequate for my engine when consumed in England, appears to have a different octane level or quality from that sold in many other European countries, hence I tend to opt for the more expensive option wherever possible to avoid worrying pinking sounds and general sluggishness from the motor. Three refills later and with night descending on the ring road around Bordeaux, I was gearing towards an overnight stop on the farthest corner of France or nearest corner of Spain, but I hadn't counted on a monsoon arriving in my path before I got there.

As I will surely have documented somewhere on my Renault 4 website in the past, my driving expeditions of the previous twelve years have presented me with just about every torrential gale, storm, thick snow and ice and other extreme of European weather, as if in the form of some sort of test of my endurance. Yet still new tortures come my way, and what arrived that night was the biggest test I've ever faced. The rain was not so much bucketing down as falling in vertical rivers. For a period lasting around fifteen minutes, it seemed like I was driving my R4 through the never-ending bottom end of Niagara Falls. To make matters worse, the rain was at an acute angle aimed directly at my windscreen, and even with the wipers on full speed, the vision ahead was just a black blur. This stage of the journey was on a busy dual-carriageway, and a lorry in front provided my only visual cue as to where the road might lead. Its rear lights were just about discernible as I tried to keep a relatively safe distance, yet had to maintain an unnerving proximity for fear of losing sight of it. Of course, all the spray that this lorry generated only made things more difficult for anything in its path behind. No lane markings or other road features were visible at all, and within minutes the surface of the road had become inches deep in flash flood water. There were no slip roads at which to leave the carriageway, at least none that could be seen, and stopping on the hard shoulder would probably have proved the most dangerous thing I could have done, with other blind motorists behind liable to smack into me.

Fortunately, conditions eased a little and I exited the main road for a quieter one leading to Bayonne. The car had escaped unscathed, but some gaps still remaining around the seam of the front wing that I had fitted weeks earlier meant that water had sprayed in and soaked my trouser leg. I took refuge for the night in a *FastHotel* in Biarritz, thirteen hours after setting off from Rouen and covering the length of France north to south. Alas, by the time I went searching for food with little petrol and little visible action in this resort town on a windy, cold, wet Tuesday night in December, I could find nowhere still open. Unwillingly, I replenished my stomach with some tinned provisions from my bag back at the hotel, but which I had to eat with my fingers!

The next morning, I became further infuriated by this French town and its nation's fussy culture, whereupon it was impossible to find a filling station which was either open or which accepted foreign credit cards. One automatic pump at an Intermarché supermarket refused my card and staff inside offered no other possibility for payment, not even cash. I'd discovered this situation in France years before, but it was the first time I'd had problems during this visit. My fuel gauge was showing

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empty and I drove around for an hour becoming ever more desperate and worried. I'd never let the needle go this low before, although this circumstance was set to be the first of many such experiences during my travels. Finally, I located a garage back near where I'd started, but I didn't escape Biarritz until 11am, and I had originally advised my friend in Madrid that I would try to reach her by the end of lunchtime.

Once I entered my first *péage* section at the border of Spain, the landscape changed dramatically from the endless flat pastures of western France, into rugged Pyrenean hillsides and clustered Basque communities crammed into the spaces in between, amidst dozens of high-rise blocks. I faced one slight hitch in my day's mission: I had no road atlas or other map of Spain. Since they were so expensive to buy in the service stations, I decided to merely look at one and try to contain its details in my memory. The itinerary seemed simple. Just stick to the A1 and follow signs for Vitoria, Burgos and Madrid in that order. The conditions I would have to endure along the route were another matter.

The motorway rises from the back end of San Sebastián, weaving around the hills and valleys at the foot of the Pyrenees, and climbing endlessly into mountains that became ever whiter and lonelier. Despite being a main autoroute - the A1 no less - speed limits were reduced to as low as 20km/h in places as the road took sharp turns upwards. Once up into the skies above, with thick snow lying all around and continuing to fall, the road then takes several plunges up and down like an elongated rollercoaster, as one traverses one mountain range after another. The poor R4 was really up against it on this occasion. Most of the uphill sections have crawler lanes designed primarily for lorries, but open to other vehicles which cannot manage a minimum seventy kilometres per hour. Several times, Reflexia had to join the convoy of trucks as her speed was reduced to as little as fifty-five kilometres per hour. I've always found that this, my third Renault 4, has been more sluggish on the slopes than her forerunners, Angelica and Nicolexia. The latter of these had been tuned slightly differently by the former owner, meaning it was more racy but also much lighter to handle, to the point of sometimes feeling a little unsafe when skipping over bumps. The differences are only marginal and not attributed to any great feats of mechanical mucking about, just mild adjustments to what is already there. In contrast, Reflexia is more reliable, with a stiffer driving feel, but like a tortoise on the hills.

My friend was awaiting my arrival with some trepidation, since all the nation's news and weather forecasts had been consumed in recent days by bulletins about the severe snowfall and dangerous conditions affecting all of north and central Spain. The advice being dispensed was not to travel where possible, and with a bank holiday weekend looming there looked like further chaos was due to hit the roads. It flew in the face of conventional expectations to travel through France in clear blue skies and sunshine for most of the journey, only to then hit extreme cold, ice and snow upon arrival in Spain. It wasn't just the mountainous regions of the north that were experiencing such unusually brutal temperatures, the rest of Spain was frozen too. Add into this mix the rather unfortunate and unenviable condition whereby the heating system in my Renault 4 was only blowing out warm air when running at low speeds or for the first few minutes of driving. Some sort of thermostat problem has always presented this situation in Reflexia, although I seem to recall my previous cars had similar issues at times. Without any driving gloves, my hands were not best equipped for holding themselves up at the wheel for such long periods, but I pressed on regardless.

