



Living La Vie Parisienne! November 2007 Edition

**By John Trew**

Dateline: Rue de Laborde, Paris

AS A LIFE-LONG Francophile I arrived here with the romantic notion of living the life of a typical Parisian, by renting an apartment in a non-touristy area, buying a beret and going native for a few weeks.

You know the sort of thing -- queueing for hot baguettes twice a day in street corner boulangeries, playing boules in the park and sipping strong coffee out of miniscule cups served by moustachioed waiters in boulevard cafés.

That dream has largely come true -- apart from the boules and beret bit. Oh, and moustaches seem to be a thing of the past, even among the gay waiters of the fashionable Marais district.

As well as enjoying a fairly typical Vie Parisienne, I have become the most enthusiastic Charlie Tourist of all time, thanks mainly to a prolonged spell of wonderful weather which has made dandering around the City of Light such a delight.

I'm 'doing' all the famous Parisian landmarks and have taken more photos of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Champs Elysee and Montmartre than anybody since Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Thanks to the hospitality of my friends in the Paris Ile-de-France Tourist Office, I'm also enjoying ultra-touristy things like going on the brilliant Bateaux Parisiens moonlight dinner cruise up and down the Seine that my new Brazilian friends Gustavo and Gabriella reckoned was worth every cent of the £70pp fare. But then, they were just starting a European honeymoon and would have been ecstatic anywhere in this city where kissing couples are part of the street furniture.

As well, I have been making fascinating excursions to places off the beaten track I never had time to visit before, such as the village of Auvers sur Oise where so many Impressionist painters lived and my hero Vincent van Gogh died.

Luxurious Laborde

OUR APARTMENT is in the fairly-swanky 8th arrondissement of Paris on a side-street just 100 metres away from the huge 19th Century Church of St-Augustin which dominates the junction where Boulevards Haussmann and Malsherbes meet. It's about the size of Belfast's Donegall Square (the junction, not the flat which is somewhat modest in size!)

As a place to live for a month or so, it's pretty well perfect which is an apt description since we rented it through [www.PerfectlyParis.com](http://www.PerfectlyParis.com), a consortium of mostly American and other overseas owners who offer their flats as Vacation Rentals. You can read all about it on that website under the title Luxurious Laborde.

It's got almost everything we need. When you get used to French plumbing and electricity being 'different' (there are other words I could use) and to the fact that there is a lot less daylight and greenery than we're used to, then it's been a really great base.

The two vast flat-screen TVs, including one on the bedroom wall, have proved an unexpected bonus, especially to watch great sporting events like the Rugby World Cup in bed (for goodness sake, they didn't kick off until nine at night, by which time I was totally knackered by sight-seeing and eating heavy meals in neighbourhood restaurants!)

No wonder I've put on so much weight that the only trousers I can wear comfortably are the ones with expanding waistbands which a lifetime of French visits had prompted me to bring along...

That fabulous French food

IN OUR tiny street, within the length of a soccer pitch, there are no fewer than nine places to eat and/or drink: three snack bars, four restaurants (Indian, Italian, French, Thai), a Corsican bakery and a place called Washington Square that seems to be a private club for menacing-looking men.

Within a five-minute walk there are another half-dozen bar-brasseries which serve food all day and night, a famous wine merchants plus at least five bistros and restaurants including two very special establishments which have become our favourites.

POMZE specialises in drinks and dishes derived from apples, so the downstairs bar serves scores of different bottled ciders from all over France -- and even Cornwall, as well as Calvados apple spirits. Dishes in the upstairs restaurant utilise with French flair an amazing selection of different varieties of apples to enhance meats and fish in a very subtle way.

Pomze owner Daniel Dayan is a great apple enthusiast and he was trewly interested to hear how cider brands like Magners and Bulmers have enjoyed phenomenal growth in the Irish/British mass market in the past few years thanks to effective marketing.

It was in Pomze that I met fellow Bangorian Chris Duffy whose family emigrated from Bangor to Canada in the 60s. He is now the top man in Paris for the global advertising agency DDB.

Among his clients is Lipton's Tea and he was intrigued to hear that Sir Thomas Lipton's yachts contested pre-war Americas Cup Races flying the burgee (pennant) of Bangor's Royal Ulster Yacht Club. His Canadian wife Joanne has been to visit Chris's family in South Down.

It was funny discussing the delights of Annalong overlooking Boulevard Haussmann. Pomze I can 'apple-y' recommend!

LA SARLADAIS is a more formal, traditional place, specialising in duck dishes from the rural Périgorde region.

On the £22 Fixed Price Menu you can enjoy a tureen of fish soup with all its tasty side-dishes of cheese, crutons and garlicy rouille, then pink breast of duck and fresh vegetables like you've never tasted, followed by a plate of six different cheeses or a delectable dessert.

That's where we saw an extended family party of people called Hare, enjoying a main course of (what else) roast haunch of hare!

