

BBC – THREE CITIES (and wine regions) IN FRANCE:
BEAUNE, BORDEAUX AND CAHORS

Dear Friends and Family,

October 2018

I have already written about My Life in Paris 2018 for this was the longest consecutive time (5 ½ months) at home since retirement in 2009. But I did do some short visits in France (plus one in Germany).

Friends had always said I would like Beaune better than Dijon. I don't agree. I only had two days but it is a very small place with not many sights nor as many of the beautiful tiled roofs as Dijon. However, as a place to base for touring the wineries of the Burgundy region it would be great!



The most prominent and interesting site in town is the Hotel-Dieu where nursing nuns treated poor patients starting in 1443. The hospital was founded by Nicolas Rolin, Chancellor to the Duke of Burgundy, and his wife Guigone de Salins. It operated continuously, with many physical



improvements to the structure, until it moved to new facilities in 1970.

The building is now open for visits with interesting medical history information as well as impressive tapestries and other art.



In addition to the large central courtyard dominated by the colorful tiled roof, a 50-meter high tower was visible from a long distance and there is an elegant clock tower.

This was the main ward for the poor patients.



The hospital also served paying customers in a more upscale environment, the nurses lived on the premises and there is a chapel with magnificent stained glass and “Last Judgement” altarpiece.



The annual auction of burgundy wines, Hospices de Beaune, held the third Sunday in November, still provides substantial financial support to the hospital.



The building is located adjacent to the river, La Bouzaize, and within the 2.5 km circle of ramparts built from the 12th to 14th centuries and fully restored.



The Collégiale Notre Dame wasn't open to see the interior at the time I was there, but the outside is a good example of Roman Basilica architecture and the accessible cloister is lovely.



The Musée du Vin in a former ducal residence contains historic tools of the winemaking process.

There are many fine restaurants and we chose to have our “splurge” meal at Le Cheval Noir which lived up to its ratings.

Other buildings of interest are the Carmelite chapel and the PTT.



Shops carrying all the regional food specialties abound, and, of course wine sellers.



Walking the ramparts is very pleasant with views to the town below, gardens, and the vineyards on the slopes.



Bordeaux, on a completely different scale, and which I had never visited, I found to be a beautiful city. Very easy to get around with the tram system and flat terrain. With approximately 80,000 university students the city seems very young and has a high energy level! That translated into lots of cafes and drinking places in the evening, not so easy however to figure out where the good food was. But, of course, it is there and we found it. Next visit I will read up ahead of time on the best places to dine.

One regional specialty is small cakes called canelés.



As with most cities I visit for the first time, I started with a bus tour. In this case it is not hop on hop off but a 50-minute narrated excellent overview including both sides of the River Garonne.

To me, the 18th C buildings lining the river in the vicinity of Place de la Bourse are reminiscent of Budapest. This opening of the city to the river by the Marquis de Tourny was the inspiration for Baron Haussmann's (a long-time prefect of Bordeaux) re-design of Paris in the next century. Bordeaux was the center of extensive shipping trade (as well as the refining of Caribbean sugar) and the Marquis said in the city where one meets the most foreigners in France, they should get a favorable impression.



Further along the river in the Chartrons neighborhood the ground floor was and is for bulk wine storage while the family quarters were on the floors above. A large number of the wine merchants were/are from countries all around Europe so this is a very eclectic area. A pair of buildings in this neighborhood are reminiscent of Dutch architecture.



Former warehouses abutting the river, called the Hangars, have been converted into mixed use buildings with boutiques and restaurants. Hangars was not a French word that I knew, I always used entrepot for warehouses.



This neighborhood terminates at the lock that leads to the interior lake, Bassin à Flot, which has increasingly silted up, as has the river which is very muddy. However, this area is on the move as attested to by the sea of cranes and skeleton structures.



Just beyond the lock is La Cité du Vin museum whose architecture is supposed to reflect wine swirling in a glass or the waves on the Garonne river. This neighborhood is known as Bacalan and the Halles de Bacalan is a food emporium similar to the converted trolley barn in Amsterdam featuring a variety of eateries and food vendors.



