



The Backroads of Western France

Exploring Brittany, Normandy and the Fairytale Loire

May 31-June 9, 2011

Monday, May 30th, 2011... we depart the USA on a unusual journey to “Undiscovered Western France.”

Tuesday, May 31st Upon arrival in Paris, David will assist us in boarding our first class coach for a transfer to the Loire Valley. En route we’ll make a stop for a snack in the town of Chartres where we can admire its puzzling cathedral, full of Freemason symbols and mysteries. Upon arrival in the Loire region mid-afternoon, we’ll visit Leonardo da Vinci’s last residence and workshop: Chateau du Clos Lucé in Amboise where he was hosted by the king of France. Here we discover the lesser-known talent of this great Renaissance genius: his stupendous inventions and his life’s philosophy. A little further down the road we arrive at Saumur where we check into the Mercure Hotel in town. In the evening, we’ll be served a welcome drink at 7:00 p.m. followed by a welcome dinner of regional specialties. An overnight bag is all we’ll need tonight. Overnight Saumur.

Focus of the day: The Kings of France and their Loire Valley chateaux

Wednesday, June 1st After breakfast, we check out of the hotel to depart at 8:30 to tour Rochemenier, a former troglodyte farming community. Caves, cut into the tufa cliffs beside the Loire and other limestone-rich areas of Anjou, were, and sometimes still are, used as dovecotes, chapels, farms, wine cellars and even homes. These so-called ‘troglodyte’ dwellings are extremely old, with some dating back to the 12th century, and have hardly changed over the years. Here we’ll tour underground stables, barns, houses and a simple rock chapel. We’ll then visit a Loire area castle off the beaten track: the feudal Château de Montreuil-Bellay was first built in the 11th century and now boasts a superbly furnished interior. It has a number of fireplaces in the Flamboyant style, as well as splendid painted and carved ceilings. Following the tour, we may enjoy some delightful wine-tasting from the property’s own vineyards and cellars! In the afternoon, we travel on to our three-night base in Brittany: Hotel de l’Océan, just outside the charming seaside resort of Concarneau. Dinner of regional specialties at the hotel. Overnight Concarneau.

Thursday, June 2nd After breakfast, we leave at 9:00 a.m. to head north to Pleyben, a fine example of a Breton ‘parish close’. The phenomenon of Brittany’s parish closes, of which there are almost 70 in lower Brittany, is closely connected to the rise of the linen industry in the 16th and 17th centuries. Due to the religious fervor of the faithful and the generosity of the rich merchants, parishes would virtually rival one another in their efforts to build the finest close.

Centered around cemeteries, these remarkable religious complexes consist of a church, an ossuary, a Calvary and a triumphal entrance, with Baroque altarpieces and sculptures carved in lacelike detail. The Pleyben parish close contains a Calvary which is a gospel in stone, designed for the edification of illiterate worshippers.

Our next stop is the unique village of Locronan, its streets lined with blue-grey granite houses. This scenic location – popular with French filmmakers – became an important place of pilgrimage to St. Ronan, an Irish monk who arrived here as a missionary in the 7th century. Locronan also became the sailcloth supplier for the rest of Europe from the 15th century onward; the village church, dedicated to St. Ronan, has retained its Renaissance atmosphere.

In the afternoon at 2:00 p.m. we'll tour Quimper's most famous faience manufacture (fine ceramics), HB Henriot. In 1690 Henriot brought the art of faience-making to Quimper from his native Provençal village of Moustiers-Ste-Marie. Since then, the family enterprise has made a name for itself throughout France and beyond. Late afternoon we'll return to Concarneau to discover its attractive and bustling 'Ville Close' (walled town). The Ville Close, set on a tiny islet of the estuary, is only accessible via a bridge leading into the outer defenses. After crossing an inner moat, we'll gain access to this impregnable town with its narrow, stone-paved streets and old crooked houses. Plenty of shopping opportunities await us here, as well as two manufactures of local specialties: chocolates, meringues and gateaux Bretons. This evening we'll savor regional specialties at our hotel. Overnight Concarneau.

Focus of the day: Agriculture, food and drink in Brittany

Friday, June 3rd After breakfast, we'll depart at 9:15 to nearby Pont-Aven, chosen by the artist Paul Gauguin. Originally a small fishing harbor, this small town eventually grew into a busy port. From the 1860s on, Pont-Aven owed its renown to the American painters who settled here. Fascinated by the picturesque character of the surroundings, they painted scenes of the daily life that they observed around them. Paul Gauguin arrived in Pont-Aven in 1886, and there he met prime artists who were later to form a part of the Nabis group. Influenced by primitive art, these painters used color expressively and evocatively, and imbued images with a symbolic meaning. Their paintings were not intended to reflect reality but to embody reality itself, with line and color producing a flat image devoid of shading and perspective. Their use of tonal contrasts, their novel approach to composition and their asceticism were at odds with Impressionism. We will tour the Pont-Aven museum's two floors of exhibitions that show a wide variety of artists, including some works of Gauguin's. Our visit will also be enhanced by a slide show.

