



French bonhomie with added sparkle

The Champagne region of France is known worldwide for the sparkling white and rosé wine that proudly bears its name.

The 220km *Route Touristique du Champagne* allows visitors to explore the region while getting to know the Champagne producers and their wine.

In centuries past, the area was one of the great economic 'powerhouses' of Europe, with the Medieval fairs at Troyes being hugely important to its economic prosperity.

This has left a considerable historic legacy for the visitor today to admire.

Champagne is also a rural region of rich and rolling countryside, speckled with small towns and sleepy villages and, in the *Parc national de forêts*, the latest and largest national park in France.

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller





A very special time in southern Champagne

By Ashley Gibbins

Ann and I have been making determined efforts to get to more of France in recent years - and have yet to be disappointed.

This time it was a five night tour through the Champagne region, more specifically southern Champagne.

And it proved to be a fascinating and hugely enjoyable addition to our French collection.

Cuisine par excellence

This being France, it goes without saying the food was rarely anything but excellent.

But then it is really quite difficult to opt for a cafe, bar, bistro or restaurant in France and not be rewarded by the choice on the menu, the food served or the ambience therein.

The finest of wines

And as this is France, an appreciation of fine wine inevitably goes hand-in-hand with the savouring of good food.

The country is rightly acknowledged as one of the world's finest wine producers.

Making every time special

And among its wines, Champagne enjoys podium place for sure fire quality and the 'go to' for those really special events and celebrations or when marking great success of any kind.

While I am in no way adverse to a glass or two of this 'bubbly', Ann is the real Champagne connoisseur in our relationship.

It is by far and away her wine of preference - whatever the occasion.

And this is very much how the residents of the Champagne region see it.

"You must never wait for a special time to drink Champagne", I was told emphatically.

"That's because Champagne makes every time special".

(See : *Sparkling wine synonymous with celebration* below).

In addition to good food and fine wine there is the inevitable warmth of the welcome in Champagne.

And we met some wonderful people on this trip including, perhaps inevitably, members of families that have been producing Champagne here for generations.

While in southern Champagne there is also the opportunity to learn more the artist Renoir and France's wartime resistance leader and subsequent president Charles DeGaulle - two of the regions revered 'sons'.

Medieval towns

There are a string of towns in the region that have carefully preserved, medieval 'old town' areas.

These are steeped in historic lure.

Parc national de forêts

The *Parc national de forêts*, which opened in November 2019, is the latest and largest of the French National Parks.

Taking in swathes of Champagne and Burgundy it is an area of genuine peace and tranquillity.

All in all a great deal was levered into a relatively short tour through southern Champagne but it meant the trip was all the more rewarding for that.

More information

www.tourisme-hautemarne.com


www.champagne.fr

Sumptuous wine synonymous with celebration

By Ann Mealor

I just love the celebratory 'pop' of the cork and the sizzling fizz of the bubbles as the pale gold liquid fills your glass?

Squeals and quick slurps to stop it escaping over the rim. Happy moments and memories.

Champagne creates a sense of occasion and it's a treat I have always enjoyed. So it was a pleasure, as well as an education, to discover more about the king of fizz.

Champagne is made from predominantly three grape varieties; *pinot noir*, *pinot meunier* and *chardonnay*.

Blending the grapes

Some Champagnes are made from a blend of all three grapes; others from two grape varieties and some from just one, such as *Blanc de Blancs* (literally 'white of whites'), which is made from just the white chardonnay grape.

By tasting a number of blends at the different cellars, you will find a Champagne that best suits your palate - it's a hard job, but it has to be done!

Light and delicate

After a few tastings I discovered my favourite was the *Blanc de Blancs*, made from only the chardonnay grape.

It is light, delicate and pale gold in colour with a lingering finish.

The *Blanc de Noirs* (literally 'white of blacks') is made from the black grapes *Pinot Noir* and *Pinot Meunier* or just *Pinot Noir*.

This champagne is slightly richer and more full bodied than the *Blanc de Blancs*.

Tasting notes often refer to red and black fruit aromas. However, as with all champagnes, and depending on the blend, two *Blanc de Noirs* can taste totally different.

As soon as the grapes are harvested at the end of August/beginning of September, it is all go!

The pressing

The fruit has to be gently pressed, to keep the juice clear, soon after picking.

The grapes are pressed two or three times and it is the first pressing, the *cuvée* that is deemed to be the clearest, the sweetest and the best, so look out for this word on the champagne bottle.

Each grape variety is pressed separately and the first, second and third pressings are all stored separately, so that each champagne house can produce its own unique blend.

The leftover grape skins, pulp, stalks and pips are used to make other products such as vinegar, grappa, cosmetics and animal feed.

The juice is then put into tanks for the first fermentation and then bottled for a second time.

During the process bottles have to be turned two or three times a day and some cellars still turn up to 30,000 bottles by hand.

Needless to say, it's a family and friends affair and everybody joins in.

Sediment is removed from the bottle by turning it upside down so that it settles at the top.