One evening while having an oyster dinner at the Halles a huge storm came up. We had a very dramatic sky, made more so by the nearby structural elements. Fortunately, contrary to the weather forecast, the storm passed us by, we had only thunder and lightning, and the rain passed to the west.



The bridge Jacques Chaben-Delmas (JCD) crosses to the right bank neighborhood called La Bastide, which is now becoming trendy with substantial new residential areas. The huge GMP (Grands Moulins de Paris) are still operable, there is a nice botanical garden and the Place de Stalingrad with its blue lion sculpture is a happening place.



A river taxi that is part of the public transport system connects various points on both sides of the



river using your transport ticket. The Pont de Pierre (1822) connects to the Place de Stalingrad.



Given the flat terrain and population demographics, bicycle transport is very popular including a carrier-type I hadn't seen before.

The JCD bridge, opened in 2013, opens vertically to allow ocean cruise ships to arrive (see stock photo by Anthony Rojo). We were told that the city limits cruise arrivals to 60 per year (the season here is April through October) and I can see 34 dates with arrivals on the 2019 schedule, sometimes more than one ship in a day. Of course, the river cruise boats are low and can pass without bridge openings.



As is often the case on a brief first visit to a new city, I did not visit any museums except Musée d'Aquitaine, a museum of the region starting from pre-history and located across the street from our airbnb. I went to see the temporary exhibition of Jack London's voyages with his wife in the Pacific from 1907 to 1909. He visited several of the countries where Peace Corps has a presence, including Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa. Seeing how totally varied the body types, languages and cultures of these native peoples were makes me think I would like to visit these countries, especially while I still have friends working there.

Just opposite the Bourse plaza is a water feature called Water Mirror. It is a 37,100 square foot granite rectangle covered with ~1" of water which reflects the nearby facades, and contains various types of water spouts which erupt seemingly

randomly. It also can produce a mist or fog which I fortunately got to see on my last day.



A piece of whimsy is the front end of a 1960 Mark II Jaguar which protrudes from a 1960's parking structure near the famous Grosse Cloche tower, one of Bordeaux's notable landmarks.



This tower (the Porte St Eloi) and the asymmetric Porte Cailhau are all that the Marquis spared of the medieval walls and entries to the city.

Another highlight of Bordeaux is its Grand Synagogue, home to a Portuguese and Sephardi Jewish Community. When opened in 1882 this was the largest synagogue in France with architectural elements of Romanesque, Byzantine, and a touch of Orientalism as a nod to the Iberian origins of this community. During WWII the German army used the building as a prison. Post-war restoration continued until the mid-1950's. The façade, seen from the outside at night, is especially beautiful.



The floating residence The World, launched in 2002, has 165 private residences with owners from 45 countries. It was docked throughout our visit. The ship functions like a condominium building with the owners' association determining the itinerary for each year and it contains all the amenities of a small city. When stopped it usually remains in an area for several days so the residents can explore the locality as thoroughly as they wish.



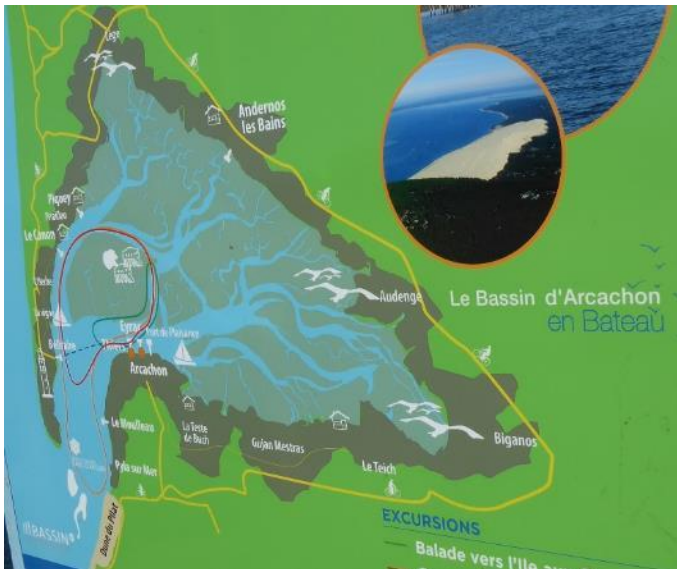
I took one of my two full days in Bordeaux to visit Arcachon, which friends have raved about. It is a one-hour train trip from Bordeaux, and known, among other things, for oysters. Actually, the oysters come from Gujan-Mestras, one of the towns on the bay en route to Arcachon. This is the 4th largest oyster producing area in France, but the first in the EU in “trapping” microscopic oyster embryos and larvae from the sea. The wines from this region are called Entre-Deux-Mers, between the two estuaries of the Dordogne and Garonne rivers. The blond stone used to build Bordeaux also came from this region.

