

TRAVEL JOURNAL

Our Vacation in France

July 18 - 31

We're on our way...

Bonjour Paris!

There it is... I can see the edges of the city below us. It seems to shine in this early morning light. Even though our flight has been long, we're suddenly about to land - in Paris! I still can't believe David gave us this trip... he said it was "the only appropriate way I could think of to celebrate 20 years of marriage...." A friend of David's had traveled with about a dozen colleagues on a four-day incentive trip to Paris and Normandy and had raved about the fabulous travel arrangements by *Carpe Diem in France*. A small, French-owned and operated tour company, it has an offices in both Bordeaux and Seattle. David called Florent, the Seattle-based partner, and came away with a dreamy, two-week itinerary. And right now, I'm watching the sun dance along the graceful curves of the Seine!

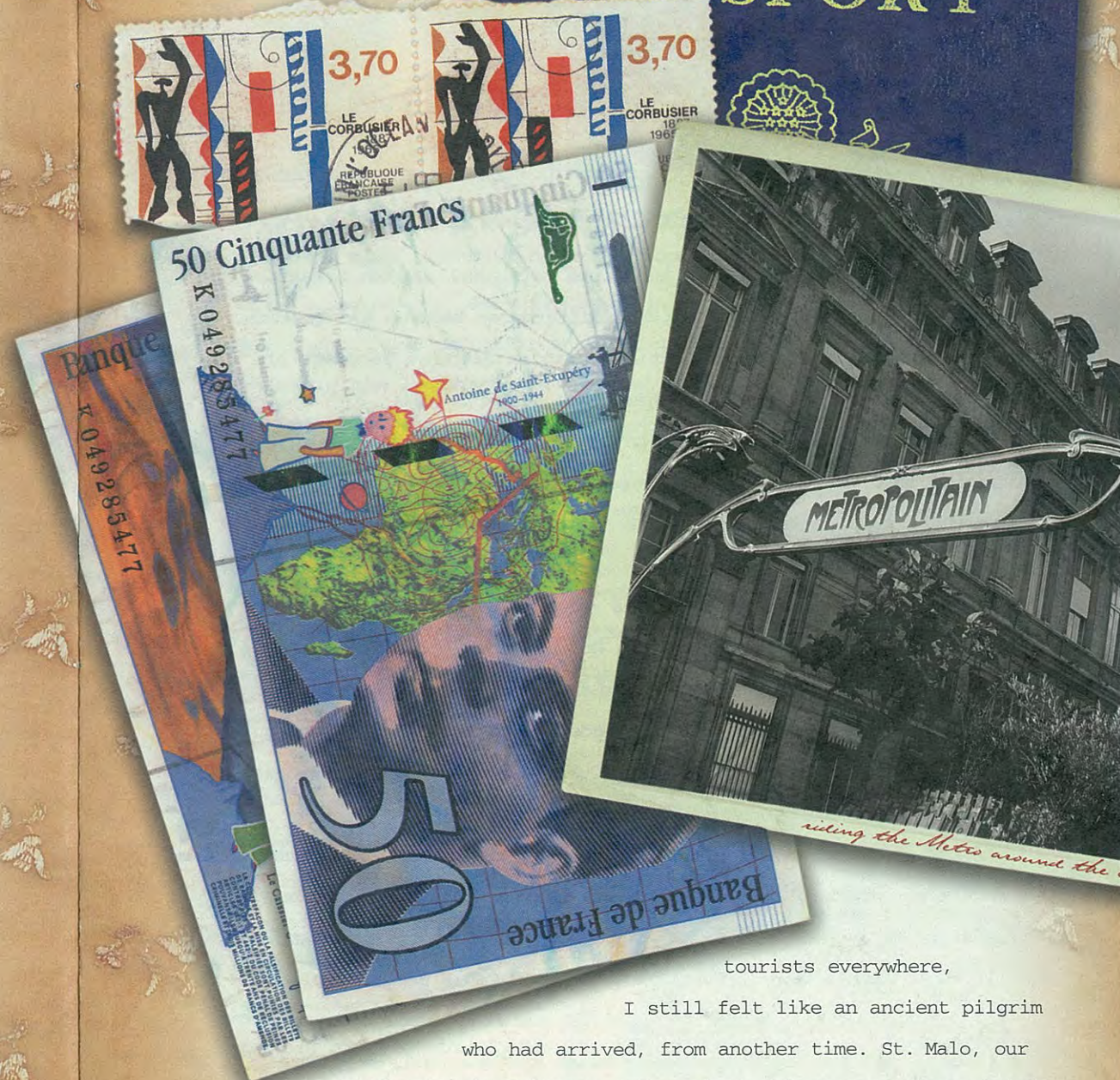
Arrival

Airport customs formalities were surprisingly efficient, and Vincent, our escort/guide, was there to meet us with a rental car ready to whisk us away to Brittany. Carpe Diem in France sent us off with a complete suggested itinerary, and outlined all the logistics... no worries for us!