The neck of the bottle is then frozen and the sediment expelled in a cube of ice.

It is at this point that sugars and white wine are added to the bottle and the vintner decides whether the champagne will be a *Brut*, *Extra Brut*, *Demi-Sec* etc.

The ageing process

Champagne needs to be aged for at least two years before it can be sold.

That said, the finest and most expensive Champagnes are aged for five years or more.

Each Champagne is different and, after seeing the care and attention that the passionate producers put into their product, it makes me appreciate my favourite tippie even more.

Cheers!

More information

www.champagne.fr

The Route Touristique du Champagne

Why would one want to visit the Champaign region and not get to know more about the sparkling wine that bears its name?

While Champagne is undoubtedly Ann's 'tipple' of choice, as she has explained, I am also partial to a glass or two and there is certainly the opportunity to do just this along the *Route Touristique du Champagne*.

The 220 km Route has five distinct sections and around 80 visitor centres along the way.

Linked to it are more than 600kms of walks to allow visitors to explore the historical heritage of the region.

The highlight, however, is going to be visiting to the many Champagne vineyards and their cellars and meeting the small, local producers.

It is a great way to learn first hand about a sparkling wine and how it has been produced with unstinting care and devotions by families who have been doing so for generations.

During our short trip through Southern Champagne we were able to take in three vineyards :

Champagne Charles Clement

Champagne Charles Clement is produced by the Cooperative of Colomb  -le-Sec that 60 independent winegrowers who come together to sell a percentage of the Champagne they produce under the name of Charles Cl  ment.

The Cooperative was created in 1956 by 22 wine makers including the Charles Clement who gave his name to it.

Its most popular cuvee is *Cuv   Tradition* which is a blending of the Pinot Noir (50%), Chardonnay (30%) and Pinot Meunier (20 %).

www.champagne-charles-clement.fr

Monial Champagne



In 1115, the Abbey of Clairvaux was founded by Saint Bernard at Colomb  -le-Sec with Cistercian farms and vineyards established.

The dominant feature of a visit to the *Cellier aux Moines* here is the 12th Century cellar that dates from this time and which has vaulted ribbed vaults and natural lighting from majestic semicircular windows.



Along with a 16th century chapel that was used by the monks, the property is now run by the Calon-Egger family and their Monial Champagne retains the heritage and quality long enjoyed by the sparkling wines produced here.

www.monial.net

Richardot Champagne



The family-run estate Richardot Champagne, in the heart of the C  te des Bar at Loches-sur-Ource, epitomises the welcome visitors along the *Route Touristique du Champagne* receive.

The estate is run by Jean Paul, Isabelle and C  cile Richardot, who took it over from their granduncle Jean, who first established it in the 1950s.

Jean believed that *we're not working the land of our ancestors but borrowing the land of our children* and that philosophy is followed today.

Some 75,000 bottles of fine Richardot Champagne is produced annually and those visiting the estate get to see the loving care and attention that goes into each and every one.

Being taken through the process and getting to see the cellars is as fascinating as the following tastings are enjoyable.

www.champagne-richardot.com/en



www.champagne-charles-clement.fr



More information

www.tourisme-en-champagne.co.uk/champagne-trail



This national parc was well worth the wait

The *Parc national de forêts*, which opened in November 2019, after more than a decade in gestation, is going to provide a major boost to the visitor potential in the Southern Champagne region.

It is the latest of 11 French national parks and, at 241,781 hectares, also the largest, taking in some 130 villages including the delightful riverside town of Chatillon-sur-Seine.

Dating back to the Revolution

Visitors to the *Parc national de forêts* will find forest areas covered with beech and oak trees that date back over 200 years, and are some of the oldest woodlands you will find in France.

It is really something to gaze on trees that have stood here since the time of the French Revolution

The *Parc* is also home to stag, wild boar and European wildcats.

Among the birds found here is the illusive black stork, which is far less common than its white 'cousin' and a real lure for birdwatchers.

Some 20% of the black stork's French population are to be found in the *Parc*.

Venus slipper orchid

The rare Venus slipper orchid also thrives within the forest and there is the chance to visit the stunning *Cascade d'Etufs* waterfall.

There is a chance to appreciate the nature on offer here via a network narrow winding roads that go into hidden valleys and, for the more active, along 2,000km of easy walking footpaths and longer more rugged hiking trails.

The *Parc national de forêts* is an integral part of an overall plan to tackle the artificial exploitation of the land through 'intensive agriculture'.



More information

www.forets-parcnational.fr

Remembering the man and his momentous times

Travelling through this part of Champagne, one should not miss the chance to get to know a little more about (or brush up on) a certain Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle.

President, nee General, DeGaulle had his much loved home in the village of Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises and right nearby is the hugely impressive DeGaulle Monument and celebration of his life.

These combine to give visitors a fascinating insight into the man and his influence on the military, political and economic landscape of 20th Century Europe.

I am old enough to remember being taught about General DeGaulle leading the French Resistance against Nazi Germany in World War II, from his exiled base in the UK.