We've eaten in at least 25 other places, almost all of which would surpass for value and excellence of cuisine about 90 per cent of restaurants back home. Average for a good dinner is £20 and lunch about £12.

You can, of course, spend upwards of a thousand quid on fine wines and foie gras in some places that cater for Russian oil billionaires and idiotic London brokers on rugby weekends.

Drooling over the window displays

SHOPPING in Paris is light years away from our weekly trundle around Sainsburys and Marks. Not that we've done much serious shopping here, as I don't really need that cashmere winter coat for £2,200 in the massive Galeries Lafayette department store, nor the leather-bound notebook for £140.

Having said that, window shopping is fascinating, as every little boutique seems to have a speciality: In our street there's a place that only sells new, second-hand and antique swords and other fencing equipment.

On the ground floor of our apartment building a friendly couple just sell pens when not keeping an eye on our car parked outside. I've seen shops whose sole stock consists of yellow items, and stores devoted to elephants. In a city where most people live in dark flats, its unsurprising that florists, lighting and interior decor shops abound.

Best of all are the chocolatiers and patisseries whose windows are full of lascivious luxuries crafted by experts and presented for our delectation by food pornographers. Drool, drool.

On the subject of porn shops, they are now only found around the Boulevard de Clichy where the famous Moulin Rouge is. Many years ago when I was on an Air Lingus Press Trip with the likes of David Dunseith and Ian Hill, we found a very sedate street which would have been well-named for such businesses. It was called Rue Rude just off the Avenue Foch!

Auvers creates a great Impression

YOU would think that a city which boasts more than a thousand visitor attractions should be able to keep the most determined tourist happy. It is said that if you only spent one minute looking at each of the exhibits in The Louvre you would need to spend 1,600 days doing nothing else.

Well, we've spent many happy hours in some fantastic places other than The Louvre. The Musée d'Orsay (marvellous meals in its magnificent dining room), and the Musees Marmottan and Picasso have been outstanding, not only for their world-class collections of great paintings but the helpfulness of staff and quality of facilities.

However, anyone like me who really loves the visual arts should go on an expedition by train from St Lazare station to Auvers-sur-Oise, an utterly picturesque riverside village which was home to many great Impressionist painters of the 19/20th Centuries.

I will treasure every minute of my day spent following in the footsteps of Vincent van Gogh who lived 70 frenetic days here in the summer of 1890. During that time he completed 70 paintings many of which have subsequently sold for mind-blowing prices: His portrait of Dr Gachet, the local doctor, holds the all-time record for any artwork, at 83 million dollars. This is almost certain to be topped at Sotheby's New York this month, when one of his last Auvers canvases of cornfields is up for auction.

I was almost moved to tears when I spent time alone in the tiny attic bedroom of Auberge Ravoux where he died in his brother Theo's arms after shooting himself in that same cornfield two days previously. Vincent was deeply ashamed of having to live off Theo. At just 37, he felt his life had been a total failure and it was years before his true genius was recognised.

As I stood in that cell-like room (which has never been repainted nor let-out because of local superstition regarding the mortal sin of suicide), and later at his graveside in the town cemetery, I wondered what he would have made of a world which despised him during his lifetime and exalted him above all others 130 years later.

When I was at the Picasso Museum in the Marais district of Paris a few days later, I thought about the different lifestyles that Spanish-born Pablo and Dutch-born Vincent experienced as foreign painters moving around France.

Pablo became the richest-ever self-made millionaire member of the Communist Party, selling pictures every day of his artistic career and keeping mistresses and wives galore. Poor Vincent never sold a picture and never had a fulfilling relationship. How sad.

'Bon voyage' is my transport theme

MY HAPPY Experiences with transport on this trip began with a delightful voyage from Rosslare-Cherbourg on board the Irish Ferries overnight service.

I shall be writing at length next month about our journeys back and forth through Normandy, which is more than ever my favourite part of rural France (31 visits!). Irish Ferries are putting the luxurious Oscar Wilde car-ferry/cruise ship into service for the 2008 season so the next TREW'S TRAVELS will be the hottest source of information on hotels, restaurants and attractions in Normandy.

My psychologist wife Karen and I chose to bring our car to Paris as we had far more luggage than even my good friends in Flybe would permit. Karen has been spending time in our Paris apartment busy on her computer, working on yet another of her important articles for one of the learned international journals. This requires access to about 28 kilos of books and academic papers (I am not making this up).

This library is on top of everything else, including a full wardrobe of winter clothes which remain unworn, thanks to the warm, dry weather.

As for other good transport experiences, we soon found a convenient parking space for our empty car and now go everywhere by bus and Metro. We each have a rechargeable weekly (£12) Navigo Card which gives access to all public transport in the Paris region. This includes the 50,000 Velib bicycles for rent at strategic points throughout the city.

We are constantly amazed at the politeness and consideration of the Parisians - of all ages - we meet on crowded buses and trains and at street corners when we consult maps. Why Parisians have a reputation for rudeness and indifference is a mystery. Maybe it's because we smile a lot and try to speak the language more than most tourists...