

Our European Adventure Part 1 - France 2018

Wednesday 18 July 2018

Well we have started our journey and are currently in the Qantas Business lounge in Canberra. We tried for an upgrade from Business to First for QF1 to London, but we were advised early this morning that we were unsuccessful. When we arrived at the Business lounge in Canberra, we were advised that yesterday's QF1 service to London was cancelled, and most passengers are on today's run. So, I guess that is why there is no availability in First – as of last night there were still five seats shown as available in First. So, we will sit back and relax and enjoy the next 24 hours travelling through to London. On arrival in London, we will be met by the Qantas chauffeur car service, and we will be transported to St Pancras International Station for our Eurostar journey to Paris where we will be based for 12 days.

Only two hours to go now before our flight departs Sydney for London. We are relaxing in the Business lounge which has quietened down significantly. The lounge was really busy and quite cramped when we entered at 11:00am this morning.

We are scheduled to depart on time at 15:55 and scheduled to arrive at Heathrow at 06:55 Thursday morning. We should get plenty of sleep on the aircraft travelling in Business; but we will see.

Thursday 19 July 2018

Today we arrived at London Heathrow 30 minutes ahead of schedule. This additional time was useful as there was only one Border Force officer on duty for the EU entry path. I could use the eGates as I use my UK passport to enter the UK, but Maree can't use them with her Australian passport unless we register in advance to use them; at a cost of GBP75 per year. But Maree can travel through the EU lane with me and that is a lot quicker than going through the foreign passport lanes and even faster than the FastTrack Lane which we had access to flying business class.

After clearing the border, we found our Qantas chauffeur car waiting to drive us to St Pancras for the Eurostar journey to Paris. The driver was Indian and of the Sikh religion. Well, we learnt about this religion in the 80-minute journey from Heathrow to St Pancras. The driver certainly enjoys talking about his religion and I have to say it was interesting and we would have retained more had we not been so tired after the long journey from Canberra.

We had a three hour wait at St Pancras before our train departed so we sat down in a small cafe, had a coffee, and waited for check-in to open at 11:00. The first thing we had to do at check-in was to have our Eurail Pass validated. A simple task when said and done. Then through security, passport check and into the waiting hall. Another hour wait before we could board the train. I allowed five hours for the transfer from Heathrow with our Eurostar booking, just in case there were delays; however, all went smoothly.

The journey across to Paris was concluded in two and half hours. The train is not as smooth as the Japanese Shinkansen but otherwise uneventful. On arrival we were met by Blacklane Cars, a chauffeur service, who whisked us away to our hotel. We could have taken the metro to our destination but after a long travel journey, and both of us being tired, I decided that this was the best solution for us to get to the hotel. We arrived at the hotel at 16:40, checked in, made our way to the room, and then lay down for a rest. Well, I woke at midnight and Maree kept sleeping and she didn't wake until the early hours of the next morning. We must have been tired...

Friday 20 July 2018

This morning we awoke reasonably refreshed after a long sleep. The first event for the day was breakfast and the hotel's buffet style were very good and enjoyable with a good range of options. After breakfast we decided that we would take the metro to the Champs Elysee and walk from there to the Louvre, get Maree her required coffee, have a look around (we had been to the Louvre on a previous visit) and go back to the Champs Elysee for lunch.

The metro was quite crowded as we started our venture in the last half hour of peak hour. The trains are hot and stuffy and are not air-conditioned. Windows are left open but that doesn't assist with ventilation as we are in tunnels and all you get is hot air coming through. It was good to get off.

We started our walk along the Av Champs Elysee towards the Place de la Concorde. The area still has a lot of scaffolding and chairs around following the Bastille Day events on the 14 July. This made crossing the Place de la Concorde tricky as the pedestrian routes were still closed and one had to navigate the traffic at the few traffic lights available. After traversing this large intersection, we headed off through the Jardin des Tuileries towards the Louvre. It was a pleasant walk through the park and there are two ponds with fountains where you can take a break during your walk and take in the view: mainly tourists though walking in the park.



Steve in front of the Arc de Triomphe de Carrousel

From here we continued our walk to the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel. Built between 1807 and 1809, the Arc de Triomphe celebrates the victory of the Grand Army of Napoleon Bonaparte in Austerlitz. It was designed by Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine and illustrates the campaign of 1805 and the surrender of Ulm on October 20, 1805. The monument is erected in front of the Tuileries Palace, to which it serves as the entrance of honor, a gate separating the palace courtyard from the Place du Carrousel, which gives it its name. After the fire of the Tuileries Palace in 1871 and its destruction in 1883, the monument is in the centre of the large esplanade formed by the Carrousel Garden and the square of the same name.

After our almost three kilometre walk it was, of course, time to get Maree her coffee. So, we headed to the Le Café Marly. We ordered iced latte, but they are not the ice latte we are used to. These are just cold coffees made with water and a little milk added – no ice cream or cream, if so desired. Still tasted ok but not what we were expecting. However, Maree's chocolate fondant was a different matter, as you can see from the image. A lovely dark chocolate cake with warm dark chocolate oozing from the centre as she carved into it. I didn't get a lot, despite Maree saying she would share.



Maree's chocolate Fondant at the Palais de Louvre



The Louvre



Lineup to enter the Louvre.

After a break from our walk and taking in the view of the Louvre Pyramid and a few photos we started our walk back to the main shopping area of the Champs Elysee. Here we had lunch consisting of antipasta for two and a beer each. I find the beer more refreshing than the French wine, as does Maree. After lunch we headed back to the hotel for a break before venturing out again.

While we were resting the room air conditioning stopped working. A technician had a look and found that the floor we were on, seven, and the one above, were both affected but the outage and required repairs that could not be undertaken until the next day. I spoke to reception regarding this as the room was heating up quickly and we both would be unable to sleep well that night if there wasn't something that could be done.

Without hesitation they offered to change our room, which we gratefully accepted. We are now on the first floor in a room only a fraction smaller than what we had that is nice and bright with full length ceiling to floor windows and air conditioning that sends snowflakes around the room – I couldn't be happier, except seeing Maree rugged up and under the bedclothes trying to get warm; normal for our household.



Le Maine Café

For dinner we went across the road to the Le Maine Café. The café is basically a Parisian pub with good food and drink. Maree had a chicken BLT (huge) and I had the Caesar salad. As it was happy hour Maree decided to try the French wine again and found a nice chardonnay. I stuck to the beer and tried the local French brand, 1664. The food, wine and beer were very good.

After the meal we returned to the hotel and retired for the evening.

Saturday 21 July 2018

We had a good night's sleep in the new room. We still awoke early but we are getting to bed later so in a few days we should be well and truly into the local time zone with normal sleep patterns.

After another delightful petit-déjeuner we headed off to the Eiffel Tower. Before doing so we thought we would checkout the Gare Montparnasse as this will be our departure point for our adventure tomorrow to Mont St Michel and we wanted to be sure where the TGV (train à Grande Vitesse) platforms were located. This station is only a five-minute walk from the hotel and the main reason I chose this location. We have two adventures departing from this station and our local metro stop Gaité (a two-minute walk) will take us directly to the TGV station for another trip outside of Paris. But more about those trips later.

Having completed the recce we jumped onto the local RER (Réseau express régional d'Île-de-France) and travelled to the station close to the Eiffel Tower and

also next to the Seine. A short walk from the station had us joining the queue to enter the grounds to the Tower. We thought the long queue was for the purchase of tickets but as we got closer, we could see that this was just a security screening point. It took about 15 minutes to get to this point and then once through we headed off to see about getting tickets.



The start of that long queue

We rounded the bend and saw a queue of people. The queue snaked around the concourse and must have had hundreds of people in the queue. After asking a few questions we found that the queuing time to get tickets to the Tower and the wait to join the queue at the elevators was just over two hours. We decided to sit down and watch the queue for a while to see if it was moving quicker than advised. Nope, it was slow.

After debating whether we would come back during the week or just join a tour to bypass the long queues, Maree came up with an idea as to whether we may be able to take out a tour package while we were here at the Tower. Maree asked the help desk that was set up nearby and the lady called her colleague over. Did I mention, by chance, that Maree had decided today to take her walking ski poles as her knee is a little tender from yesterday's walking? Well, the helpful person asked Maree if she had a medical certificate and Maree said "no, but I can show you the scar". So that was all she needed to do. This person took her directly to the cashier where she paid 16 Euros to enter the Tower and then took her to the front of the elevator line. Within 10 minutes she was out of sight and on her way to the second level of the Tower. I didn't go as I don't have a head for those dizzy heights.

The lady advised Maree that she would only be able to go to the second floor as the queue to get to the top was an hour and that was from the second floor. Maree was very happy with being able to get to the second floor so easily. She spent about an hour at this point and enjoyed the experience immensely. Split into two sections, the second floor operates as the main viewing gallery on the Eiffel Tower and is apparently the best for getting some great photos of the Parisian landscape, from the majestic Sacre-Coeur on the hill of Montmartre to the ribbon of the Seine winding across the city. The second level is also approximately 115 metres above ground level.

As you can see from the images below, Maree did well with the camera.











After Maree returned from the tower we sat down for a while so Maree could rest her knee and then we headed off to get some lunch. We found a nice restaurant on the banks of the Seine. The food was very good, and it also gave us the opportunity to take the weight off before taking a leisurely walk along the banks of the Seine to the station for the return journey to the hotel.

The walk wasn't as long as yesterday but we did cover quite a bit of terrain around Paris. Now what to do for dinner – the planning never ends.....

