

Chronicles of the French Dream

Timeline: May 2005



5/4-5 Travel, first day of exploration -

Lord, it takes forever to get a dream started and at 10:50 Paris time, we finally get to ground 0, ready to get going on this immense opportunity; my luggage got misplaced and it will be delivered to our hotel within 24 hrs. We take a cab and the price for the ride is 45 Euros - in 1985 it was around \$10.00, tip included. But that's OK, we're in Paris, in the smallest hotel-room ever built but it's OK; it has all the amenities - there's just no room to move around the bed.

We immediately start on an exploration of our neighborhood, find the church (hard to miss), the grocery store, the drugstore, a "Monoprix" where I replenish my stock of misplaced necessities, a "Bureau de Tabac" for stamps and post-cards, and finally a

"Brasserie" where we eat an early dinner. Then, it's off to bed.

5/6 Second day of exploration

Notre Dame, the Louvre, where we saw our old friends: Diana at the hunt, Nike, the Venus de Milo, and of course, the one and only Mona Lisa, along with other truly awesome masterpieces, and the Jardin des Tuileries...Also, the Place de la Concorde and the place Vendome. Lunch at McDonalds, Dinner in an Italian Restaurant with "American Coca" (diet coke) for a drink.

Notre-Dame... What a monument! Located on the Ile de la Cite (you get to it by crossing a bridge over an arm of the Seine and there it is, in all its splendor); the gargoyles which some long-ago architect decided to use as covers for the water spouts; the flying but-tresses which are supposed to hold up the whole building, the famed Rose stained-glass window, and that's just the outside, guarded of course by an equestrian statue of Joan of Arc; inside... a collection of art-works, the pulpit, the side-chapels with their own statuary, one of which is the French version of the Pieta... The stained glass windows each describing a station of the cross... It's just so much to admire... And to go from there to a walk through the Louvre on the same day... It's just too much!

5/7 Third day of exploration -

The Alexander III bridge, the Eiffel tower, the Hotel des Invalides where we visited Napoleon and his son, Joseph-Napoleon II, king of Rome, Vauban, Louis XIV's military genius, Turenne, his fortification specialist, Lyautey, the early 19th century "peaceful conqueror of North Africa" etc., and admired the richest looking altar ever built. While we were on the top story of the Eiffel tower, admiring Paris which lay at our feet, it started storming and I mean STORMING: thunder, lightning, a real laser show, but they didn't evacuate us and instead let us admire the spectacle. By the time we got down, it had stopped raining and so we proceeded through the Military School - Saint-Cyr - where earlier we had spotted a rider from the top of the tower, and where once Pouj the Elder taught fencing, back in '39 and again in '47-'48. It started raining again and so we found refuge in a small brasserie called cafe de l'Alma named no doubt after one of the most one-sided victories of Napoleon's. Many pix; lunch at McDonalds, dinner at Buffalo Grill.

Thunderstorm while on the tower, hail while resting our camera finger at the café. It must be May.

5/8 Fourth day -

It's raining like crazy; we're prancing in the rain; got lost looking for Hertz - exactly - but found a grocery market on our way home; bought our lunch (yoghurt and fruit); had nap; went out again and found a flea-market; Dianna almost bought something; found a bookstore where Dianna bought Neil's gift; re-found our 1st cafe and stopped for a repeat of our first meal in Paris. Went back home. Time to plan for to-morrow.



5/9 Rainy, rainy Sunday, this Fifth day -

You'd think we're in Germany or someplace. So we opt for indoor activities: 1st , 8:30 mass at St Medard, a medieval church in the Romanesque style and from there to the metro which takes us to the funicular to practically the front door of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart where the main chapel is surrounded by secondary ones dedicated to Joan of Arc, St Denis (France's patron saint), St Vincent of Paul, St Antoine de Padoue (after whom San Antonio, TX, was named), and dominated by the dome fresco of Christ welcoming all people to His church: American Indians in their head-dress, Asians, Africans, even Frenchmen

From there to the "Terte" where Dianna posed for a street artist; from there to a "creperie" for lunch and from there to a nice sweat-shirt shop. Bought some, and on to the funicular, to the metro, to home, to nap, but not before shooting a full roll of point n' shoot and running the battery down on the digicam. Got out again at five, toured the Jardin des Plantes, more pix. From there to the Buffalo Grill where Dianna had to restrain me

from shooting a couple of unruly little girls and her Italian guardians. To-morrow, real shopping. So up early and attem.

