FRANCE – THE CHAMPAGNE REGION & PARIS

Out of the snow and into the vineyards of Champagne in France. This journey was part of a 'special year' in 2019 – a celebration or sorts. Where better to celebrate that in Champagne, drinking Champagne and learning about Champagne.

To this day, we look back on our journey through Champagne with fond memories of an extraordinary trip. Just the fact we could indulge in a "Champagne flight" each afternoon and it was perfectly acceptable to do so. In fact, mandatory!

Our discovery of this trip was Nancy – did not see that coming! While I had researched extensively to find a stop over point between Grindelwald and Epernay, never did we realise what an absolute gem we would find. Nancy rates as having one of the most beautiful city centres we've seen and is testimony to the fact that the best adventures are often those you don't see coming.

We have made a lifetime of wandering off the beaten track, with varying results, and can attest to the fact that it has enriched our travel experiences in ways we could never have planned for.

So let's be young, free, careless and champagned up for our trip through France!

SATURDAY – DAY 1

We collect our new vehicle, from the depot at Mulhouse (French side) and have an economical VW Golf to continue our journey. Off we zoom north west to Nancy.

The drive is scenic and 'very French countryside.' Once we get off the freeway and head into the wine area the traffic is heavier for the last hour or so.

We arrive in **Nancy** (Non-see) and find our way through a labyrinth of streets to our hotel, the **Hôtel d'Haussonville**, a 16th century mansion which is centrally located.

There is nowhere to park and we find a little side street to unpack. I dump the luggage while Dave waits with the car. When I ask about parking we are directed to public parking a few block over. What we find is that between us and the car park is the biggest carnival you've ever seen and it's in full swing. We very luckily snare a car park and walk back to the hotel. The carnival is throbbing with people and rides.

By the time we are back at the hotel our bags are in our room, which is good as our room is 59 cement steps up a turret! Novel.

Our **Ispahan Suite** is on the top floor and is lovely. A large sitting/lounge room with a lovely roomy bedroom and bathroom. There is a slight issue with the internet to get sorted - lots of shrugging when it doesn't work - but it's a lovely hotel in a fabulous part of town.

Nancy is very much a uni town and the square just up from our hotel is teeming with students, enjoying Saturday evening at the local bars.

We walk up the side streets to **Place Stanislas**, one of the most beautiful plazas we've seen. The surrounding buildings are all uniformly built, with the same second floor balconies and ironwork on all of them. There are about five streets leading off the plaza, all of which can be sealed off by ornate, black gates. There are sculptures atop all building and the pièce de résistance is the Hotel du Ville, which takes its place of honour along one side of the square. What an exquisite building.

It's after 8pm so we take a seat and have a red wine while soaking up the atmosphere. As the square darkens the building lights come on, simultaneously. Makes a beautiful place even more beautiful.

We soak up the atmosphere and then wander back the way we came, looking to choose a local bistro, a bit away from the tourist throng.

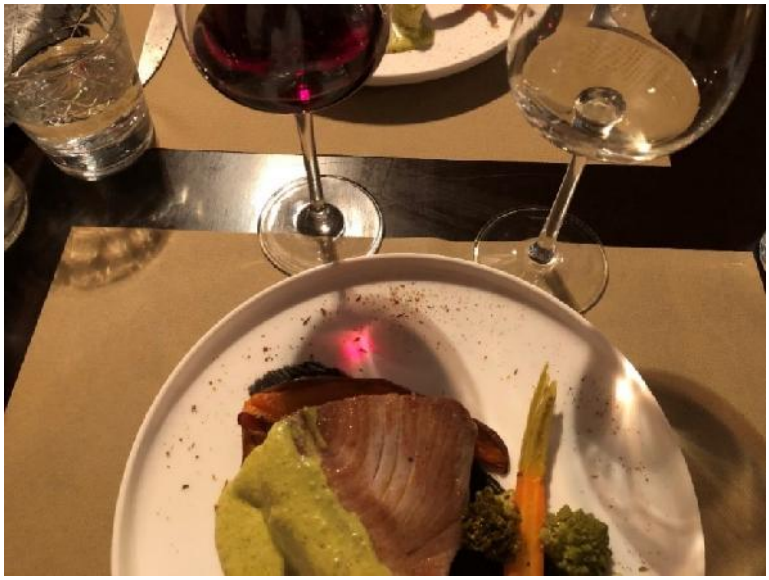
We look in a few windows before choosing **Les Puces** - it is busy and buzzing and the lovely waitress squeezes us in. The restaurant is full of locals and we are the only 'non-French' in the place.