Once beyond Burgos, the mountains had levelled out into the high plains, and the end of my journey (or the first leg at least) finally seemed in sight. That was until a pair of police officers suddenly diverted traffic down a slip road and blocked off the motorway without warning. I now found myself in the middle of nowhere with no map, compass, GPS, sat-nav or other gadgetry, in

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the freezing cold, with the hot air of my breath forcing me to continually demist the windows to save letting colder air into the car through the vents. I tried to follow the lorries ahead, sure that they would also be heading in the general direction of Madrid and know the best way to get there. Just half a mile around the corner, however, they all pulled into a rest area and there seemed to be no other traffic in existence. I was perplexed, and lost. Taking a U-turn, I headed back under the carriageway in what I assumed to be a south-westerly direction, hoping to find a turn-off soon. With hope beginning to fade a few miles later, on endless plains running to the horizon, a tiny sign pointed in the direction of a narrow lane, simply reading 'Madrid'. Despite here being over one hundred kilometres off the capital, it seemed this city was the only place worth putting on a signpost in this region, and it was the one I needed. As I entered the lane, the name of the approaching small village was also displayed on a sign. It was called 'Canada'. Looking around at the scenery, that didn't seem too far from the reality.

The highway heading into the Madrid region began climbing again as I had to straddle more mountains, and as I rose past the red flags with stars proclaiming I had entered Madrid, I dived into the clouds and then into a tunnel that was full of this same cloud. It was virtually impossible to see anything. On emerging at the other end, I was only glad my journey wasn't in the opposite direction, as traffic had come to a standstill and was queued for a long way back. The opposite tunnel must have been so thick with the icy, murky air that the road was impassable or there had been an accident. Eventually, at around 4.30pm, I escaped all the snow and entered the busy freeways around the capital. All I knew from here on was that the place I was heading - a city in the outskirts called Alcala de Henares - was to the north-east of Madrid, so I guessed my way across the north of the city and hoped for the best in picking a road going in the direction of Zaragoza. A quick call to my friend resulted in a change onto the A2 and my arrival in Alcala some forty minutes later, a day and a half after leaving Rouen.

The picture below was taken at the spot where I parked the car for the coming few days, outside the railway station in Alcala de Henares. It's hardly the most inspiring surroundings for a photo and doesn't give away much about where it could be, so I ensured I snapped another before leaving the town.



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Whilst visiting my friend, I was rather surprised to pass a classic Renault 4 van parked in the town centre (see picture below). It was an F4 that had the early front grille, and so would appear to be from the early Sixties. My friend believed its year could be ascertained from the number plate, although with the vehicle being older than her, she wasn't so sure what this year might be.



After four nights spent in this authentic and attractive town, it was time to move on. Without having a Spanish road map at hand, my principal plan was to get out of Spain by heading northwards back to France. It had been my aim to take a short tour around some cities in the south of France in the new year, because I was keen to check out other study options for the future, so I now decided that I may as well bring part of that trip forward, and attempt to tie in a couple of the locations on my return through France. This would take me through Toulouse and Montpellier, possibly also heading onto Lyon after that. I already had the return ferry crossing from Dieppe to England booked for shortly before Xmas, but I could bring that forward a little rather than spend too much money travelling around. There was another option of taking the ferry from the north coast of Spain back to Portsmouth, but this was expensive, and I would be unable to obtain any refund on my Dieppe ferry due to the terms of the ticket. So the question now was which route to take in crossing the Pyrenees and reaching Toulouse?



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It was tempting to pass through Zaragoza and onwards to Andorra, one of those small states that I've always wanted to visit just for the point of saying I've been there, but in this weather, on a bank holiday weekend, it was not advisable. A route to the east of the mountains was too long-winded, and so it seemed that a reversal of my previous route would be the most viable option. I had attempted to contact my old friend and Renault 4 colleague Asier Castellano in San Sebastián, and just before setting off from Alcala I received an email reply from him. We arranged to meet in his home city that evening, putting further strain on me to reach a rather remote destination within a compact time frame, in a Renault 4. Before exiting my surroundings, I took one more snap (see picture, previous page) just to prove that my Reflexia really did make it all the way to Madrid at the ripe old age of twenty-four.

Unlike the heavy snow of days before, I instead had to drive through another deluge until I'd passed by the flags with the stars and exited the surroundings of Madrid, whereupon it turned clearer. As I passed one giant black bull hoarding after another, I was determined to find one with a stopping place nearby, where I could take a photo of the R4. My friend in Alcala had been telling me how the constructions had originally been erected decades ago for an advertising campaign which used the symbol for its branding. Some of them are enormous and tower over the motorways with a powerful and ominous presence, such that they have become iconic objects held dear by much of the population, who frequently sport much smaller stickers of the same symbol on their boot lids. Apparently, the current Spanish government had wanted to have them removed, but public protest had won them a stay of execution. Somewhere between Madrid and Burgos, I found a spot to stop and get my prize photo (below).



It was at this same spot that I snapped the next picture (see following page), looking in the opposite south-easterly direction, towards the mountains shrouding the northern fringes of the Spanish capital.

From here on until reaching the Basque capital, the journey was less eventful as night fell and, unsurprisingly, I found the drive down through the mountains much easier than the climb going the other way. The final section as the road enters the urban sprawl between Vitoria and San Sebastián was a most enjoyable ride, as I hurtled around the winding valleys on a downhill run rivalled only by the best ski slopes. The snow had all but gone, and the down carriageway takes a more direct route than its twisty-turny uphill 20km/h counterpart. My only instruction from Asier was to take the first turn-off signed Ondaretta, and then pull over into the car park of a hotel named the *Hesperia*. Once I arrived, Asier came to meet me on one of his motorbikes, and we finished off the

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night with a couple of beers in the local bar. It had been over five years since the Interrail trip during which I had met up with Asier and his friend Luis, the other R4 fan from the city. On this bank holiday occasion Luis was out of town, but Asier did his very best to fit me in around his holiday plans. We arranged to meet the next morning at the edge of the bay, and he hinted that if the weather held out and there was no rain, he might just bring along his classic 1960s *Cuotralata* for me to see.