5/10 Monday. The Sixth day -

We should have gotten out of Paris yesterday according to the original plan but there are so many things to do here. Today: shopping day. Up early (before 10am), into the metro to "Au Bon Marche" (reasonable prices -ha), back in the metro to the "Galeries Lafayette" (2 side-by-side 6-storied buildings, better prices = several purchases), light (17,000 calories) French-type lunches, into the metro to home to dump purchases, back out to our neighborhood "Monoprix" (can you say 'Big Lots'?) for more purchases on to a THAI restaurant for dinner, on to a Japanese Brasserie for a beer and a coca lite where we bribed a waiter so he would take a picture of the both of us sitting out in the sidewalk cafe. All in all a great day; tomorrow we go back to walking; the metro is nice but it rather limits our photo ops and THAT's detrimental to our figures.

5/11 Tuesday. The Seventh day -

Our last day in Paris, at least for a while. And that didn't start out so well; maybe we were tired, but, as Dianna suggested, we might just have started missing Paris. Whatever...After a small in-room lunch of grapes, nectarines and camembert, off we go, past Notre- Dame (more pix -the light is better than in previous days) to the Samaritaine, another dept. store, this one taking up only 6 stories. We toured the whole place, bought 2 tubes of super-glue and left toward the Louvre in whose Cour Carree we had a snack of coca light, raisins and peanut-butter crackers in front of some frustrated pigeons. To our feet and on toward the Pyramids (photo-op; the light etc.) thru the Jardin des Tuileries to the Place Vendome (photo-op) and up the Champs Elysees (multiple photo ops), took pix of General de Gaulle's statue and on to the Ark of Triomphe which we photographed every which way FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE CHAMPS, with cars flying past us in both direction

Our mission accomplished, we finish crossing the street and proceed to head back to the Place Vendome. Walk into a couple of stores only to make sure that we were more Monoprix people and less the Louis Vuitton kind. Walked by a McDonald's, and sat in a street-side cafe, only to be ignored (we were probably overdressed), moved down the line to another café where we were treated like royalty (the snub was our first negative human encounter of the whole trip) while enjoying our Lipton Ice Tea "pêche", Coca Lite and Creme Brûlée for two. Then it's back on the trail home (we walked 12 miles that day) to pack and have dinner -French cuisine this time- and on to bed. To-morrow should see us drive thru Paris traffic to get to Versailles and beyond...

5/12 Wednesday, the Eighth day -

We're up at dawn -actually it was closer to 9- and we check out and get a cab to take us and our 700 lbs of luggage to the Hertz (exactly) place where they've never heard of us. We still manage to rent a vehicle (a Renault Espace, the French Suburban) and off we go toward Versailles only to find after 40 minutes that the directions given us were no good; so on to Fontainebleau which we reach without any problem. We even find a space to park our monster. On to the chateau we go, pay our money and have a wonderful visit with History from Francis 1st to Napoleon III; well, Fontainebleau will never outdo Ver-sailles, but at least, it's easier to find. Then, it's on to Epernay following a road map that keeps disagreeing with the actual layout of the highways.

At one point I drive us smack into a dead-end but Dianna forgives me; she alights from Monster to take pix of the nuclear plant - that place was smokin'... Back on a road with better access, we finally arrive in Epernay where all hotels are booked -no room at the inn and it's only May... On to Reims then, where we follow the signs to a car-"Parc" which sits right in front of a Best Western hotel nick-named Cafe de la Paix. We will be there for the next 2 nights. Yea...



5/13 Thursday, the Ninth day -

Our hotel room is so BIG compared to our Paris closet that we almost decide to forget we're tourists. So on to the Cathedral where Joan of Arc brought Louis XII to be crowned king of France before the Brits could react. Many, many pix to be sure; the smiling angel, the double altar, the crowning font, the Marc Chagall stained glass windows, the vaults, the naves, the side-chapels, etc., etc., ad brain overload... Well, with most of the day ahead of us, we decide to pay a visit to the other cathedral, that of Saint Remi, the medieval bishop who christened Clovis, king of the Franks and a warrior if ever there was one, in the year 598. Clovis must have been hard to live with because his wife Clotilde was eventually canonized. Saint Remi had built this church atop some Roman ruins and was buried there -- in a beautiful mausoleum which stands 10 ft.-high, right behind the altar-- in 603. This church doesn't have the fame of the other cathedral, but the workmanship of the stone-cutters and masons who built this thing... just as awesome.