Watching his subsequent return to a liberated Paris in 1945 and that triumphant walk down *Le Avenue des Champs-Élysées* retains its seminal status.

Particularly given Adolf Hitler's pompous 'victory' cavalcade along the same route in June 1940.

But (and ironically as things have worked out) it was as President of France, from 1959 to 1969, that DeGaulle was to become a figure of some derision in the UK.

His emphatic *non!* (twice) in vetoing my country's request to join the, then, European Common Market showed how wartime allegiances had been replaced by peacetime politicking.

DeGaulle died in his beloved home Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises a year after standing down as President and has a humble burial place in the village cemetery with a headstone merely inscribed: *Charles de Gaulle 1890-1970*.

It is in sharp contrast to the 145 ft high *Cross of Lorraine* that dominates the western end of the village as part of the overall DeGaulle Memorial, and which commemorates his wartime role as commander of the Free French Forces.

The DeGaulle Memorial

DeGaulle's influence and impact on post war European unification is evident given this Memorial to him was officially opened, in 2008, by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The Memorial and its many exhibition spaces use Charles de Gaulle as a catalyst to chart the history of France and Europe in the mid-20th century.

This enables visitors to focus on the momentous events that unfolded during de Gaulle's life.

This is, deliberately, not a museum to the man stocked with his memorabilia.

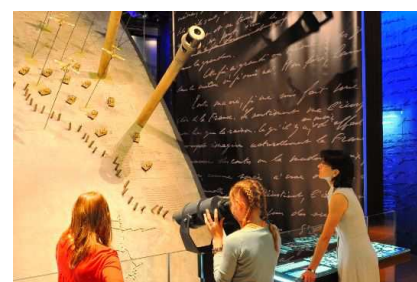


The only de Gaulle artefacts on display are two of the Citroen DS cars he used, with one bullet hole ridden following a near fatal attempt on his life in 1962.

What we do get is something more important, and that is a genuine understanding of de Gaulle's time during his service in the Great War (1914-18) and his fleeing his country and the invading German forces to lead the French resistance movement from London.

There is also space, of course, allocated to the man's time as president and the cultural and often traumatic changes that took place during his presidency.

Dominating the vista is the Memorial's huge pink granite Lorraine cross, which was adopted as the symbol of France's wartime resistance against German occupation.



La Boisserie

La Boisserie, DeGaulle's relatively modest home is also open to the public.

He bought the property in 1934 and found real respite, relaxation and solace there, particularly during the *presidential* years.

Visitors can tour the ground floor of the house to view the drawing room, dining room, library and office where the de Gaulle wrote his *Memoirs*



More information

www.en.memorial-charlesdegaulle.fr



Essoyes celebrates its favourite impressionist



The artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841 -1919) was a leading proponent of the *Impressionist* style of painting.

There is the chance to get a fascinating glimpse of the man and his work at Essoyes, as this small town has taken the artist to its heart.

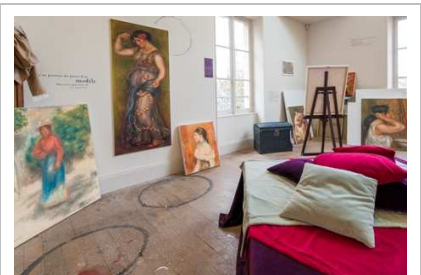
The Renoir family home has been bought by the town and is open to the public as is his light filled garden studio.

Back in the town square, the Renoir Centre has permanent exhibition on the artist and a video presentation of his life and work.



More information

www.renoir-essoyes.fr





The Champagne region's flourishing heritage

While getting to know more about Charles de Gaulle and Pierre-Auguste Renoir proved a highlight of this trip, we also got to meet those who are, today, ensuring the heritage of the region still flourishes.

Le Moulin de la Fleuristerie



The *Moulin de la Fleuristerie*, the Flower Mill, is the only place in France still making floral arrangements and artificial flowers for the premier fashion house like Chanel, Lenôtre and Noriko Endo in Japan.

Their flowers even adorn the costumes of the ladies at *Le Moulin Rouge*.

But for the visitor it is the chance to see these being made in a factory unchanged since the 1920s.

The mill's 19C machinery is still powered by the 110 volts of electricity generated by the paddle wheel first constructed in 1264.

Originally a traditional flour mill, the property was turned over to making silk flowers in 1903.

The company doing so operated until the mid-90s when it was bought by Emmanuel and Annette Geoffroy.

The couple have faithfully retained the flower making skills and all of the original tools, working surfaces and machinery and have added a gift shop, alfresco café and guest house accommodation to the complex.

They also run workshops teaching the age old skill of hand made silk flowers.

A hugely enjoyable couple of hours can be spent here.

www.champagne-ardenne-tourism.co.uk/what-do/activities/le-moulin-de-la-fleuristerie

Saveurs de Mets



Although not formally open to the public it would be good to get along to *Saveur de Mets* at Auberive if you can.

Jules Aubert, with father Pierre and brother Jeremy, is creating a fine fragrant vegetable oils from seeds by local suppliers. Jules will be delighted to show you around by appointment.