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It was now Monday morning and a bank holiday. Following instructions, I made my way down to the corner of the bay in Donostia (the Basque name for its capital, San Sebastián), which was full of locals promenading. A couple of daring ladies in their fifties even donned swimsuits and went for a dip, though it was a decidedly nippy, grey December day to do so. Asier arrived with his girlfriend, and we admired the sculpture named *Peine de los Vientos* wedged into the rocks by the sea, where crowds gathered nearby to stand atop blow holes that send vertical gusts up the public's trousers and other clothing as the tide rushes in under the rocks below. I imagined this would be a more interesting place to appreciate during the summer when hordes of unsuspecting ladies arrived in ill-advised fashions.

Asier had, as promised, brought along his blue classic, out of its garage for the first run in a while. We took a tour heading up onto the cliffs above, but since these were shrouded in mist which spoiled any chance of a view over the bay, we retreated and instead parked the vehicles at a spot down by the waterside (see pictures above and on following pages). There could be no doubting which of the cars had been most spoiled during its lifetime in terms of maintenance, though I like to think that my Reflexia nonetheless appreciated my giving her the chance of a holiday in Spain.



Asier's car, the 'Blue Star', was his second current Renault 4, and the third Renault vehicle in his possession at the time. Keeping all these motors, in addition to his two motorbikes, was putting a strain on his time and his finances, so he was facing the dilemma of having to wave goodbye to some of his spoils. The Blue Star, a 1977 model, was immaculate, and had been taken good care of by both Asier and the previous owner. It was special to him due to the year of manufacture also representing his year of birth, though he wasn't so happy about the 'M' at the start of the number plate, designating the Spanish capital Madrid, which was something of a dirty word in this region. He had been considering changing it to a local 'SS' variety, but his mother had been advising not to do so since the original plate was a part of the car's history.

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The standard 850cc engine of this TL had been replaced by the former owner with a more powerful 1,108cc version from a GTL, and just for fancy effect it had even been fitted with a push-button start, located under the dashboard. This was quite a peculiar thing to witness on a Seventies generation R4. I was privileged to experience a short ride in the car, but declined the offer to drive it, for fear of driving it against a grain of dust or ruining the tyres by passing over a discarded peanut.



We went for a stroll through the town, stopping for a quick pintxo in a local bar, and admiring a few sights of a city that I love more each time I go there. In fact, the experience was starting to make me question whether France is really the place I want to be at all, since it is relatively dead when it comes to bars and people on the streets, outside of its biggest cities. When we returned to our cars at the seaside, Asier was furious to discover parking fines had been issued, which he believed was not normal practice for a bank holiday. He would have to pay his, though the chances are I might get away with mine by living in another country. The number plate had been recorded, but whether the authorities would chase it up remained to be seen.

Later that evening, I arranged to meet Asier and his friends down at an Irish bar at the back end of town. The latest downpour was heavy and made driving conditions very dangerous. Even armed with a map of the city I managed to get lost twice in crossing it diagonally, as my wipers once again struggled to cope with the onslaught. Wisely, Asier had decided not to come in his Blue Star on this occasion. We sat watching the final of an odd Basque sport on the television, although the actual game was being played just over the road in an indoor arena. Named *Esku-Pilota* in the Basque language, it involves two male opponents who smack a palm-sized leather ball against two walls

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perpendicular to each other. This particular variation of the sport is the most famous in the region, and tonight's game was the annual live final.



The game was difficult to watch, since only minimal hand protection is afforded to the players who must whack the ball so hard against the main wall a fair distance away, such that their hands swell up to enormous proportions. Asier is a regular player himself, but of a lighter version that, thoughtfully, allows the use of bats. He once tried the real thing and his hand was sore and swollen for days afterwards. Just to make the whole thing more bizarre, though the game is played on an indoor court the audience sitting along one side of the playing area are all allowed to smoke, and of course they all do since Spain is still a heavy smoking nation. Some male audience members sport the traditional large, flat Basque cap, and they throw bets around, over the heads of other onlookers, making last-minute or even last-second gambles on the result. I certainly felt that this was an authentic Basque experience, and it was more interesting than watching yet another game of football.

Following the match, with the rain still hammering down, Asier and his girlfriend were glad of the chance of a lift in my Renault 4, although they were at first puzzled when I opened the door on the opposite side of the car to what they normally expect. Reliable Reflexia got everybody back safe and sound, and Asier suggested we meet once more the following morning before I depart the city, for a last chance to see his original 'Red Devil'.

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One week after originally setting off from northern France to Spain, I was now set to depart Spain and head back to France, in the direction of Toulouse, north of the Pyrenees. The mountains behind Donostia were again the cause of cats and dogs that cascaded down from the skies, and the wet climate was one of the only things that put off more people coming to settle in this otherwise beautiful town. I stopped off at Asier's workplace, where he spared me half an hour of his time after negotiations with his boss. We nipped next door to a hotel for a quick coffee, over which a last few sentiments were shared about the Renault 4, our reason for being there. What I had never realised until now was that Asier had only met Luis via my website, when they both realised they were Renault 4 owners living in the same city. It was the same way that they subsequently teamed up with long-time 4 fanatics Fernando and João in Lisbon, and set off on countless R4 adventures across their two countries, as documented in various places around this site. I had just assumed that Luis had been a friend previously, so it was good to know that my site had brought fans together more than once. I discussed how I still planned all these years on to do more in future to bring other fans together, whilst swallowing a pinch of salt as I did, in knowing how long I've held that ambition and failed to deliver it.

Before saying goodbye, I attempted one speedy snap in the miserable deluge outside (see picture, above), to try and capture both the cars together in one shot. The 'Red Devil' had been in Asier's family since new, before being passed on to him in the late 1990s, so it was very special to him. And of course, it had the desired 'SS' number plate. He regretted having to sell any of his cars, but he would rather part with the immaculate blue one than see the Red Devil go. For now, though, it was parked up at his workplace and out of action most of the year round, whilst his other Renault alongside was used for most of the daily run-arounds.