Back toward Centreville we go, only to find out that lunch is no longer served - it's only 4pm... So we grab a couple of sandwiches cum pastries to take to the hotel and eat the whole thing with tomato juice and coca lite. It is now nap time. After waking up, we reorganize our luggage and find the weight to be less gross -- only 650 lbs. It must be all our walking. It's now around 9 pm and we go looking for an open restaurant; we find one and it's wonderful; pate, asparagus, duck and filet, cheese platters, crème Brûlée, apple tart, all of it helped down with champagne. La Lorraine... The right place for our last supper in Reims.

5/14 Friday, the Tenth day -

9 days down and 7 to go,,, We got up a little late today, checked out, and on to Epernay where we're going to visit the caves of Moët et Chandon. I find Epernay but locating the Avenue de Champagne where most of the champagne makers like Perrier Joët of the flower bottle, Mercier, Pol Roger, etc., operate was a little harder. Conflicting directions from well-meaning natives didn't help. That's when my navigator bade me park Monster near a city map she had just spotted and the rest was easy. We even found a parking space less than two klicks away. Tried to get into Perrier-Joët but they were closed for the week-end. Tried M&C -- not before 2pm. So, off to a corner brasserie for lunch, to the tourism office for information, to the old city hall and its park for pix, and finally on to M&C for a seminar on champagne--making. And a bit of a tasting... Great time.

After a few purchases, we're on our way toward Dijon of mustard fame; get off the highway and, following the back-roads and equally screwy directions, we find the Hotel du Lac right across the area train station. More pix, more food at the auberge, a little walking and off to bed. It's been a great day -again- and we're expecting another one tomorrow.

5/15 Saturday, the Eleventh day -

Came all the way from Is-sur-Tille to Les Reys de Saulce in the Drome Dept. Crossed the Rhone, the Saone, the Isere, a few canals complete with self-powered barges where once they were horse-drawn from the shore. Almost didn't get lost and that was in the parking lot of a "Geant" supermarket. We would not have starved to death. Today we stayed away from the much faster Autoroute so we could pretty much stop and even U-turn for a photo or two of some gorgeous landscape. And U-turn we did, a couple of times, with no problem. The drivers in the provinces are a lot more generous than in Paris and let me get away with some "Oops!-I'm in-the-wrong-lane-can-I-cut-you-off?" stuff.

Anyway, a relaxing day amid a lot of mountains and vineyards - Gevrey-Chambertin, Nuits-St-Georges, Julienas, Pouilly-Fuisse, Cotes-du-Rhone, Macon-Villages, Puligny-Montrachet, etc., etc. And if one could drink from all those vineyards with a camera, Dianna wouldn't regain her sobriety for a year. Today, a deja-vu. When we got to the hotel where we would spend the night, guess what: another nuclear plant! Are we good or just lucky?

5/16 Sunday, the Twelfth day -

And from Les Reys de Saulce, on the A7 Autoroute, we speed to the promised shore - the Riviera - which we reach around noon. We stay away from the well-known towns such as St Tropez (of Brigitte Bardot fame), St Raphael, etc., and find a lovely place in Ste Maxine - Hostellerie de la Vierge Noire (Hostel of the Black Virgin to you Francophobes) - which will rent us a room AND a balcony facing the beach which beckons us from across the street. First we eat lunch at a place called "Le Prao" and then, on to the beach where we spend about an hour, take a dip, get a little sun-burned (well, one of us did) and then into Monster and on the road to towns east. Time to get lost and turn around and on to towns east.

We go by some stores, park the van (about 2 klicks away), walk back to the stores, spend money (post-cards are SO expensive on the Riviera). And all of a sudden, it's time to sample some of that wonderful Provençal cuisine. We park Monster in front of a Sailing Club and enter "Les Alizes" (the warm winds) and sample, and sample, and sample. Eventually, we get back to Monster which has been vandalized; only one thing missing: one of Dianna's purses, the one containing the rental agreement. We patch up the window as best we can. To-morrow we call the cops - that should take all of our AM. We were having too great a time, I guess; something bad had to happen; at least it didn't happen to us.

