

First prize twinner,

*Reflections on hosting Gien visitors by Fran Vandelli*

After chairing the Twinning Association's AGM earlier this year (for all of ten minutes) and finding everyone so warm and friendly, I decided to join the Association with a view to (at some point in the future when I have some time) thinking about how we might have some links with Italy. (By the way I've found one, but that's another story.) On that basis it was a bit of a surprise to receive an urgent request to host some visitors from Gien this summer, but the idea of saying 'Non' seemed a bit rude. And besides, I thought, how hard can it be to make up a couple of beds? I was reassured further to hear that Julia was relaxed about me and my husband having to stick to our work schedules during the exchange visit, and I didn't need to go on the trips or out to dinner.

And so it was that I was confident it would all be a doddle, as long as I did a bit of light housework before the guests arrived. I wasn't too worried when the schedule of visits was emailed to me, or the long list of visitors and hosts, or even the invitation to a meeting for first time hosts. However, by the time we were half way through the meeting I was very nervous about what I might have gotten us into. Or more to the point, what I might have gotten myself into, given that my husband was going to be working away for the weekend of the visit!

Meeting other 'first-timers' (and some 'old-hands') at Julia's made it clear that I wasn't going to be on my own, and that other hosts would be happy to help, advise, and join together for activities. There was such enthusiasm for the trips out and showing our visitors around, that I decided to throw myself entirely into the hosting - I always love cooking and entertaining whenever I get the chance anyway. I snapped up places on the outings I knew I could attend and I made sure I had a table booked for the farewell meal, and then arranged a social calendar of joint events and outings with other hosts.

On the arrival day, I ended up working late and dashed to the Town Hall to meet my guests, wondering whether they would enjoy my plans breakfasts or my sandwiches on their first day trip out, and worrying whether I'd be sufficiently entertaining company while my husband was away (he wasn't planning to be back until Tuesday), especially since I haven't spoken French properly since my CSE oral exam many decades ago.

What I should really have worried about, was how much I would miss Stefan and Flora after seeing them off on the coach when Tuesday had come around all too soon. The weekend was a whirlwind with sight-seeing and shopping, talking about books, music, art and history, taking photos, eating out and socialising, eating in and sharing recipes (and wine!), playing games and laughing. That my school-girl French improved is an added bonus.

I'm so glad I agreed to hosting. I think my guests had a good time and felt welcome and comfortable, I had a great time and husband was able to get back on Sunday so we could take our guests to try an Indian restaurant. I learned about Stefan and Flora's lives; their family, work, school, home, town (and Town Council) and I we became firm friends. In fact, I feel like I've won first prize in a 'friendships' lottery because of all the other friends I've

made (visitors and hosts) through the experience. Now I'm looking forward to renewing those friendships next June...