

<HR> <h4>5-14-03: Hello France!</h4>
 The flight from Montreal was uneventful and Janette and I were pleasantly surprised when Matt came to pick us up at Charles de Gaulle airport relieving us of having to find our way to his apartment in Versailles through the metro system. We spent the afternoon wandering about Versailles palace where we visited the Hall of Mirrors and walked through the nearby Petit Trianon gardens made famous by Marie Antoinette.

<HR> <h4>5-15-03: Arrival in Paris</h4>
 All of Paris's tradition and history opened up to us Thursday morning as we took the subway to visit the old downtown core: the River Seine, Ile de la Cit◆ and Ile Saint-Louis, Notre-Dame, the Tuileries gardens, the Louvre palace, the Assembl◆ Nationale, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, Sacre Couer, l'Hopital des Invalides, towers, churches, archways, bridges and fountains. We spent the whole day wandering about the city just soaking in the history.

<HR> <h4>5-16-03: Versailles --> Rheims</h4>
 It did not bode well that we got lost on our way to the Hertz car rental on the day we planned to start our road trip into the countryside. The car we ended up getting was a Renault Megane, an upgrade from the econobox Opel Corsa I had requested but quite satisfactory considering we got it for the price of the Corsa and it ran on diesel fuel which is cheaper than unleaded gas in France. Starting it was another matter altogether since it uses a card instead of a key for its ignition. And braking took a little getting used to since this car was a whole lot newer than my trusty nine-year-old Dodge Colt.

 But after a little experimenting we found our way onto the highway and proceeded to Epernay - the capital of Champagne. Our roundabout route found us horribly lost in Meaux so we spontaneously changed our plans and headed for nearby Rheims instead.

 No worries about getting lost on the way to the cathedral here as it dominates the landscape and is pretty hard to miss. It's far more impressive than Notre Dame in Paris and houses some pretty neat Marc Chagall stained glass.

 Historically, Rheims is where the ancient kings of France have been crowned starting with Clovis, who founded the Kingdom of France and was baptised around 496 by Bishop Remi in the future Notre Dame Cathedral. After Louis le Pieux in 816, most of the kings of France were crowned here, including Charles VII in 1429 who was escorted by Joan of Arc during the Hundred Years War, Louis XIV the Sun King, up until Charles X in 1825.

 Seeing as how we had missed out on the champagne caves of Epernay, we checked out what the offerings were here instead after our cathedral tour. At the tourist office we discovered Maxims was open until 7PM so we decided to visit there. We had time to spare before the next tour so we peeked inside the nearby gothic-styled St. Remi Basilica which was built at the end of XI century and still houses the tomb of St. Remi today. Our guide was pleasant enough but giving only her third ever tour in English and was pretty grateful when Janette jumped in to help her out. Who knew she had such a good french vocabulary! After the tour we tried three flutes of champagne and then a very helpful manager helped us find a cheap hotel for the night, gave us directions and didn't even try to upsell us on any champagne!

 We spent 53E on l'Hotel de Nord in the heart of the old city at Place Drouet d'Erlon and visited Les 3 Brasseurs for dinner where we tried savoury flammed tarts called flammekeuches - they're like a thin-crust pizza made with cr◆e fraiche, cheese, onions and bacon bits in one of its more popular forms - before retiring for the night.

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<h4>5-17-03: Rheims --> Sedan</h4>
 In the second and third centuries, Rheims was a prosperous province of Rome and we visited two remains of that age in the morning: The Porte de Mars, the widest arch of the Roman age and the cryptoporticus, a subterranean warehouse situated place du forum, in the centre of the Antique city.

 Then it was off to

nearby Sedan and the [medieval festival](http://www.medieval-sedan.com/) it was hosting that weekend. Sedan is most notable for its heavily fortified castle, built around 1424 and the largest of its kind in Europe, situated strategically on [France's eastern border with Belgium](http://www.sedan-bouillon.com/indexpc.php). As it turned out, the festival was a pretty big event and that led to the following exchange at the tourist office when we inquired about lodging for the night (My apologies for the bad French grammar):

Me: S'il vous plait, peut tu nous aider? Nous cherchons un hotel pour la nuit ce soir.

