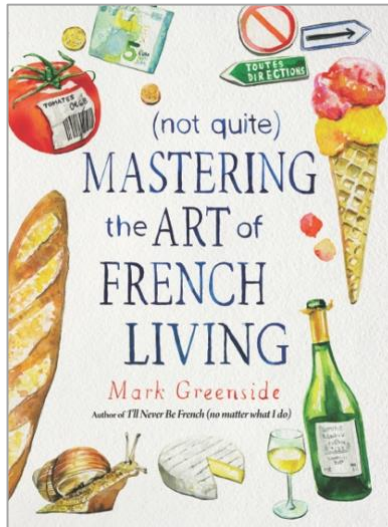




Volume 7, Number 2, August 2023



Dear Friend,

Donna and I are back in Brittany. Usually when I'm here, at the house, I work on whatever book I'm writing, but this summer I'm on hiatus. I finished my third book about living in France—at least I think, I hope, I did. If/when it sells, I'll have to work with the editor on editing (commas, dashes, colons, italics, using my French vs. real French) and the publisher on design and marketing (cover art, font, margins, line spacing, chapter breaks, book jacket blurbs and reviews). And if it doesn't sell, I'll have to revisit it, as I did with *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*, which as much as I resented it, made it a better book.

So, I'm on hold, not ready to move forward and start something new, and not having the heart—or reason—to go back and review the old. To keep my hand in the game—I write by hand with a #602 Blackwing pencil on a yellow pad—I'm writing a newsletter, the first one I've written from Plobien. It's about travel and cars, and—of course—my continuing education in France....

The Car—Again!

At the last-minute Donna and I changed travel plans, which meant canceling the Renault lease my car guru, Rob, set up months before, and renting a car. Rob was on vacation so I searched for a deal, which doesn't exist a week before traveling, and paid Europcar an exorbitant fee for an Opel with a manual transmission that runs on gas

because the automatic transmission I wanted so Donna could drive cost exorbitance squared.

We landed on time at Charles de Gaulle Airport, and, to my amazement and delight, easily find the Europcar office at Terminal 2 E-F.

“Bonjour,” I say to the young woman behind the counter and hand her my papers.

“Hello,” she says, which is comforting (she speaks English) and irritating (I can’t even make my ‘Bonjour’ sound French).

She takes the papers, taps on the computer keyboard with the longest, pointiest fingernails I’ve ever seen, looks at the papers, and says something in French to the person next to her, the only words of which I understand are Greenside and Opel. He says something back, and she dances on the keyboard again, prints out more papers, and hands them to me to sign. This is how I learn instead of an Opel with a manual transmission that runs on gas I’ll be driving a Ford Fiesta with a manual transmission that runs on diesel.

It’s my usual one-out-of-three success rate in France so I’m not surprised, though I am disappointed (in myself) and disgruntled (with Europcar).

I sign the papers multiple times, more certain with each signature that I’m giving away my rights, my bank account, the house in Plobien, and Donna’s inheritance, and hand them back to her. She hands me a key, my copy of the contract with a stall number written on it, and shakes my hand, saying, “Bon route,” in a way that tells me she never expects to see me again—and she doesn’t, as neither she nor anyone else walks us to the car to show us where the lights are, the windshield wipers, how to open the hood, or how to read the gas gauge, which on some cars looks empty when it’s full and on others looks full when it’s empty.

I load the baggage in the car, set the driver’s seat, rear mirror and side mirrors, turn on the windshield wipers, turn signals, air conditioner, and maybe the fog lights, headlights, high beam, and low. I have no idea how to open the hood or gas cap. Meanwhile, Donna

enters our hotel's address into her phone using Waze, because the previous summer the GPS in the car—in France's attempt to save the environment—directed us to 20 and 30 mph (30 and 50 kmh) C and D one-and two-lane roads instead of the 65 mph (110 kmh) four-lane National highway, turning a twenty-minute trip into ninety minutes, tripling the amount of carbon in the air, not reducing it, and once again confirming the law of unintended consequences.

I drive out of Europcar's lot still disgruntled, complaining about the hard clutch, small gear box, that it's a Ford, not an Opel, bracing myself for the 80 mph (130 kmh) Autoroute. Ten minutes later I pass a Total station and my disgruntledness turns to glee: Gazole (diesel) is 25 centimes cheaper than gas, *per liter*. With a fifty-liter tank, that's 12.5 euros (almost thirteen dollars) savings PER TANK. Since each tank is good for about 500 kilometers, and I normally drive 5,000-7,000 kilometers a summer, that's about 50 tanks and between \$125-200 saved—two or three crêpes dinners in Brittany....