Sunday 22 July 2018

Today we are undertaking an excursion out of Paris to Mont Saint Michel. The departure wasn't too early as the railway station Gare Montparnasse is only a five-minute walk from our hotel.

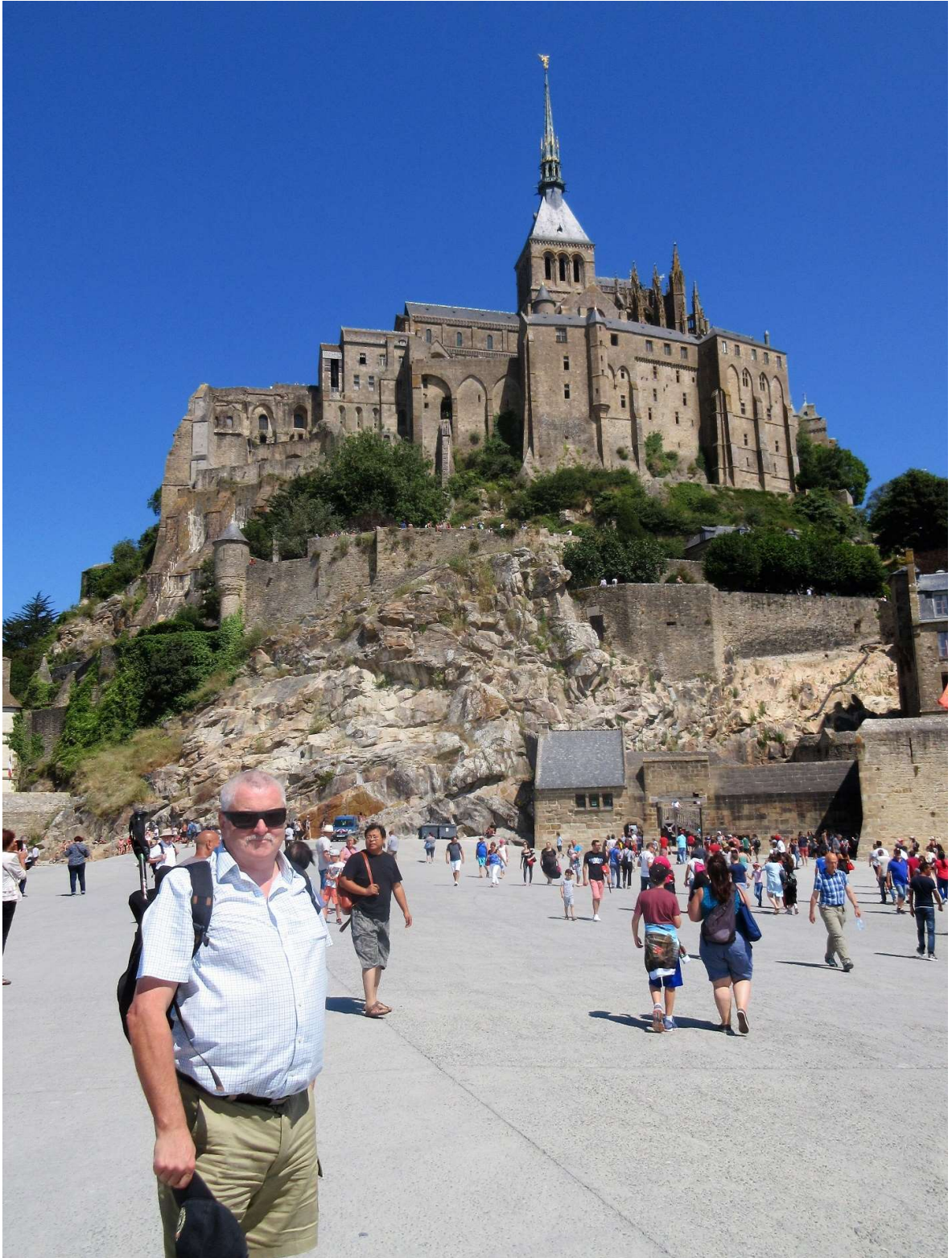
We decided to use our Eurail for this trip, so we needed to travel by TGV to Rennes in southwest France. The travel time to Rennes is only 1H30m for the one way of a 700-kilometre round trip. By comparison it would have taken five hours if we had taken the tour option from Paris by coach. The train trip was fast and smooth on the TGV. I had also planned for the both of us to be met at Rennes station by car and driver. I found a limousine chauffeur service in Rennes on the internet and there were good reviews. Our experience proved to support these reviews as the service provided was excellent.

On arrival in Rennes, we received a text from the driver letting us know where to meet him. Then it was into the car for the one-hour drive to Mont Saint Michel to visit the Abbey. On arrival the driver dropped us off and pointed us in the direction of the free shuttle service to the Abbey. We also noted that you could pay to get to the Abbey by horse and cart, so we decided on this method of transport. It was a nice slow ride and took us just over thirty minutes to reach the gates of Mont Saint Michel. The cost of the ride was only 6€, and I say only, as I thought that was cheap for the distance we covered.



Mont Saint Michel Abbey as we approached in the horse and cart.

Well, about the Abbey. It looks straight out of a fantasy film – as if dragons might swoop down as you enter. This World Heritage Site lies just off the rocky coast of Normandy. It's a medieval must-see where you get panoramic views of the sea and sky. Mont Saint Michel is a small island commune in



Steve in front of Mont Saint Michel Abbey

Normandy, and the Abbey is most definitely its crowning glory, looming over it all like a big stone soldier as the wave's crash on its rocky shores. The worship of Archangel Michel first occurred in this spot in 708 AD, making it 'the' place for a

medieval pilgrimage. In the 10th century, the Benedictine monks realized its importance and promptly set about building a proper abbey here. In 1874 the abbey was listed as a historic monument; this was after the monks said their goodbyes in 1790. Apparently, it draws as many crowds today as it did hundreds of years ago – thanks to its airy interior and majestic position.



Inside the Abbey grounds

With over 20 rooms and spires and towers looming over the town below, there's plenty to explore. As you walk around the abbey, it is possible to watch the tide roll in and out (it has Europe's highest tidal variations, swelling and dropping as much as 15 meters in as little as six hours). Unfortunately, we didn't make it to the very top as there were just too many steps for the two of us. But the photos show you the Abbey in all its glory.



Inside the Abbey grounds – the crowd

After wandering around inside the Abbey grounds, we stopped for some lunch. Not bad food but as usual Maree picked the better of the two dishes we ordered. From here we walked up an oblique path and then took some steps to get as high as we could to take photos. The views are incredible, as is the Abbey.



The Abbey, close up view.



Abbey view from inside the grounds.



Abbey view from inside the grounds.



As you can see, Maree has the camera on this holiday.

From there we made our way down and took the free shuttle back to the point where the driver met us. We would have taken the horse and cart again but alas there wasn't one and we didn't want to hang around waiting. So, we took a slow walk back to where we left our driver. A pleasant 30 minutes' walk.

The driver took us back to Rennes where we had coffee, tiramisu, and a rice pud for our afternoon tea. Our train back to Paris leaves at 19:30 having us back in Paris by

21:00. We will grab another pizza to share and then make our way back to the hotel, only a couple of minutes from the pizza restaurant.

Tomorrow we are going to make it a very relaxing day as we have an early start on Tuesday morning, 04:50, for our two-day adventure to Amsterdam.

Monday 23 July 2018

Today is a lazy day. Nothing planned as we have our early start in the morning.

After breakfast we lazed around before heading off to the Champs Elysee around lunchtime to get Maree some socks; exciting I know. So, we went to a street café that we went to the other day and had the antipasta again. After lunch we went on another recce to Paris St Lazare station to find out where the train leaves from for our trip to the Normandy beaches next Monday. Good job we made this move as it is a bit of a rabbit warren at this station. It took us about fifteen minutes to get our bearings before we were happy with the route to take from the metro to the main line station.

Then it was back to the hotel to laze around for the rest of the day.

Tuesday and Wednesday 24 and 25 July 2018 – Amsterdam Excursion

We were up at 04:00 this morning to prepare for our excursion to Amsterdam for two days.

No time for breakfast as the restaurant at the hotel doesn't open until 06:30 and our Blacklane car is due to collect us from the hotel at 04:50. As usual with Blacklane, the driver was on time (early actually) and quickly whisked us off to Gare du Nord so we could catch our Thalys high speed train to Amsterdam.

We arrived at Gare du Nord at 05:10 for our 06:10 departure. Better to be early and wait than see the train pull out of the station in front of you. The first order of the day is a coffee for Maree. Hmm, the cafe doesn't open until 05:30, can she wait that long – no choice ha-ha.

05:30 has arrived and I make my way to the café for the coffees and Danish for Maree and a baguette for me. Now we just have to wait until the platform opens 20 minutes prior to departure and then we can board our train.

We have finally boarded, and we are on our way as the sun is just starting to appear above the horizon. As you can see, Maree has settled in nicely for the three and half our trip.



Maree with book in hand as we leave Gare du Nord.

Well, the time went quickly, and we arrived in Amsterdam Central on time. We will be checking into our accommodation after our canal cruise booked for 15:00 so we will wander the streets of Amsterdam taking in the sites until then. When we arrived at our accommodation, Keisershouse, we were amazed how big the place was inside. However, we then noted that the rooms for the accommodation were upstairs and ours was on the top floor as I had booked the junior suite.



Maree outside our accommodation in Amsterdam, at the Keisershouse. Our room is at the top; the top two windows.



