Paris — Ahhh, to be French!

Marielle Saulnier, a 34-year-old radiotherapy nurse, took 10 days off to ski in the French Alps over Easter, and three weeks to vacation in Corsica during August. She took another week off in October to visit museums and parks with her children during their mid-autumn school break, and 18 more days, sprinkled throughout last year, just to relax.

She still has 35 free days saved up from past years and will take 8 of them this month before starting again the annual cycle of vacations — 58 days, in all, not including weekends.

But is she happy?

"Not entirely," she said with a sigh, "because I'm tired."

Like many workers in what some European neighbors consider a mollycoddled land, Ms. Saulnier complains that the country's 35-hour workweek, adopted in January 2000, is making her work too hard.

The law, conceived at a time when the national unemployment rate was nearing 13 percent and French pessimism was at a peak, was supposed to usher in a utopian era of greater leisure and more jobs. But many workers complain that it has not led to enough hiring and has instead squeezed the same amount of work into fewer hours.

"If you cut the hours without increasing the work force, everybody has to work harder," said Jean-Paul Rouillac, a postal worker and union official, sipping a coffee beneath a poster of Che Guevara at a local union office across town.

To some extent, the logic behind the 35-hour week has been vindicated. Unemployment has dropped to 9 percent since the law went into effect, and the government, which has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to subsidize new jobs, claims some of that reduction is because of the shortened workweek.

The greater flexibility has also helped streamline French industry and might be one factor for France's better economic performance compared with that of many of its neighbors in recent years.

But Laure Maillard, an economist with CDC IXIS, a financial firm, argues that the short-term employment and productivity gains will be overtaken by a longer-term drag on corporate profits and government revenues.

"I think it could hurt French competitiveness," she said.
It is already causing problems. Lawyers, for example, say that some of their high-salaried associates are demanding enforcement of the 35-hour rule, and application of the law has been frozen for hotel and restaurant workers because those businesses cannot afford to keep bankers' hours or hire more people.

It is doubtful the 35-hour week will be repealed any time soon, however, and the reason has more to do with sociology than with economics. The French already work less than people in most other developed countries — on average, nearly 300 fewer hours a year than Americans, according to one study — and they like it that way.

"I'd rather have a better quality of life than touch a little more money," said Jean-Marie Gastou, 39, a Federal Express deliveryman.

France, the richest country in Europe during the 18th century, was slow to industrialize, and so it preserved a provincial pace while many of its neighbors, notably Germany and Britain, beavered ahead. In the 19th century, Marxist influences helped define work as a means to achieve leisure rather than an end, as it was to many Americans.

Some French were even taught that ambition could make them ill, said Theodore Zeldin, a British sociologist and keen observer of French society. Karl Marx's French son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, wrote a political tract entitled "The Right to Idleness," which argued for a three-hour workday.

"It fits in with a French idea of what life is about — the enjoyment of one's senses and the company of others, sitting in the cafe watching people go by," said Mr. Zeldin, who nevertheless cautions against facile characterizations that ignore the country's many entrepreneurial personalities.

A sense of immobility in the traditionally class-conscious society also saps many people here of the get-ahead ambition that drives their counterparts in the United States. The country's exam-heavy education system sets career paths early and there is little flexibility for changes later on.

"We've never believed in the American Dream," said the nurse, Ms. Saulnier, relaxing in a lounge of the sprawling 19th-century hospital where she works. She says it's obvious that there aren't enough jobs or resources to allow everyone to move up, "and the French understand that."

Instead, the French prefer to keep work in perspective, giving them what many people see as a healthier balance to their lives.

Ms. Saulnier says she's content with her 860-square-foot, rent-subsidized Paris apartment, for which she and her common-law husband pay about $600 a month. She considers her $20,000 annual salary adequate and even better than that of many of her peers.

"My life doesn't turn around money," she said. "I'm more interested in having more time to do what I want."

Part of the reason for the relaxed attitude is that the government gives citizens free health care and education, inexpensive and reliable child care when they are working and hefty unemployment payments when they are not. There are subsidies for all sorts of things, including housing and schoolbooks. Parents get a monthly stipend of about $60 per child simply for being parents.

Some other European countries rival France in its leisure ethic, its taxes and the generous social
benefits, but none have yet enshrined such an abbreviated working time into law.

Valérie Arnaud, a marketing executive at a financial services firm, says that most people in positions of responsibility realize it is not possible to adhere to a 35-hour week. Still, thanks to the law, she gets 22 extra days of vacation each year — the maximum allowable.

The added vacation days permit many people to start their weekends on Thursday or end them on Tuesday. Working mothers now often take off Wednesdays when many French children are not in school.

Ms. Saulnier, who now goes home a little more than an hour earlier every day, receives 20 more vacation days a year than she did before.

But falling profits and budget cuts have prevented hiring at many companies and institutions, such as her hospital. The result is a rising murmur of complaints that the shortened work year has made life more stressful for many people.

Ms. Saulnier says she has to work harder to finish her job before quitting time — theoretically 2:36 p.m. under the new rules — and complains that if she runs late, her work eats into her personal time.

"From outside, it looks great, but because we're short of staff it isn't great," she said, adding that during the afternoon, her ward should have seven nurses but there are rarely more than four.

Workers complain that the tighter schedule has made people stingier with their time. Some stores, for example, now close half an hour early so that workers can leave promptly at the official closing time.

"Back in the old days, things were friendlier and we didn't watch the clock so much," said Serge de Matos, 34, a crew-cut night orderly, stuffing union flyers into envelopes at the hospital's union office.

Mr. de Matos, says he spends the extra free time sleeping because he's busier at work now.

"I'm more tired than I was before," he says.