I get on the N-104, heading to the A-104, Wazing our way to Melun where we don't want to be, but it's within a ten-mile radius of Fontainebleau, Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte, and Barbizon, where we do want to be, and after an hour of no problem, not getting lost, not hitting anything, and only scaring the hell out of one driver at a round-point, we arrive at the hotel.

"Bonjour," I say to the young man behind the counter.

"Bonjour," he says to us, and checks us in.

It's a three-star hotel, so I don't know what to expect. Four-star hotels are almost always excellent. Three-star can be—and also can not be. Here, in Melun, where most non-residents and tourists don't want to be, the hotel is perfect. We're in the quietest hotel room I've ever been in, partially because for three of the five nights we're there the hotel is empty, and partially because the walls are rock solid thick.

We sleep well, wake early, and Waze our way to the Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte, built in 1661 by Nicolas Fouquet, Superintendent of Finance for Louis XIV. It's your classic

comeuppance story and goes like this.

Maître Fouquet assembled the greatest talents of his day—Mansart and Le Vau (architects), Le Brun (painter), and Le Nôtre (fountains, grounds and gardens) and built his dream chateau. When it was finished, he invited Louis to dinner, and his dream became a nightmare. Louis saw what Fouquet had and he hadn't, and concluded Fouquet was stealing from him. Fouquet would spend the rest of his life in jail, and Louis would build *his* dream chateau. He took Fouquet's ideas and plans, plus Mansart, Le Vau, Le Brun, and Le Nôtre, and built Versailles, which became a Bourbon family nightmare, a precursor to the French Revolution, and another example of unintended consequences....

I'm thinking about this on the drive back to the hotel when a bright orange (!) appears on the dashboard screen. It doesn't go away so when we get to the hotel I open the glove compartment and look for the owner's manual to see what (!) means and am surprised to find there is none.

I'm not worried, though. It's an orange light, not red—a pay attention sign, not a warning that we're about to blow up. Besides, tomorrow, we're driving thirty miles (50km) to Lumigny, Parc des Félines, the world's largest Feline Zoo, to see over 300 cats and 30 of the 41 species. I'll stop at a Ford dealership or garage along the way and find out what (!) means and fix it....

We arrive at the zoo without incident, Ford dealer, or garage. I did see two garages, but both were closed, because, I find out later, most independent garages, unlike every other business I know in France, work eight-to-five, Monday to Friday—and this is Saturday. I don't know this yet so I take a different route back to the hotel and find two more closed garages and lots of Renault, Citroën, and Peugeot dealers, but no Ford, as apparently I'm the only person in France who's driving one.

Now, worry begins to creep in: I've driven more than fifty miles with (!) glowing and nothing bad or unusual happening, which can only mean something soon will.

I sleep a little less well, wake a little earlier, and with contradictory thoughts in mind—

Everything is OK/We're going to blow up—drive to Barbizon, a pretty little village next to the forest of Fontainebleau, home of the Barbizon school of painters made famous by Millet and Sibley. I'm still looking for a Ford dealer or garage I can go to on Monday, because on Tuesday we're driving to Vitré, a medieval fortress village in Brittany, three hours and 325 kilometers away, and *that* worries me—especially after I discover there are no Ford dealers or garages to and from Barbizon on Sunday, and none on Monday to and from Fontainebleau, Napoleon's second favorite home, his first being the battlefield. As a last resort before driving to Vitré, I Google 'Ford dealers in my neighborhood' and find three—the closest being two hours away. That's the bad news. The good news is I discover what (!) means.

New cars offer so much information on their dashboard screens that I pay little attention. I saw the brightly glowing orange (!), but didn't see what was next to it in black and white... I was blind, but now I see—and what I see is this:

2.9) (1.6

2.6) (2.3

I have no idea what the numbers mean, but I do know what (!) means: the passenger side front tire is low.... All I need is air....

In the U.S., I'd pull into the nearest garage or gas station and fill the tire to the correct pressure level, and that would be the end of it. Not in France. In France, people buy their gas at *supermarchés*, like at Safeway or Lucky's, or at convenience stores like a 7-11, where hardly ever a repair or garage facility is attached. This is the first time I've ever had to put air in the tires of a leased or rented car so I'm not sure what to expect, but I'm hoping maybe, maybe they have air....