The view from our room

The room was great, big, and airy and a great view of the canal junction with canal boats going in every direction but getting there, up two sets of extremely narrow staircases was enough to make you want to stay in the room and never leave until it was time to be evicted. The photos don't really show the steepness, but you can get the idea. Just look closely at my face. On the way up the second set of stairs I literally climbed them on my hands and knees.



Steve on those stairs.

Oh well it is time to go out to dinner, can't put off the stair descent any longer. Not bad this time, it only took me three minutes to descend eight steps – that was the first set by the way, from the top floor to the first level. I still had another set to go. However, the steps from the first level to ground level are easier to manage as there are bannisters either side, not the case with the upper level stairs where there is one banister and a wall.

We decided to go to a restaurant called Marlong which is situated about 200 metres from our accommodation and on the banks of the canal. A lovely spot as you can see from the photo.



View from the Morlang Restaurant where we had dinner.

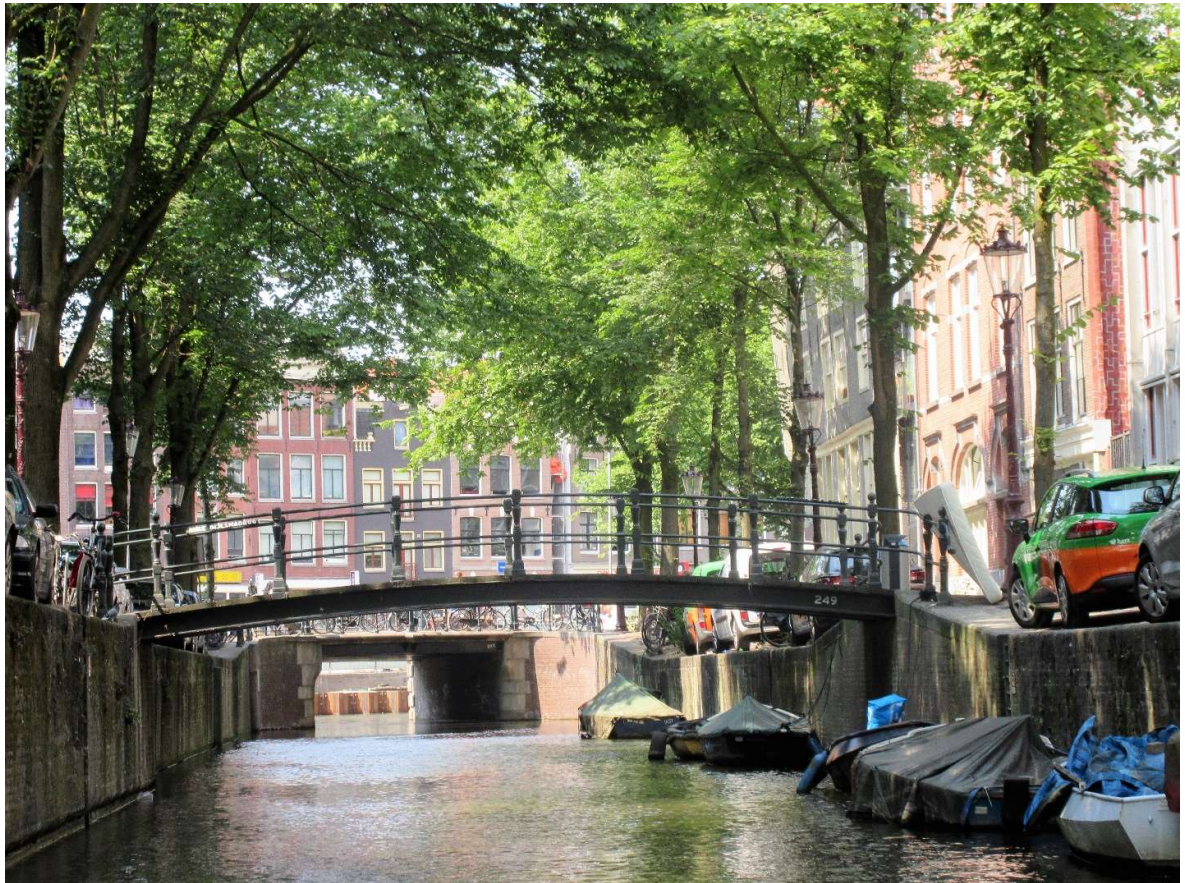
Dinner was also very nice. I had the green curry and Maree had the pappardelle with mussels. We also ordered the one brand of Australian wine on the menu, a chardonnay. A pleasant drop but not cheap but after those stairs we needed it.



Relaxed after a wine or two.

Well after a pleasant evening we decided to go back to our accommodation and retire for the evening. I am getting better at stair crawling, but I would hate to have to do these stairs every day.

This morning we awoke to the sun streaming in through the window and the sound of boats motoring up and down the canal. The windows in the accommodation are not double glazed and they do not seal properly so you hear everything that goes on outside, even the people talking as they walk past the house.



View from the open boat canal cruise



View from the open boat canal cruise

Breakfast was provided and was excellent. There was a wide variety of choices of breads, croissants, cheeses, meats, eggs, juice, cereals, fresh fruit and coffee and tea. Very pleasant. After breakfast we checked out and went roaming the streets again looking at various places around Amsterdam. We kept jumping on and off trams and this is a cheap way of getting around the city. We went to the Van Gogh Museum, but the ticket lines were very long. So, we may come back next year when we travel to do the Windstar cruise in the Mediterranean which departs from Barcelona. We are looking for a base for a week before the cruise and we may pick Amsterdam as it is only a train ride from Amsterdam to Barcelona; but we will see.



View of the Rijksmuseum



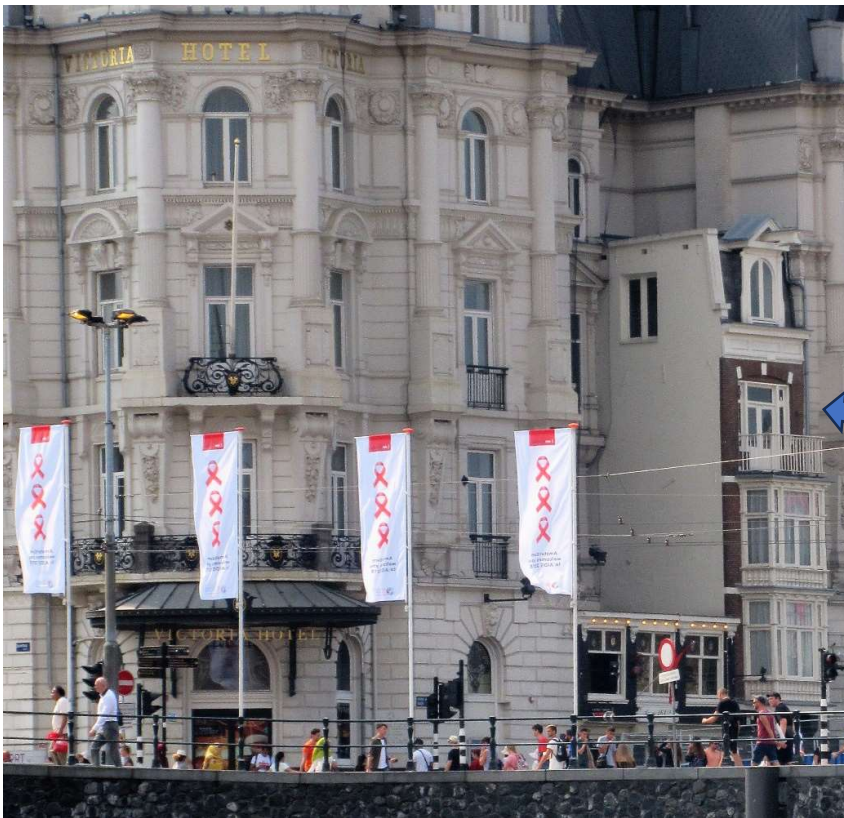
Maree in the red-light district



View from the open boat canal cruise



These buildings' foundations have moved, and the buildings are leaning and are still lived in by residents.



This is a picture of the Victoria Hotel. Note the residential building on the right. Owners refused to sell, and the hotel owners couldn't afford the asking price, so the hotel was built around this house.

Well, we are heading to the Central Station to catch our train back to Paris. I am going to sit back and relax and enjoy the train ride back. This is all for today.

Thursday 26 July 2018

Happy 60th to Maree today.

Today we celebrated Maree's birthday in Paris. To mark the occasion, we have booked a table at the famous Maxim's restaurant. The following is some history about Maxim's and photographs we took during the evening.

Maxim's was founded as a bistro in 1893 by Maxime Gaillard, formerly a waiter. It became one of the most popular and fashionable restaurants in Paris under its next owner, Eugene Cornuché. Cornuché gave the dining room its Art Nouveau decor, installed a piano and made sure that it was always filled with beautiful women. Cornuché was accustomed to say: "An empty room... Never! I always have a beauty sitting by the window, in view from the sidewalk." It was so famous that the third act of Franz Lehar's operetta *The Merry Widow* was set there. In 1913, Jean Cocteau said of Maxim's: "It was an accumulation of velvet, lace, ribbons, diamonds and what all else I couldn't describe. To undress one of these women is like an outing that calls for three weeks' advance notice, it's like moving house."



Maxim's dining room.

In 1932, Octave Vaudable bought Maxim's. He started selecting his clients, favouring the regulars, preferably famous or rich, beginning a new era of prestigious catering under the famous Vaudable family which lasted more than half a century. Famous guests of the 1930s included Edward VIII and Jean Cocteau, a close friend and neighbour of the Vaudables. The playwright Georges Feydeau wrote a popular comedy called *La Dame de chez Maxim* ("The Lady from Maxim's").