And his oils have such wonderful flavours.

www.saveurdemets.fr



A medieval city bustling with vibrant majesty

Troyes, the one time capital of the Champagne-Ardenne region, is the place to start and/or end a trip to this part of France.

Situated on the Seine, some 90 miles from Paris, it can also combine with the French capital for a two city break (one large one small) via high speed rail link.

Ever keen to highlight its strategic position within the Champagne region, everyone here seemed keen to alert us visitors to the outline of the city's 'old town' area, and it being shaped as a Champagne cork.

With just a smidgen of artistic licence, one has to agree.

What we get to enjoy in Troyes derives from its status in the Middle Ages as an economic powerhouse of Europe, with the wealth and prosperity this generated.

The city was strategically located on the great trade routes between Italy and Flanders and, as such, an ideal place to host two annual fairs.

Each would last three months and take over the town with the huge influx craftsmen, merchants and those working in the ancillary professions.

For similar reasons, Troyes also became an internationally recognised centre for hosiery and cloth making.



A traumatic milestone in its history came in May 1524, when fire engulfed the town destroying nearly all 1,500 buildings that existed here.

It is an indication of Troyes importance, at this time, that the houses and the churches were quickly rebuilt, and this is what we get to appreciate today.

The post-fire reconstruction of Troyes, during the 16th and 17th centuries.

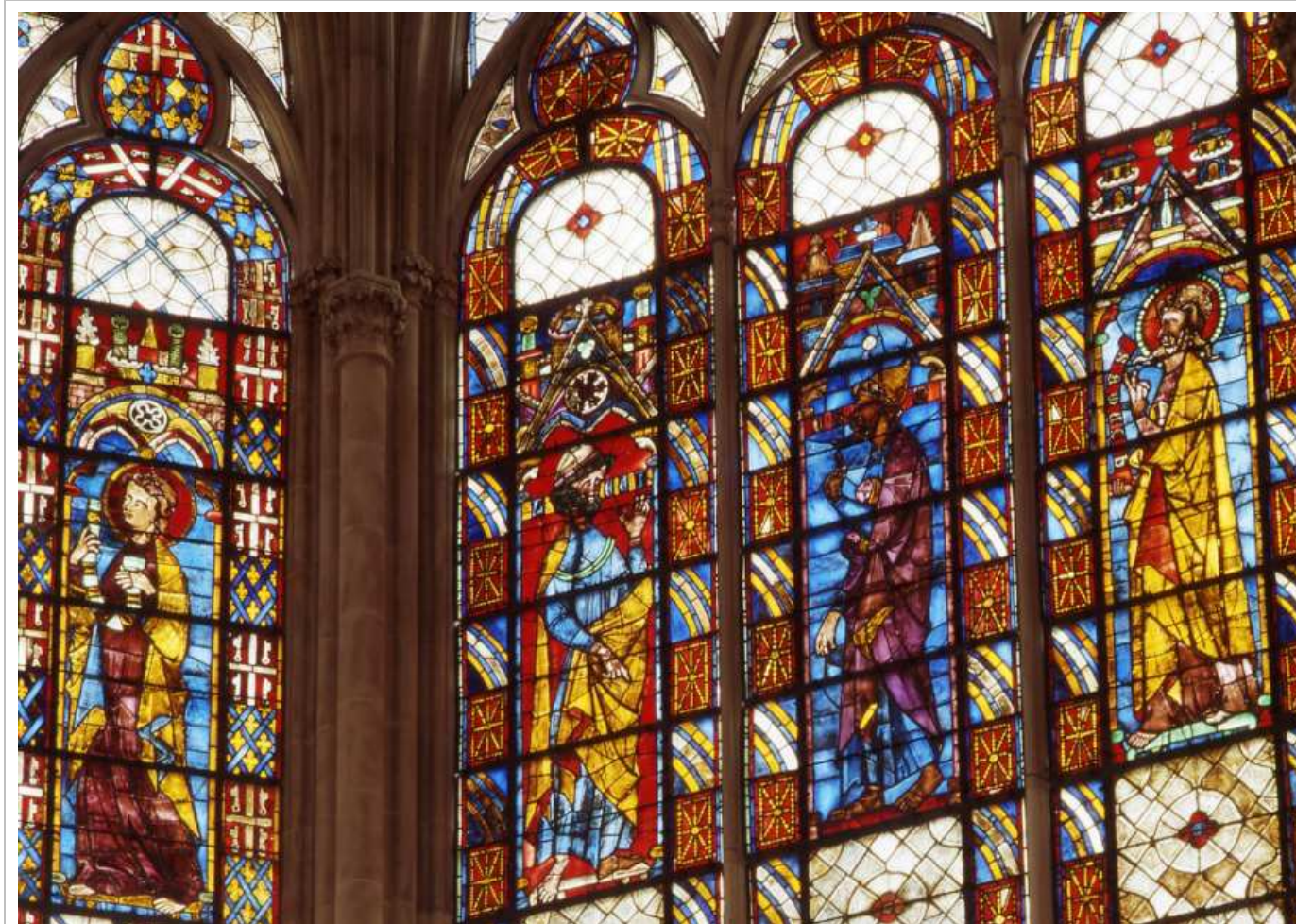
And they provides us today with a remarkably well preserved area of narrow cobbled streets lined by over 400 multi-coloured, Medieval, half-timbered buildings.