Asier had been very welcoming, like the previous occasion five years ago, and I set off in the GTL wondering how long it might be before the next time we would meet, and whether Reflexia could possibly make it this far south again. The path north avoiding tolls was tedious and it was some while before I had even passed through Bayonne, but from there I found myself back out on the open road. I generally prefer to avoid major highways, not just because of tolls but also the monotony and unchanging views that accompany them. Getting a real taste of France can only be achieved by passing along its smaller roads and weaving through the traditional towns. It would also frequently result in passing a Renault garage, one of which seemed to exist in practically every French village. And here on the border of the Landes and Pyrénées-Atlantiques départements, I came to a screeching halt when I glanced at one such garage and was amazed to see two Quatrelles

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sitting for sale on its forecourt (below).



For myself as - until this point - a UK resident, this was an astonishing sight, though it's perhaps not so strange in other parts of the world. The owners of most Renault garages in Britain wouldn't dare display an R4 outside their snazzy showrooms, but the car is so ingrained in French life and culture that I suppose it is more accepted by the French, and not sniffed at in the same class-conscious way that it is by the Brits. At the end of 2008, however, publicity like this was still quite a surprising spectacle. The cars were of course secondhand and belonged under Renault's *Occasions* banner, alongside other discarded old favourites. This particular garage was located somewhere near the village of Cauneille, on the N117 east of Bayonne, but it was rather in the middle of nowhere. As I pulled over, a man I assumed to be the garage owner was leaving in his Kangoo for the lunch hour. He seemed equally bemused to spot my right-hand drive R4 opposite his garage so far down in the south of the country.

I parked outside the garage which was closed during the break, and examined the twin white opportunities in more detail. One was a 1982 TL in rather poor condition, at 500 euros. It certainly didn't look like it would give anything more than another year or two of life and probable grief, before rotting away. The other was a 1992 Savane TL model, one of the last produced, and now commanding an exotic fee of 2,800 euros. However, I wouldn't have described its general condition inside and out as startling, and it had done 151,000 kilometres. For such a high price, I wasn't tempted to swap, although I'd have loved to have seen the garage owner's face on his return had I managed to put my own car in position.

Whilst continuing my trek through France, I passed a few other Renault garages that had Quatrelles either taking pride of place at the front or being hidden away at the back, including a few vans. To see so many of the F4s and F6s knocking about was another extraordinary thing for me, since even ten years ago, when spotting an R4 in England was still possible once in every season, the cars would outnumber the vans ten to one. This corner of France still seemed to have both the saloons and the vans in plentiful numbers.

My journey east skirted around Pau and then straight through Tarbes, an attractive looking town but one that I should have avoided, since I found myself stuck in traffic jams through the centre for over half an hour. It was one of those French towns where the road signs suddenly stop, and you're left going around in circles trying to find the right exit to where you're going. Over the previous few weeks' experiences in the country, I'd come to loathe the French road signage and sometimes the road system in general. I found myself cursing several times and ultimately sticking my fingers up at horn-honking French motorists who can never stop beeping for the slightest pointless reason. As the signs finally displayed directions towards Toulouse on a green background, indicating a non-motorway road and the one I was after, it led me straight into a *péage* for the main autoroute. I

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carefully began reversing on the very wide stretch of roadway leading into the empty toll gateway, yet tedious French gits couldn't help beeping me as they came past, prompting my two-fingered salute. Of course, in France and most other countries outside the UK, the use of two fingers is completely misunderstood, so that would be my defence should I find myself in the courtroom having to explain, as I believe can happen in Germany at least. I would argue that the second digit creates a double negative that cancels out the first, thereby rendering the gesture meaningless.

As I approached Toulouse and navigated its complex ring road and main arteries, poor signage wasn't the only thing hampering me in reaching the youth hostel. The directions in my guide were pathetic and merely gave the name of an area which, when I enquired from several pedestrians in all corners of the city, seemed to be a place of myth that I could never hope to get to. It took me an hour and a half of careering around the city's streets after dark, on both sides of the river, before I finally located the hostel and could settle for the night, after another long day of intensive driving.

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Toulouse had been bitterly cold during my two-night stay, with sleet falling by day and temperatures plummeting further by night, which didn't offer the best opportunity to appreciate what is probably by summer a very attractive city. I continued my journey east towards Montpellier, reckoning that this day's travelling wouldn't be nearly so long as most of the others until now, and that I should reach the city on the south coast by mid-afternoon. I'd rather ruled out the possibility of accidentally driving dozens of miles in the wrong direction.

I had another panic episode after leaving Toulouse way behind and realising my fuel gauge was hopelessly to the left, and that there were no filling stations anywhere for many miles. Eventually I took a road undocumented in my three-year-old French road atlas, following a private sign I'd seen further back down the route promising the riches of oil if I took a turn a little less obvious at the next roundabout. It lived up to its hype and my car must have felt the same wave of relief that a human feels when emptying themselves of their own fuel after a long wait. However, it wasn't my road atlas that was to blame for the next incident around the neighbouring towns of Aussillon and Mazamet, where for some reason I began believing that I was following signs for Carcassonne rather than for Béziers. It wasn't until half an hour later that I realised something was amiss, and I pulled over several times to check my location and think of a way out of the mess I'd got myself into.

The road had evidently become more wiggly than I would have expected, and began winding up through steep hills, eventually leading into lush white snowy forests of pine trees. It was a beautiful drive, if somewhat hazardous, and I was starting to suspect that sticking to this route was going to lead me into problems as the road surface became more white than black, and few vehicles passed in the opposite direction. The first photo above was taken when I emerged from this wilderness into an open plain with expansive views across to the distant Pyrenees in the south. So what were these hills I was passing through if they were not the Pyrenees? My atlas informed me that I was deep within an area known as the 'Montagne Noire', and that the only sensible thing to do would be to retreat northwards and correct my earlier mistake. But I didn't want to do that, I'm not a man for giving in without a fight!

Knowing full well that what I was beginning to plot would only lead me into further trouble, I picked out a route using smaller roads that traversed the Montagne Noire, back to the point I should have been aiming at in the first place. There was a strong chance that these roads would be blocked or too dangerous to drive on, but I couldn't resist the bait. At the uncomfortably named village of Villegailhenc I got all mixed up on a tiny track that led me through ever more unlikely and narrow

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surroundings, and eventually into somebody's back garden with the dog. Then I weaved my way through a fantastic mixture of vineyards and pretty villages, before ascending once more the Black Mountain and delving further into the heart of darkness. Dramatic settlements clung to the gorges at Citou, before I took the bendy road up the mountainside at Lespinassière (below).



