

FRENCH WATERWAYS 2012

This one started out, as many of our trips do, with something we got in the mail. We have previously taken river trips with Vantage, and enjoyed them thoroughly. This cruise started in Nice, and cruised up the Rhone and Saone Rivers, through the heart of Burgundy and ended up in Paris.

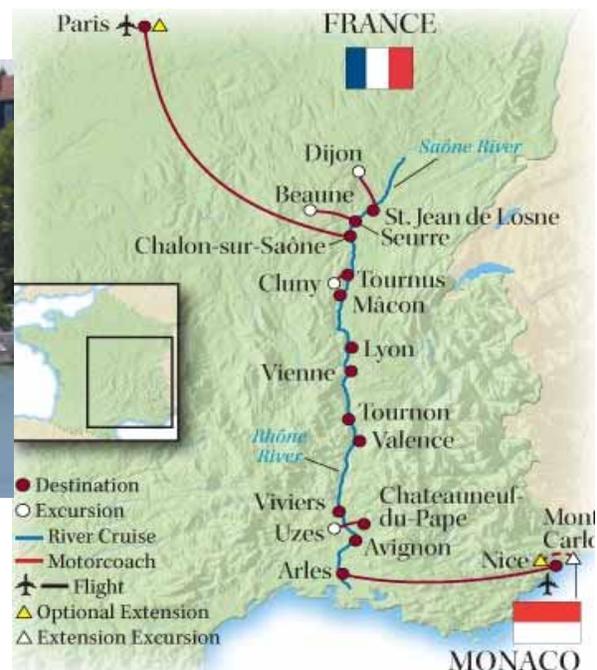
We went on line to check availability, and to our shock, the entire 2011 season was just about sold out! One of the reasons was the ship only held 72 passengers as opposed to 140 to 170 passengers on the Danube cruises

.Also, there were only 4 suites with French Balconies and queen sized beds on the ship. The rooms were still small, but oddly enough, the bathroom was about half the size of the bedroom. After enjoying French Balconies on our Danube and Rhine cruise, we did not want to go back to just a window and a tiny cabin. We loved the ability to open the balcony slider and enjoy the fresh air of the beautiful rivers with the swans gliding by.

We called Vantage, and were waitlisted for the 2012 season to get first shot at the suites. We got a call in November of 2010 and made our choices.



As you can see by the picture, our ship (in front) is quite a bit smaller than the standard river cruise ship.



To get from Switzerland to our river cruise, we took the train from Lauterbrunnen to Nice, changing in Basel. We had figured if we could make it from Wales to the Lake District in England changing twice, this should not be a problem. The difference was there were 5 changes of trains instead of 2! We were resigned to only taking 2 suitcases and 2 carry-on's for this 22 day trip.

While visiting my mother before this trip, I suddenly had an idea! I could put the 2 carry-on bags back to back, and strap them together with a luggage strap, reducing our bags to four.

WENGEN TO NICE

We descended from Wengen on the now familiar cog rail train to Lauterbrunnen. From there we took Swiss Rail trains to Geneva catch the TGV (French for very fast train) to Nice and Monte Carlo. Because of the length of the trip and the amount of luggage we had, we decided to get First Class tickets. The train was nicely appointed, and we could get up, walk around, look out the windows, etc. This was much better than trying to fly with the attendant security stops, etc. Also, we could see the countryside as we went by, instead of from 30,000 feet.

MONTE CARLO

We arrived in Monte Carlo, and check into our hotel. We were much more rested than if we had flown in, with the attendant customs, immigration, baggage pickup, etc. Kathy had a discussion with the desk clerk, and we were booked into a balcony room overlooking a marina full of yachts. It was evening, and a beautiful sight. We also took our obligatory picture.



Since we got in to Monte Carlo at around 8 PM, we just had dinner and relaxed. We got up the next morning and had breakfast at the hotel. We felt sorry for the people who had just arrived as they would be fighting the effects of their flights.

We watched some of the yachts come and go, and as one of them docked, Kathy said, "That boat has bow thrusters". We had only seen them on cruise ships before this. The yacht docked at the entrance to the marina sailed out, and I got a picture of it coming back in. What a moose!



We were told the Casino opened at Noon, but when we got there we found out it did not open until 2PM. We had lunch at the Café de Paris first, and I went to the local department store to find a part for my camera.



We wandered around the casino, imagining what it looked like in the evenings, with everyone dressed up. We were surprised at the attire of some of the people; jeans and sneakers seemed to be the dress of the day. Apparently the dress code in the evening is quite a bit more formal.

Kathy sat down at the roulette table so she could place a bet (it was on her bucket list). We then wandered around Monte Carlo and headed back to our hotel.