Walking from the train station to the tourist information office the dominant view is of Chateau Deganne, built in 1853 as a replica of the castle of Boursault in the Champagne region. It now houses a casino.



At this time of year, the petit train tour of the lower town goes only once a day in the morning, for which I arrived too late.

So, I walked the waterfront, with its beautiful sand beaches and views over the Dune du Pilat and Cap Ferret which guard the entrance to the bay. The dune, at 106 meters high, 503 meters wide and 2.4km long is the largest in all three categories in the EU.



This year-around recreation area is surrounded by regional and national forests interlaced with hiking and bicycling trails. I couldn't tell if the fishermen on the pier were having any success or not!

I had an excellent lunch of fish soup and oysters at Café Victoria. Seated at an adjoining table were two women with handsome dogs and I asked permission to take their photos.



Between the two piers from which boat tours depart is a sculpture of a whale tail. When I went on line to find out about it (the sculpture is by Emmanuel Janssens Casteels) I was surprised to see photos of it as a solid pink color. Further research revealed that every year the whale's tail changes color. Here are some other previous versions: white in 2011, pink in 2012 and tiger in 2017.



Arcachon was a small fishing village until 1841 when the railroad was extended from Bordeaux to nearby La Teste de Buch, prompted by the new fashion for sea bathing. In 1852 the Pereire brothers extended the railroad to Arcachon. They were originally from Spain and their grandfather invented sign language in the 1700's.

Arcachon's neighborhoods are named for the four seasons, with the upper town known as Winter Town. The brothers developed this subdivision of narrow winding streets in the 1860's where people could build their own distinctive villas. The town's temperate climate was considered to be ideal for those suffering from tuberculosis, with its marine air and the scent of pine from the surrounding forests.

In the afternoon the petit train toured this area. The commentary explained the history of many of the villas, each of which has a name. I found a web site, www.arcachon-nostalgie.com which showed historic photos of many of the villas I had photographed.



Laennec was the classic Arcachon villa for a tb patient. Toledo is one of the oldest, built in 1862.



The Meyerbeer was atypical due to its half-timber style (originally in dark wood). Carmen was a multi-family rental house and is now condominiums (as are many of the villas).



Villa Regina (now) was Grand Hotel de la Foret, then a retirement home after penicillin's discovery largely eliminated tuberculosis, and is now for-sale apartments.

Villa Teresa's first known owner was an Irish painter (female) named Lewis. In a Hispano-Mauresque style its interior was known for decorative ceramic scenes. It

was almost demolished in 1970 having been abandoned since 1928 but is now a “listed” property under restoration. I particularly liked Montesqieu with its extensive windows!



From Parc Mauresque, created in 1863, there are beautiful views over the lower city and bay.

I just had time before my return train to walk to the marina which with 2600 moorings is the second largest (after La Rochelle) on the French Atlantic coast. But I did not see the historical pier reserved for the traditional boats called pinasses (seen below in Parc Mauresque) as well as sailing barges and tall ships.

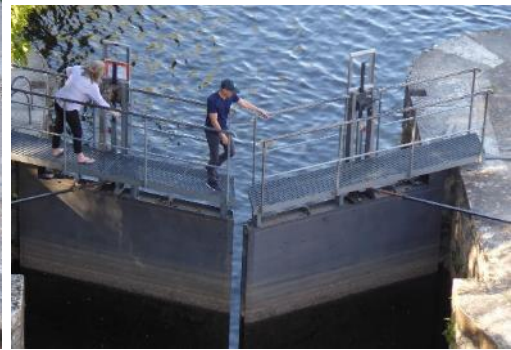


When returning to Bordeaux via the train station I used the public toilet. We have a lot of self-contained, self-cleaning installations like this in France. But I was very impressed as this one functioned as both a “Turkish” “squat” toilet and a “Western” toilet since the ring of a seat could be used lowered or raised out of the way.

