We live in a unique French port. Most of the boaters here are French people who live on their boats and work in Paris. When we wintered in Roanne, the port was 10% French and 90% International. English was the default language among the boaters, who were mostly retired folks enjoying life on the French canals. In Paris, it is just the reverse; the port is 90% French and 10% International. We are one of the few couples here who are retired, and French is the language spoken here.

We live in the big boat area of the Arsenal. Our neighbors are French families, some of whom we have known since 2001. Our neighbor’s son, who is now 10, used to play with a wooden sword that his father made for him when he was little. Dressed in his cape and sword, we would play on the quay. We watched from our wheelhouse as he would fight off an army of imaginary soldiers who were trying to conquer his homeland. One year, when he was about seven, he got a broom handle horse for Christmas. As the family went off to Grandma’s house, he had on his cape and sword and he carried his trusty steed across our boat to the pontoon where he swung his leg over and galloped off after his family. We couldn't help but smile.

Our friends who live a bit further along the pontoon have a son who just turned seven. He has always been good about correcting our French pronunciation, and now that he is starting English class in school, we help him with his English. His parents can tell he if he is here by the bike parked at our front door, so they only come looking for him when they think that he may have overstayed his welcome.

Recently we heard a knock at the door early on a Sunday morning. We looked over, but couldn’t see anyone at the door, so we knew that it was our little tiny French teacher. He came in and we talked of this and that. He told us that his parents had sent him to invite us to have lunch with them at 1pm, and we told him that we would be happy to come. Then he took the helm as he likes to do, and said that he would take us to Chez Fifi, a cruise on the Marne that we have made with his family a couple of times, and he often pretends to take our boat there. These imaginary trips are always exciting. Boats appear out of nowhere, and rocks pop up in the middle of the river. He pretends to spin the wheel to avoid the hazard that only he can see, and thanks to his skills, we always arrive safely. He was just looking for something else to do when his parents came to the door to say that they had been waiting for him. He was supposed to ride his bike down to invite us to lunch and then come right home so that they could all go shopping. Oops! He got so busy saving our boat from sinking that he forgot that he was only
supposed to come down to ask us to lunch. In the end, he stayed with us while his parents did the shopping, and everyone was happy with that arrangement.

Both boats moored behind us belong to young couples. One couple is expecting their first baby in February. Recently we heard construction noises coming from the inside of their boat, and when we asked they told us that they were building a cabin for the baby.

The other couple has two children and a very charming cat called Nina. We have always been amazed by Nina and her, “je ne sais quoi”. She is different from other cats in that she has the ability to make people stop and pet her. It happens all of the time, and we always wonder just how she does it. About six months ago, an adorable Jack Russell puppy, Dude, was added to the family. He was smaller than Nina in the beginning, and now they are about the same size. Nina does not spend much time with her family as she seems to be more interested in how many strangers she can attract, but the children love running up and down the quay with Dude. Dude is very quick, has a mind of his own, and never comes when he is called, so we often hear not only the kids, but sometimes the parents calling out “Dude” with a bit of frustration in their voices and a French pronunciation that makes us smile as we turn to each other and say, “Duuuuude” is loose again.

Down the pontoon a bit, another young family has a nine year old son and they are expecting their second child in January. When their son was little and went to school for the first time, he asked his classmates, “What is the name of your barge?” He thought everyone lived on a boat.

Halloween never really caught on in France, so last year we were surprised when a couple of our little neighbors came by in homemade costumes looking for a treat. While we were busy trying to put cocktail peanuts in a bag for them, they threw a handful of confetti on the pontoon in front of our boat as a warning to other kids that this house is a waste of time. You won’t get any candy here! That was a social faux pas that we didn’t want to repeat this year, so we searched high and low before we found anything that resembled Halloween treats at our local market. We paid dearly for the mini candy bars, but at least we would not have to suffer the stigma of confetti this year.

We didn’t know how many kids might come out Trick-or-Treating, but we knew the kids next door were planning to dress up for candy, so we asked their mom what time they might be coming by so that we would be sure to be home. While we were out, we ran into our little friend’s mom and reminded her that it was Halloween. We told her that we were prepared for
Trick-or-Treaters this year, and she said that she hadn’t thought about it, but that she would come up with some kind of a costume for her son.

Just after dark we heard some ghostly noises, they got louder and louder and then there was a knock at our door. We looked at the window in the door, but we didn’t see anyone. Another knock, more scary noises and we got up to investigate. We opened the door and gasped in fear. Two little ghosts were at our door. We screamed and they giggled. Their mom watched and smiled as her cute little kids tried to figure out what to do next. Halloween is not a tradition that has been handed down from parent to child here, so they didn’t know what to say, but they had heard that candy could be had if they came prepared with a big sack. The little ghost was so busy giggling that it was up
to her big brother to push forward his sack so that we could toss in several little candy bars. We were still smiling when we closed the door and waited for the next knock.

Our little buddy the barge pilot/French teacher was the only other French kid trying out an American tradition. His mom had rummaged through the closet, and he was wearing an Irish hat, a Canadian shirt, swim goggles, and he was trying to look scary. We gave him most of the candy that was left, and closed the door for the night.

There were a couple of mini Mars Bars in the candy bowl, and we realized, as we ate them with great pleasure, what a treat it is to have kids on the block again.