It makes for one of the most attractive historic old town centres to be found in France.

Moreover, these buildings house the shops, cafes, bars and restaurants that infuse Troyes old town with a bustling vibrancy.

And there are some wonderful restaurants in the old town (two of which Ann writes about below).



The Cathedral of Saint-Pierre-et-Saint-Paul

Just beyond the old town area and within easy walking distance is the city's other major attraction – its majestic cathedral.

The Catholic Cathedral of Saint-Pierre-et-Saint-Paul is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture.

There have been churches and cathedrals on this site the 4th century, including one in which the Order of the Knights Templar was confirmed and its rule established.

Construction of the current cathedral began in 1208 with work continuing, as tends to be the case with cathedrals, until the 17th century. From an historical (and English) perspective, it was in the cathedral that the *Honteux Traité de Troyes* (the shameful treaty of Troyes) was sworn in 1420, granting the crown of France to Henry V of England.

And just nine years later Joan of Arc secured the allegiance of the city for the young Charles VII here in order to drive the English out of France.

How times have changed!

The cathedral avoided damage during the French Revolution, but was 'de-Christianised' and turned into a *Temple of Abundance* for several years.



Looking up at the cathedral one quickly spots that it has only one tower dedicated to St Peter.

They never got around to erecting the corresponding tower for St Paul.

The Cathedral of Saint-Pierre-et-Saint-Paul does however have one of the most stunning collections of stained glass windows in France.

Having visited the cathedral (a must) one can take in up to 10 other grand and historic Catholic churches within easy walking distance.

www.en.tourisme-troyes.com/discover/religious-heritage/the-city-of-10-churches.

All this and more



In addition to the old town and the cathedral area, Troyes has the River Seine running through it, which provides some splendid riverside walks, particularly in fine weather.

With this and the many annual fairs and festivals held here, it all adds up to a hugely enjoyable and relaxing enjoyable couple of days.

The best place to get to on arrival is, of course, the *Maison du Tourisme* located centrally in rue Aristide Briand.

Twenty minutes talking to the team here will enable you to best plan your time in Troyes.

More information

www.troyeslachampagne.com



Langres retains its charm within the ramparts

When it comes to being historic and very attractive, the small hill top town of Langres, in the south of the Champagne region, richly deserves mention.

An, as tends to be the case, it's the 'old town' that demands visitor attention.

Here one finds a heritage of historic stone buildings from the 13th to 17th and all easily walkable within the ramparts of the city walls.

The Langres rampart walk itself offers a really pleasant 3.5km stroll to appreciate the historic architecture within and the views of the surrounding valleys beyond.

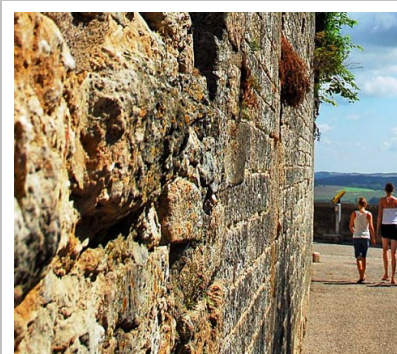
Langres has been classified as one of *the 50 most beautiful towns in France* and, we were lucky enough to be taken around by Helene Levret, our excellent and hugely knowledgeable tour guide.

Even on a day of torrential rain, it made for a fascinating three hours.

Guided tours by Helene or one of her tour guide colleagues (and on hopefully better days for you) can be arranged via *Tourism Langres*.

If all this invigorating exercise gets you ready for something to eat or drink there is an inviting choice including the Restaurant Diderot and Villa Vauban (see Ann's review below).

As for us we also decided to stay overnight and opted for the *Le Belevard des Remparts* (see a place to stay below).



More information

www.tourisme-langres.com



Hostellerie La Montagne

Always the same warm welcome on this trip

By Ann Mealor

Our trip through southern Champagne saw us stay in a different place on each of our five nights in the region.

Each was different in its own way – but all offered a warm welcome and a rewarding experience.

Le Belvedere des Remparts

At the end of a long journey from Paris Charles de Gaulle, we finally wound our way through the pretty, narrow streets of Langres to **Le Belvedere des Remparts**, our bed and breakfast for the night.

We were welcomed to this grand and charming Edwardian manor house by Eglys and Loren Eliot and their playful Chinese Crested dog Cookies.

Eglys, originally from Cuba, and her French husband Loren bought the building, with its high ceilings and original mosaic hall floor, after it lain empty for 15 years and spent a year renovating the property.

As we were shown up the gently winding staircase to our room it was clear that this mansion had been lovingly restored to the highest standards.