In complete contrast to Bordeaux with its wide streets, large plazas, significant cathedrals, churches, gates, and commercial buildings, there is Cahors, a 13thC walled city with narrow lanes.



It dates from Roman times when its wine (known as black wine) was an important export. It was a major commercial center using the river as transport. The locks serve tourist boaters today. They have to hand crank to open and close the locks on route.



Cahors was/is a stop on one of the pilgrimage routes to St Jacques de Compostelle.



Unlike

Beaune, with its restored ramparts, only traces of the former wall remain, but several of the towers exist.



However, the historical core is largely in place with substantial restoration work ongoing. Restored 15th C doors were impressive.



The buildings were typically of brick and mortar, but half-timbering was also present.



We were staying next to one of the former major medieval streets, known as Rue Chateau-du-Roi. The typical building had arcade arches at the street level for artisans, then upper stories of specific patterns of windows. A fleur de lys imbedded in the façade meant some relationship to royalty.



There are a lot of artisans here, and great views down to the river Lot, since Cahors itself is a peninsula in a bend of the river. It is a great base for hiking in the region.

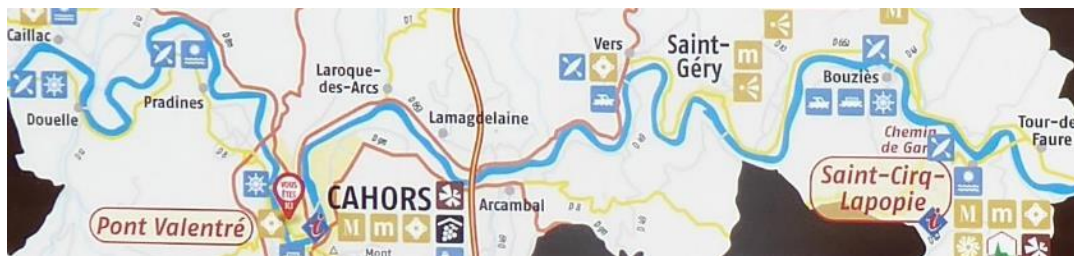
There is significant rocky terrain, with fall colors when I was there.



Pont Valentre, the most complete medieval fortified bridge in France, remains a highlight.



The river Lot is truly serpentine with many interesting villages in this vicinity.



The Wednesday and Saturday market next to the Cathedral throbs with all the local specialties, such as black truffles, all things made from duck, all things made from walnuts, and saffron. The hikers of the group I was with reported substantial new plantings of the oak below which truffles grow.



Rocamadour cheese is also from this region. The covered market (Halle) is open daily except Sunday afternoon and Monday.



I had never seen the cake Pastis before which looks like a spun sugar confection but has at its base an apple tart whose apples have been marinated in plum brandy. It has nothing to do with the aperitif pastis from Marseille, rather the name comes



from pastilla, the extremely thin pastry with which one makes the dish of that name in north Africa.

Other specialties of the region included the aligoté of cheese, mashed potatoes, butter, and crème fraiche served with sausage. It is very hearty as is the cassoulet made with duck sausage.

The Cathedral St Etienne, built between the 12th and 16th centuries was quite interesting to me as I don't think I have ever been in a French cathedral which has domes. I also liked the stained-glass windows and chapels.





Cahors is an AOC and its red wines are robust with a minimum of 70% Malbec grape. After the great French wine blight phylloxera epidemic, which hit this region between 1883 and 1885, Malbec became primarily known from Argentina. However, following WWII Cahors began to re-establish its wine industry. These grapes prefer gravelly terrain which is abundant in the region. There is even a special wine glass for Cahors wines. (Note the circle in the stem.)

So, to finish the wine aspect of this visit. The Burgundies of Beaune are primarily made from the pinot noir grape (the whites from chardonnay), and the Bordeaux are usually blended with cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit Verdot and Malbec for the reds and sauvignon blanc, semillon and Muscadelle for the whites.

Marilee