There is a blackboard menu and I can make out very few words - lapin, boeuf, asperges, veal, not enough to make sense of the whole menu by any means! There is a lovely couple next to us and they offer to translate the menu for us. Merci.

I choose the asparagus soup and Dave the lapin terrine and we both choose the tuna, which our translation buddies recommend.

The soup is light and tastes of white asparagus. Dave's terrine is also excellent. The waiter recommended a white wine for me and it is suited perfect to my meal. Dave has a red which is also well matched.

The tuna comes with baby veges and sauce verde and is possibly the best tuna I've ever had. Wow! The waiter is superb... and so friendly; we have a chat to him about our travels and he says he must get to Italy. Impossible to think that someone who lives so close to the Italian border has yet to visit Italy!



There is no way we can fit in any more food and we reluctantly depart. One of the best French restaurant experiences we've had - so local, freshly prepared food and tolerant servers. Just fabulous and €85 total.

SUNDAY – DAY 2

We enjoy breakfast in a beautiful, period dining room. The building is very historical and restored beautifully. The table settings are quite grand.

We pack quickly and go to fetch the car. It's always a comfort to find a car is still there in the morning and undamaged. We collect our bags and hit the road around 10:30, destination **Épernay** in the heart of the champagne region. Épernay is located 25kms from Reims in the heart of the Champagne vineyards. The city is known as the "Capital of Champagne" and many of the Champagne houses are located here.

Arriving along the **Avenue du Champagne** in **Épernay** is quite the welcome. There are champagne houses lining the street. The town is reasonably quiet but has still got a nice feel to the place.

We arrive at our hotel, the **Hotel Jean Moet**, in rue Jean Moet. It is early afternoon and we wander off to explore the town. First stop is the Tourist Office and the lady is most helpful. She gives us a map of the town with a walk marked on it and a map of the region with the Champagne Trail marked. Both handy for our days in Epernay.

The trail the Tourist Office suggested takes about 30min. The town is very pretty and there are spring bulbs out everywhere, particularly on the roundabouts. It's deadly quiet and nothing is open... quite pleasant for exploring and getting some uncluttered photos.

We walk up Ave Champers and decide it's time for a sit….. and a champagne. We take an outdoor table at **Collard-Picard**. There is a tasting menu, by the glass, and also a degustation menu. Dave goes in and comes back with two glasses of bubbles. Welcome to Champagne

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It's a lovely day, cloudy but quite warm as the sun breaks through. There are only a couple of other tables occupied and it is a peaceful way to while away the time. We watch the passers by - cobbles make a racket when driven on!

We enjoy a second glass of Rose bubbles. The glasses are *only* 10cl each. The taste is rather fabulous and we get a sense that with so many producers here there will be some very different champagnes to sample.

We walk back to the hotel and our bags have been delivered to our room, which is spacious and bright. There is a huge walk in shower, separate loo and good wardrobe space. A beautiful room and towards the back of the building, so not subject to traffic noise.

We have opted for an easy meal at **Le Sardaigne**, an Italian only a short walk from the hotel. Many restaurants are closed SUN/MON so this one is packed. We are seated upstairs in the 'tourist' area. I order lasagne du salmon and Dave a pizza... with an egg on it. My lasagne is quite enjoyable, the pizza also. Nothing outstanding but pleasant and a reasonable option for a Sunday night meal.

MONDAY – DAY 3

We have brekkie downstairs. I am feeling a bit 'cheesed out' but the baguette with apricot jam and cafe au lait is perfect.

We are going to start on the **Champagne Trail** and see how far we get. First stop is **Reims**, a very pretty city with a magnificent Cathedral, **Notre Dame de Reims**. We take a quick walk through - it is cavernous and cold, being a concrete construction. It is grand and the sheer size of the building projects a very solemn feel.

The day is very grey and smoggy, visibility not great, but it puts a different light on the countryside and it remains interesting.