5/17 Monday, the Thirteenth day -

Today was a better day. At least it started right. Then the things we might have obsessed about had to be taken care of. We went to the Ste Maxine National Gendarmerie post and reported the vandalism of the night before. I had figured the whole AM would be shot - bureaucracy, you know - but the lady gendarme was cool, most efficient and she had her printer spit out her certificate in minutes. Then we called Hertz to give them the bad news - exactly - and in hours we got a new rental document but no new vehicle. Our window sort of patched-up, we headed toward Cannes where the film festival is raging. Think of it as a drunken night in Old S.A., chaos wise, only on scooters, motorbikes, bikes, cars AND on foot... Said Dianna later, "After this, Paris will be a breeze!"



!"... Anyhoo, we had lunch there - 1 Italian pizza, 1 Heineken, 1 Coca lite - and on into the murderous traffic; as soon as we saw an arrow pointing to Ste Maxine, though, we just headed west to our hotel, after of course collecting a sand sample from Cannes's beach, buying and mailing a few post-cards and taking many, many, many pix of yachts, villas high up on the "Corniche d'Or", the many sailboats moored in the Croisette, the mountains, etc., etc. Back to our hotel - in one piece - we re-boarded Monster's window a little more professionally and, satisfied with our job, availed ourselves of a beach break. This Mediterranean - you've got to see it! Her lazy waves seem to tell you, "I'm not a lake, I'm a sea, but a nice one!"

With hunger calling, back to the hotel we go and, sitting on our balcony overseeing the sea (pun intended) we share the last of some (really) delicious pastries and the first of a Coca lite. Then back inside to pack. Tomorrow it's Nimes and back toward Paris.

The Riviera...What a dream!

5/18 Tuesday, the Fourteenth day -

"To leave", said the poet, "Is to die a little". And we certainly left parts of ourselves on the Riviera - on the beach, on the streets of Cannes, at the Hostellerie de la Vierge Noire, for sure, even at the Gendarmerie.

Today we left Ste Maxine right after breakfast and headed to Nimes, formerly a Roman town and the seat of power of some consul or another (the nephew of then Emperor Claudius, maybe?), whose house - the famed "Maison Carree" - still stands some 2000 years later. Many, many pix there. Nimes is also the home of the "Arenes" where gladiators once fought for their lives and where now the bulls chase a bunch of nuts around the old coliseum. We were also told that, once in a while, a "course de taureaux" (bullfight) is held and sometimes, the bull wins. Many pix there of the old "Arenes" and of the statue of the torero laying his cape down, presumably in front of the bull which the sculptor never attempted to portray. The bull never stood still long enough, we guess.

Lunch was in a Brasserie where a thoughtful waiter showed us the way to the Rue d'Aspic and the Rue de la Madeleine where only pedestrians - on foot and atop scooters (?) - are allowed for the noble purpose of shopping. And shop did Dianna, until I bought her a nice necklace/pendant, and until we found some suitable post-cards, etc. It is there that we learned that all those insect broaches were not flies but ... cicadas.

After a few more pix on the place des Arenes - of a fountain symbolizing Nimes and of a church (Ste Madeleine?) - back on the road we go toward Lyon. We almost get run off the road by a truck and later by a midget car, and finally arrive in Roussillon - the town, not the province --, and check in at the hotel Europa where I promptly tear up the right side of Monster, trying to get into too narrow a tunnel to the parking lot. Oh well. The room is nice, supper was great at "L'Emeraude" (more pate, more mousse) and now we rest. Tomorrow we get closer to Paris and might even reach the Airport. We'll see.



5/19 Wednesday, the Fifteenth day -

We wake up early this day and as I begin to load up our luggage into "Scarface", the torn-up door that caused the change in "Monster"'s nickname is still torn up - that was no nightmare - shoot!

When we finally hit the road though, our vehicle is still fast and responsive but I can tell that the kilometers we've piled on have taken their toll on both Dianna's and my nerves. Our route takes us to Lyon where I miss the turn-off to Paris and get to screw around in morning rush-hour (an oxymoron if there ever was one) traffic until another of those

omnipresent circular intersections puts me back on the right track and into the tunnel that takes me across the city back onto the Autoroute.