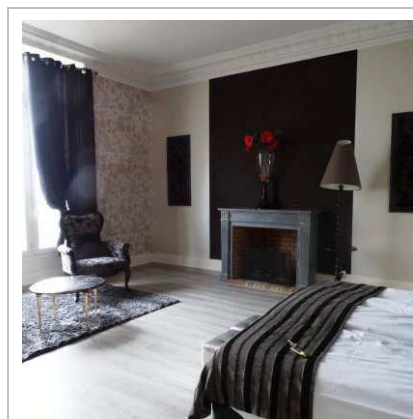


All elegance, our bedroom was decorated in stylish grey tones with accents of silver.

Period furniture with a modern twist included a large comfortable bed, two stylish chairs, an antique wardrobe and wooden flooring.

There were stunning views through the large windows across the decking and garden onto the open French countryside and distant lake.

The bed and breakfast, situated on the highest point of the fortress wall, gives guests panoramic views across the town.



Breakfast was in the charming dining room and included rich espresso/cappuccino coffees, freshly squeezed orange juice, bread/mini croissants and raisin buns, fresh fruit salad, ham, cheese and eggs made to order.

Everything was beautifully presented and tasted delicious.

www.lebelvederedesremparts.com



La Cressionnier



Hostellerie La Montagne

La Cressionniere

This traditional rustic French farmhouse, owned by Dany and Dominique at Leffonds, is full of character and interest.

Our room had a Swiss lodge feel, with its pine panelling and staircase leading to the bathroom with its huge shower.

Next door to our bedroom was a mini spa with sauna, steam room and a huge hot tub, for soaking away the strains of the day.

That evening we enjoyed a tasty four course home cooked meal with Dany and Dominique in their conservatory.

Dany is an accomplished chef and uses produce she grows on their small holding in her cooking.

Dany and Dominique were good company and with the help of Google translate and our limited French we swapped tales and jokes and had a great evening together.

The next morning, following a light breakfast (we were full from the night before) we were given a tour of the extensive grounds.

There we were introduced to the fluffy rabbits, the rare ducks, the pretty fan tailed doves, the clucking hens, the cooing pigeons and the gaping goldfish.

We had been introduced to Dany and Dominique's adorable pet poodle the day before but, unfortunately, the two French heavy horses were nowhere to be seen as they had wandered off into the many acres of farmland.

We also got to see the mini-museum that Dany and Dominique have created to showcase the interesting antiques and *objets d'art* the couple have collected from their many house renovations.



La Cressionnier



La Cressionniere has many excellent reviews and repeat visitors - a true reflection of how much people enjoy their time here.

www.la-cressionniere.business.site

Hostellerie La Montagne

Full of character the stone built Hostellerie La Montagne is a scintillating mix of rustic hunting lodge (with a strong stag theme) and grand chateau.

The stone floored reception, with its high, wooden beamed ceiling, black round medieval cast iron chandelier and purple walls is furnished with comfortable modern sofas and winged chairs.

Centre stage is a colourfully decorated life size model of a stag with red antlers against a painted backdrop of a stark forest.

It's a wonderful design mix of the traditional with the more modern.



Hostellerie La Montagne



Our bedroom was large and comfortable, decorated in gold and apricot with one whole wall dedicated to an arresting, almost oriental style, illustration of trees with golden leaves.

The bathroom was moss green with a white Victorian sink, bath and shower and a mahogany side table for toiletries.

The grounds and gardens are quaint and pretty and staff friendly and helpful.

Breakfast had everything you needed: bread, jam, eggs, pastries, cold meats, smoked salmon, cereals, fresh fruit salads and hot chocolate.

Dining here is a special treat, as the restaurant has a Michelin star – more about this later!

www.hostellerie.lamontagne.com



Hotel de la Poste

Les Demoiselles

With beautiful views overlooking the picturesque town of Essoyes, *Les Demoiselles* at Essoyes is a perfect place to stay for visiting Renoir's house, studio and final resting place.

The hotel is linked to a vineyard that produces its own high quality champagne, so enjoying a glass or two in the salon bar whilst admiring the scenery is a must.

The restaurant is excellent and well frequented by the locals.

Our evening meal was delicious (more later) and we got to meet the chef who came from the kitchen to greet every table.

Our bedroom was large and comfortable with complimentary tea and coffee.

Breakfast was simple but satisfying and included a selection of cheese, cold meats, bread, yoghurts, pastries and cereal.

Everything was kept neat and tidy and the buffet table well-stocked.

The welcome is warm and friendly and staff are efficient and attentive, making *Les Demoiselles* a relaxing place to stay for exploring Essoyes.

www.les-demoiselles-essoyes.fr/en



Les Demoiselles



Paintings, photographs and images of horses feature throughout the hotel which, with my love of equines, suited me down to the ground.

Our room, the Champagne suite, had a vaulted ceiling with wooden beams, a wonderfully comfortable bed with memory foam pillows and a mirror in the bathroom that doubled as a large screen TV.