I pull into a Super U gas station and see a sign for *Gonflage*—inflation. Yipppeeeee, I think. This is it—bye-bye orange (!). I park and pull the hose to the passenger side tire, start to gonflage it, and stop: there's no pressure gauge attached to the hose to ensure I inflate the tire to the correct—and safest—pressure, which, according to Google is 32 – 36 psi (pounds per square inch) for a Ford Fiesta. Now, I don't know what to do. Do I want too

much pressure or too little? Too much, especially in the heat (it's seventy-seven degrees) at high speeds (65-80 mph) is dangerous, as heat and speed increase the pressure, possibly causing a blowout, so I opt for the devil I know, too little, because I've been driving with (!) and a low pressure tire for five days now, and nothing terrible has happened... Yet....

To be sure, I stop at two other *supermarchés*, and it's the same: I can pump air, but have no way to gauge the pressure, before, during, or after I pump, so I leave well enough alone, and drive to Vitré with the orange light glowing, and the numbers I don't understand staying constant, which I think/hope means nothing is getting worse, which also seems to be my new mantra: if you can't make it better, don't make it worse—or worst.

We visit the chateau at Vitré, drive thirty miles to the chateau at Fougères, and two days later drive three hours and 250 km to Plobien, seven days and 700 kilometers after I first saw the light, which is now glowing with impunity. The next day I drive to the *Intermarché* to fill the tank with diesel and see a huge sign that says AIR. I figure it's more of the same—a pump without a gauge—but when I stop to look, I see it's not. It's a five-foot-high red metal box that looks like a Las Vegas slot machine with a hose attached. On top, in big red capital letters it says: ATTENTION: NOUVEAU SYSTÈME DE GONFLAGE, and beneath, *Les instructions avant toute utilisation....*

I get out of the car and look. Five pictograms show how the system works, the first being money: for 1.5 euros (about \$1.65) I can buy six minutes worth of what up until now I thought was free. The second picture shows a finger pushing a + or – button to *selectionnez la pression*. The third shows a hand pulling the hose to the tire valve; the fourth a hand next to a head listening to musical notes *pour retirer l'embout de la valve*, which I think means music will let me know when the tire is filled to the desired pressure. Picture five shows a flat tire, which I don't have, and don't care about—yet. Under the five pictures is a screen with two blank parallel bars, like an equal sign, which I assume, like the three cherries, are supposed to line up. Next to the top bar is the word *SEL*, which as far as I know means salt, and has nothing to do with tires or inflation. Below the bottom bar is the word *BAR*, which is where I'll be going if this doesn't work....

I put 1.5 euros in the money slot, the machine groans on, and 2.6 appears in the top

bar. I have no idea what it means, but it's like the numbers on the Fiesta's dashboard screen so it must be some form of measurement. I Google, 'is SEL a unit of measurement' and get *Sound Exposure Level*, which is a measure of energy, but as far as I know—which clearly isn't much—has nothing to do with air pressure and tires. I Google, 'is BAR a unit of measurement,' and that's how I learn one BAR equals 14.5 pounds per square inch. I do the math: if the Fiesta's tires should be 34 psi, and one bar equals 14.5 psi, the correct reading is 2.3 BARS, which means three of the four tires are off.

I push the minus button and watch the number in the top bar drop from 2.6 to 2.5, 2.4, and 2.3. I connect the hose to the front passenger side tire and 1.6 appears in the bottom bar. I fill the tire until I hear a sound—a SEL?—and see the bottom bar match the top bar at 2.3. I work my way around the car, but run out of time, money, and air before I get to the passenger-side rear tire, which I hope is still 2.3. I put the hose back, get in the car, start the engine, and to my great joy and relief (!) and the numbers are gone, and they stay that way until three days later when (!) returns and the two passenger-side tires are (1.6 and 1.9) low.

I've had it. I never liked or wanted this car, anyhow. I drive to the Europcar office at the large, busy Quimper train station to exchange it, but it's lunch time and they're closed. I wait an hour, then explain the situation to the young woman behind the counter.

“Je deux pneus avec bas pressure. Je gonflage les pneus trois jour dernier et maintenant deux est bas. S'il vous plaît, donnez moi le autre voiture.” I have two tires with low pressure. I inflated the tires three last day and now two is low. Please give me the other car.

She then explains the situation to me—in English: Yes, I can have another car, but first I have to call the number on the contract, and they have to approve it. *Then* I can have another car.

I ask her if she will call, because using the phone is a mystery and adventure I always try to avoid. So, apparently, does she, as she declines, and now I know why.

Europcar is a huge car rental and lease operation—Euro, Europe—and I’m betting every contract for every car in every country uses the same 800 number.