Maxim's dining room

During World War II Maxim's was the most popular Parisian restaurant of the German high command and collaborationist celebrities. Hermann Göring, Otto Abetz, and Ernst Jünger favoured Maxim's when in Paris. Due to the support of officials Maxim's enjoyed protected status during the occupation.

Maxim's was also immensely popular with the international celebrities of the 1950s, with guests such as Aristotle Onassis, Maria Callas, the Duke of Windsor and his wife Wallis Simpson, Porfirio Rubi Rosa, Max Ophüls, and Barbara Hutton. When the restaurant was renovated at the end of the decade, workmen discovered a treasure trove of lost coins and jewels that had slipped out of the pockets of the wealthy and had been trapped between the cushions of the banquettes.

François Vaudable, who had been directing the restaurant by his father's side for years, pursued the work of his family which gave Maxim's its era of glory. In 1981, more attracted by the scientific field than by the jet-set, the Vaudables offered to sell Maxim's to fashion designer Pierre Cardin. A rich Arab had offered to buy the restaurant, but they were upset at the idea of it falling into foreign hands. Cardin eventually accepted the offer. Under his management, an Art Nouveau Museum was later created on three floors of the building and a cabaret was established which Cardin filled each night with songs from the beginning of the 20th century.



Maree's Birthday Dinner at Maxims' Restaurant Paris – her special dessert for two has just been served. Maxims offered to make this dessert for her when I wrote to them to make a booking for dinner.



Maree's dessert was especially made for her by Maxims – Raspberries Napoleon, with raspberry sorbet and dark chocolate sauce.

The following image is of the potatoes "pommes soufflées" served with Steve's main course. The potatoes are not what they seem. They are each a thin layer of potato with air pushed into the thin layers. So, you end up with an inflated potato layer, very

light and contain lots of flavour. The waiter advised us that these little gems take two days to prepare. Incredible.



Steve's potatoes.

MAXIM'S 3 RUE ROYALE 75008 PARIS TEL : 01 42 65 30 25		
26-07-2018	22:07:45	
(N4) Note N. 200/1	POS# 1	
TABLE 18		
Operateur : (2) Direction 2	Couverts 2	
Vendeur : (2) Direction 2		
2 x SAUMON FUME	48,00	96,00 (1)
2 x PATISSERIE	26,00	52,00 (1)
1 x FILET DE TURBOT		82,00 (1)
1 x FILET DE BOEUF		103,00 (1)
2 x COUPE CHAMPAGNE	20,00	40,00 (2)
1 x EAU MINERALE		9,00 (1)
1 x CHABLIS		120,00 (2)
TOTAL	502,00	
RESTE :	502,00	

And of course, you can't have a great meal without getting the bill – in Euros of course.

Friday 27 July 2018

Today we head off on an excursion to the Loire Valley to visit three of the famous Chateau in the region, the Chambord, Cheverny and Chenonceau.

We caught the TGV at 07:30 this morning for the one-hour journey to St Pierre des Corps. As we were nearing our destination, about twenty minutes away, I went for a bathroom stop. When I came out, I saw Maree lined up with other passengers as the train was slowing down for a station. This is too early for our stop I thought. I asked a passenger in my best French if this was the stop for St Pierre des Corps of which the reply was “no no, the next one”. So, Maree and I went back to our seats.

I did tell Maree our stop would be the first one, as indicated by the train departure information board at Gare Montparnasse so I was surprised it stopped at the earlier station of Vendome. However, Vendome was mentioned on the departure board before the words “TGV Montparnasse to Poitiers” – so it must have been explaining a special stop, I suppose. Anyway, fortunately we didn’t get off as the station was pretty remote.

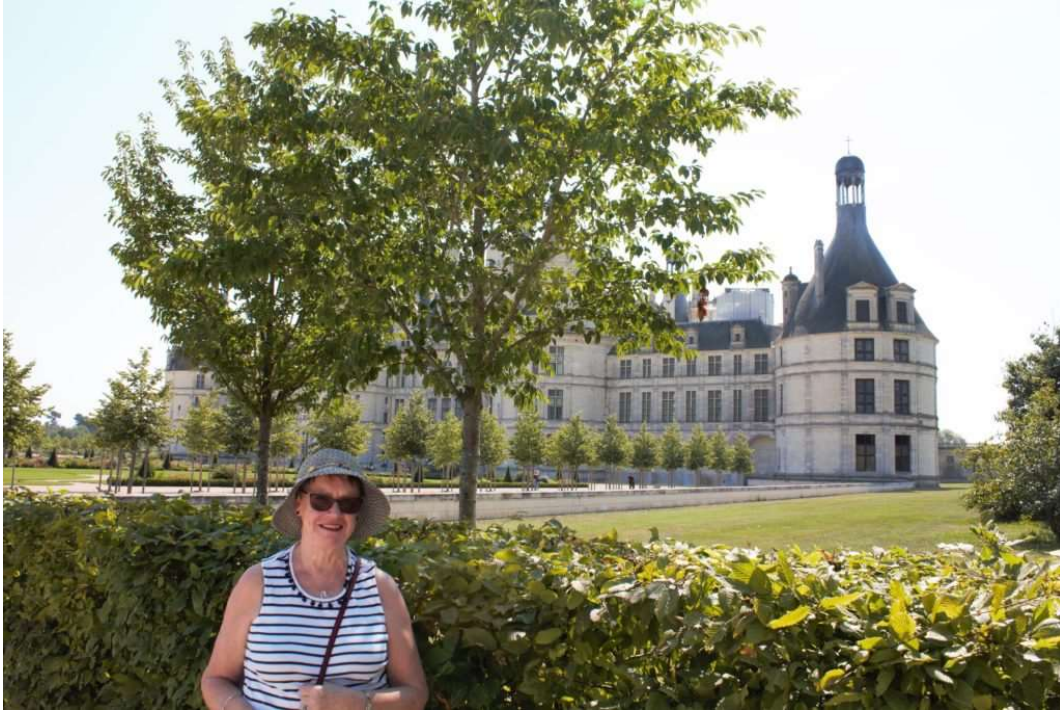
On arrival at St Pierre des Corps we made our way to the Hertz office to collect our vehicle for the day. We decided it would be a better option to have our own vehicle so we could travel the countryside while viewing the Chateaus in the region. No dramas collecting the vehicle and we are on our way. There is a good inbuilt GPS in this Renault Talisman vehicle, as long as you enter in the correct destination.

After a few wrong turns after leaving the motorway, max speed of 130 kph by the way, we made it to our first destination, Chateau Chambord.



Chateau Chambord

Chateau de Chambord is located 16 kilometres east of Blois, and four kilometres from the Loire, in the countryside surrounded by woods. The Counts of Blois had originally built a palace to be used for hunting – until 1518 it belonged to the Counts of Blois, at which time Francis I decided to demolish it and build a luxurious mansion. Francis I, who delighted in this very practical exercise, could not have picked a better place to construct a castle. Chambord is impressive with about 400 rooms, more than 80 staircases, 365 fireplaces,



Chateau Chambord with Maree in the Gardens

and an exceptional number of towers, high ceilings, pointed domes and graceful pinnacles. The castle is situated in a vast park with an area of about 5000 hectares. The castle consists of a large rectangular area, surrounded on three sides by buildings in the form of wings attached to the body of the main building, which occupies half of one side. Designed in the shape of a cross, it has a central tower flanked by four towers and surrounded by a courtyard. The external structure of the castle of Chambord has a very clear defensive logic, being formed by a “keep” (a keep is a type of fortified tower built within castles during the Middle Ages), shaped like a quadrangle, flanked by four towers.



Chateau Chambord

The Chateau de Chambord can be considered as an old French castle, decorated with an Italian Renaissance style, and it presents one of the most striking of the buildings of mixed style to be built in France at the beginning of the reign of Francis I, before the 'French style' was better defined. It is likely that the architecture of the castle of Chambord is the work of French artists who were influenced by Italian architecture, and while in the use of this new decorative style they showed some occasional inexperience, at other times they also proved very skillful. An example of this is in the arrangement and decoration of the central staircase, which today still has a high reputation – the bastion and stairs was built in a very original pattern consisting of two spiral ramps, combined so that those descending the staircase do not meet those who are climbing the staircase – an idea of considerable originality and ingenuity. The design of the double helix staircase is thought to be influenced by Leonardo de Vinci.



Maree in front of the Chateau Chambord

From here we drove through the lovely French countryside to the Chateau Cheverny where we also decided to stop for lunch.

The Chateau Cheverny is located between Blois and Chambord and a few kilometres below Cheverny village. The Chateau de Cheverny was built in the early 17th century by the Hurault family to a design inspired by the Palais de Luxembourg in Paris. It was designed by Jacques Bougier who was the architect of Blois. It has remained in the Hurault family for six centuries. The main façade of the castle is made entirely of stone 'Bourré', which hardens and becomes whiter with the passing of centuries. The north facade is built in Louis XIII style whilst the south side is decorated with busts of Roman emperors which have been very fashionable since the Renaissance.



Chateau Cheverny with gardens and water features.

There is a beautifully gardened section between the chateau and the orangery. Whilst overall formal in style with a formal pool and geometric patterns there are also areas of roses and perennials in a softer planting style. There is also a maze, popular with children, and a large tulip garden planted with over 100,000 tulips.

