

BORDEAUX AND REGION

7 – 13 July, 2017



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St. Jean de Luz

We crossed the border into France, to St de Luz for the usual and lunch, but although in France this is still Basque country and both Basque and French are spoken. It is a busy fishing port and up from the harbour we come to the town, the harbour one side the sea the other. The town square is



covered with cafes and shops and the Town Hall. The town's most famous moments were the marriage Franco-Spanish meetings that resulted in the Treaty of the Pyrenees, bringing to end the bitter French Spanish war. One clause in the treaty was the marriage of Louis XIV to Maria Theresa, the Infanta of Spain. Saint-Jean-de-Luz and its church were chosen to host the royal wedding on 9 June 1660. The marriage is one of the most important political marriages in history that brought an

end to a bitter war. The cathedral main door is bricked off. Two theories, both probably true: the door the couple passed through was later closed to represent the closing of the troubles between France and Spain; and Louis XIV ordered the door to be closed off, so no other couple could walk into the church to be married in his footsteps. The extra seating along the walls was because of the crowds who came to see the wedding.



We find a Basque lunch place which was quite ordinary – sardines again. Then we walk to the far end of town and that's St Jean de Luz.

Bordeaux Region

We had been on the coach from St Jean de Luz for a very long time. First through rather dull flat country heading due north parallel to the Bay of Biscay until we came to within 16 km of Bordeaux itself then highways from all directions seem to converge in a massive gridlock. It didn't help that it was the beginning of the school holidays. We finally arrived late and bursting at the berth of APT's Amadolce our travelling hotel for the next 10 days. We would be cruising up and down the Garonne, Gironde and Dordogne stopping for at places of interest which largely meant vineyards. The Bordeaux region covers a large area. The Gironde estuary which splits into the Dordogne river to the north east and Garonne heading south east, on which the city of Bordeaux is situated.

Sauternes

Our tour of Bordeaux city comes later. Our first visit is by bus to the Chateau de la Brede. Note: Chateau in this case means castle, it being Montesquieu's birthplace and residence, as opposed to Chateau meaning a wine estate. Montesquieu was a French lawyer, man of letters, and political philosopher who lived during the Age of Enlightenment and contributed to it. He is famous amongst other many things for his theory of separation of powers, which is implemented in

many constitutions throughout the world, but seems to be under attack in Australia, witness our PM who bellowed what seemed like an order: “ ... and the High Court will so decide!” Unfortunately like many of these stately homes no photos were allowed inside where we saw portraits of Montesquieu and his family, his writing desk and office. The outside however was very photogenic.

Next stop the other sort of Chateau: Chateau Smith Haute Lafitte in Sauternes district on the banks of the Garonne but they also did reds and dry whites. I won't go into the immense complexity of Bordeaux regions which I couldn't anyway except to say that the Left Bank of the Gironde Estuary is predominately Cabernet Sauvignon based with the Right Bank being more Merlot based. Most Bordeaux reds are a blend of these two with some malbec cabernet franc petit verdot – it all gets very complex when you come these blends with 37 distinct regions. What makes it worse is that there are various levels of quality so a wine buff in France has to have a prodigious memory to know what is hidden a simple label. Whites are mainly Semillon, sauvignon blanc and some minor varieties. Sauternes occurs in a foggy area which rots the grapes so well it is called noble rot, or botrytis, which has a drying effect leaving a sweet must that ferments into sauternes.



At Ch. Smith-Haute-Lafitte we sat through the first of many a long lecture on how to taste, as if we didn't know. This Ch. is on the left side of the river which is gravel and limestone so the roots of the vines mainly the cabernets insinuate some 7 metres into the limestone to gain water, which increases the density of the grape. These wines are blended with merlot from the right bank. This is sauternes country and the sauterne here was a lighter less sweet than a full blown one. Light or butch we were told not to partner sauternes with sweets and desserts as we usually do: cheese, fruit, and as an aperitif are the places for sauternes.

We drive back to the ship passing some nice scenery and pass through the town of Cadillac. Yes, the car is named after Antoine Laumet de la Mothe, otherwise known simply as Cadillac, a 17th century explorer of North America, described as “a Gascon adventurer, the most wicked character in the world, a scatter-brain expelled from France”. Nevertheless he had a lot to do with establishing the NE of the USA, especially Detroit. Years later the Cadillac car was named in his doubtful honour.