It’s Friday afternoon, about 4:00. I’m back at the house after seeing the Europcar lady, calling the 800 number. Amazingly, *tapez deux, # 2*, takes me to English long enough to get me comfortable and hopeful before it switches to French. A few minutes later someone answers—a miracle I soon find out—and between Monsieur’s fractured English and my beyond-repair French we establish who I am, where I am, what I need, and where I can go to fix the problem, and, if not quickly fixed, get another car.

He gives me an address in Loscoat, less than ten minutes away. It’s 4:10. The garage closes at 5:00—just enough time for me to drive there and for them to look at the car, confirm the tires are bad, they don’t have replacements, and authorize another car, hopefully diesel.

I race there and see the office doors are still open. I rush in before they can close them. The young woman behind the counter looks at me, clearly not happy to see me at 4:25 on a Friday afternoon. I show her my Europcar contract and the 800 number and explain, “*Je telephone cette numero et le monsieur dit moi visite votre magazine pour le reparation.*” I call this number and the gentleman says me visit your magazine for the repair. The word I want is *magasin*—store—but I always pronounce it *magazine*, which in French, like English, means *magazine*.

She visibly relaxes as she slowly explains a new owner bought the shop a year ago, and they no longer work with Europcar, making one of the two of us very happy.

I drive back to the house and call the 24/7 800 number, wait twenty minutes to go from French to English to French, and get a woman I can’t hear. She must have laryngitis or something, because she’s whispering, not that it matters, because she’s whispering French. I hold on anyhow, happy to be speaking with someone—anyone—so I don’t have to call the number and wait again. Finally, she realizes I’m dumb, not deaf, and transfers me to a man who speaks excellent English.

“Can I help you?” he asks, and is probably sorry he did. I tell him about the car and the tires and orange exclamation mark and the shop that no longer does Europcar work. He puts me on hold and comes back with two other places I can go to “in Loscoat,” and gives me the names and addresses, which I can’t understand. He repeats the information three times—slower each time—then says, “I’ll send you an email,” and hangs up.

An hour later I get the email. One garage is in a village an hour away. The other garage is on the far side of Quimper, at least forty minutes away, but I don’t care. Either one is fine—I just want to be done with this and get a different car, but after the lady who hasn’t worked with Europcar for a year, I’m not going to either place without calling first, which (1) brings me back to the phone, and (2) reality: it’s after five o’clock and everyone is closed.

The email the nice man sent me has the name of the shop, the address, phone number, and hours they’re open on Saturdays so at nine o’clock the next morning, I begin calling. I call the first shop and there’s no answer, just a message that says they’re closed. It doesn’t say if it’s for the morning, the day, week, or forever. I call the second number, and a fellow answers immediately.

“C’est ouvert?” I ask. Is it open?

“Oui.”

“Vous fait travailles pour Europcar?” Makes you work for Europcar?

“Oui.”

“Vous fait le reparation les pneus pour le Ford Fiesta?” Makes you repair the tires for the Ford Fiesta?

“Oui.”

“Vous-avez les nouveau pneus, c’est necessaire?” You have the new tires it is necessary?

“Oui.”

“Vous fait le travailles aujourd’hui?” Make you work today?

“Non.”

“Lundi?” Monday?

“Non.”

“Quand?” When?

“Jeudi après-midi,” Thursday afternoon, the day we’re meeting our friends Judith and Ted in Roscoff, an hour away.

I’m back to the 800 number. I call, wait twenty minutes, and hang up, furious with Europcar. I shower, dress, try to write, and call the 800 number again. This time I wait thirty minutes, and *they* cut me off, telling me *I’ve* been on the line too long.

I give up. I’m resigned to paying \$1.65 every three days and seeing (!) the rest of the summer. At four o’clock the phone rings and in perfect English a woman says, “I’ve organized something, and someone is coming to tow the car.”

“I don’t want the car towed,” I tell her, “without a replacement here.”

“I’m organizing it.”

“Good. Call me when it’s organized. I don’t want it towed before.”

Now, I want the car, because a car with two low tires is better than no car, which I know is what will happen if they tow it without another car here.

An hour later, a guy calls and tells me he's here for the car. "Je suis ici pour la voiture," and asks me where I live: "À quelle maison?"

I don't want him here, and I don't want the car towed, but I don't know the word for tow. He's outside, waiting for an answer, so I don't have time to look it up. "Reste le voiture ici, s'il vous plaît," I say. Stay the car here, please.

"Si si," he says, and he stops in front of the house in a tow truck. I go outside to stop him. He's a young guy with a boot on his foot, like it's broken.

"Bonjour," I say, shaking his hand, looking at his foot, "Reste la voiture ici," adding, "pas en voyage." Not travelling, I add for emphasis.