Hergé (the pen name of Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi) used the Chateau Cheverny as his inspiration for Marlinspike Hall in his famous Tintin book.

For lunch we headed to a little cafe called Pinocchio. We had the local antipasta. The spread wasn't as good as the ones we have had in Paris but still tasty and filling enough for a lunch.



Antipasta Lunch

After lunch it was off to the third Chateau, Chenonceau with a pleasant drive again through the French countryside.

To build the Chateau on the River Cher in the 16th century, Thomas Bohier demolished the fortified castle and mill belonging to the Marques family and left standing just the Keep: The Marques Tower, which they restored in renaissance style. The layout of the forecourt is a copy of the former medieval fortress surrounded by moats. Still standing beside the tower, is the well, decorated with a chimera and eagle, emblem of the Marques family.



Chateau Chenonceau



Chateau Chenonceau



Chateau Chenonceau

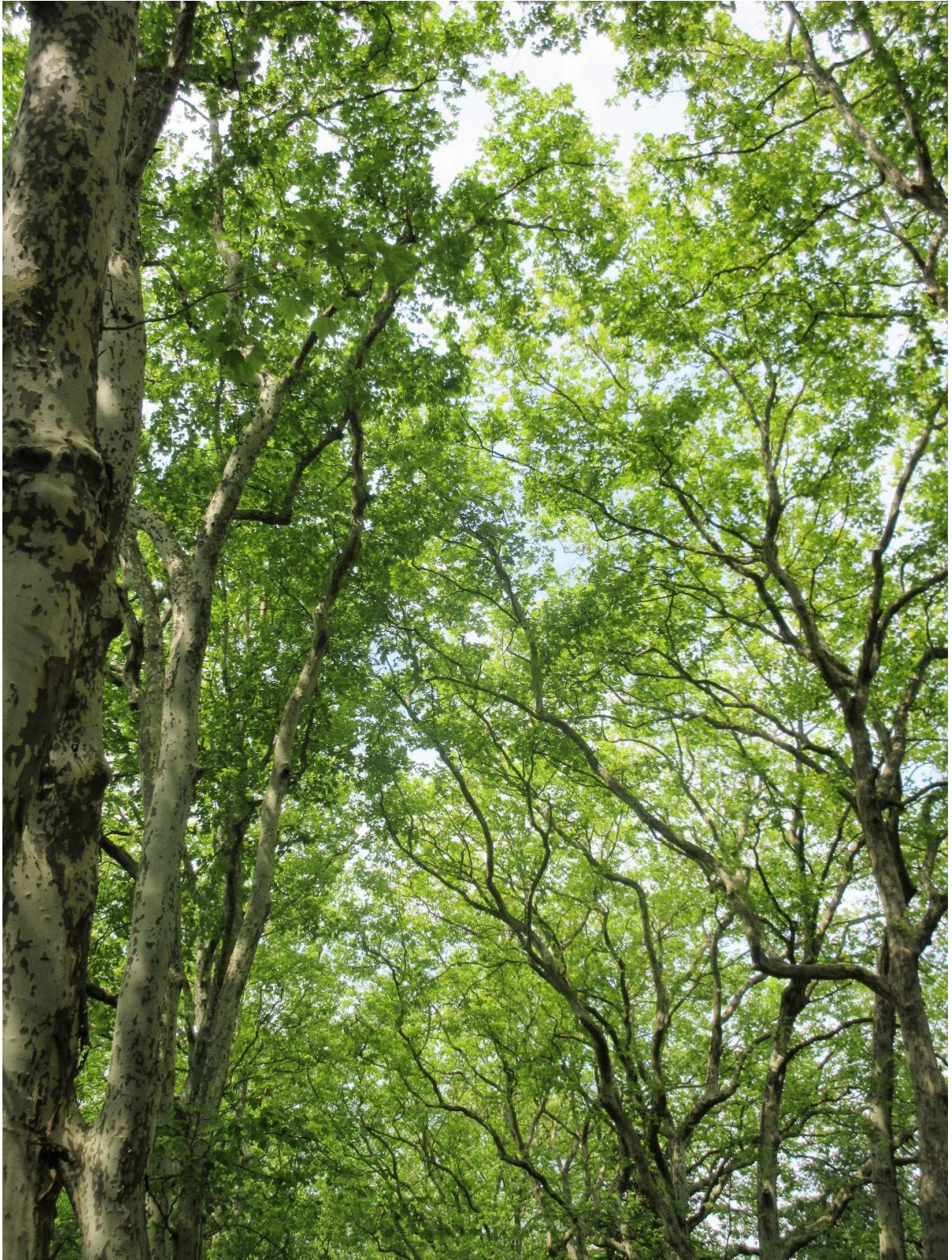
To the side of the Chateau as you approach the main entrance is Diane's Garden. The layout of the flowerbed has remained unchanged since its creation by Diane de Poitiers. There are raised terraces to protect the garden when water levels rise in the river Cher.

Closer to the Chateau is Catherine's Garden. Queen Catherine de Medici's Garden is the picture of refinement. Looking over the water and the park, its paths offer views of the chateau's west façade. Its design centres around five lawns, grouped around an elegant circular pond and dotted with rounded box hedges.

As you walk in towards the Chateau you come across a maze. Situated in a clearing in the 70-hectare grounds, the maze is planted with 2000 yews covering more than one hectare. At the centre a raised gazebo offers a clear view all around the maze.



Entrance to the Chateau Chenonceau is via the path through the forest of trees



Chenonceau Forest



Diane's Garden



Diane's Garden



River Cher

From here we headed back to Tours to return the hire car. We took the back roads until we had to join the motorway. The speed limit on this motorway was 130 kph but I was content with 110 kph.

We arrived back at the Hertz office about 17:45 so we decided to hand the car back in. Our train wasn't due to depart for Paris until 20:20 so we were originally going to keep the car longer and drive around town; a good job we didn't go with that plan as you will note when you read on.

After handing the keys back we went around the corner to a little pub and we both sat and relaxed with a beer each until the pub closed at 19:00. We then went inside the railway station to wait for our TGV. While waiting I went and purchased a baguette for me and muffin for Maree. While sitting eating my baguette I glanced up at the departure board. All the train departures were listed up to and including 20:55. Hmm, then why wasn't our train departure at 20:20 showing. It was now 19:10. I went to the SNCF staff member who was assisting people and I asked him why our train wasn't showing. Ah, he said, simple – it has been cancelled!!! But he said, “not a problem”. “You can catch the express to Orleans and then connect with the Orleans – Paris train at 21:26”. Good I thought. Then he said, “you need to go to platform 6 now as the train to Orleans arrives at 19:15, in three minutes”.

I yelled out to Maree that our train was cancelled, and we needed to get to platform 6 now. She grabbed her stuff, and we moved as quickly as Maree could go and got to platform 6 to find that this train was delayed ten minutes; no need to have dashed after all. Better safe than sorry though.

This service to Orleans takes one hour and ten minutes so still plenty of time to connect to the Paris train at Orleans. It was a good job we decided to hand the rental car back when we did as this St Pierre des Corps to Orleans train was the only one to connect with the service to Paris today. We would have been stuck in Orleans for the night otherwise.

We connected in Orleans with 40 minutes to spare. The train to Paris arrives at the Paris D'Austerlitz station and not Montparnasse so we still had a metro connection to take to get back to the hotel. No problems there but just more time until we made it back to the hotel. So instead of arriving back at the Hotel at 21:30 by catching the original TGV from St Pierre des Corps, we arrived at the hotel at 23:15. So a long day as we started out at about 06:30 this morning; but also, a very enjoyable day.

Tomorrow is another rest day with our next excursion on Monday which will take us to the Normandy Beaches.

Saturday 28 July 2018

We slept in this morning being quite tired from yesterday's trip. So today is a lazy day with me spending most of the time catching up with the blog; I hope someone out there is reading it, and Maree reading and resting her knee. We had a late breakfast at our Cafe across the road and it will be dinner later tonight at a local restaurant in our area. We will wander around and see what we can find.

Well, we found a nice spot for dinner this evening – Le Cafe de la Place. The cafe was quite busy, and it was fortunate that we went out when we did at 8pm otherwise we may not have found a table.

After perusing the menu, we decided on the antipasto again. As you can see from the images it was a large and tasty plate. We enjoyed this with a nice bottle of French Sauvignon Blanc, and we are now finding the French wines very pleasant. We had a couple of bad experiences earlier on in the trip, but we think we were sold some cheap French wine. The one we had tonight was 20 euros a bottle, not bad pricing for a restaurant and when compared to Maxims the other night where the bottle cost 130 euros.



Le Cafe de la Place with Maree and Steve enjoying dinner.



Our antipasta at le Cafe de la Place



The owner of the Cafe gave us this addition to our antipasta plate, Epoisses Cheese, when we expressed sheer delight at the other strong cheeses served with our antipasta. The cheese has an incredible intense flavour and well recommended, if you are in France.

After a pleasant dinner and fine wine, we decided to retire for the evening. We have another relaxing day tomorrow.

Sunday 29 July 2018

After a lazy start we headed off for brunch at the Maine Cafe across the road before heading off to the Esplanade des Invalides in the centre of Paris. It is a large park area and is frequented by the locals. It was getting busy here today as the Tour de France Teams are riding through the main street on the way to the Champs de Elysees where the race will finish. We have some great images and some information below about the Pont des Invalides bridge that crosses the river Seine.