That night we have a sumptuous dinner at the Chateau de Cazeneuve, the ancient residence of the kings of Navarre. Edward I of England came here with Eleanor of Castile. It was totally renovated in the 17th century and declared a national monument in 1965. The present owner, who comes from the Sabran-Penteves family which has produced 5 queens, two kings, 2 saints and a pope, and his glamorous wife greeted us with a small baroque band. These days, kings queens saints and popes notwithstanding, streams of visitors such as the likes of us are obviously an important source of income to maintain such a place. We are shown around inside – gobsmackingly stylish, with a huge art gallery, a trophy gallery consisting of bits of dead animals, mainly their heads, an armoury, huge elaborate bedrooms in 18th century but again no photos allowed. After gawping at these we went to an elaborate dining room for dinner, nice but not memorable.



The trip was marred by a guide who talked nonstop during the hour it took to get there. On the way back she said, “Now I will be quiet on the way back” – which was greeted with loud cheers and clapping. She was very hurt. I apologised on behalf of my colleagues but nevertheless we made sure we went for the alternative guides in future – who were very pleasant and knowledgeable.

Gironde Estuary, Pauillac

Pauillac our stop next day, in the Haut Medoc region which includes 3 of the 5 premier cru chateaux of Bordeaux. We walk the town with its large Church of St Martin, marina and a very muddy Gironde estuary, the colour of which the locals are proud, bespeaking the richness of the soils. Next to sample a couple of reds of the region to be presented by an oenologist, but our garrulous guide of yesterday took over to the visible displeasure of the oenologist. What was more interesting in fact



was a cooperage where a very unassuming young shows he makes barrels, the very foundation of a wine market. They are made of French oak staves, that are curved then held together with iron hoops, a very tricky and physically demanding operation, which prompts a lady to ask: “Can women make barrels?” to which he replies “Of course if they are strong enough.” They are then charred or toasted on the inside. The degree of toasting, the type of oak used, the size of the barrel all determined the quality or taste of the wine. Barrels are used once only for premium wines, up to 4-5 times for lesser wine, as the oak tannins have done their job. The used barrels are then sold off to spirits makers for whisky, brandy. It is an expensive operation each costing around AUD\$1,000. We then tour the region by bus as names of famous Chateaux flash past, Ch Mouton Rothschild, Ch. Pichon Longueville, Pichon Rothschild as do two cyclists in training for the Tour de France. And then in case we forget what this about.

Blaye is a small town on the right bank of the Gironde estuary, at the narrowest part but still 3 km wide. It was important during 17th century religious wars between England and France, hence this citadel, one of several constructed by the Marquis de Vauban. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2008. It is very picturesque with trees in blossom and old houses. Not so picturesque is the river: these boats were floating when we entered a couple of hours earlier.



Bourg, is a hidden gem on the right bank of the Dordogne River, in the heart of the wine appellation of Côtes de Bourg, in the Gironde department, the famous Ch. Margaux not far away. It is an ancient commune perched atop a quiet secret, and seems largely to have been forgotten by the crowds. Catherine took the option to tour Bourg while I took the alternative: a trip to Cognac, home of course to the famous brandy. Catherine said there wasn't any story as such but some nice pictures of a pretty little town.

Cognac

My destination is Cognac. Unknown prior to the 9th century, the town was subsequently fortified. During the Hundred Years' War, the town changed sides on several occasions as the result of fighting and treaties in the region. Francis I granted the town the right to trade salt along the river, guaranteeing strong commercial success, which in turn led to the town's development as a centre

of wine and later brandy. Brandy came about because in the 16th century the Dutch settlers wanted to buy many things including wine. To make it keep they distilled it into eau-de-vie or as the Scots call it Uisge Beatha, while the Dutch called it bradewijn or burnt wine hence brandy, or in this region Cognac. Brandies from other regions are not allowed to use the name cognac

There are six vineyard areas around the Cognac area, but vary in quality from the best growth area of "Grande Champagne" (nothing to do with the Champagne wine region in NE France), through "Petite Champagne" then "Borderies", "Fins Bois", "Bon Bois" and finally "Bois Ordinaire". The best Cognacs are generally only made using grapes grown in Grande and Petite Champagne. All Cognac is produced by blending a variety of distillate from white grapes principally ugni blanc from different locations, and from different vintages. After double distillation the eau-de-vie is stored in barrels, changing character with time. After two years, the predominant character is floral, after another two it becomes vanilla, a few more years the smell is predominantly coconut, and finally becomes rancio or forest floor was how the guide put it. Cognac is ranked as VS ("Very Special"); VSOP ("Very Superior Old Pale") and XO ("eXtra Old"). The longer the Cognac matures in the barrel the smoother it will generally become. Once it is bottled no further development takes place. Most houses still have barrels of Cognac dating back to the 19th century sitting in their cellars waiting for fine blending by the Cellar Master.