As we drove west, Normandy scenes flashed past the window and Vincent pointed out ancient abbeys and vignettes right out of *Impressionist paintings*. We chatted about our trip and he offered some excellent advice on things to see and do while in the Loire Valley and Bordeaux. We'd have an escort/driver for some of our trip and also have the car and time to ourselves during other parts.

We were headed toward the coast to Mont-St.-Michel and a cool breeze told me we were close. Vincent had taken us to sample a slice of the region's famous *apple tart* (tarte normande) and after a strong coffee, I was wide awake with anticipation.

David first spotted it, rising out of an island of sand... one of the most lovely sights I could ever have imagined... Mont-St.-Michel has probably inspired every architect - not to mention sand castle builder - since its first stone was laid in place in 966. Even though there were



tourists everywhere, I still felt like an ancient pilgrim who had arrived, from another time. St. Malo, our destination in Brittany, was a short drive away and our hotel, a lovely 18th-century mansion, was just outside town. We'll spend the next two nights here. Vincent joined us for our welcome dinner and, being a native of western France, briefed us about the region we'd be *exploring* the next day. We agreed on a 9:30 a.m. pick up and bid him good night. How easy this first day had been... we could get used to this!



Touring Brittany

We slept like babies last night and awoke refreshed. During breakfast, I read about the fascinating cultural differences between the Bretons and the rest of the French... Celtic art and a distinct language are still very much alive in this northwestern corner.

Vincent arrived and gave us a brief introduction to St. Malo, explaining that the town, almost completely surrounded by water, had been the home of French corsairs - pirates who had royal permission to take foreign (especially British) ships.

We drove to Cancale, world famous for its *oysters* and Vincent told us they've been cultivated since Roman times - "The flavor is strong and superb, like no others anywhere!" he claimed. And because we must sample these delicacies, we headed for a local bar on the quay at Port de la Houle where: I HEREBY DOCUMENT that David ate two dozen oysters in about three minutes flat!

In the medieval walled city of Dinan, on the banks of the Rance River, Vincent took us for a crab crêpe lunch; then westward... past the *sandy beaches* and dramatic rocky promontories that make up the Côte D'Emeraude (the Emerald Coast). At Cap Fréhel, we climbed the lighthouse for stupendous views of the marine-carved geography. It's late afternoon as we turn back toward St. Malo and our camera has captured three rolls of sea vistas, villages of blue-roofed, white stucco houses, *charming resorts* and a still life of David with oysters!

Later, after dinner in St. Malo, we joined other town residents and strolled along the city walls facing the sea. With a very relaxed sigh, I realized I had left my busy, detail-filled life on the other side of the ocean.

Into the Loire Valley

Vincent came for us again this morning and we packed up our belongings for the day-long trip into the Loire Valley. I was so looking forward to seeing this legendary region... home of medieval courts and

Renaissance palaces - inspiration to poets and artists.

And as our drive unfolded, both David and I were awestruck by the beauty of the landscape and the castles around every turn in the road.

Our hotel was on the outskirts of Azay-le-Rideau and we paused to drop off our bags and freshen up a bit. What a place! The hotel was built as a hunting lodge in the *old-world style* when kings came to the country to hunt with their trained falcons. We never would have found this place without Carpe Diem.

Vincent took us to the Château Azay-le-Rideau (which Balzac called a "multi-faceted diamond") and we toured the early 16th-century pleasure palace.

"Now for a local treat!" Vincent announced and off we went, winding our way through the rich vineyards. In St. Nicolas de Bourgueil, we turned into a small local winery - it belonged to Florent's cousin and his wife. How we enjoyed ourselves! Can you imagine? Our very own tasting in this glorious region!



The Loire
, and Us...
we're on our own!