The story of this bridge started in 1821, when engineer Claude Navier conceived a technologically revolutionary bridge that crossed the Seine in one single reach without any point of support in between. The proposed suspension bridge, the construction of which started in 1824, was meant to be erected opposite the Hotel des Invalides on the site of the current Pont Alexandre III. Navier failed to leave a safety margin on top of his calculations, and the contract to build the bridge was unusually rigid. After Navier's plan had been approved by the private investment company, the contractor could not make changes without approval, and there was no authorisation to suggest improvements. The bridge became unsafe after cracking of the anchorages due to natural settling and additional movement after a water main break near the buttresses. The bridge had to be dismantled, and Navier was chastised by a government committee for relying too much on mathematics. He was even compared unfavorably to the accomplishments of (French rival) British bridge builders. After a settlement between the contractor and investors was reached, the raw materials were reused for other bridges, with designs to be provided by the head investor Alain Desjardins, which were widely seen as less elegant.



View from the Pont de Invalides Bridge



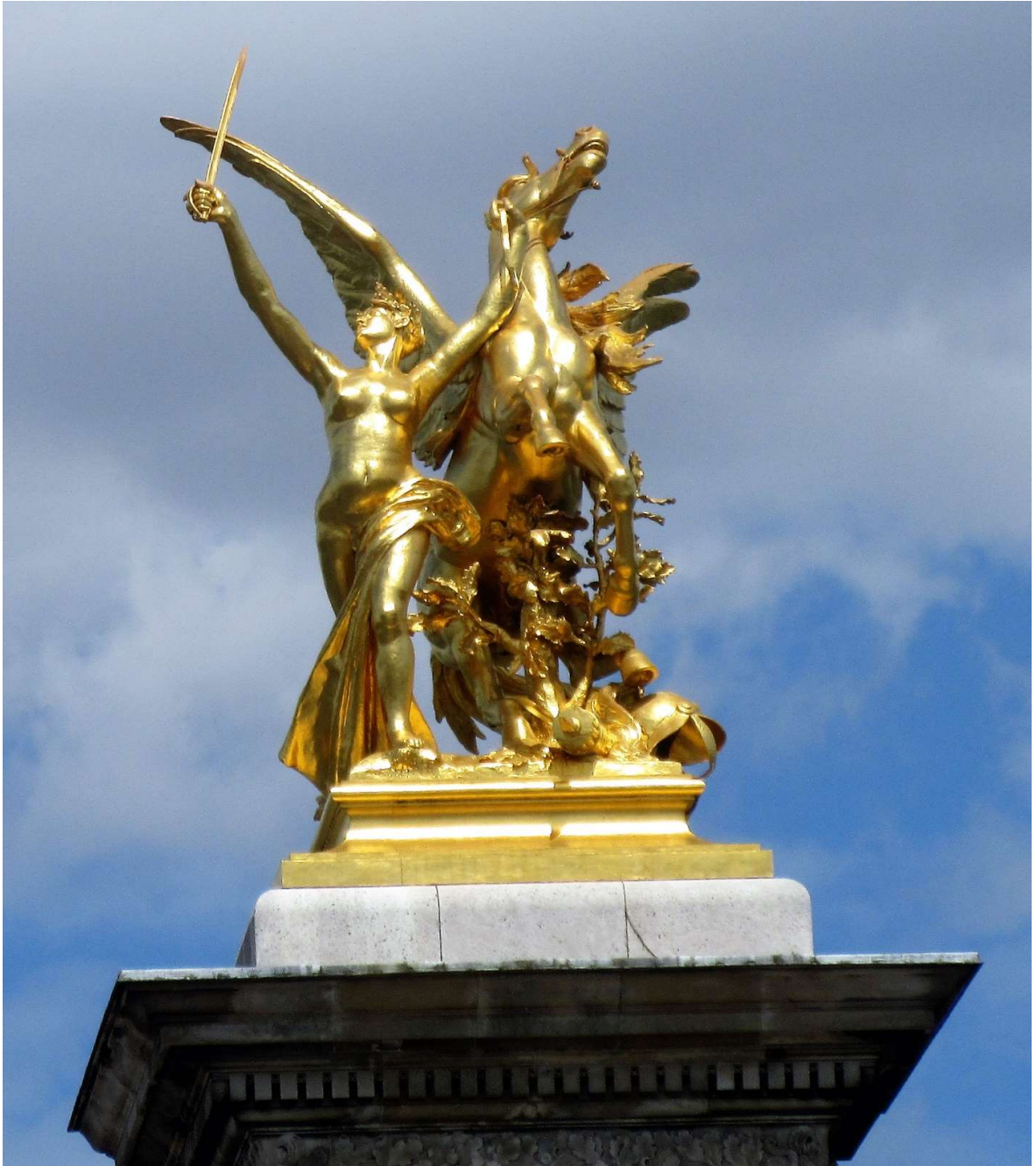
Eiffel Tower from the Pont de Invalides Bridge that spans the river, Seine. In response to complaints from the defenders of the Invalides perspective, the Public Services decided to shift the bridge site downriver. Therefore, in 1829, two engineers, de Verges and Bayard de la Vingtrie, completed the construction of a proper suspension bridge supported by two piers in the Seine and three porticos,

each 20 m in height. Unfortunately, due to rapidly growing wear on the bridge, its access had to be regulated in 1850.

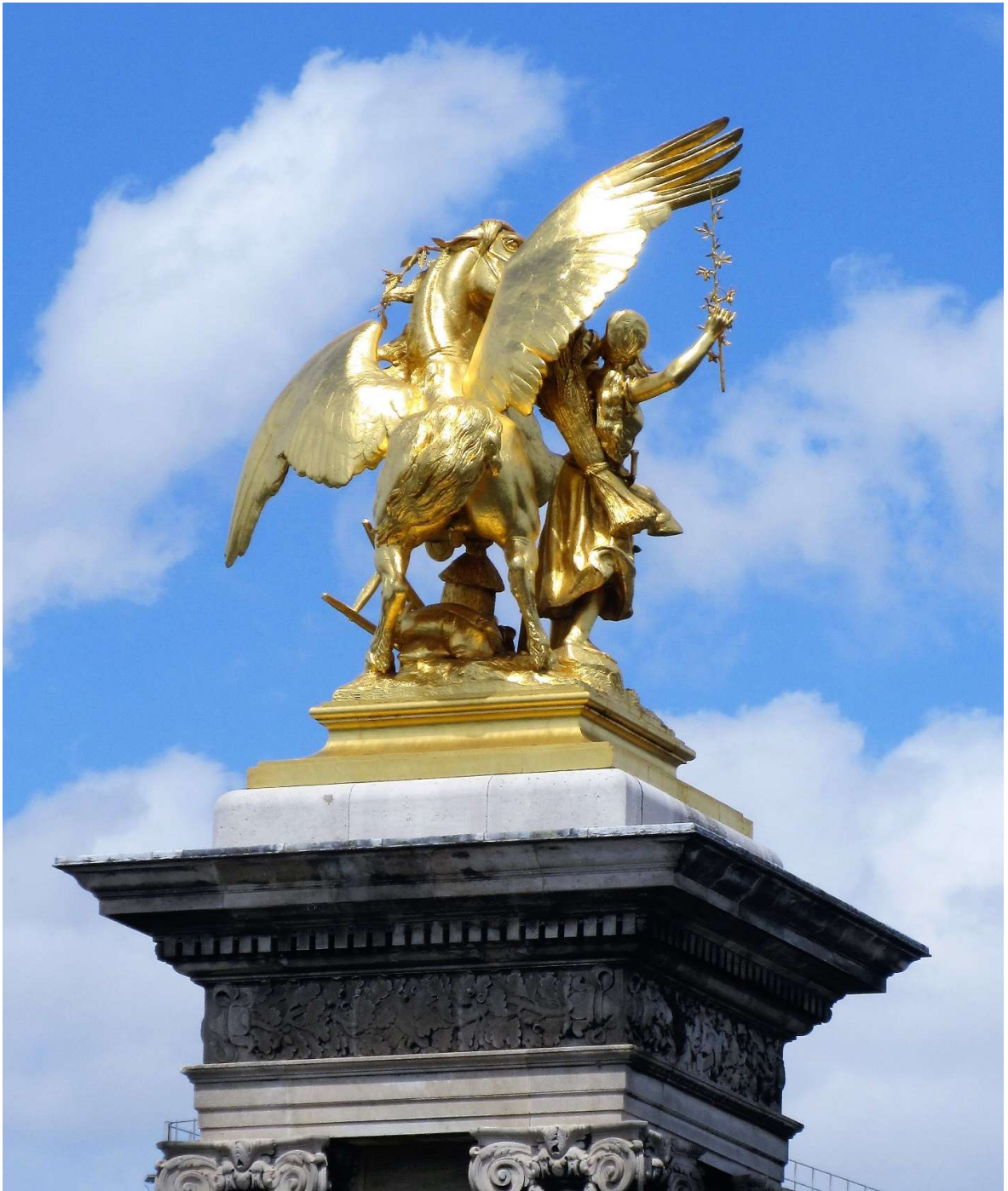
In 1854, the bridge was demolished to be replaced by a new one in time for the upcoming 1855 World Fair in Paris. Paul-Martin Gallocher de Lagalisserie and Jules Savarin used the existing piers of the former suspension bridge and a newly added central pier to build an arch bridge in masonry on the same site.



One of the four gilt-bronze statues of Fames watching over the Pont de Invalides Bridge on plinths with the Fames restraining Pegasus.



Fames watching over the Pont de Invalides Bridge on plinths with the Fames restraining Pegasus.



