



# france c'est bon!

by PAULA G. CULLISON

FRANCE NEVER DISAPPOINTS. COMBINING IDYLIC PROVENCE, BUSTLING PARIS WITH ITS ART TREASURES, SUMPTUOUS COQ AU VIN, DELECTABLE PASTRIES, REFRESHING PERRIER, AND SUBLIME DON PERIGNON—THIS TRIP CAME CLOSE TO PERFECTION.

Taking a *French for Travelers* class at a local community college proved to be very helpful. Armed with new knowledge and a guidebook, I was ready for a new adventure.

I decided on two weeks in Aix-en-Provence, where I continued my French language studies, and two weeks in Paris, where I immersed myself in art and culture. While in Aix-en-Provence, my afternoons were generally spent wandering around town, lunching with other students, and visiting the markets and local art galleries. My apartment had a lovely terrace and view of the city. One afternoon, I visited Cezanne's home and Atelier studio where I stood in front of the very table that appears in his still life paintings. Later that week, a hike into the St. Victoire area where the artist painted his scenes of nature proved to be another thrill. The city of Aix has placed brass makers in the streets where Cezanne walked, so visitors can trace his footsteps.

Having Aix-en-Provence as a base, made it easy to take day trips. One of those trips was to Arles, founded by the Greeks in 600 BC. Van Gogh spent his final years in Arles. Visiting his famous (albeit, very small) bedroom had special meaning. It was exciting to be in the area where Impressionism was born. Arles proved to be a charming and picturesque city. The Romans built an arena in Arles, now used for bullfights in which, fortunately, the bull is not killed. I returned to Aix via Les Baux with its imaginative and colossal Cathedrale d'Images carved into the limestone caves. This project was originally conceived by photographer Albert Plecy and completed by his wife. A multimedia presentation on Venice with baroque music and larger-than-life photos projected onto the walls and ground was a fantastic experience.

A cooking and a wine class were arranged through the language school where I was studying—a must-do when visiting France. The cooking class menu included tapenade, tatin de legumes a la nicioise, alouette a la provencale, riz de camargue, salade de melon au pastis (liqueur), vin de provence et champagne. Tres Bien! The wines of southern France were explained during another two-hour class. Vin Rose is most popular wine in this region and perfect for summer enjoyment.

Close by is **Avignon**, where seven exiled Popes established the Palais des Papes as their headquarters from 1309 to 1377 when they fled from the corruption and civil strife in Rome. Having arrived in Avignon before the throng of tourists hit the streets, I walked up



the main thoroughfare to Pace de l'Horloge and had breakfast at an outdoor café. Local artists set up in the adjacent square are happy to interact with the tourists.

The Palais des Papes is a colossal, fortress-like structure situated on a high hill with a magnificent view of the city, the Tower of Philip the Fair, the St Benezet Bridge (of children's song fame) and the Rhone River. The adjacent Petit Palace Museum houses fine art including Botticelli's "Virgin & Child." Other highlights of my two-week stay in Aix included lunch at Les

Deux Garçons Café on the Cours Mirabeau—Cezanne's favorite haunt. I also attended two outstanding concerts: one at the cathedral of St. Sauveur, which featured a choral group and instrumental ensemble playing some Gershwin and Bernstein along with Amazing Grace. The other was at the Chapelle des Oblats and featured nine instruments including a clavichord and viola de gamba. Overall, the two weeks in Provence were superb!

From Provence, I took the TGV train to Paris for another two glorious weeks. I arrived in

Paris at the Gare Lyon and took the Metro to Louvre-Rivoli. The station is adorned with replicas of sculpture from the museum. The apartment I rented was within five minutes' walk to the Louvre. Paris is one of the world's best cities, with its art, history, music, mass transit and people—not to mention the food and wine. I can never get enough of the Louvre and d'Orsay museums.

The exhibitions at some of the other museums are noteworthy as well. The Pompidou Center with its modern art focus, L'Orangerie, which is home to Monet's water lily paintings, and the Marmottan, which features impressionist art, are fine museums. Walks through the parks and along the Seine coupled with time lingering at sidewalk cafes makes for the true Parisian experience.

With a four-day museum pass I purchased through [www.discoverfrance.com](http://www.discoverfrance.com) (located in Scottsdale), I was able to avoid the long ticket lines, making the pass a huge plus. The Louvre staff is prepared for the onslaught of tourists who make a beeline to see Leonardo DaVinci's "Mona Lisa." "Wedding at Cana" by Italian Master Paolo Veronese is a huge, complex work hanging on the opposite wall and patiently waiting recognition. Marvelous! Surrounded by the world's Masters, I was in total awe of each room's priceless treasures.

One evening, while visiting the d'Orsay, the French National Symphony under the direction of Kurt Mazur (New York


Philharmonic) was scheduled to kick off the Summer Music Festival. Along with 2,500 other attendees, I was seated in the grand hallway of the museum where listening to the world's finest music while surrounded by the world's finest art.

Hearing evening vespers at the Notre Dame Cathedral was another unexpected treat. Heavenly music in a world class cathedral ... what could be more inspirational? There is always much to do in Paris in the summer, and since the sun sets at 11 p.m., getting around while it's still daylight isn't a problem.

Walking down the Champs Elysees and then along Avenue Montaigne lined with designer shops and boutiques is delightful. At the end of that street is Cafe Francis, where one can sit for an hour sipping wine while gazing across the way at the Eiffel Tower.

Another nice surprise was a few days spent in Chartres. The French consider the Notre Dame Cathedral of Chartres to be the number one in the country because of the magnificent and numerous stained glass windows, and because they believe it contains a sacred relic—the tunic of the Virgin Mary, which miraculously survived

a fire in 1194. While there, I was able to attend two concerts, a Gregorian mass, a lecture, a wedding ceremony, and the annual 10k race in which the runners circle the cathedral numerous times, and still found time to visit all the Saturday markets. The city is steeped in history and charm. Lucky enough to secure one of the 15 coveted Monday passes to the Monet Gardens in Giverny, which are closed to the public on that day, I decided to spend two nights there. We 15 artists, photographers and writers had the gardens all to ourselves. The experience was truly magical. Being surrounded by water lilies and thousands of beautiful flowers, plants and trees made it seem like paradise. The entire town closes down on Monday, so it was entirely free of tourists. I spent several hours walking around the Giverny and visited the church where Monet is buried.

A day trip to Reims allows one to visit the Notre Dame Cathedral with its stained glass windows created by Marc Chagall, and there is time to visit several champagne caves as well. Few experiences could be better than spending the day sampling Don Perignon, named for the Benedictine monk who served as cellar master of the abbey and is credited with inventing champagne, and then visiting to Moet and Chandon, and Piper Heidsieck. These names are music to the ears of champagne connoisseurs and were heaven to the palette. My stay in Paris ended all too soon. Au revoir! 

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Louvre Museum in Paris