

The Continental Cactus Crawl, April 4th -7th 2018 ("The French Fling." Organiser: James Gold)

WEDNESDAY

Zut alors, Mercredi! James shifts the Cactus Crawl forward by one day. We assemble in Sainsbury's car park, Enfield, permission being granted in exchange for a donation to charity. We are delighted to see that the excellent Motts of Aylesbury are once again supplying the coach, with our indispensable guide Nicky and our incomparable driver Brian.

James allocates seats by what Wasim calls "psychological profiling". Wasim and Eddy, plus *nooduitgang* (emergency exit – showing off now) and toilet form a *cordon sanitaire* across the coach, or after a couple of days, *insanitaire*. (I don't mean Wasim or Eddy). All the suspect characters are relegated to the rear of it, discouraged from nameless delinquencies by a strategic distribution of married couples.

We have no trouble at all getting into Continental Europe, unlike the Scottish Tour a week ago, some of whose members are accused of being football hooligans. An unfamiliar route takes us inland to the little town of Libercourt, near Lens, for our first ever visit to Envie de Cactus. There is enough of interest here to shake the moths out of our wallets. Then we proceed to familiar territory, namely the eternal traffic jam at the Kennedytunnel in Antwerp. Thence to the Postillion at Dordrecht, who are still glad to have us. Must be the bar takings.

THURSDAY

Jawohl, Donnerstag! On an unfamiliar day we take an unfamiliar route south. The motorway is closed, so Nicky and Brian devise an ingenious rat run through a succession of villages in order to reach the Eindhoven Triple Bypass. From there we head to Venlo (without incident) and into Transrhénia. Our first stop is at Leverkusen, or rather by a large dung heap in some fields where Sabine Reinecke's nursery is situated. Herr Reinecke welcomes us by standing on an upturned flower pot and warning us about the terrible things that will befall us if we so much as breathe on any of his red labels. Then he turns us loose among their substantial collection of Hoyas, Pelargoniums, and interesting exotics of all sorts.

From there we cross the Rhine back to *terra cognita* and approach Düren from an unfamiliar direction. We get a familiar friendly reception, though, from Georg Piltz, to whom all good wishes.

Conversation in the back of the bus is occasionally coarse, sometimes loud, usually prolix, but rarely memorable. However, this overheard gem is crying out for publication:

"Who's so-and-so?"

"You know him. He has a cat called Timmy with big ears."

As we approach Ingo Breuer's, discussion intensifies and fixes on the subject of ice cream. The Scottish trip find the ice cream parlour by the entrance to the nursery shut. Ha Ha! But today it is *geöffnet*. Your correspondent has a double on the way in and a double on the way out. Braver souls risk their pelvises on the rolling tables, and are rewarded by a wider range of plants than usual.

We return via Roermond, Weert and Eindhoven. It is Brenda Hefford's birthday, a contingent but not a necessary excuse for a drink.

FRIDAY

Verbazend, Vrijdag! A few of the late-night drinkers are looking pasty, but the rest of us are eager to make an early start, for we have six Dutch nurseries to visit. We begin with Jan Westeijn. The two dogs are missing, and so is Martin's electric fence. The nursery is not yet in full production, but lots of plants are scooped up. Brian performs a brilliant three-point turn, and follows it up with getting out of Westeijn's little lane in one simple movement. We have quite forgotten getting stuck in the mud.

Van der Linden's, whose premises are already big enough to join the United Nations, is in the throes of a massive expansion. It must be the current craze for succulents. Various members buy lots of plants "for the Branch raffle". Brian says that driving us is "one million times better than the

school run”.

Next is Cok Grootcholten. Cok's present system is that you select a plant, hunt him round the nursery, wait politely for your turn to speak to him, ask him if it is for sale, he says “No”, and you put it back where you find it. If he says “Yes”, you take it to Ine at the cash desk. Ine does not know that Cok has said “Yes”, so she goes to look for him to check. She also has to ask him the price, because there is no indication on the label. Indeed, there is no label. He says “Five Euros”, and she comes back to the cash desk only to have to repeat the process all over again with the next plant. Most visitors are simply happy to drink the excellent coffee.

Fourth is Aad Vijverberg. There are lots of excellent cactus seedlings, so carrying trays are filled to overflowing. Nicky is made anxious by carefully chosen tales of cactus growers and their eccentricities, which, while normal to ourselves, suggest raving insanity to those outside the hobby.

On the way to Two Shovels, your correspondent pours himself a shot of *Pastis*. Then, on turning round to pass the bottle, he knocks his glass into his lap. Now hoping not to meet any draghounds in the next few days, he pours himself a replacement. At this point Roger Hefford's plants fall off the parcel shelf, and his glass is filled with compost. This must be a divine warning.

Two Shovels is the same as usual; careful scrutiny reveals must-have plants, and more money is spent than intended.

Finally, Gerrit Melissen. He buys collections, and all sorts of plants are available. Some large plants find their way on to the coach.

As we approach the Postillion, James gives orders for the day. Plants must be boxed and deposited at the hotel entrance before breakfast. At dinner Stirling thanks everybody who has contributed, and Eddy thanks Stirling for thanking everybody.

SATURDAY

We are not used to going home on a Saturday. The two tallest men, Mark and Ian, have been selected to work in the confined space under the coach, but they manage brilliantly. James has exercised uncharacteristic restraint. Only cactus growers, used as they are to greenhouses that are invariably too small, have the packing skills to get a quart into a pint pot.

So off we start for Cactus Flower. There are many signs warning NIET TE KOOP (Not For Sale), but my favourite notice reads NIET AANRAKEN (Do Not Poke About). [My favourite sign on the whole trip is the name of the store just outside Utrecht selling lavatory pans: SANI-DUMP.]

Lastly, we call in at Ariane, in the little town of Lochristi, north-east of Ghent. Brian cannot get the coach into the narrow entrance on the right-hand side of the road, so he drives into Lochristi and pulls a magnificent u-ey in the main street. Applause! This is our first visit to Ariane. It is a large commercial nursery with most plants laid out on the floor to save the cost of staging. Outside, in pots, are millions of *Sempervivums* and *Jovibarbas*. Inside are colossal elephants' feet heavier than any man on this trip. The proprietor spends a lot of time practising his English on us, then, just as we start queueing up to pay for our purchases, he goes off for lunch.

A few miles into our journey home, several members make a point of showing your correspondent the vast Duvel brewery at Breendonk (Brain Dunk?). He does not understand why they think he should be interested. The trip ends with a trouble-free return to Blighty. It is deemed by one and all to be a complete success. In future we shall have to stop calling James Scottish and start calling him British.

John Watmough