NICE

In the morning we were taken on a panoramic city tour of Nice with a visit to a local food market. The fruits and vegetables were very interesting and Kathy picked up some sun dried tomatoes and some Herbs de Provence. Kathy also picked up some Herbs de Provence grinders for her friends. The ship was selling the same ones for 3 times the price!



We had lunch on our own, and then were taken to the ship in Arles.

ARLES

Our cabin was very comfortable, with a French Balcony, and our first order of business was to get our chargers plugged in. By the time we had the Nook, cameras, speakers and cell phone charging inside the medicine cabinet; it looked like an electronics laboratory!

Prior to the trip, we received an e-mail from Vantage offering an optional tour of the asylum Van Gogh stayed at before going to Auvers sur Oise for the last days of his life, and the hilltop town of Les Baux.

We had no interest in the asylum, but we looked up the town on the internet. We had our fill of hilltop towns on our Portrait of Italy tour a few years ago, so we passed.

It turned out the town was having an exhibition on Van Gogh and Gauguin paintings called Carrières de Lumières (Careers of Enlightenment) inside an old quarry

Each year the Carrières invites visitors on an extraordinary audio visual journey made possible by cutting-edge technological equipment and methods developed by Culturespaces and its multimedia partners: 70 video projectors, 3D audio adapted to the specific characteristics of the site, etc. More surfaces used in the show to give it more breadth and extend this artistic journey.

. That really interested us, especially since we would be going to Tahiti, where Gauguin painted, for our anniversary. Also, we had just finished reading a book called "The Last Van Gogh" about the last months of his life. I got on the internet and found a taxi service that would take us there.

The picture on the right gives some perspective of the size of the exhibition relative to the visitors. The chair and window on the left wall are from a Van Gogh painting of his room



The picture on the left is Van Gogh's "Irises", while the picture on the right shows how it was displayed on the wall and floor. His "Sunflowers" painting is in the background. We have seen the originals and to see them like this just blew us away.

We were totally immersed in the images projected onto all the surfaces of the rock. They are now using twice the number of video projectors in order to cover twice the wall area. The ground is completely covered, too, and becomes a vast carpet of images.

The accompanying music matched the mood of the paintings. I recognized some pieces by Grieg and Rachmaninoff, among others.

The Gauguin paintings were also spectacular in their projections.



The exhibit lasted 35 minutes, and we sat and watched it 3 times! It was absolutely fantastic, and sure beat scrambling over cobblestones in a hilltop town. The taxi showed up at the appointed time and took us back to the ship.

Our tour manager told us about a supermarket across the square from the ship, and I wanted to pick up some of the local wines of Burgundy. I emptied my backpack, and headed for the market. They had a good selection of white wines which we would never see in the States, as it was not economical to ship them. I stocked up, and picked up some soda, and headed back to the ship. Kathy cracked up when she saw me unload the backpack. I had 7 bottles of wine and 2 six packs of soda!

AVIGNON

We docked near the famous Pont (bridge) of Avignon, and we were surprised that it only had 4 of the arches left. The bridge of Avignon was started in 1177 and had 22 arches. Over the centuries it was destroyed by floods and rebuilt. The river also caused an island to form in the middle, which negated the need for most of the bridge.



We were taken on a walking tour of Avignon with visit to Palais des Papes, the Gothic 14th-century Palace of the Popes. On the way to one of the city gates, we discovered a beautiful field of wild lavender.



Once inside, we passed a shop that had the most interesting miniature figurines in the window.



We continued to the main square, and saw the Papal palace. I had read that the rooms were empty, so we were not interested in climbing all the stairs.



What we did see in the square, was a little train that took you all around the city. It had narration in a number of languages, including English. This was a much better way to do a walking tour! After the train ride, Kathy sat in a little outdoor café while I went to look for the synagogue.



The synagogue of Avignon was first built in 1221. A 13th century oven used to bake unleavened bread for Passover can still be seen, but the rest of the present round, domed, neoclassical structure dates from 1846.

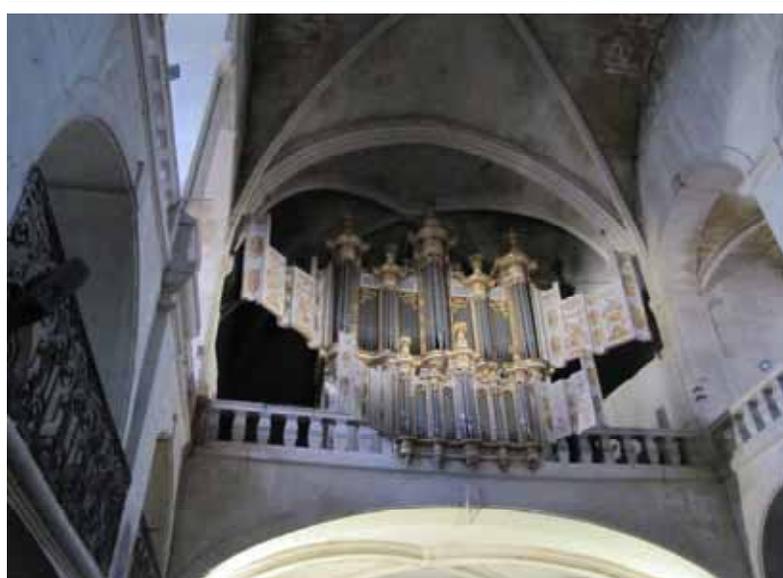
The synagogue was rebuilt between 1765 and 1767 by architect Franque and sumptuously decorated. This building totally burned down in 1845, but was immediately reconstructed by the care and efforts of the municipality to the plans of the architect J.A. Jeffroy.