From this point on, the road became very narrow, and very icy, and I could just feel the wheels on my R4 almost starting to give a few times when I strayed off any previous tyre tracks and over the icier strips. This was now starting to get dodgy and the steep drops at the side of the road were not always protected by a barrier. One false move here and I'd have been a snowball. I dropped down into second and then into first gear, noticing that five, ten, fifteen or more minutes had now passed since anybody dared meet me in the opposite direction.



The next village was a long way away, especially at ten kilometres per hour, and I wondered how much provisions the people in these parts have to stock up with before each winter. A dog came bounding out of one very isolated cottage, and I felt sorry to let it down by not stopping, since I probably represented its highlight of the day. When I stopped to take the pictures displayed on these pages, I crossed to the verge on the other side of the road and my leg sunk down in the snow beyond the knee.

Driving in these sorts of conditions causes all the muscles of the body to tense up in anticipation of the faintest skid, and has bad effects on the stomach if it continues for prolonged periods. I know that only too well from a driving job I did several years earlier during the thick of winter, in which I had to cross the Peak District in England every day in a Transit van. The vehicle was rear-wheel drive and ill-equipped for the conditions, and I found myself spinning off the dual carriageway near

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Stoke on one icy morning. Even at just a few miles per hour, the van would totally lose its grip at any moment and have me emulating Torville and Dean in remote countryside spots. Try doing that for eleven hours a day, six days a week and your stomach soon turns to squid. By contrast, the Renault 4 was handling everything remarkably well, and although the difference between front and rear-wheel drive is totally lost on me, I knew that something about the R4's high ground clearance and the additional gearbox weight at the front of the car balancing the luggage load in my boot, was keeping me on track better than some cars might manage. I dare say such things as the car's front-wheel drive and its high torque also have some bearing on the matter, but I'm no expert at such mechanical melancholy.



I had now detoured for over two hours, and was relieved (yet also somehow disappointed) when the snow began ebbing away and the road carved a path downwards to less frostbitten pastures. In fact, within half an hour I was back on the main road and would never have known what conditions I'd been in before from looking at the view around me (see picture, next page).

There followed a long, enjoyable descent towards the town of Béziers, populated by more and more Renault 4s both at the roadside and in motion. Whilst passing through one town, an F4 van came into sight ahead of me and another saloon pulled out behind, creating a coincidental convoy of three Renault 4s in succession. I muttered something to myself about Renault 4s ruling the world and sat at the wheel with satisfaction, whereupon a fourth came past us in the opposite direction and another was parked alongside. For other drivers and pedestrians we must have looked like a bunch of stubborn, unyielding owners who outright refused to move with the times and replace our cars with something more modern. Or perhaps we just looked French.

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The route then swung north-eastwards towards Montpellier, first diverting towards the coastal town of Mèze, where I stopped for a pastry and ended up with a banana, such is the particular nature of the French that they daren't sell something that belongs in a pastry shop inside a supermarket, and vice versa. In fact, coastal town is probably inaccurate, since the place is cut off from the wilds of the sea by the *Bassin de Thau*. Nevertheless, there were many more R4s to be seen in these parts, more than in any other slice of the country I was to pass through. For a few dazzling moments, everywhere I looked were Quatrelles peeping out and flitting across junctions ahead and in my mirrors. It was like a meat market discothèque only with metallic, insentient (controversial), rustic, ageing and humble little vehicles in place of the sweating, aching, searching, pulsating hormonal teenagers of the Ritzy nightclub. I felt like I was on the lookout for others of my type, on the pull for a motor like my own.

Cooling myself down I returned to the road north, reaching Montpellier at dusk - and at rush hour - a few hours later than planned. The ring road continually frustrated me and threw me off down places I didn't want to go, due to late lane markings and last-minute signs that forbade me from switching amidst heavy traffic. The circuit it led me on took me what seemed like almost 360 degrees around the city before letting me get closer and indicating that my entrance to the *Centre Historique* was now permitted. Once into the heart of this medina-like core, I became lost on one-way circuits and eventually dived down into a car park under Gambetta to get away from it all. An hour and a half walking around the centre had already shown me most of what the city had to offer. In many parts it was very attractive, a little like an alternative version of Aix-en-Provence but on a larger scale. However, I then needed to find my way to the *FastHotel* in the city's outskirts, and petrol was running thin again. By the time I figured out the directions I only just made it to a garage, but one that had no Super 98, so I had to settle for a few euros' worth of the regular version and hope to top up with better stuff later on. The motel was located out in a dingy industrial area beside a pallet truck warehouse, near the airport. Hooray. Just what I'd be needing for a good night's sleep after another long day on the road.

Later that evening, I decided to return to the city centre as it was about the only place I was likely to find any food. As I neared the turn-off from the dual carriageway, I tried to memorise the location so that I wouldn't get lost again reaching the hotel on the way back. I needn't have bothered. I'd always thought my sense of direction was pretty good, but this city baffled me like nowhere else on Earth. In fact, I began to believe that Montpellier might be the portal to another dimension because all logic flew out of the window in trying to find my way around - and into - the city. Even when I followed the same roads as earlier, they would lead me underground, past a subterranean car park, and back out again in the wrong direction. Common sense would dictate that when following a ring-road anti-clockwise, taking a turn left at some point will dig you closer to the centre of the city, but not so here. Whatever I tried to do, I found myself heading back out of the city on a complex system

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of roads that seems to have been expertly engineered to prevent any cars ever getting anywhere near it.