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The plinths supporting each of the Fames restraining Pegasus.

The new pier was adorned with sculptures in two allegorical themes: the Land Victory by Victor Vilain upriver; the Maritime Victory by Georges Diébolt downstream – four gilt-bronze statues of Fames watching over the bridge, supported on massive

17 metres masonry socles that provide stabilizing counterweight for the arch. The socles are crowned by Fames restraining Pegasus. Despite being stronger, the new bridge still sustained a subsidence between 25 and 30 cm in 1878 and lost two arches during the winter of 1880 (restored by the end of the year). The bridge has been quite secure since then and the only modification made in the 20th century was the expansion of its pavement in 1956.

Well, it is time for dinner. We are going out early tonight, 18:30, as we have an early start in the morning to catch the train to the Normandy Beaches. So, it is off to Le Cafe de la Place.

Monday 30 July 2018

Today was our adventure to the Normandy Beaches and our first port of call by train is Caen (pronounced khan). We left the hotel at 06:00 to ensure we made it to Gare St Lazare in time for our 07:06 train. Our metro goes directly to this station so that makes for a one stop trip to St Lazare and of course having completed the recce earlier in the week we know exactly where to get our train in this large station.

The train trip took just under two hours on the intercity semi-high-speed train (160kph). We arrived at Caen at 08:55 and proceeded to the Hertz desk to get our vehicle. I had booked a Hertz GPS, and they are usually a portable device. However, the chap at the desk said he would give us an upgrade to an auto with a built-in GPS for the price of the rental of a portable GPS, 21 Euro. We initially booked a manual vehicle, so this was a good option to score an automatic plus an inbuilt GPS. Hertz programmed the GPS to English, went through the basic workings of the vehicle and then we were on our way. Getting out of the city wasn't as easy as first thought, even with the GPS. The instructions weren't overly clear and for a while we ended up going around in circles. On the third pass we decided to hang a left and a right and this did the trick. The GPS only mentioned the left turn and not the immediate right turn after taking the left.

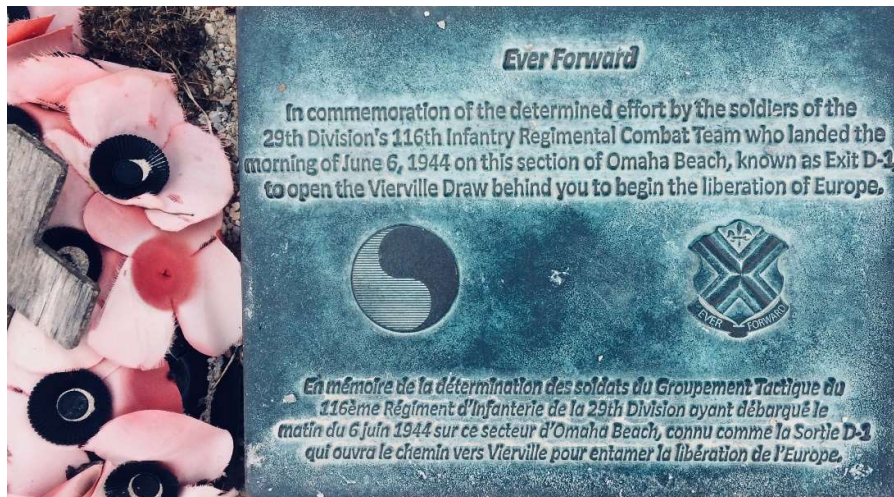
It was nice driving through the countryside. The GPS took us along the back roads and through rural farms. It was nice not to be driving on the highways. The roads in the country are not very wide, barely enough room for two cars to pass and the speed limit on these roads most of the time was 90kph. Needless to say, I wasn't doing anywhere near that speed. Our first destination was to Grand comp. This was as far as we planned to travel northwest along the Normandy beaches. The journey back from here to Caen took us along the beaches of Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword. These beach names were the operational names for the proposed landings on D-Day in 1944. This operation was codenamed "Operation Neptune". The codename for the Battle of Normandy, the allied operation that launched the successful invasion of Germ occupied Western Europe, was called "Operation Overlord".

From Grand comp we drove to Vierville. This drive took us along the beach area codenamed "Omaha Beach". We stopped and took in the views of beach and walked

by some of the memorials that have been erected. We also took several photos of the memorials.



The Vierville Draw was the westernmost of the five beach exits necessary to bring follow-on troops and equipment inland.



From here we drove to the beach codenamed “Gold Beach” and then to Arromanches which is located in the area codenamed “Juno Beach”.

On arrival at Arromanches we decided to stop for a coffee break and some lovely French pastries. From there we went for a walk around the town and along the beach foreshore. We also headed up the hill where we were able to get some great photos of the cliff face facing Juno Beach that the troops had to climb once they made it to the beaches. There are many pontoons still lying in the waters of this beach. Once again, we walked around looking at several memorials that had been erected.

Troops deliberately did not land at Arromanches on D-Day itself, to leave the coast here clear for a portable harbour (nicknamed Mulberry Harbour) being tugged over from southern England to be put in place, free of any debris. The port was meant to be temporary, lasting maybe three months. It served for some five months. The Arromanches Mulberry Harbour became known as Port Winston, after British wartime leader Winston Churchill, who was closely involved in its conception. A staggering 2.5 million men, 500,000 vehicles and 4 million tonnes of supplies arrived via Port Winston.



Arromanches Harbour with cliffs in the background.

According to the plans of operation Overlord, the liberation of Normandy should have been achieved in three weeks. Four times as many were to have elapsed before that objective was attained. The allies struggled and had lost over 200,000 men in the Battle, 37,000 of them dead. But the Germans had lost the bulk of their forces in the West in the confrontation: 400,000 were taken prisoner, killed or wounded, along with a very substantial proportion of their equipment and their tanks. They had resisted for three months, right up to the extreme limit of their capacities, before collapsing totally. As a result, the liberation of France was as rapid and easy as that of Normandy had been long, difficult, and costly.



Nearly 20,000 civilians had died. Caen, Lisieux, Coutances, Saint-Lo, Vire to name but a few were on the long list of towns that had been laid waste; peaceful villages

had been blotted out. Economic activity had been considerably disrupted. Artistic and cultural treasures were gone forever. Normandy was to carry the scars of war for many years. Its ordeal was the ransom to pay for national liberation. It is fitting today that no one forget that fact, as it is fitting that the sacrifice of a region and its inhabitants be forever linked in our memories to the sacrifice of those young men who came from over the Channel and over the Atlantic, and who now rest in peace forever in this land they came to liberate.

After quite an exhausting day we drove back to Caen where we were able to change our train departure time back to Paris to 18:00. On arrival back in Paris it was a quick trip to the pizza place for a shared pizza and a large beer each. Then we went back to the hotel where we started to pack for our departure to Gourdon in the south of France where we will be staying with friends, we met on our Greek Island Windstar cruise last year.

Tuesday 31 July 2018

Today we travelled down to Gourdon in southwestern France. We departed from Gare d'Austerlitz for the five-hour journey. The start of the journey revealed views of the city, and this slowly changed to a more rural style. It was interesting watching the changing landscape. The last couple of hours of the journey we travelled through green hills and valleys, which was very pleasant and an indication of the type of area we were heading to for our stay.

The train arrived pretty well on time, and we were met by Shane and Simone who whisked us away in their Mercedes to their lovely home located in Lamothe-Fenelon.

After relaxing over a nice glass(es) of champagne we sat down to a lovely dinner and then retired to the pool where we sat and talked the evening away until bedtime. This area is a lovely spot and very quiet and peaceful.

Wednesday 1 August 2018

This morning we awoke to the birds singing. We are staying in the gîte which is a separate two bedroom building that Shane and Simone have on their property. A gîte is usually a specific type of holiday accommodation. Gîtes are usually fully furnished and equipped for self-catering. Technically, to be called a gîte, the owner must live close by in order to provide help, assistance, and a warm welcome to guests. Gîtes are generally old farm workers' cottages or converted outbuildings and barns within proximity of the owner's principal residence. Needless to say, our gîte is extremely well kept and is an excellent self-contained accommodation with great hosts. We spend most of our time with our hosts in the main house.



Our gîte

The main bedroom is upstairs where you can see the French doors at this end of the building. We open these in the evening and get a cool breeze coming in through the night. This is why we wake to the birds singing in the morning. It is very pleasant.

Today we are heading off to Sarlat la Caneda.

Sarlat is a medieval town that developed around a large Benedictine abbey of Carolingian origin. The medieval Sarlat Cathedral is dedicated to Saint Sacerdos. Said to have been inhabited since Gallo-Roman times, Sarlat became a prosperous city at the end of the eighth century under the reign of Pepin le Bref and Charlemagne when the Benedictines established a monastery here. In 937 the abbey came under the rule of Cluny and then under the direct authority of the Holy See in Rome. In 1147 Saint Bernard, passing through Sarlat on his return from the crusades, performed-as legend has it- the miracle of the healing loaves, commemorated by the tower of Saint-Bernard, known as the Lanterne des morts (lantern of the dead),



Maree and Shane in the streets and Buildings of 13th century Sarlat.