That evening, our tour managers treated us to a ride on the Ferris wheel that was near the ship. The view from the top was great, as we could see the entire Papal palace.



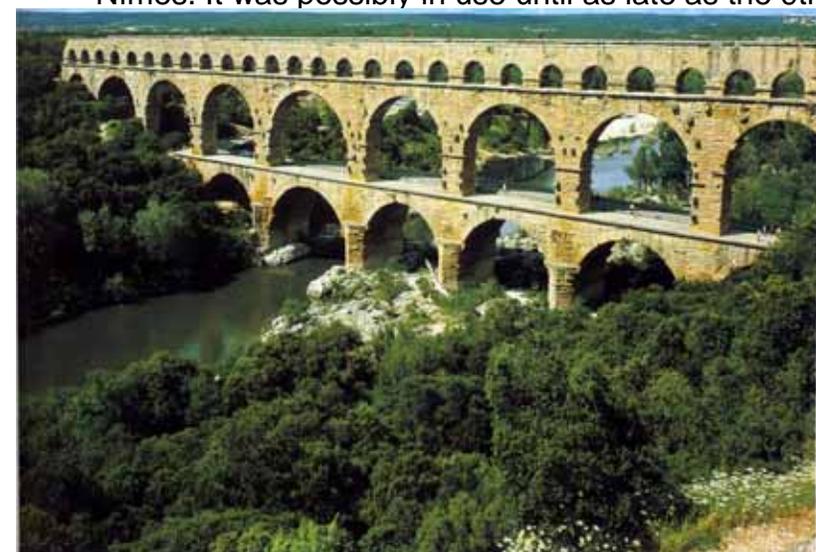
UZES, PONT DU GARD

We first drove to the historic town of Uzès, which lies at the source of the Eure, from where a Roman aqueduct was built in the first century BC, to supply water to the local city of Nîmes, 25KM away. The most famous stretch of the aqueduct is the Pont du Gard, which carried fresh water over splendid arches across the river Gardon. We first passed the ducal palace, and then by the Saint-Théodorit cathedral and its Fenestrelle (window) Tower.



After visiting the cathedral, we walked to a pretty tree covered square and people watched for a while. They hold a farmer's market there once a week, but not the day we were there.

We drove to the Pont du Gard, the famous Roman aqueduct, which was constructed in the 1st century AD and is the highest and the best preserved of all Roman aqueduct bridges. The bridge has three tiers of arches, standing 160 ft high. The whole aqueduct descends in height by only 56 ft over its entire length, while the bridge descends by a mere one inch, indicative of the great precision that Roman engineers were able to achieve using only simple technology. The aqueduct formerly carried an estimated 44 million gallons of water a day to the fountains, baths and homes of the citizens of Nîmes. It was possibly in use until as late as the 9th century, well after the fall of Rome.



We had a nice picnic there, complete with wine. That is really the way to tour! We then headed back to the ship and had a cheese tasting.

Our tour manager brought in about a dozen different cheeses, some made from cow's milk, some from sheep, and some from goats. They ranged in texture from hard to very soft.

Our favorite, however, was a cheese from Normandy called Camembert. As it ages, or ripens, its texture changes and it gets softer. Camembert is ripened as a small round cheese fully covered by rind. It thus tends to be sold in thin round wood containers. More on ripe camembert cheese later.

CHÂTEAUNEUF DU PAPE & VIVIERS

We passed by this ruined castle on the way to our dock, and then headed into the vineyards.



We were taken to a winery, the first of four we visited. The wines were nice, but very expensive-in the \$50 range.



We then stopped for lunch at a local restaurant, but it was kind of disappointing. What we were served sounded good on the menu, but the chicken was overcooked and dry by the time we got to eat it.

VIVIERS

We then visited the Ardeche town of Viviers to see the Cathedral and hear an organ concert. The path up to the cathedral was steep and the streets were paved with small stones, which made walking difficult. Kathy struggled up, and said that if she died, at least it was on the way to a

cathedral. The concert was very interesting, and I bought a CD of organ music performed by the organist.