The city itself isn't even very big, and I exhausted just about every road and lane at each junction that there was, yet every time I was deposited somewhere previously unexplored and illogically far away. When I finally found a road that came into the city through the grand arch at one end, my path was blocked by rising bollards that required a ticket. It was a full hour and a quarter of violent thrashing around the weird road system before I got to where I wanted to be, back at Gambetta and in search of oriental take-aways. I charged on foot through the myriad alleys and narrow streets of the historic centre, and finally found a Chinese restaurant that was small and, worryingly, empty, unlike the many buzzing pizza and other establishments I'd passed. I had been dreaming of a chow mein since arriving at the hotel, and nothing else was going to satisfy me. I entered the restaurant, made my order and paid, then watched a cockroach scuttle across the floor whilst I was waiting. Montpellier wasn't the town for me.

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One of the few redeeming features of my hotel in the city of Montpellier (or rather, in a place that could have been the dog end of any city in the world but which in this case was vaguely in the vicinity of Montpellier's industrial backwaters) was the free wi-fi. It was Friday morning, and my original ferry booking from Dieppe was scheduled for the Saturday night eight days hence. The trip was costing me a lot in fuel, lodging and other expenses, and it wasn't affording me the best opportunity to check out all these potential new home cities in the beginnings of a frozen, barren wintertime. I had been considering going north-east to Lyon, but my original desire for my future study explorations was to visit Marseille and Nice, in addition to the other locations, and taking those in would be another lengthy detour in consideration of my ultimate need to reach the northern French coast.

I discovered that the ferry operator had revised their sailing times for the approaching weekend, now proposing some more feasible crossings at less ridiculous hours, so I suddenly turned my thoughts towards a straight route back up the middle of France, despite the demands of more intensive driving this would bring about. Though I'd done the north-south route in a day, I certainly didn't feel like trying to match that achievement in reverse, so my goal was now to get to somewhere in the middle of France by nightfall. To reach that target, I would take a route that would lead me via one of the engineering marvels of the modern world.

With another near-starvation experience involving the fuel solved by a last-ditch refill west of Montpellier, I continued to the A75, one of few largely toll-free motorways of any reasonable length still remaining in France. There was just one toll waiting ahead, but one that I was prepared to stump up a quite considerable sum of money for if necessary, armed with the knowledge of its purpose. I had my camera at the ready to film my Renault 4 as it neared one of the grandest pieces of architecture and construction ever envisaged. The road began climbing ever more steeply, as my car again crawled in the lorry lanes around dramatic gorges, finally emerging at high altitudes on the top plains above. I was heading into the Aveyron département, from whereon I would be entering once again the Auvergne region, a part of France that my Reflexia had discovered three years earlier, and my favourite part of the country.

Despite the cold air and the snow visible on distant mountain tops, I was driving under a clear blue sky, and the sun was beating down into the rear of my car with just enough warmth to make up for the lack of such available from my troublesome heater. Several split-second glances at the map on my passenger seat showed that I was now only a couple of bends off of my holy grail. With camera in one hand and steering wheel in the other, I was calmed by the lack of much other traffic around - especially on my side of the carriageway - from cluttering the view in front or forcing me to lower the lens in suspicion of law enforcement patrols. I slowed to allow a couple of speed freaks to zoom well ahead, and closed on the final bend with a clear view ahead of the glorious spectacle I had been waiting for, the *Viaduc de Millau* (see pictures below and on following pages).



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What with my divided loyalties to both driving and filming, it was rather difficult to engage in a third activity of savouring the moment as I crossed the 2.5 kilometre-long bridge. Not a single other vehicle spoilt the view either in front or behind. I had the whole thing to myself! This particular route down the centre of France was considerably more busy in the holiday season, when all the north of France takes to their automobiles to infiltrate the southern half, leaving their grannies behind to bake in the summer oven, and leaving bewildered tourists wondering why every voice they hear around Paris is anything but French.



The crosswinds battering my car during the morning's drive had been a cause for concern, but thankfully the shields on the bridge were so effective that my crossing was the least blowy part of the entire day's journey. Soaring through a high sky past the seventh and last pylon, I squeaked across the join of the final span back onto solid ground, then veered off into the service area, which offers a panoramic viewpoint of the viaduct and its breathtaking setting in the Tarn valley. Satisfying myself with some extended gawping, a pair of chilled pink ears, a perusal of the souvenir shop, a coffee and a screening of a short film that seemed to over-glorify Jacques Chirac's involvement in the realisation of the project, a good two hours had been killed and I should have continued my northbound charge. Admiring the scene from the top alone wasn't enough for me, however, so I detoured down into the valley, through the busy town of Millau and out onto a small road running beside the River Tarn that I'd observed from above.



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It was certainly a worthwhile diversion, and I hit the almost empty road west as the sun lowered itself in the afternoon sky, lighting up one half of the viaduct and also the pretty village of Peyre below. A turn-off at the foot of one of the immense piers takes drivers over the river and up a steep climb to a visitor information centre, but an offshoot used during the construction of the bridge provides a stopping point, which on this quiet winter weekday was devoid of any other public intruders and, remarkably, of any sound from vehicles passing on the roadway high above. The wind shields along the carriageway also provide good noise insulation, and the only audible environmental events were the peaceful flowing of water down the river nearby, and the pre-dusk tweets of birds staying put for the cold season. You couldn't blame them for not giving up their lodges in such a serene setting.

The two closest piers to this deepest point in the valley rise unfeasibly to support the motorway one quarter of a kilometre above, with one mast reaching a record-breaking 343 metres at its peak, higher than the Eiffel Tower. It's difficult to stand at this spot and appreciate that thundering lorries and a multitude of other vehicles are hurtling along in the sky on a four-lane highway (an apt word).



A certain reluctance to leave these enchanted surroundings was only losing the battle against my coldness. I'd whittled away the afternoon loitering around this one point on the map, and my original intent of reaching the middle of France was now competing with the notion of staying put in a local hotel, in order that I could return to see the viaduct illuminated by night. After all, it might be a long time before I should ever revisit the area so why not make the most of the opportunity? In a similar mode of thinking that has prevented me rounding off other adventures, like climbing only halfway up the Eiffel Tower and shunning its upper section, or forgoing the opportunity to jump on a passing tram car in San Francisco, I decided to leave Millau and imagine a future occasion will materialise when I could still have something new to savour there.