It started to rain and we knew if it got dark it might be difficult to find our hotel. The town of Onzain seemed close on the map, but we got lost along the rural roads and I worried that we would run out of gas. We happened across a small village where I ran into a local café to ask for directions - in my high school French of long ago! With lots of pointing on the map, the friendly waiter sent me on my way. And voilà! The sign for Onzain appeared in less than 15 minutes and we found our hotel on the edge of town.... This remarkable establishment - another Carpe Diem in France find! - was built in 1860 by a famous publisher as his private retreat. We felt we had earned our haute cuisine dinner.

Off to Bordeaux

Later, we drove back into town, to our friendly hotel where we had a glass of superb cognac (distilled not too far from here) and planned our next day - a bicycle adventure!



Cycling to Espiet

We had asked to bicycle somewhere in the Bordeaux region and Carpe Diem in France had arranged this marvelous day for us. After our leisurely breakfast (mushroom omelets and fresh-picked strawberries), we picked up bicycles and gear and headed for an abandoned railroad bed (no TGVs here!), groomed for cyclists. We rode along in soft sunshine, through forests and pastoral farmlands. A young family was *picnicking* alongside the trail and we stopped to ask them to take our picture. They offered us some locally made cheese and told us we were probably the only Americans ever to have sampled this farmer's specialty. With our tastebuds tingling, we waved our thanks and continued on our way.

The dinner hour approached, and David and I were eager to reach our destination - the village of Espiet. The charming station building (Gare d'Espiet) had been converted to a café/restaurant (the French really know how to make you feel guilty after a healthy workout!) with quite the local reputation. Claude, the owner, set forth a delicious dinner and we exchanged cycling stories in jovial company.

The Day of the Grape

With Mathilde, we set out for a day of exploring, passing through villages renowned for their wines - Lussac, Montagne, and Puisseguin - and stopped at several (how is it I lost track of the exact number?) wineries and *private châteaux* for tastings of the region's superb reds and whites. And, as Pierre promised earlier, there were plenty of fabulous vintages to take home.

We ended the excursion in beautiful Sauternes, home to the world's most acclaimed dessert wine. Here we visited the castle of writer/philosopher, Montesquieu where he wrote "The Spirit of the Law."



delicious picnics in the countryside



bicycling in Bordeaux was a highlight

Cooking, Dining and more wine

In keeping with Carpe Diem in France's pledge to bring guests into the real heart of France, we planned a cooking class to see how some of this marvelous food we'd been enjoying was prepared. So we went to meet a chef friend of Pierre whose home - and kitchen! - is built around a *beautiful old watermill*.

We used all fresh produce and locally grown products and created a feast of typical dishes including a Basque Piperade - an omelet with ham, peppers and garlic - and a heavenly stuffed and roasted, duck. Our lunch, accompanied with a variety of wines, lasted until 3 p.m.!

We returned to our B & B for what any civilized French person might do after such an endeavor... Take a nap!

Then, time for more wine tasting! So we set off for the regional jewel - *St. Emilion* - whose wine (David's personal favorite) has been called the "Wine of Honor." And if the vintner's claim to fame isn't enough, St. Emilion is also famous for its macaroons... a sublime confection with ties to the 8th-century monk-turned-saint (Saint Emilion) who had once been a baker. I asked David if he thought I could pray for forgiveness for eating too many macaroons!

Train Ride to Montpellier

Today was a travel day and we boarded the 10:21 train to Montpellier after a brief layover and change in *Toulouse*. David and I caught up on our postcard writing, checked off gift lists and read about Provence, our next destination. We got off the train in Montpellier that afternoon - Carpe Diem in France felt we'd enjoy a night's rest at a hotel, right in the lively old part of town.

The Road to Provence

Early this morning, Bruno, our driver/guide for this part of the trip, picked us up for the ride into Provence. And what a drive it was... a feast for every sense! I felt like an Impressionist painter with words, jotting down things I couldn't bear to forget: the gold of the ancient stone villages; fields of buttercups and cultivated flowers, *serene rivers*, the light playing on the sea, and a feeling of complete well-being, of life lived well.

We stopped in Aigues-Mortes, a walled 13th-century town with views of the salt marshes of the Camargue. Next stop - Arles, the lovely medieval town on the banks of the Rhone where Vincent Van Gogh lived and painted. The light here is exquisite and I took dozens of photographs... it's no wonder the town has been nicknamed "the soul of Provence." We had lunch at the café which *Van Gogh* had painted, then drove to Eyguières where Bruno dropped us off at our B & B, a mansion set in a lovely park. We'll spend three nights here.