VALENCE & TOURNON

We explored the streets of Vieux (old) Valence which was from around the 11th century and visited the castle, built on a rock outcropping, which is now a museum.



From the top of the castle you could see the Rhone River, and across the river were the vineyards of Chapoutier, one of the well known owners in this area.



Across the river from where we docked, there was a small chateau, and I was lucky to get a picture with its reflection in the river. The picture on the right is Kathy relaxing in her “day camp”, on the top sun deck of our ship. She has her book, water, and the Nook playing music through our mini speakers.



We then drove to the vineyards of the Cote du Rhône for a wine tasting, and then visited Tain l’Hermitage, another wine community. The wines were nice, but very high priced again.

VIENNE

This was sort of a day of rest for us, after visiting a number of these cities on walking tours. I had a map of Vienne (of course), and noticed an archeological museum near the ship. The museum is in the deconsecrated church of Saint Pierre (Saint Peter). The church dates from the 6th century, and in 1809 became a museum. It had a collection of statuary and mosaics from the Roman period.



The museum had a collection of mosaics, both small and large. Some displayed vertically, and the larger ones on the floor.

There was a display case of sculpted heads recovered from excavations. The display that blew me away however was a wall of Roman amphorae. An amphora (English plural: amphorae or amphora’s) is a type of container of a characteristic shape and size, descending from at least as early as the Neolithic era. Amphorae were used in vast numbers to transport and store various products, both

liquid and dry, but predominantly wine. Most were produced with a pointed base to allow upright storage by being partly embedded in sand or soft ground. This also facilitated transport by ship, where the amphorae were tightly packed together, with ropes passed through their handles to prevent breaking or toppling during rough seas. In kitchens and shops amphorae could be stored in racks with round holes in them. Additionally, it seems that the inconvenience of the pointed base was surpassed by its advantage to concentrate solid deposits from the contained liquids (such as olive oil and wines), and those deposits would remain at bottom even during transport.



After returning to the ship we left Vienne and cruised to Lyon.

LYON

We arrived in Lyon in the late afternoon, and we went on an orientation tour of the city. I broke off from the group to look for a replacement part for my camera. I stopped at two places, but had no luck, as the part was specific to my camera.

I enjoy wandering around towns, as all I need is a starting point and ending point and a map. I came across a pretty square with a pool and fountain, and a double deck carousel. I had never seen one before.



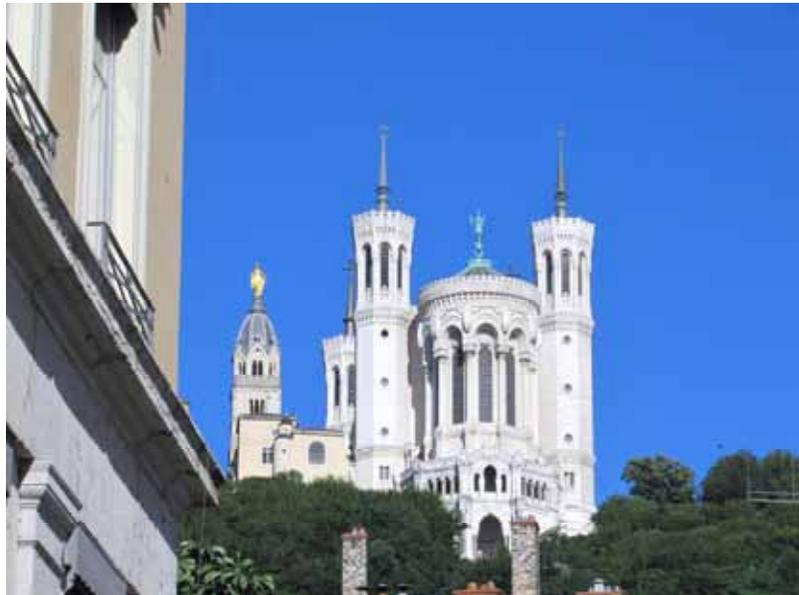
As I was heading back to the ship, I came across an open air market with all kinds of interesting produce. Aside from produce, there were all kinds of cooked foods and cheeses. I saw a small wheel of Camembert and bought it. More on the cheese later. The tomatoes were unusual, as they were heart shaped. The sign says "Heart of Beef from the region of Remy in Provence 3.9 Euros (\$5) per kilogram (2.2 pounds)".



The selection of breads was great, and you could even buy Paella (a dish of rice and seafood, scented with saffron).



We took a morning tour of the Renaissance Quarter, including the Basilica Notre Dame, which was at the top of the hill. Fortunately, the bus took us there, as opposed to Viviers, where we had to climb narrow cobblestone streets.



After visiting the Basilica, we were taken on a tour of the Traboules of Lyon. These were indoor passageways with vaulted or coffered ceilings that were built to link buildings together and to protect the silk being carried from the rain. One had an interesting tower and well.