Once I had wound my way back to the summit north of the town, it seemed that my simple strategy from here was to just drive and see how far I got. The dark of night was about to hunt me down and I had nothing more to expect out of today than a dinner and a bed. But shortly after rejoining the autoroute, and moments after the sun had hidden beneath the rear horizon, I turned a bend and was confronted with a beauty of nature's making that rivalled the magnificent experience of the man-made bridge I'd left behind. As if to compete and prove that, ultimately, nothing can outdo the phenomena of the world's own creation, a giant full moon bigger and brighter than any I'd seen before had risen above rocks resembling the Grand Canyon, against a back light of a supernatural purple and pink sky. Hurriedly, I attempted to capture a shot in motion as I drove, only to find my

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camera had exhausted its battery supplies after all my snapping back at the bridge. The single shot I managed to obtain (see picture, below) didn't represent the colours correctly or the drama of the scene being acted on the sky's stage, and the zoom would not function before the device retired like a shy child in a school play and refused to make another stand.



For the ensuing twenty minutes, I chased the moon ahead and the view became only more sensational, with vivid hues of orange, green, yellow and blue lighting up the southern skies behind me and in my mirrors, complementing the increasingly luminous picture in front. I had to concede that whatever I had witnessed that afternoon had been eclipsed by this moment. I wished that the whole world could have been in the back of my R4 to see the same sight as myself. My mobile phone camera was also dug out in my furious attempts to save the scene for posterity, but that too would utterly fail at the job of recomposing reality (see pictures below).



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The motorway climbs steadily as it progresses further north, and location markers positioned every kilometre display the current altitude. As the road plunges up and down often steep gradients, this facilitates an ad hoc adaptation of *Play Your Cards Right*, in which I must guess higher or lower on approach to each sign. At 860 metres, I thought it unlikely that I'd be wrong to keep guessing lower. However, the surroundings turned to a white of a mystical quality, as the intensely bright moon shone against the snowy ground surfaces set against a backdrop of dark, silhouetted distant mountain ranges. The temperature inside my car had now dropped to an unfunny low. I was having to keep one hand held inside my coat whilst the other was on the wheel, swapping them every few minutes. The altitude peaked at an exhilarating 1,221 metres, and twice more reached within a short stroke of this record, and I was glad for every metre dropped beyond that, for my limbs were now numb.

Regular signs had been appearing giving distances to not just the bigger towns and the ultimate destination of Clermont-Ferrand to which this motorway led, but also to the *Viaduc de Garabit*, a superb rail bridge designed by Gustave Eiffel that I'd visited with Reflexia in 2005. Constructed in 1884, it was as striking in its time as the Millau Viaduct is today. Indeed, it is still an impressive feature in the region, but not one I had expected to see continually referenced on the road signs from more than one hundred kilometres away. After all, it is just a rail bridge spanning a splendid rural setting, there's nothing much else there for highway cruisers to need be distracted by. When I eventually reached the final sign pronouncing the imminent arrival of the viaduct, I hadn't expected to see anything of it by night, but then the reason for its inclusion in countless previous information signs seemed no longer to be in dispute, as a marvellous golden orange light appeared to the left of my vision, and the illuminated girder work of its construction unfolded in dazzling style. I pulled off at the adjacent *aire*, discovering only a deserted car park with a toilet as the sole feature of the stopping point, and continued refusals from my camera to operate until I catered to its energy hunger. Now, the puny photographic device on my ancient mobile phone was going to provide the only means for recording another monument and moment from possibly the greatest day's drive in my life (below).



By night, the Garabit Viaduct provided a landmark for every driver to be guided by, and for every child in a family car to persist in asking how far until they reached it. I was now most interested in how far until I reached somewhere that provided warmth, and should my car somehow fail me at this point I would surely be in trouble, since my fingers were now barely able to dial a number on my phone. Some forty-five kilometres further on at Lorlanges, I steered off the autoroute into a service area, and whilst the petrol station was seeing a steady stream of cars passing through, the road uphill to the restaurant, hotel and other services had barely been tyre-trodden, and was covered in thick cracked ice. Uncertain if the facility was open, but miffed should it be closed at 7.30pm on a Friday evening, I hesitantly stepped down to first gear and offered the slippery slopes to Reflexia. She didn't complain and I arrived in a completely empty car park that didn't hold out much promise. Unless the staff were expert cross-country skiers I couldn't see how they would have got in there.

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Inside the doors, however, was a perfectly normal, functioning service area, albeit without any people. I selected from the extensive buffet full of cooked food that would likely find no home for the night, and waited whilst the sole member of staff completed her multi-tasking role that kept the whole place alive. For the duration of my meal, not a single soul walked through the door. I wondered if I went back the following day, whether the place would still exist, or it would prove to have been a figment of my imagination. The cold can do strange things to one's mind.

I pondered over the possibility of resting in the neighbouring hotel for the night, though I was a bit concerned that if the weather worsened I could find myself and my car stranded by the morning. The weather forecast showed this region as being the coldest in all of France, sinking to -7 Celsius overnight. The rates were also a little over my usual budget, so I took to the car for one last surge north. Sticking loyally to the *FastHotel* chain that I'd depended on twice already, I referred to their location guide, and ploughed on to Clermont-Ferrand, where I checked in for the night. It was another motel like the one in Montpellier, near an industrial estate near the airport and about as far from glamorous as it was from Las Vegas, but it was basic, warm and would serve my needs for the next twelve hours.

The extreme cold was all too evident the next morning, when I opened the door of my motel room for one second and forced the heater to spend the next few minutes automatically raising the temperature back to a stable level. By the time I had faffed about with the free wi-fi a little longer, the morning was not far from over. I rang up the ferry company, Transmanche, and took a gamble by booking myself onto the eight o'clock sailing that evening from Dieppe, one full week ahead of my original schedule. To reach *La Manche* by the latest advised check-in time of 7pm, I would face a stern test of my driving abilities against the clock. By now, I'd come to expect nothing more having zipped about France and Spain in such a mad flash.