The horsey theme continued with lamp bases made from stirrup irons and leather belts wrapped around lampshades. We had a small but cosy sitting area with a leather topped table, chair and sofa.

The bathroom was large, chic and well stocked with quality *Nuxe* toiletries.

A luxurious *Nuxe* Spa, which includes a sauna, hammam and sensory shower is based in the hotel and available for guests to use free of charge. Massages and treatments can be booked at extra cost.



On the morning of our departure, we tucked into a sumptuous breakfast, which set us up for the day and the journey home.

There was plenty on offer including; a selection of fresh breads and jams, pastries, juices, bacon, beans, eggs, yoghurts, cereals, cheeses and cold meats.

For exploring the delightful town of Troyes, you couldn't find a better place to stay than *Hotel de la Poste*.

www.hotel-de-la-poste.com/en

Hotel de la Poste

The historic *Hotel de la Poste* just oozes atmosphere and character.

Situated in the centre of the medieval town of Troyes, the hotel, a former mail posting house has a strong horse and carriage theme in celebration of its glorious past.

Old world yet modern, the reception features quirky leather chairs shaped like upturned saddles and striking horse head sculptures.



Fine dining from start to finish in this part of France

By Ann Mealor

During our five days in southern Champagne we enjoyed so many wonderful lunches and dinners.

There is such a fine choice of places to dine but these come highly recommended - from personal experience.

Restaurant Diderot

Our first meal in Champagne was at the stylish Restaurant Diderot in the Cheval Blanc, Langres.

The Hotel, a former abbey, has many original features and dates back to the ninth century.

We started the evening off with a glass of champagne and canapés in the cosy, comfortable bar and then made our way through to the chic dining room.

First came the amuse bouche; smooth porc pate with a crunchy finger of toast.

Next was a starter of plump succulent scallops and large, spicy prawns.

Ashley went for the marinated mackerel in a delicate sweet Thai sauce with a lightly whipped mustard ice-cream.

Every morsel was a tasty treat.

For mains I chose the crispy skinned sea bream with fennel and asparagus and Ashley tucked in to the sea bass with ratatouille and candied tomatoes.

We also found room to try the soft, creamy Langres cheese and a dessert of refreshing iced nougat with chocolate mousse and a colourful selection of berries.

Every course was beautifully presented with artistic culinary flair.



Chef, Patrick Durdan uses seasonal, regional produce to create his menus and takes great care to get each dish just right.

This was the best possible way to start our trip.



www.hotel-langres.com/en/diderot-restaurant.html

Restaurant Natali, Hostellerie La Montagne

Eating out at the Michelin starred *Restaurant Natali* is an occasion.

The dining room is a gentle mix of traditional and Japanese with wooden beams and floor and images of cherry blossom trees painted along one wall.

The leather chairs are large and soft, so the diner can enjoy an eight course tasting menu in comfort.

We chose the Summer Inspiration menu, a selection of six (seven if you include the cheese) exquisite dishes, each one intricately put together with great attention to detail.

Our first course was a tiny rolled omelette placed on cauliflower puree and decorated with black caviar pearls.

It came on a dramatic arched, white plate and looked and tasted spectacular.

Next was a boule of delicate celery mousse topped with a thin layer of bright green celery jelly and black caviar.

It was surrounded by a scattering of yellow caviar and celery shavings – so colourful on the eye and tangy on the tongue.

A refreshing dish of finely sliced apples, scallops and roasted mushrooms in a lemon and apple juice followed and was eagerly scooped up by both of us.

Our fourth plate was a roulade of white sea bass and cauliflower florets with a black crisp on a startlingly red beetroot coulis.

A mouthwatering combination of textures and flavours.

We couldn't miss the cheese course and selected three creamy local varieties before going on to the desserts.

We each had two sweets; poached plums with cloves in a brandy snap tower topped with caramel ice cream and a chocolate mousse on a chocolate biscuit surrounded by blueberries accompanied by a boule of marmalade and blueberry sorbet.

We scraped our dishes having enjoyed every course of this delicious culinary journey.

The service was attentive and discreet and the wine list extensive.

We chose a bottle of Chablis, but wine pairings were also on offer.

To mark a special occasion (one local couple were celebrating an engagement), Restaurant Natali is the place to be.

www.hostellerielamontagne.com/en



Restaurant Natali



Les Demoiselles

Very popular with the locals as well as hotel guests, Chef Frederic offers diners a selection of seasonal and traditional dishes at *Les Demoiselles* at Essoyes that look and taste delicious.

Whilst we perused the menu we enjoyed homemade mackerel pate with toast which made a pleasant change from the usual bread and butter.



Les Demoiselles

For starters I decided on the light and creamy butternut squash soup with crispy croutons.

It was served piping hot, which was just to my liking.

Ashley chose the chunky crab meat with avocado which looked a treat on the plate, garnished with slices of orange and grapefruit.

It was a good sized portion, but Ashley rose to the challenge and ate the lot.

For mains I had the rump steak with a herb crust, port wine jus and sliced potatoes baked with cheese and mushroom.