TELECARTE
120 UNITES

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vous dire, aussitôt je vous le dis
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Walking Through Les Baux

Today Bruno accompanied us on a hike through the ruined fortress town of Les Baux. The region surrounding it seemed otherworldly with strange and shadowy rock formations that fade away into the hillsides of the Alpilles. Feeling like time travelers, we rambled around the deserted citadel, castle ruins and old houses and tried to imagine the city's heyday when feudal lords ruled and the famous *troubadours* sang their ballads of courtly love.

David and I sat on a warm, flat rock and savored a fabulous picnic lunch of crusty bread and local olives, a variety of pâtés and cheeses... my favorite was the Picadon. Bruno entertained us with local literary trivia and we learned that the verb "to flirt" derives from the courting *poetry* of the local troubadours: "conter fleurette" - to talk about flowers.



We loved discovering Provence

SNEF **BILLET** **BORDEAUX** → **MONTPELLIER**
Valable 24 heures maximum après compostage

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A Day of Art & Beauty... Aix-en-Provence

With the car to ourselves for the day, and art in our hearts, we set off for Aix-en-Provence... and promptly got a flat tire. I was annoyed that David wouldn't just fix the thing, but he reminded me that we could call the Carpe Diem in France office in Bordeaux and waved their number at me. Luckily we were still in town and I made the call easily. The office assistant assured me someone would be out to assist us and that yes, calling had been just the thing to do. Soon enough we were back on our way. I stuck my tongue out at David when he gave me his "I told you so, dear" look.

We parked the car in Aix and set off on foot to explore this "*city of a thousand fountains*." We walked along the Cours Mirabeau, one of Europe's most beautiful avenues, lined with shops, cafés and mansions, and shaded by graceful plane trees.

After a coffee and a local calisson, a candied melon and almond paste confection, we visited the Musée des Tapisseries. David was in heaven examining the historic episodes woven in thread that date back 300 years.

We sampled the fine art and archaeological treasures of the Musée Granet and saved the *Atelier Cézanne* for our grand finale. The studio (in his house on the outskirts of town) where the master painted is as he left it in 1906 and I was very moved by the sight of his personal objects, paint brushes and the filtered light patented by Provence.

To celebrate our day, but mourn the end of our stay in Provence, we drove to Châteauneuf-du-Pape and raised several glasses of some of the world's finest wines to art, architecture, natural splendor, and to Carpe Diem in France's divine intuition for sending us to the places we'd only read about.





Monsieur le gargoylle watches over Paris



To Paris...

The morning TGV whisked us back to Paris. And what a delightful surprise... our first escort, and friend, Vincent was waiting for us! David and I had spent a week here a few years back and though Paris seemed huge and bustling, we felt a comfortable familiarity with it. (Actually, I confess... I felt downright French after our past 12 days!)

Vincent took us on a walking tour through the legendary *Marais District* with its elegant mansions and paved courtyards. We stopped first at the Musée Carnavalet, whose exhibits recount the history of Paris from Roman times, then visited the nearby Musée Picasso, which showcases the world's largest collection of the artist's work. In the nearby Place des Vosges, we found a park bench and rested a moment in the presence of the grand architecture that surrounds this favorite square of the Parisians.

That evening, Carpe Diem in France had reserved seats for us at the *Opera* - a thrill for both of us.

Our Last Day



We woke up early this morning to take advantage of a few free hours of *shopping*. I bought a gorgeous, hand-painted silk scarf for our daughter-in-law. David stocked up on tinned pâtés, dried mushrooms and other ingredients for a future dinner party I could tell he was concocting in his mind. And we found a couple of beautiful old maps at a sidewalk book stall.

Carpe Diem in France had suggested a visit to the Canal St. Martin as a glimpse into the Paris seldom visited by tourists. A delightful time... just strolling the tree-shaded quay along this *three-mile canal*. We watched fishermen dangling a line, and barge workers maneuvering in-between small boats. Old brick and iron factories still stand among the little parks and we crossed the river back and forth on iron footbridges. I couldn't think of a more "authentic" slice of daily Parisian working life and felt lucky to know about it.

That evening, after changing into our saved "best-for-last" attire, we went out into the Paris summer evening to the restaurant reserved for us, and we treated ourselves to a dinner that will become *legendary* by the time David has told everyone back home!

And now, yes, home... back to our own day-to-day and our family and friends. We will really miss our time here.

"And how will you top this for our next anniversary," I asked David as we strolled back to the hotel.

"I guess I'll have to consult Carpe Diem in France," he said with a wink. And I knew a tradition had begun.