We are told all this at the Baron Otard distillery in particular. Baron Otard himself was as an aristocrat arrested during the French Revolution and sentenced to death. However the brandy loving



populace of Cognac smuggled the Baron out on the eve of his execution. Good thinking for he then returned to produce the brandy that now bears his name. This building contains the distillery storage and many splendid rooms. This one was once a prison each cell, 2 x 2 x 6m wide containing a dozen men many of whom scratched their names on the walls, English names in the 18th century you will see. The girl

who showed us around had a strong English accent except for the way she pronounced some multisyllabic words like "distiller -Y". On being asked she said she had spent only two weeks in England her accent came from her English teacher. Anyway the dear child made us all happy at the end.

Now let's wander the town itself.

St. Emilion

St Emilion town was named after Émilion, a travelling monk, who in the 8th century performed miracles that made him a celebrity. He escaped attention by travelling until he found a cave with a pleasant outlook and access to water. He carved a bed and a chair in the limestone that he stayed there for another 17 years before he died. Monks started up commercial wine production in the area. That cave is in a huge block of limestone that in the 12th century was carved into a cathedral.

But before we see that stupendous sight we first visit a small family vineyard Ch Cardinal Villemaurine. They specialised in a fairly ordinary wine principally merlot aged for only one year and

a Grand Cru aged for two years and with better structure and depth. But that was an introduction for what was to come.

WE then bussed on to St Emilion town. Leaving the bus in the car park, we passed an old monastery and the remnants of a Roman wall. Following down the main street, under an ivy covered arch, down a steep incline we found almost every second shop is a wine store for Ste Emilion is one of the principal red wine areas of Bordeaux along with Pomerol and other appellations on the right bank of the Gironde, the primary grape varieties used are the Merlot and Cabernet Franc, with relatively small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon also being used by some châteaux.

But enough of that. Saint-Émilion is surely the most striking of French villages with the cathedral carved out of one rock, monolith, except for the tower and steeple that weighed 4,000 tonnes. Over the centuries it was too much and in the middle of last century the supporting pillars had to be scaffolded with massive braces. Here is a photo of Emiolon's cave, but unfortunately it was too dark to take photos inside the cavernous cathedral where services are still held. Coming out there is a large café – and then the rain bucketed down. When it eased we walked up a steep rocky alley to a terrace at the top. The Tower and bells reared upwards and over the parapet were stunning views of the surrounding townscape. A very brief visit to the tourist bureau there and it had to be back to the bus.



We then arrive at Libourne a town of some 25,000s a gateway to the St Emilion and Pomerol wine arrondissements. It is the wine-making capital of northern Gironde and lies near Saint-Émilion and Pomerol and a dormitory for Bordeaux 30 mins away. We approach over a famous bridge over the Dordogne and walk the streets. Here is the Chapelle de Carmel, and on the other corner a famous school. The church one of the highest in the region. Libourne was the birthplace of Max Linder, a silent comedian to whom the younger Charlie Chaplin acknowledged his indebtedness. They meet in Los Angeles in 1917 but Max doesn't seem too pleased.



We have to return to the ship for the Mascaret is due: a phenomenon that occurs when the outflow from the rivers meet the rising tide from the sea. This is common near Libourne at the confluence of the Dordogne and Garonne rivers. Recently an to cruise boat stayed moored at the pier and as a result the force of the Mascaret badly damaged both boat and pier. As a result we had get back to the boat and wait in the middle of river until it passed. Here is what it can look like. Some got stuck into the Travelcalm as we waited apprehensively on the upper deck. And waited, until a faint ripple that didn't even rock the boat diddled past. A bore indeed but not very tidal.

Dordogne

The Dordogne is and the perigeux district is more famous for food than for wine: the ethically tarnished foie gras, snails, truffles, pork, fruit and vegetables, some wine and caviar.