At just past eleven o'clock, I set out on what I hoped would be the last long slog on the road, but after an hour avoiding the toll roads, I hadn't even reached the town of Montluçon, which I had estimated was where I would need to be by that time if I were to not miss the boat. All manner of petrol tankers, farm vehicles and old dodders were obstructing my path on single carriageway roads, and finding a suitable passing point was further hampered by my right-hand driving position. Then the skies clouded over and the road surface became more damp and dangerous. It was clear that at some point I would have to pay up for the tolls and break with my self-imposed restriction on their use. One good straight stretch south of Bourges was sabotaged by a twin oil tanker combo that I just couldn't get past, as the surface spray saturated my screen and conditions became hazardous. I switched allegiances to the toll road between Bourges and Orléans, and made up for lost time.

From Chartres via Dreux to Évreux, I retraced the route I'd taken southwards when I first left Rouen twelve days earlier. The crossover from day to night was less pronounced, since the ugly, gloomy wet weather only served up darkening shades of grey, and yet again I was running desperately short of fuel having not passed a garage or service area for dozens of miles. This time, the needle was not even wavering, it was just stuck firm left, and with rain belting down in the dark, and my ferry leaving in just a couple of hours, I found myself leaning forward at the blurred windscreen with tensed muscles and intense concentration, seeking any scent of a roadside light that might signify a garage. My motor must have been feeding on just the last drop in the feeder pipe when I found one, but the challenge was not over yet.

As I re-entered Rouen, I cursed and shouted in a deranged state when the motorway split and none of the road signs indicated which route led to Dieppe. In such treacherous conditions and with only

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a printed atlas in a dark car, I could only hazard a guess, which fortunately turned out to be a good one. But having already done the Rouen - Dieppe journey three times in recent weeks, I knew that I needed close on an hour to make it. The time was already half past six, and I'd read previously on the Transmanche website that the absolute minimum check-in time was forty-five minutes, which was exactly what now remained for me to get there within limits.

My foot had been firm to the floor most of the day, indeed for virtually the whole trip, and I sometimes needed to put pressure on the muscle above my knee using my hand, in order to relax it from the constant strain it was being put under. Once again, the unending rain and spray was leaking through to the driver's footwell and saturating my trouser legs and shoes. This one was going to go right to the wire! As my car struggled on the uphill slopes leaving Rouen, I willed it on to find some secret supergear. On the motorway towards the coast, I was struggling to see any road markings and had my face almost pressed to the glass again. If I thought I was pushing things to the limit, I wasn't the only one. A van towing a trailer came hurtling past in the outside lane, dicing with death from what I could see, and then I spotted the UK number plate. As we neared Dieppe, other UK-registered cars were swerving around soaking roundabouts. The drive had turned into some psychopathic race from a fantasy computer game as we all tried to get one up on the competition. Upon penetrating the outer fringes of Dieppe, a limitless series of road signs and roundabouts must be navigated, each time the advertised distance to the car ferry terminal seemingly not reducing. I overtook the trailer van on a hill, and although almost nothing else was visible, I could clearly see the grimace on the driver's face as he realised he just might not make it. I couldn't believe that Reflexia had held up and not skidded at any time, especially with the full tank of fuel and most of the luggage weight sitting on the rear axle.

With the next ferry not leaving till a day later, nobody wanted to spend a wet December evening and lifeless cold, grey Sunday in a dodgy Dieppe bed and breakfast. Finally, after an eight-hour sprint from the centre of France, I skied down the final slope to the Transmanche terminal beneath the cliffs, arriving at the check-in booth at 7.14pm, with one minute to spare.

The red cross sign above the booth was of some concern, and looking ahead I could see no boat and no cars. In a self-mocking voice borne out of exhaustive emotion, I enquired of the guy at the desk, - *'Où est le bateau?'* - to which he replied, - *'The ferry is not here. It's been delayed by an hour. The sailing will be at nine o'clock.'*

I was offered a coupon entitling me to a free hot drink, and I took my place in lane number 3. Two minutes later, the space next to me in lane 4 was occupied by the man with the van, and the trailer, who descended from his seat sweating like a baboon in a sauna.

By the time the boat set sail and I'd feasted on a chewy warm chip-based meal from its canteen, I could only then flake out along with most of the other passengers. On the return from my first visit to Rouen weeks before, I'd taken the slower coastal road from Newhaven back to Hove, supping on the sights and sounds of Brighton seafront on a Saturday night, full of tanked up lads and hot pants-clad girls in the freezing cold during the awkward interim outdoor stage from pub to club, or from pub to throwing up in the back of a taxi for many. My home town. Always a joy. This time, I wanted none of it, and I steamed straight around the back road via Lewes.

It was now 1am, and I pulled up outside my home, listening to Reflexia purring unperturbed by her exploits and the hard graft I'd put her through. More than three thousand extra miles had been added to her clock in the last twelve days, and I'd suffered not one problem along the way, aside from the dodgy heater and having to drive around a frozen Europe in an ice box. I wanted to pat the car on

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the head like a faithful friend, because that's what the car had become to me. Whilst hundreds of horizons had passed by my window and half a continent had drifted by my eyes, most of my hours were spent confined in the tiny, spartan, but familiar interior surroundings of my Renault 4. I never once doubted that it would be up to the job, and my faith was repaid by its unerring service.

It had been my intention after settling in France to consider a road trip with Reflexia in the summer of 2009. I had already been considering visiting my friends in Madrid and San Sebastián, and doing many of the other similar things that instead occurred some months earlier than planned. I felt proud of my little R4 because almost every stage of the journey had been a real ordeal for any car, let alone a basic, lightweight model designed primarily as a rural run-around with many components' designs dating back to the early Sixties. To the residents in the vicinity of my home, the car would be back sitting there on its regular spot like nothing ever happened, only it got a bit dirtier. They would never suspect that it's been off moonlighting with a Spaniard. It may be rather battered and bruised looking, but it still works, and that's the most important thing. It's forever the genius of the Renault 4. It just works.

Visit the website for a movie of Reflexia crossing the Millau Viaduct. Go to www.renault4.plus.com