From there we walked through Halles de Lyon (famous food market). The profusion of food was absolutely fantastic! We ended up buying some duck terrines and another wheel of Camembert. More on that later. All the chickens we saw still had their heads on! (Yuk)



It was an interesting adventure, and we would have liked to stay longer, but had to get back to the ship for lunch!

After lunch, I set out to find the synagogue in Lyon. I had my trusty map, and knew it was right on the river between 2 streets. I could not find it on the first pass, so I walked across the street to look at the buildings. The only indication of the synagogue was a Star of David on the window on the top floor! No wonder I could not see it from the same side of the street.

The synagogue is composed of two buildings: the first one with a facade which overlooks on the quai Tilsit on the Saone River and with a 160 square-meter area, and the second one with a 550 square-meter area separated from the first building by a small 120 square-meter courtyard. The access to the building is by the courtyard, through a porch located below the first building, enclosed by a wrought iron gate.

A small vestibule, open to the court by three arches, provides access to the prayer room with three wooden doors. This large rectangular room is divided into three parts: the central nave of the building height and on each side the aisles, which are lower, separated from the nave by twelve columns recalling the twelve tribes of Israel. Each column is topped by a Corinthian or composite styled

capital. On each side, above the aisles as well as above the entrance hall, there is the gallery reserved for women with balustrades of stone columns



I took a different street on the way back from the synagogue to the ship. As I passed a bookstore, they had a small thick book on impressionist painters on sale. I skimmed through it, and brought it back for Kathy. It is just the right size for our coffee table.
That night we saw that the bridge we had walked over in daytime was lighted at night and made a nice remembrance of Lyon.



MACON & CLUNY

We sailed through the lovely Maconnaise countryside and continued to Tournus on the River Saône
We got pictures of a swan family gliding along the bank and a group of swans looking for a handout from us.



We took a coach from the ship to Cluny and visited the famous Cluny Monastery. It was another uphill climb, and Kathy opted to wait near the bottom of the hill. The first part of the monastery we saw was the tower. Upon entering, we saw a model of what part of the monastery was still standing. The white part is what remains, while the brown part indicates what was destroyed. Needless to say, there was not much left!



Kathy had found a nice shady spot where she could people watch, and enjoyed herself. We were then taken to Tournus, one of the oldest monastic centers in the region for a wine tasting.



The tasting was held in the cloister of the church, and the winemaker was there to discuss his wines. One of his wines was a very nice white Burgundy, and I bought a bottle to take back to the ship.

SEURRE & BEAUNE

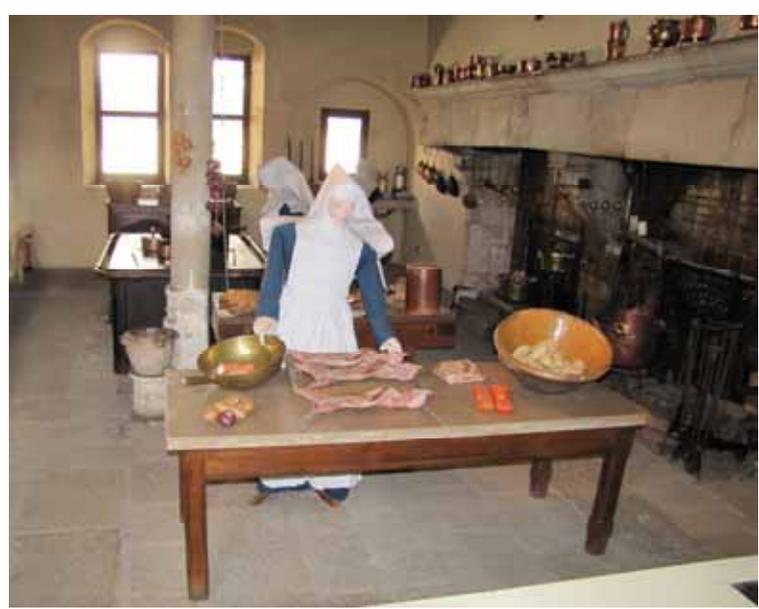
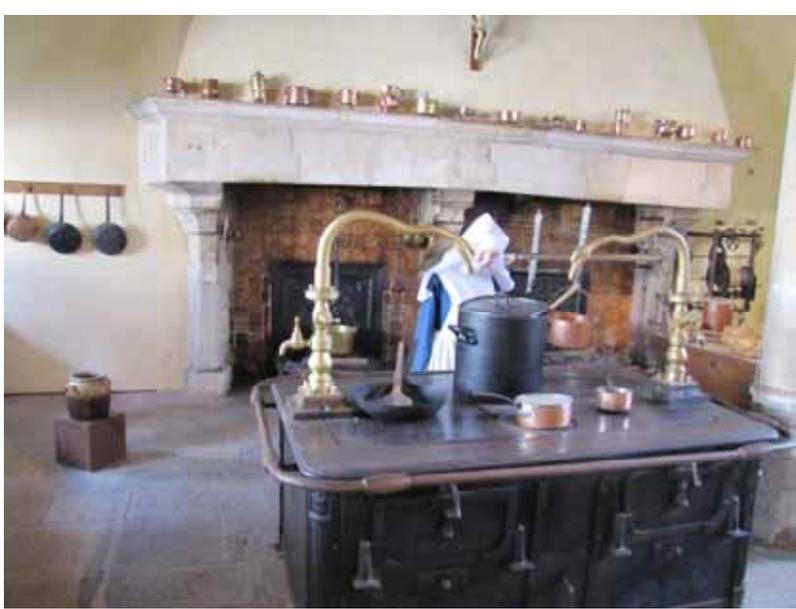
We docked at Seurre and drove through the Cote de Beaune past the vineyards of Volnay, Pommard and Meursault to Beaune, where we explored the Hospice de Beaune. The Hospices de Beaune or Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune is a former charitable almshouse in Beaune, France. It was founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of Burgundy, as a hospital for the poor and needy. The original hospital building, the Hôtel-Dieu, one of the finest examples of French fifteenth-century architecture, is now a museum. An important charity wine auction is held in November each year (formerly in the great hall of the Hôtel-Dieu).