We have a quick drive around Reims and get back to the Champagne Trail. The drive through very pretty towns is lovely but, once again, everything is closed. Given there is not a lot of excitement on the Champagne Trail we head back to Épernay for some champagne sampling. We figure the rest of the trail will be more of the same, same, ie very pretty but very closed.

We drop the car at the hotel and walk up the Ave. First stop **L'Ecurie,** which has a gorgeous chateau on the property. We go to the champagne bar and take a seat. Our company, unfortunately, is a group of loud tourists and the ambiance is zero as a result. Onward and upward.

Just down the street is **Leclerc Briant,** which looks delightful and we are the only ones there. The lady serving us is wonderful - knowledgeable and very friendly. She spends a great deal of time with us, explaining the champagnes and the difference between them.

We opt for the Formule Duo Blanc de Blancs, the La Croisette and Pure Crement, which is 100% Chardonnay grape. We also learn that all the champagnes are made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meniere grapes. Different combinations thereof and different amounts of sugar combine to give different results. Our Champagne education is really coming along.

There are only three tables here and the other two soon fill up. A fourth couple come in and we offer to share our table with them. What follows is a wonderful afternoon of conversation with our new American friends. They are great company.

We also enjoy the champers immensely. The afternoon here has been fabulous - the champers, the lady who works here, the atmosphere, the company. Brilliant!

We go to **La Cave a Champagne** for dinner. It is a very small restaurant but I notice that some patrons are taken out the back…. a special place for favoured clients? Dave has veal kidney I have 'hot pot' which was like cassoulet with chicken instead of duck. The service is terrible and gets to the point where we've been totally disregarded.

Things don't get any better with dessert – who knew the French could turn Profiteroles into such a disaster. Oh well. Unfortunately, the evening has been a really disappointing. Food, service, etc. Clearly tourists are treated badly and ignored. Pity as the restaurant is lovely but the food and service have been average.

TUESDAY – DAY 4

We enjoy another lovely brekkie.

In the foyer of our hotel is a fabulous red Vespa. The hotel owner is a collector and this bike is **the one that Michael Shumacher** used to zip around the pits at the F1. A Ferrari Vespa… not often you come across one of these!

We have a 10:00 tour at **Moet & Chandon**, which is 5mins up the road. It is raining, after some heavy falls early this morning, and we rug up to make the short walk.

We are greeted by our lovely guide, Yumi, who moved to Épernay from Tokyo 20 years ago. She takes us through the history of M&E - the early Moet daughter married a Chandon husband, hence the name. They merged with Hennessy a few decades ago and Luis Vitton more recently.

Yumi takes us down into the cellars - 28km of cellars belonging to Moet & Chandon alone. Extraordinary. One of the caves, on the side, holds 18,867 bottles and there is cave after cave after cave.

I ask how many bottles they produce a year - Yumi advises they don't talk in terms of production but that a cork is popped on a bottle of Moët, somewhere in the world, every second. That would be 31,536,000 Moët pops a year. Wowser.

The tour is nothing short of amazing. The tunnels, the champagne, the process of making it, extremely labour intensive. The bottles are turned regularly after the yeast is added, to move the sediment, and a good 'jiggler' can jiggle 50,000 bottles a day, in 7 hours. This process takes its toll on their wrists and, increasingly, mechanical means are used. This is also a result of the injection of finances, which has put pressure on increased production, usual story.

We finish our tour in the tasting room and have another explanation of the champers making process. We enjoy a glass of Moët and are led into the boutique to finalise our tour.

The boutique is fabulous with all manner of Moët merchandise, not just bubbles! We buy a set of Moët glasses as a memento as well as a dazzling Moët champagne stopper.

The tour has been absolutely brilliant and we've learned so much about Champagne in 24 hours. Feeling quite the champers experts, compared to when we got here.

After a few hours of relaxation, it's Champagne time again! We find **Janisson-Baradon** just around the corner. We have walked past a few times and it looks quite nice. We choose the degustation of five different Champagnes, each 6cl. They come out in shot glasses on a shot board. Fairly entertaining. The lass here is quite pleasant and gives us a run down on each.

Tonight we go to **La Grillade Gourmande**, which is 300m walk from the hotel. We are greeted warmly by the proprietor and shown to our table. I look up and see the same two guys who were opposite us last night. We wave and say hi!