After Lyon - thanks to my getting lost, some pix of this beautiful city on the Rhone were taken -, it's Beaune and on to Auxerre, in the Poitou province, where we find a "Geant", a kind of super-Kmart with satellite stores and restaurants in attendance, forming a "mail" or mall. We park our wounded steed and proceed into the mall's maw, find the Geant proper, purchase a mini-recorder and some tapes; we park ourselves in one of the brasseries, eat a light lunch and resume our Paris-bound trek.

Soon, we reach the peripherique (in English, we use a shorter word: loop), turn eastward and briefly wonder why it would have been easier to find Versailles coming from Auxerre than from Paris. Go figure. The loop traffic is at a stand-still - only motorbikes are moving (at 50 mph between the stopped cars). Eventually though, we find our exit - St. Denis - and start on our search for a parking lot and a hotel. We find the "Parc" easily enough and to our surprise it's practically empty. We find our first hotel only to be told by a machine that it's full, then our second hotel where two wrestler-types who look as though they never expect overnight guests tell us they're full as well. Back to "Scarface" we go and we're outta here! The only store in the area: a monoprix which no one seems to be frequenting; the only restaurant: a McDonalds with no customers.

Back on the road, we follow Charles de Gaulle signs all the way to Goussainville where we find a nice hotel called "Bagatelle" (= "no big thing") into which we book ourselves for two nights. Nice room, shower, everything, AND a nice restaurant well-stocked in good wines and a better dessert buffet. And good folks whose duty they told us was to serve us...

A little aside: it seems in retrospect that as our trip progressed, our rooms got bigger and bigger and their prices cheaper and cheaper. Next time we come here, we're booking nothing but suites!

Tomorrow we must surrender "Scarface" to her rightful owners - Hertz - and I'm not exactly looking forward to it. So sleep comes slowly, but it comes...



5/20 Thursday, the Sixteenth and last day -

We get up early, have breakfast - croissants, juice and "yaourts" - and off we go toward CDG which we reach easily, thanks to the hotel owner's directions. There we find Hertz where they don't exactly welcome us with open arms, what with the damage we inflicted on their vehicle. We fill out papers, they fill out papers and finally we're free to go. To the nearest terminal we walk and from there catch an "Air France bus" which takes us to Montparnasse.

Upon alighting from the bus - can you imagine making a living driving a bus in Paris? - we find ourselves standing in front of another Galeries Lafayette store which we enter.

There my professional-shopper-wife finds a Lancôme counter, picks out some beauty-help thing (I never said she needed help in that respect, I swear!). Our goal, now: another big department store called "Printemps" where we find out we don't belong there, locate some toilets (those Metro rides can really do things to your body) and ask a Securite guy the best way to get to the "Prisunic" - a dime-store - which is supposed to be in this neighborhood (THE boulevard Haussmann neighborhood); he tells us of course (!) that it no longer exists (our Paris guide lied) and so we ask him whether "Printemps" dabbles in souvenirs and the like. He says, " Mais oui! Au sixieme etage!" (which equals "Sure! On the 7th floor!"). So up several escalators we go to a marvelous section where they offer Eiffel Towers, post-cards, t-shirts, sweat-shirts, etc., all with some Paris reference on them. Dianna had a ball and bought half the shop for only 189 Euros.

Loaded with these goods, into the Metro we go, all the way to the Pont Neuf (the bridge built by Henri IV back in the 16th century) where we spot a brasserie called "Café du Pont Neuf", a sure sign that we got off at the right stop. It's now around 2pm and even though most cafes are closing, this one is open at all hours, long enough to serve us lunch. We then patrol the Quays for a while, taking a few pictures here and there, very conscious of the fact that we're spending our last hours in France. Back into the Metro to the Chatelet where we connect with the railroad service that'll take us all the way to Goussainville where we walk from the station to our hotel right past another "McDo", this one thriving.

We repack our over-abundant luggage one last time, go have dinner and call it a night.

Our taxi will pick us up at 7:15 a.m. tomorrow morning.

Our dream is all but over. And what a ride it was...