The room is furnished with two rows of curtained beds. The central area was dedicated to benches and tables for the meals.



The kitchen was fitted out as it had been used, and there were models of two sisters preparing meals.



Following the large ward is the Chapel. The place for the chapel was chosen to allow the bedridden to attend Mass from their beds. The painting of the Last Judgment is a polyptych by the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden. It was thought to be lost at one time, but was discovered in the attic of the hospital and returned to its place in the chapel.

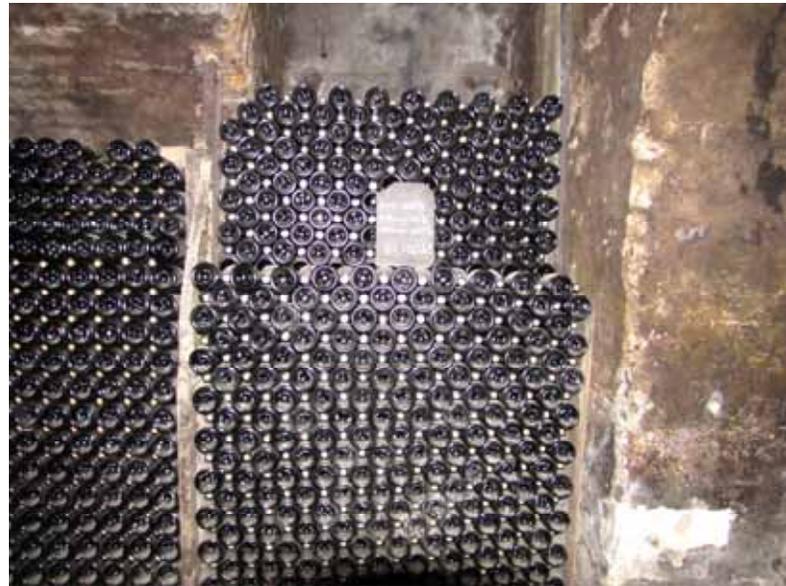
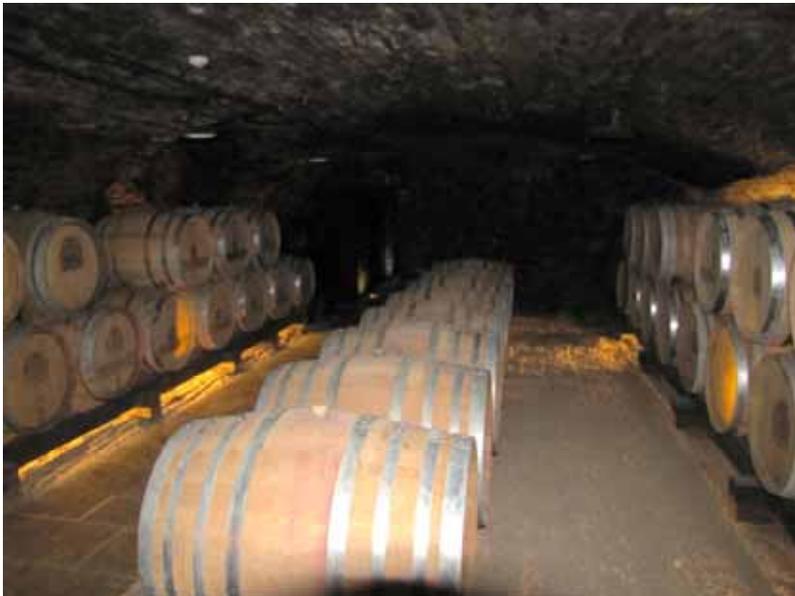


From Beaune we drove to Chateau Pommard, one of the premier wineries in Burgundy. On the way, I was fascinated by the signs to different vineyards in the area. These were vineyards in Burgundy that I had only read about over the years. The most prestigious was a 2 acre vineyard of Romani Conti. A bottle of wine from this vineyard sells for \$5000! Someone on the bus said, "I want to buy a bottle of wine, not the vineyard".