View of the streets and markets of Sarlat with Simone and Shane in the background



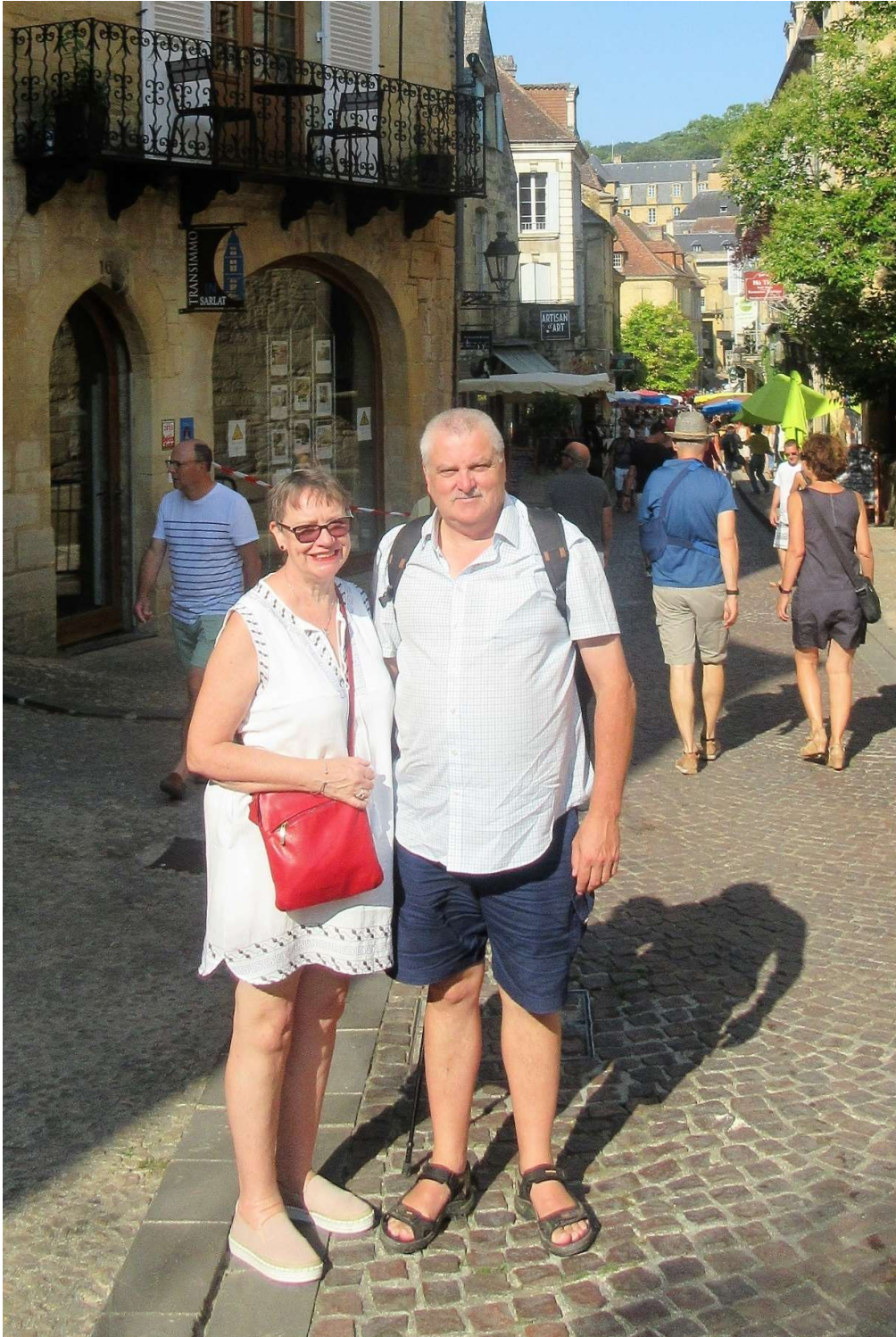
Streets and Buildings of 13th century Sarlat



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Streets and Buildings of 13th century Sarlat



Maree and Steve in Sarlat

The town suffered from the Norman invasions and then from the Hundred Years War owing to its position as a frontier region between the kings of France and England. The town, well-fortified by its Consuls, withstood all attacks and only became English at the end of the first part of the Hundred Years War (1360) when, by the treaty of Brétigny, Edward III of England renounced his claim to the throne of France in

exchange for the Southwest of France. Ten years later, the Connétable du Guesclin chased the English from France and Sarlat became French once more.

Although the treaty of Castillon ended the Hundred Years War in 1453, the Wars of Religion ravaged the countryside and the town suffered from the exactions of the Chevalier de Vivans and the Vicomte de Turenne. But this changed and peace returned to Sarlat with the reign of Henry IV.



Our coffee stops with delicious French pastries.



The poet Étienne or Estienne de La Boétie, who was born on 1 November 1530 and died 18 August 1563, was also a French judge, writer and “a founder of modern political philosophy in France”. La Boétie was born in Sarlat, in the Périgord region of southwest France, to an aristocratic family. His father was a royal official of the Périgord region, and his mother was the sister of the president of the Bordeaux Parliament (assembly of lawyers). Orphaned at an early age, he was brought up by his uncle and namesake, the curate of Bouilbonnas, and received his law degree from the University of Orléans in 1553. His great and precocious ability earned La

Boétie a royal appointment to the Bordeaux Parliament the following year, despite his being under the minimum age.



Maree and Steve with the statue of Etienne.

There he pursued a distinguished career as judge and diplomatic negotiator until his untimely death in 1563 at the age of thirty-two. La Boétie was also a distinguished poet and humanist, translating Xenophon and Plutarch, and being closely connected with the leading young Pleiade group of poets, including Pierre Ronsard, Jean Dorat and Jean-Antoine de Baif. La Boétie opposed religious toleration, arguing that allowing Protestants and Catholics to both conduct worship services would undermine the crown. He served with Montaigne in the Bordeaux Parliament and is immortalized in Montaigne's essay on friendship.



Maree and Steve at the “Square of the Geese”.

The statue symbolises who butters Sarlat’s bread: the buttery livers of force-fed geese, better known as foie gras.

Thursday 2 August 2018

Today we went for a tour of the Chateau Fenelon which was very interesting.

Around the year 1000, the name Fenelon belonged to a noble family that owned Sainte-Mondane and other estates. When the Brétigny Treaty was signed in 1360, the Lords of Fenelon took an oath of allegiance to Edward III, King of England. In 1375, the chateau was English property; but as it was poorly defended, it became French again on 23 June 1375. In 1445, the Lordship of Fenelon was owned by the Salignacs, a powerful Perigod family that gave the chateau the appearance it has today.



Chateau Fenelon

In 1568, Bertran de Salignac, better known as Monsieur de la Mothe, a French ambassador of King Charles the 9th, bought a lot of furniture to further embellish the chateau. He was sent on a mission to the Queen of England, Elizabeth the 1st, Even though his mission was a difficult one, he succeeded in keeping Calais a French city and managed to justify the Saint Barthelemy's events to the English monarch, but unfortunately failed to ease Mary Stuart's fate.



Chateau Fenelon



View from Chateau Fenelon



View from Château Fenelon

On 6 August 1651, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, better known as Fénelon, was born in the château. The youngest son of Pons de Salignac and Louise de la Cropte Saint Abre was to become the most famous member of the family. A disciple of Bossuet (famous Bishop of Meaux) and tutor to King Louis the 14th grandchildren, academic and Archbishop of Cambrai, his defence of quietism later alienated the King's favour.



View from Château Fenelon

Around the end of the 18th century, the Salignacs moved away from the château. During the French Revolution the château was turned into a farm devoted to the breeding of silkworms. The Malevilles restored the château in the middle of the 19th century. It now belongs to the Delautre family who try to preserve its unique character.

Friday 3 August 2018

Today was a very relaxing day as this evening we are attending the summer festival/dinner that is held by the village commune of Lamothe Fenelon, Simone and Shane's village. The dinner is set up in a field in a tent and is attended by around 200 people. The function starts at around 20:00 and goes to very late; so, a nice relaxing day is in order.

We arrived at the function on time, French style, which is about 15 minutes later than the official time to arrive. The event was set up with three rows of long trestle tables and bench seating. A DJ had set up adjacent to the trestles and there was a large dance floor for those who wanted to get up and strut their stuff. The dinner consisted of five courses starting with melon and prosciutto, BBQ lamb chops cooked on an open grill over charcoal, garlic potatoes, goat's cheese, and desert of mixed fruits in natural juice. Wine was included in the cover charge, along with an aperitif of white wine and strawberry and a second one, but I can't recall the ingredients, all for only 18 euros per person. Beer was also available on the tap and was only 2 euros a cup; good value all round. Maree stayed with the beer for our refreshments as the evening was very hot. Europe is suffering from higher-than-expected temperatures at the moment. The temperature when we arrived was in the mid-thirties, but it did cool down later, around midnight.



Simone, Shane, Maree, and Steve at the festival.



BBQ setup for dinner with the spuds cooking in the large paella dish.

Saturday 4 August 2018

Today we are travelling back to Paris from Gourdon and will arrive in Paris at about 18:40. We overnight at the Mecure hotel at Gare de Lyon as our departure for Milan in the morning is from Gare de Lyon at 09:41. The trip will take us just over 8 hours on the TGV.

On the return journey from Gourdon to Paris the air conditioning on the train failed in the first three carriages. We were in carriage one. So, by the time we reached Paris it was pretty hot and stifling. At one stage we were going to replenish our water as we were getting low. We waited for the chap who walked through the carriage with the food cart, but he never arrived. I then found out that this service does not run on a weekend. So, I thought I would walk to the restaurant car. But that was carriage 15 at the other end of the train. So, I gave up and we rationed our water instead.

Sunday 5 August 2018

Today we are heading off to Milan, Italy. Read the "Our European Adventure Part 2 – Italy" to continue following our European trip.