The steak was juicy, tender and cooked perfectly. Ashley picked the local perch served with a rich pumpkin risotto. A flavour filled combination.

The desserts sounded wonderful, but we were too full to eat one, so we missed out on the blueberry soufflé pancake and the pear gratin with gingerbread.

However, we did enjoy an excellent bottle of champagne (which was very reasonably priced) produced by the Hotel's own vineyard.

The set menus at Les Demoiselles change regularly and are great value with three courses plus a selection of local cheeses for 33 euros.

Bon appétit!

www.les-demoiselles-essoyes.fr/en/



Le Valentino

Le Valentino is one of the top restaurants in Troyes.

Situated in a quaint, half-timbered house in a quiet courtyard in the heart of the old town, this Michelin starred restaurant serves innovative and interesting, modern cuisine.

The restaurant is cosy and intimate with a large veranda overlooking a garden.

We decided on a set menu, and sipped a glass of chilled glass champagne as we chose from the dishes on offer.

As we were mulling over the choices, a selection of perfectly formed bite sized Amuse Bouche were placed before us. Each exploded like a little taste bomb in the mouth.

For starters I went for the pea gazpacho, roasted Dublin prawns, fresh cheese mousse, Espelette pepper and roasted pine nuts.

It was a creative dish, refreshing and satisfying with a great combination of flavours and textures. Ashley chose the roasted tuna with sesame and poppy seeds, exotic fruit chutney and mustard. He had a very generous portion, but there were no leftovers!

For the second course we both stayed with the fish as Le Valentino is known for its seafood.

We had succulent salmon bass on a bed of gnocchi with a light and frothy parmesan jus.



The fish was topped with a handful of bright green, springy rocket.

The flavours worked so well together.

The dessert of strawberry, rhubarb, jelly, mousse, crumble and vanilla ice cream was a creative and crunchy sweet shop delight; like a colourful candy cane on a plate, but it tasted much nicer.



Accompanied by a bottle of the respected regional Rose des Riceys the meal was a gourmet treat from start to finish.

It will come as no surprise, that advance bookings are recommended.

www.levallentino.com



Villa Vauban



Sherwood

Lunching in style along the way

By Ann Mealor

There is no end of places for the food lover to enjoy a hearty lunch or a light bite in Champagne.

Here are some of the restaurants we had the good fortune to sample.

Villa Vauban

A modern bustling, brasserie in Langres serving creative French cuisine.

Situated in old style building that had been refurbished, the décor was chic and the chairs so very comfortable, which is always a plus.

A great place for a catch-up and longer lunch. Stand out dishes were the delicate pout fish and the sticky tarte tatin. Service was swift and friendly.

www.tourisme-hautemarne.com/tourisme/restaurant/LANGRES-LA-VILLA-VAUBAN_56__HEBCHA0520001074.htm

Sherwood

Conveniently placed right in the centre of Chaumont, Sherwood is a popular choice for lunchtime dining.

The wooden furnishings and colourful 50s style chairs give it a Scandi feel.

The mix of tables, which stand at differing heights, cater for the one and the many.

Portion sizes are large and set menus well priced.

The stand out dishes were the warm profiteroles filled with goats' cheese and the Rainbow trout in white wine sauce.

www.restaurants.accor.com/gb/restaurant-8283_R001-sherwood-chaumont.shtml



Chez Felix



Chez Felix

L'Inter'Val

This cosy restaurant in Colombey Les Deux Eglises, a favourite with the locals soon fills up at lunchtime.

It has a lively, friendly atmosphere and the service is swift and efficient. The standout dish was the poached salmon in white wine.

There is a small, interesting shop adjoining the restaurant which sells local and regional produce, including wines and beers.

www.tourisme-hautemarne.com/tourisme/restaurant/COLOMBEY-LES-DEUX- EGLISES-L-INTER-VAL_41__HEBCHA0520001079.htm

Chez Felix

Tucked away down a narrow alleyway in the ancient town of Troyes, is Chez Felix, a buzzing French brasserie.

Quirky objet d'art such as copper pans and old suitcases decorate the walls, along with antique prints and etchings, giving the diner plenty to look at between courses.

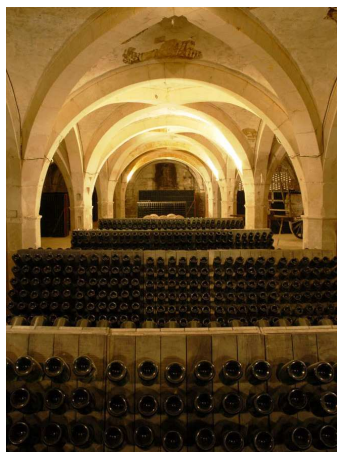
Chefs can be seen hard at work in the kitchen through large glass windows. The stand out dish was the rib-eye steak.

www.chez-felix.fr



Villa Vauban

A snapshot of southern Champagne



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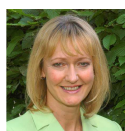
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