The entry courtyard was very interesting, as it contained some very unusual sculptures by Dali. He was truly strange!



We were taken on a tour through the cellars where wine was aging both in barrels and in bottles. The cost of holding this entire inventory must be huge!



We were then taken to the tasting room where we sampled some of the wines. They were very nice, but again, at \$50 a bottle, were out of our price range. We were given our glasses as souvenirs, and we got them home unscathed.

DIJON & ST. JEAN DE LOSNE

The ship arrived in St. Jean de Losne for visit to Dijon. We drove to visit Dijon's Old Town, including the Palais des Ducs de Bourgogne and Chateau du Clos de Vougeot.



Clos de Vougeot used to be an active winery and had huge wine presses that had to be cranked by 4 men. There was a model so one can get an idea of its workings.



From Clos de Vougeot we were taken to a central square in Dijon. There was a nice shop on the square selling all kinds of Dijon mustard. We knew, however, we could buy it at home and not have to tote it all the way back. Kathy did find a cute apron and a refrigerator magnet. The magnet had a wheel of cheese, a bottle of wine, and a baguette on it.

CHEESE STORY

Now for the cheese story! We discovered, much to our dismay that as our Camembert ripened, it gave off a power smell! We kept it in our refrigerator and had it in a zip lock bag and covered in aluminum foil. That helped some, but it was still pungent. None of the little towns we stopped at had markets to buy more zip lock bags until we got to Dijon.

Our tour manager told me of a market named Lafayette 4 blocks away that should have something. I found the place, and much to my dismay, it was a 6 floor department store! I found the directory, and headed up to house wares on the top floor. They did not have any bags, but I found a round Tupperware that would work. It cost as much as the 2 wheels of cheese, but we had to do something. Kathy told me it was going in my suitcase on the way home because she did not want her clothes smelled up!

After returning from the store, we found an art museum right off the square in Dijon. It did not have any elevators, and after going through a couple of floors, I volunteered to find the Impressionist Room. Well, the place was a real maze, and I had to go up 3 floors first, and then wind around and down 2 floors.

I found the small room, and took pictures of the painting to show Kathy. That way she did not have to negotiate the maze that I did. After taking the pictures, I tried to find the exit to the floor I had left Kathy. It took 3 tries, with help from one of the docents, but I did get back to her.



Monet – The cliff at Etretat



Manet – Mery Laurent with black hat

We walked back to the bus and boarded our ship. In the afternoon, we sailed down the Saône River to Chalon-sur-Saône

CHALON-SUR-SAÔNE / DISEMBARK SHIP / PARIS

We were taken by motor coach through the French countryside toward Paris. On the way, we stopped for lunch near the Chateau Fontainebleau. We were cautioned not to go inside, as it takes about 3 hours for the tour. One can imagine the carriages pulling up to the staircase and the fancy dressed ladies ascending the stairs.



We were taken on a panoramic city tour of Paris which was made easier by the heavy traffic. Our tour manager told us a funny story about the way Parisians park. If the space is too small, they will push the cars apart with their bumpers! As we were stopped at a traffic light, we watched a lady park and just do that!

We went to the Place d'Etoile (Place of the Stars) where 12 streets come in to the traffic circle. It is the largest roundabout I have ever seen. If you got stuck in the center lane it would take forever to escape! In the center was the Arc de Triomphe (Arch of Triumph). It honors those who fought and died for France in the French Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars.

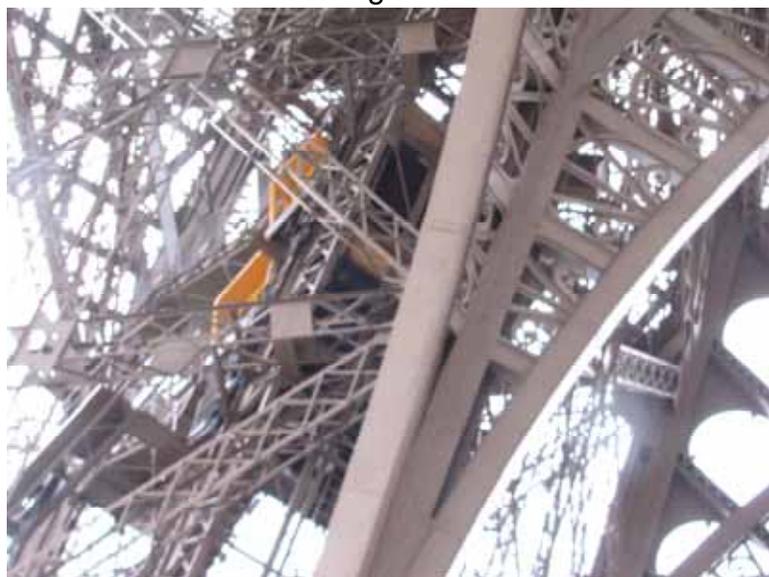
Finally we got our first view of the Eiffel Tower.