We visited the caviar farm at Neuvic and shown how they produce it. The sturgeon are kept in long ponds, the water recycled in a nearby river, which clarifies and cleanses it. For luck, they keep a herd

of dwarf goats, which don't enter into the process of making caviar (I think). Here are kept different varieties of sturgeon for visitors to look at but under murky water they didn't photograph too well. They buy 30,000 sturgeon fingerlings, four varieties and grow them for three years, when they can tell if they are male or female. The males are sold off to Germany where they are grown to market size and their flesh eaten. The females are then grown for another three years, killed and their roe taken, lightly processed, their flesh filleted and sold. It is expensive taking 2,000E a day to feed them— that and delicate handling make caviar so expensive: the cheapest 2,000E per kilo to 8,000 for Beluga. We sampled the rilletes of their flesh, very tasty caviar butter, but the caviar itself had a very strong salty taste which is probably not worth the expense of buying it.



Bordeaux City

Bordeaux has been settled for over 2,000 years. From the 12th to the 15th century, Bordeaux became linked to England when Eléonore of Aquitaine married Henri Plantagenet shortly after became King Henry II of England. It was also the capital of an independent state under Edward, the Black Prince (1362–1372). In 1453 it was annexed by France, although Bordeaux and England have remained close thanks largely to the wine trade, rather like port and Portugal. In 1462, Bordeaux obtained a parliament, but regained importance only in the 16th century when it became the centre of the distribution of sugar and slaves from the West Indies along with the traditional wine.



The 18th century was the golden age of Bordeaux. Many downtown buildings (about 5,000), including those on the quays, are from this period. Victor Hugo found the town so beautiful he once said: "Take Versailles, add Antwerp, and you have Bordeaux". Baron Haussmann used Bordeaux's 18th-century large-scale rebuilding as a model for rebuilding Paris.

Since WW2 Bordeaux became industrialised and heavily damaged by pollution, the city limestone walls stained black. Alain Juppe once PM of France became mayor of Bordeaux and determined to revive the city. In the last 20 years he cut pollution, had important public buildings sandblasted back to the original golden sandstone, introduced modern trams, rebuilt the waterfront and made many streets pedestrian only. Now it is UNESCO heritage listed, a major tourist centre with 1,600 restaurants for a population of 250,000.

Our boat is moored along a long esplanade that fronts the main CBD of Bordeaux. At the Gironde Estuary end we see a massive hi tech bridge and a close up of the wine museum. The side opposite to the city was for armaments factories and was a target for German bombing and some wrecks are still there. Today ships carry wings for the Airbus made in Libourne we visited yesterday. We are taken by bus up the esplanade the Quai de Chartrons which has for name changes until it reaches the Pont de Pierre. On the way we pass various buildings including evidence of the British interest in Bordeaux, The Dog and Duck. There we get off and start walking along Cours Victor Hugo which is the southern edge of the CBD, accessed by various gates. We head down a long pedestrian Mall Rue

de Catherine, and into a square containing St Andre Cathedral. This stands on a very old site where a church had been erected in the 6th century, the present building in 13-14th centuries. Very impressive but some of the old Bordeaux grime is still in the upper parts. We turn down an adjacent street and there is a Love Shop, appropriate near the precincts of the cathedral. Hobart had one once but we thought it a nuisance it seems.

We then approach the posh centre of Bordeaux, the Golden Triangle, containing everything from supermarkets underground shopping malls, touristy places, an old church, the town hall rusty old statues and of course French necessity, the ubiquitous carousel..

We head back to the Ship via the Place de Quinconces one of the largest city squares in Europe. The two columns facing the Garonne one symbolises commerce, and the other stands for navigation. The principal monument was erected in memory of the Girondists who fell victim of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. It has a large pedestal framed with two basins, decorated with bronze horses and troops, and surmounted by a large column with a statue on top to represent the spirit of liberty. The horses represent Ignorance, Lie and Vice. The horse-fish is a representation of Happiness. The Germans in WW2 took the fountain to be melted down for armaments but it was near the end of the war and they found near Anvers and later restored to Bordeaux many other metal artworks were not so fortunate.



the extraordinary acrobatics. The council a watery playground, an area that periodically floods to the depth of 2 cm to the immense delight of all. Then mist swirls on the water and it is dryish again. For a while. How simply, yet how much the public enjoy it and not only kids. This glamour puss demands to be photographed. It is also a wonderful mirror for reflecting the church. The sequence of events represents the making of sauternes believe it or not. First dry weather for the ripening of the grapes. Then rain and the subsequent mist that creates the conditions for botrytis to form – then sauterne.

The captain of APT decides to takes up river a little to see the lights of Bordeaux.