The service is fabulous and so friendly. We order our dinner. We have a wine list that reads like War and Peace - I have never seen such a huge list and don't even bother looking at it. Our waitress suggests the Sommelier can discuss our wine choice and he is excellent. I have a preference for a white and he directs us to a wine he suggests will complement all our choices. It is excellent - from du Pape (a winery we are quite familiar with) but I didn't even check the label, such was the lovely night we were having.

I go to the toi-toi and say hi to the English guys (I picked their accents up last night). They comment that tonight is a very different experience from last night. Is it ever!

There is an 'open kitchen' next to them where chef cooks the grilled options. Everything about this place is just divine. Dave has Snails with garlic butter to start and I have Crushed cod with lentils. The snails are to die for, as is my cod. Veal liver follows for Dave and I have Cocquilles St Jacques, a blast from the past. Six perfectly cooked scallops with a sauce that is divine. What a meal, and wine, and atmosphere.

I order Poached Pear with Cinnamon and it is fabulous. Dave has a concoction of too many ice creams, chocolate sauce and cream, which looks all the world like an old-fashioned parfait.

A wonderful evening.... one of the best we've had on this trip. Loved it!

WEDNESDAY – DAY 5

We enjoy brekkie, have a quick pack and on the road to Paris. Our stay in Épernay was everything we expected and a whole lot more. Simply exceptional.

We are questioning though the whole idea of coming north at this time of year. While it is great that the area is so quiet and there are no queues anywhere, the downside is so many places are closed and there has been a lack of atmosphere. For consideration in the future.

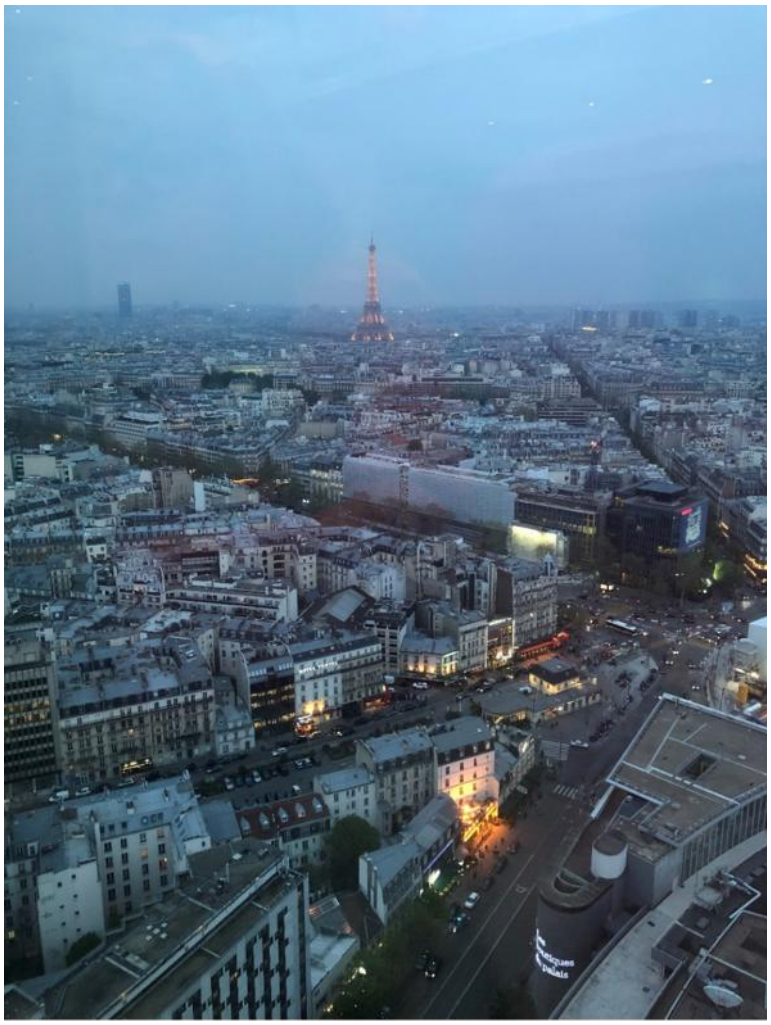
We are on the road by 10am, destination Paris. The weather is overcast but we only encounter a bit of drizzle along the way. We enjoy the scenery. And then we hit the Paris traffic and things grind to a halt. The last kms are slow but we find out way to our hotel easily.