Later we head on over to the historically rich town of Quimper. Here we'll have free time to take in the atmosphere of the colorful farmer's market and the busy old town center with its stunning cathedral. This afternoon at 2:45 we'll travel south to Loctudy where we will have the opportunity of visiting the interior of a traditional manor house, Manoir de Kerazan. Seen from the outside, this solid granite building, constructed between the 16th and 18th centuries, conveys an image of Breton strength. On the inside, we discover a refinement and comfort which are worthy of the estate. Though its history goes back four centuries, it is mainly the furnishings and lifestyle of the 1800s that we view in detail as we join an insider's tour of this authentic home that also features a precious collection of unique Quimper faience objects. Outside, Kerazan's vast grounds invite us to visit its working farm, its walled vegetable garden and even the old clothes-washing area near the stream. Tonight we'll enjoy a dinner of Breton delicacies at our hotel. Overnight Concarneau.

Focus of the day: Art and handicrafts in Brittany

Saturday, June 4th After breakfast, we check out of the hotel at 7:30 a.m. for our departure to discover some of the wonders of the world, the megalithic stone alignments of Carnac. We'll be awed by the thousands of standing stones located at Carnac, representing the most extraordinary group of menhirs in the world. These alignments include about 3,000 megaliths, some dating back about 6,500 years, and were probably connected to religious beliefs and rites. The area still harbors an aura of mystery and one can almost feel a lingering presence of unfathomed human intelligence and unexplained engineering achievement. Our next stop will be at nearby Loqmariquer where we discover the largest upright menhir and a colossal flat dolmen, known as the 'merchant's table'.

Early afternoon, we continue our trip northward to visit the Mont St. Michel. Iconic in its fame, this solitary rock at the land's end is crowned by a monumental abbey. A pilgrimage sight for 1,000 years, its church at the summit is a unique architectural masterpiece and offers stupendous views for miles around. Mont Saint Michel has the highest tides in continental Europe with a difference in water level of 50ft. When the tide is out, nearly 100 sq miles of sandy bay are revealed. After an early dinner in the Mont St. Michel area we continue to our hotel in Caen, Normandy, our base for the next four nights. Overnight Caen.

Focus of the day: The Celtic heritage along the Atlantic coast

Sunday, June 5th After breakfast, we'll have free time for a stroll around, possibly to attend a church service. At 11:30 a.m. we'll visit the excellent displays and view the dramatic films offered at Caen's Peace Memorial, one of the best museums of its kind. Here there is a reflection on the frailty of peace, which involves the powerfully staged evocation of the entire Second World War, from the fated chain of events of the interwar years, leading to total war and the horror of genocide. Making use of film presentations, audio-visuals and a wealth of photographic displays and other exhibits, the museum documents not only WWII and the D-Day landing, but recalls the second half of the 20th century and shows how the end of that war did not herald an end to violence, to all types of violence. Our next stop will reveal the remains of four colossal gun emplacements that the German army set up as part of their redoubtable 'Atlantic Wall'. Situated along the coastline at Longues-sur-Mer, these batteries were featured in the film classic "The Longest Day". Our last stop on today's tour will be at the American military cemetery near Colleville-sur-Mer. With views over Omaha Beach where American casualties during the epoch landings were the highest, this manicured graveyard is the final resting place for close to 10,000 US soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the fight for freedom. Dinner of Norman specialties this evening. Overnight Caen.

Focus of the day: WWII

Monday, June 6th "D-Day" After breakfast, we'll take a drive (departing at 8:30 a.m.) to Bayeux where we pay a visit to the tapestry museum that houses an impressive, 240ft-long linen cloth that was hand-stitched in 1066. The tapestry tells the story of William the Conqueror's life and exploits in a vivid and entertaining manner. After the museum, we'll continue on to Ste Mere Eglise the first village to be liberated by American troops (Band of Brothers). After a bite to eat, we'll attend the commemorative D-Day event at Utah Beach. We return to Caen late afternoon. Dinner of regional dishes at the hotel. Overnight Caen.

Focus of the day: The D-Day Landings and the "Greatest Battle Ever Fought".

Tuesday, June 7th After breakfast, we pay a short visit to the Basilica of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, one of France's most important pilgrimage sites. Each year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims flock here on account of St. Thérèse who achieved posthumous renown for her book 'Story of a Soul' and who was canonized in 1925. Later we continue our excursion into the "green heart of Normandy" the Pays d'Auge, an area famed for its pastoral landscapes, its apple orchards and the best-loved cheeses in France. Our next stop is at the Village Fromager where we see how various French cheeses are manufactured, among them the original Normandy camembert. We then cruise on to the Jardins du Pays d'Auge, a delightful melee of decorative gardens set around 17th century farm buildings. Then we're scheduled to tour Château de Crèvecœur, a traditional castle estate. We return to Caen in time to enjoy a little leisure time in the town center before a delicious dinner at the hotel.

Overnight Caen.

Focus of the day: Agriculture, food and drink in Normandy

Wednesday, June 8th After breakfast, we bid farewell to Caen and drive east to Giverny. The renowned artist Claude Monet chose this quiet part of the Norman countryside as his residence and place of work. Diverting a stream and employing six full-time gardeners, Monet created a garden of beauty around his home, a source of inspiration for numerous paintings, many considered to be his best. Our visit to Giverny will give us an opportunity to have a bite to eat before continuing on to Paris.

Upon arrival we'll visit the Orangerie, with its collection of Claude Monet's famed water lily paintings, created at Giverny. In Paris, time permitting, we'll take in some of the lesser known, 'insider' sights of this incomparable city, after which we'll check into our Hotel Mercure in Roissy, near the airport. Here we'll enjoy our farewell dinner at the hotel or nearby. Overnight Roissy.

Focus of the day: Monet's world

Thursday, June 9th After breakfast, we head for nearby Charles de Gaulle airport and our return flight home to the USA.

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