Tracing footsteps....

My godfather Theophile lived in a windmill near St Malo. He was a poet and writer who ran an arts magazine called Le Goeland (sea gull) from 1936 till his death after a car accident in 1956.

My father continued to visit the windmill and Theo's widow every year of my childhood. PL (petite lumiere or little light) would welcome us with warmth and biscuits and let us roam the windmill and the grounds as long as we wanted. We spent every August at St Malo and Rotheneuf and I learned my first French words at the 'Club Mickey' kids club on the beach!

To celebrate Theo’s life and my 60th birthday we decided to trace some of his steps with an autumn trip to Brittany using Peugeot EuroLease.

Our first day took us from Paris CDG Airport to Verneuil where Theo died in that fatal car crash - at an old fashioned priority right French junction. With no sign of the junction now, we headed off to Giverny and Monet country where we immediately found a farmer's market and stocked up on sausages, bread, tomatoes and salad before heading north to Deauville for a picnic lunch and a brisk dip in the English Channel. Like a slap in the face with a wet mackerel - cold but refreshing after two days air travel.

Theo spent most of his life in St Malo, near to the famous walled Corsair City. The Corsairs were in the service of Louis the 14th and his successors were allowed to keep half of all the gold and jewels that they were able to lift from British and Spanish ships returning from the Americas. This meant that St Malo landed a quarter of all the gold in France in the 18th century and with their enormous wealth the Corsairs built massive houses, called Malouinières, used as summer houses for entertaining. We were blessed in that we arrived in time for a weekend Patrimoine where the local Malouinières were open to the public. At Ville Bague we were entertained by a group of French horn-blowers and a pack of almost cooperative beagle cross hunting dogs.

St Malo was badly damaged by Allied and German bombs in 1944 and has been lovingly and perfectly restored to its original look. As a sign of respect from the French Government it is the only city that is allowed to fly its city flag higher than the French tri-colour. The distinctive white cross on a blue background features an ermine in the top quadrant, with the ermine representing the purity of spirit. In an ancient story the ermine was being hunted by a prince and was blocked by a swamp of mud, but rather than dirty its coat the ermine turned to face the prince and was killed! "Better to die than soil your coat!"
Brittany is famous for seafood and every day we could gorge on fresh mussels from the bay of Mt St Michel and buy giant spider crabs, cod and mackerel from the daily farmers markets around St Malo. The region also produces the best cabbages and cauliflowers in Europe and every field in the region and around Theo’s windmill is full of the emerald treasure of these granite loving brassicas being harvested and shipped far and wide.

French farmers never fail to be dramatic and when they protest about prices and EEC quotas they block the motorways with their tractors and dump produce across the roads. Last year it was fishermen dumping mackerel and sardines at Roscoff and this year it was the potato growers depositing 100 tonnes of new spuds on the main road into St Malo, which provided great news and lots of entertainment for the local cooks who gathered them up in bags, baskets and pockets!

My godfather loved to swim and held the record for the 7km swim from Ile de Cezembre to St Malo, so as part of our homage and respect we dutifully swam every day. The weather was unseasonably warm and for Brittany, stunningly dry, but the English Channel remains “fresh” and fails to warm whatever the summer. We swam on the Plage du Pont in front of the windmill and had the surreal experience of being on a beach with no children and only the retired lounge lizards of St Malo for company because we visited in school term time and the children were in class until 5pm.

Our Peugeot 3008 gave us great access to all the beaches along the Cote Emeraude (emerald coast). We swam in gentle surf at St Coulomb, flat water at Parame and increasingly warm water in the Rance estuary at St Suliac.

Our Peugeot gave us so much flexibility and comfort and most pleasingly it seemed to take forever before we needed to fill up - with an average 1000kms per tank of diesel!

One of our last nights, after oysters and muscadet in Cancale we caught one of my godfathers favourite images, “the Green Flash”. Impossible to photograph, the green flash is an optical illusion seen only on the emerald coast of North Brittany. On a clear and cloudless evening you can watch the setting sun from the granite cliffs and as sun meets sea there is a magical green flash!

That about sums up our entire holiday actually. It was truly magical.