The valet lets us park the car while we check into the **Hyatt Regency Etoile.** We have a lovely room, looking over the city towards Sacre Coeur. The room is small and there is little room to unpack but we know that before we get there! We have been staying at this same hotel for 7 years now and love everything about it. The location is perfect, the staff extremely good and the breakfast is fabulous.

We leave our things as we must return the rental at La Défense. Should be easy as it is only a few km up the road. Nothing easy as it turns out. It's a disaster, we get lost over and over and the rental drop off is in a car park in the middle of a construction site. The staff are accommodating of our late drop off though, which is nice of them (thank you Europcar). The only easy part is the metro, which is close by and we are on our way to Porte Maillot.

Tonight we are off to our favourite local restaurant, **Le Relais de Venise**, a lovely entree to our stay in Paris. This restaurant is superb and has one thing only on the menu – steak! Which is served with chips and salad. The only choice you need to make is how you want your steak cooked. The tables are close to each other and you are very cosy with your neighbour. It is a busy, buzzy, fabulous bistro and the food is great. I finish with profiteroles and they are as good as always.

It's still light when we leave so we go up to Windo, at the Hyatt for the view, one of the best you will find in Paris.



THURSDAY – DAY 6

The breakfast is as good as always – a wonderful spread served in a light and airy dining room. They really do it well here.

We take the metro to the **Luxembourg Gardens and Palace**. The day is brilliant and there are people out everywhere. We sit for a bit and enjoy the sunshine.

We walk through the gardens and up to the Pantheon before heading to the river.

We walk through the loveliest garden opposite **Notre Dame**, which is heaving with people and has large queues. We walk up **St Honore** and all the way home. The rue St Honore is **the** shopping avenue in Paris and takes us straight to our hotel.

Dinner tonight is at the local Italian, **Bellagio,** just around the corner from the Hyatt. I have spaghetti with Chilli and Tomatoes, really enjoyable. Dave's lasagne is good but he has had better here.

FRIDAY – DAY 7

We are here with our runners who are participating in the Paris Marathon on Sunday. Today we are off to the expo.

Tonight, a group of seven of us return to Relais Venise for dinner and have another great evening.

SATURDAY – DAY 8

We go to the Breakfast Run with the runners. For years we have not bothered finishing the run as there is the most perfect café about half a kilometre from the finish line. We take a seat at **Le Champs de Mars** and the usual, a hot chocolate. We walk off towards our hotel, up through the gardens surrounding the **Eiffel Tower**. It is always beautiful this time of year and the blue sky day makes it more so.

We get back to the Hotel, get changed and go out again. Dave has picked out a park to walk to - **Park Monceau**. It is another beautiful park, with lots of people out enjoying the sunshine.

We become creatures of habit and convenience when in Paris and we are off to Bellagio again. I have seafood risotto which is great. Dave has a pizza, also good.

SUNDAY – DAY 9

Today is Marathon day and we wake to a clear and cold day. 1 degree, on the way to 12. We have a spot on the marathon course where we stand each year, near the 26km mark. It is cold but sunny.

Sticking with our creatures of habit theme, we always stop at the same café on the way back to the hotel, **Paris Follies,** where we sit outside in the sunshine. We have a delightful Cheese platter and a Rose. The bread is soooooo good. We enjoy watching life go by for an hour and a quarter continuing our trek home.

We conveniently have an Irish hotel, which is now called the **Canadian Embassy,** across the road. We gather there with the runners on Sunday evening and rehash the day's events.

Tonight we also enjoy the final round of the US Masters on the TV (they always have sport on the TV here, it's great). Tiger is on the prowl! We watch Tiger win another tournament.

By the time we leave it is late and we end up at the only place open, Bellagio! Great night, good company, too late!

MONDAY – DAY 10

We catch the bus to CDG - took 45mins. **Le Bus Direct** stops right outside our hotel and it is the perfect way to get to the airport. We are now headed for Iceland!

We have loved our time in France. Nancy was an absolute gem, the Épernay champagne experience fabulous and Paris as wonderful as always.

Au revoir Par-eee and see you again next year.