We checked in to our hotel, which was practically at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, and went to our Farewell Dinner.

The last time we were in Paris, the lines for the Eiffel tower were hours long. Three months before our trip I went on the Eiffel Tower website, and was lucky enough to get us reserved tickets to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower! The time for our visit was 9:30 PM, which is just before dusk at that latitude.

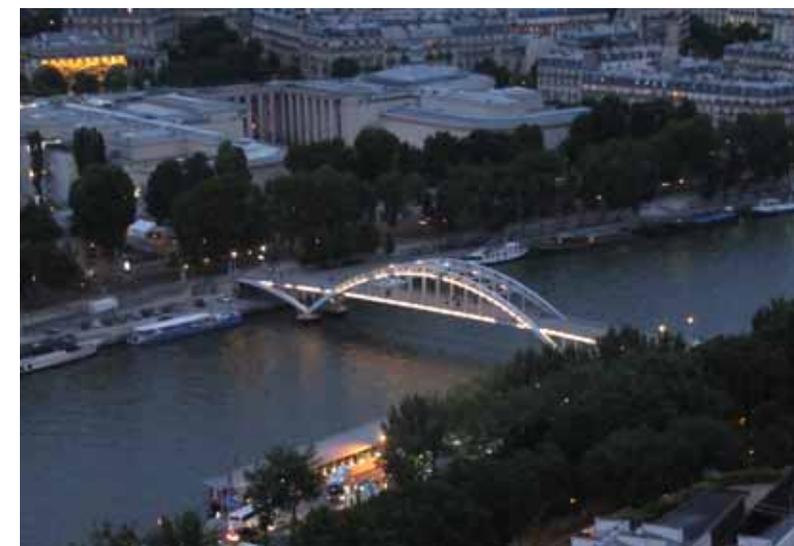
We boarded the first of elevator, which was almost like a funicular, as it had to go up the leg of the tower at an angle. We took a second elevator straight up to the top. On the side of the elevator shaft was the mark indicating an elevation of 281 meters (927 feet)!



.We could see the Champs de Mars (Mars Park) with Military College in the background. We also saw the Arc de Triomphe and the surrounding area. Looking in another direction, we saw the Isle of Swans with a smaller version of the Statue of Liberty at its far end.



We were able to see the illuminated buildings as darkness fell. The pictures below are of the Basilica of Sacre Coeur (Sacred Heart) which is 2.5 miles from the Eiffel Tower.



We toasted Paris with flutes of Champagne at the top of the tower, and marveled at the wonder below us. Ah to have Paris at our feet!

The next day we were taken to the airport to catch our flights home. Charles de Gaulle was a zoo, as expected, but we were able to relax in the Business Class lounge for a while. Unfortunately, Heathrow was worse! We had to go through security again, but fortunately we were fast tracked. Kathy had a 4 ounce bottle of contact lens solution in her bag, which had gone through security in Los Angeles, Heathrow and Paris. However, this time they would not let it through, even though she poured some into her contact holders!

This was reminiscent of a previous trip where she drank some cough medicine from the bottle, but security would not let it through!

Fortunately, there was a drug store in the terminal, and we bought a 2 ounce bottle to get her home. The flight to Los Angeles was long, but we were at least able to get some sleep. My only concern about going through customs and immigration was the cheese. I could see one of the beagles they use taking one sniff and rolling over! The cheese container did its job and I did not have any stinky clothes.

THE CHEESE!



We were met by our driver, and were home in about 2 and a half hours after we landed. Now to get over the jet lag!

We are home now until our anniversary trip in November, or so we thought! We just decided to take an 8 day Fall Foliage tour of New England in October. It will be a great deal, as Kathy gets the leaves and I get to ride 4 trains!

To illustrate how close our hotel was to the Eiffel Tower, the picture below is me waiting outside the hotel with our luggage.



In conclusion, this two part trip of Switzerland and France was fantastic. It was the fulfillment of a carefully planned but flexible itinerary that thankfully came off without a hitch. We agree that the memories of these 23 days are as they say, priceless.

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