He looks at me like I'm nuts, and I understand I may not fully understand what's happening. "Vous fait le reparation, ici?" I ask. You do the repair, here?

"Oui."

I look at the truck. It's a huge flatbed with nothing on it. I *know* I need two new tires and maybe four, and they are definitely not there. He points to the front passenger side tire and shows me a nail in the tire, something he sees in one minute, that I didn't see in ten days. He gets his toolkit, which is about the size of a kindergartner's lunch box, takes out something that looks like a pick, pries the nail out and then jams the pick into the hole and makes it larger! I can't believe what I'm seeing. Maybe this is the French way of making sure an unusable tire isn't used. But no: he's fixing it. He pushes something that looks like a rubber worm into the now larger hole, filling the hole completely. Then he snips the end pieces, like a piece of thread after sewing on a button, and c'est tout. He looks at me very pleased with himself. I figure it will last a day or two or three, and I'll be back to calling the 800 number and finding a garage for a permanent fix.

He does the same thing with the rear passenger side tire: finds the hole, jams the pick in to make it bigger, fills it with the worm, and snips the ends.

“Combien hours c’est marche?” How many hours does it work?

“Finì,” he says, puts away his toolkit, shakes my hand, and leaves—and so does (!). Forever.

Once again and again and again, I learn when all is lost and I’ve given up, something happens and everything works out for my best. You’d think by now I’d be used to this pattern, maybe even expect it, but I don’t. Every time it happens is new, a miracle, and a delight, and I hope it continues forever, however long (or short) that may be, because sometimes unintended consequences are the best.



**NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living* and
*I’ll Never Be French (no matter what I do)***

- A Polish publisher has bought the ebook and audio book rights to *(not quite) Mastering* and *I’ll Never...*
- A Hungarian publisher has bought the printed rights to my third book about living in France, *Bonjour Au Revoir*, which means, like *(not quite) Mastering*, it will be published in Europe before it is published in the U.S.
- To my amazement, *(not quite) Mastering* often outperforms *I’ll Never*, which is rarely the case of a sequel. *(not quite)* has 908 Amazon reviews (4.3/5), *I’ll Never* 575 (4.5/5); *(not quite)* has sold about 20,000 copies in the U.S. in five years, *I’ll Never* about 35,000 in fifteen years. *I’ll Never* is frequently listed in the top 10 ebooks about Brittany on Amazon; *(not quite)* is frequently listed in the top 50 ebooks in the

categories French Travel, French cooking, and French History on Amazon. (*not quite*) was a *Wall Street Journal* best seller.

I want to mention and recommend several books written by friends and acquaintances (in alpha order) that I've been re-reading:

Finding Fontainebleau: An American Boy in France by Thad Carhart, author of the enchanting, *The Piano Shop on the Left Bank*. *Fontainebleau* is a memoir about growing up at the chateau as a child and returning there with his own family as an adult.

The Little French Bistro by Nina George, author of *The Little Paris Bookshop*. The bistro is in Brittany as is most of the story and characters.

A Long Way from Iowa: from Heartland to the Heart of France by Janet Hulstrand, author of the insightful and helpful, *Demystifying the French*. Her new book is a family saga that begins at the start of the twentieth century in rural America and ends in twenty-first century France. It's a fascinating story.

Jacqueline (as in Kennedy) in Paris by Ann Mah, author of two wonderful best-selling books, *Mastering the Art of French Eating* and *Lost Vintage*. Ann also wrote a very generous introduction to the paperback version of (*not quite*).

Final Transgression: One Woman's Tragic Destiny in War by Harriet Welty Rochefort, author of *French Toast*, *French Fried*, and *Joie de Vivre*, three of my favorite books about an American living in France *and* marrying a French man. *Transgression* is a novel about a woman's love and betrayal during World War Two.

A Reader's Guide to St-Rémy de Provence and Surrounding Areas by Keith Van Sickle, author of *Are We French Yet* and *One Sip at a Time*. St-Rémy is a beautiful village at the heart of Van Gogh's history and lore. The book is highly informative and completely interactive, moving from book to websites to book. It's the perfect way to present a detailed guidebook, tell lots of fascinating stories, and provide tons and tons of information.

If you're interested in all things vintage, check out my friend Sylvie's website, sosylvie.com, especially her link to Etsy. She's been trying to convince me—and has offered to help me—set up an Instagram account.... We'll see....

If you haven't reviewed (*not quite*) and *I'll Never be French* on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#), please consider doing so, as those reviews are critical for the book's success and my mental health.

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- Amazon author page: amazon.com/author/markgreenside

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Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