Guide: Ahhhhh non Monsieur! Je suis tres desolé. Tous les chambres dans tous les hotels sont occupe!

Me: Hmm. C'est mal ca. Est-ce que tu peux recommandez un place pour la nuit?

Guide: Ohhhh Monsieur! Je suis tres desolé. L'hotel tout pr est dans la Belgique! En Bouillon! Et c'est un voyage tres oign.

Me: C'est quelle distance?

Guide: Ohhh Monsieur!. C'est loin. C'est 16 kilometres!

Distance is such a relative thing.

Janette and I decided to find lodging for the night in the neighboring fortress town of [Bouillon](http://www.bouillon.be/index.asp?lg=fpdb/frboui&page1=a-accueil.htm) before returning to Sedan for the festival which would be starting later that day. A short 15 minute drive later we were very happy that we had been diverted across the border. Bouillon was gorgeous. It is home to the oldest and most interesting feudal castle in Belgium dating back to the 8th century and its existence was made immortal by the heroic Godfrey of Bouillon, leader of the First Crusade in 1096.

After finding lodging at [Hotel Panorama](http://www.panoramahotel.be/) on a hill overlooking the ruins of the fortress and the meandering Semois river around it, we headed back to Sedan for the day. Festival highlights for us included: a cider press, pig on a spit, Julia l'ours dansant, a speed of tour of the castle and the jousting tournament. The Canadian in me had to admire the use of spray-painted hockey equipment as armor in the knightly skills competition which did in fact include a real joust with guys getting knocked off their horses.

Supper that night was a four-course medieval meal in the castle made in the same style and with the same ingredients as used in medieval times. Yum yum. I remember wooden pans of open-faced sandwiches, spare ribs, boars legs, some kind of lentil mixture and the wine. There was no way I could finish the meal and I happily passed my leftovers across the table to the french couple we chatted with over dinner.

5-18-03: Bouillon --> Strasbourg

After a late breakfast, we took a self-tour of the castle ruins at Bouillon before heading off to our next destination Strasbourg. The tour was great except for the bit where Janette locked me in a prison cell and used medieval implements of torture on me. We were quite pleased we didn't get lost en route to [Strasbourg](http://www.ot-strasbourg.fr/htm_uk/accueil.htm).

It took us a couple of days but we eventually discovered that highways numbers in France change from city to city and the best thing you can do is look for destination pointers at every roundabout instead of highway number signs. Having figured that out, our drive was a breeze with some photo opp stops in picturesque countryside towns like Signy-Montlibert along the way.

Upon arriving in Strasbourg, we parked and got our bearings at the train station, scoped out a few inexpensive hotels and quickly settled on the nearby [Hotel Petit-Trianon](http://www.hotel-petit-trianon.com/uk/trianon.htm).

After checking in, we spent the rest of the day wandering about the Grande Ile (Big Island) in the heart of the city, encircled by the Ill River and Fossé du Faux-Rempart canal. The dominant landmark in Strasbourg is the Cathédrale Notre-Dame in the Vieille Ville (Old Town). It has

remained unchanged since the Middle Ages. The central square is place Klœer - named after the brilliant Strasbourg-born military officer, Jean-Baptiste Klœer (1753-1800), who was singled out by Napoleon Bonaparte for high office in Egypt. Close by is place Gutenberg - named after Johannes Gutenberg, who resided in Strasbourg between 1434 and 1444, perfecting his famed printing press with moveable metal type. The main streets (rue des Grandes Arcades and the parallel rue des Francs Bourgeois) are remarkably small and pedestrian friendly.

 The Petite France area in the Grande Ile's southwestern corner, crossed by canals, is Strasbourg's medieval quarter and classed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Its half-timbered houses and narrow streets could not be more different from the ultra-modern City of Europe to the northeast of the city.

 An extension of the Petite France district are the Ponts-Couverts covered bridges. They kept their name in spite of the disappearance of their roofing in the XVIII century. They are dominated by four towers of the XIV century, vestiges of the former battlements, guarantors of the independence of the Strasbourg republic. Immediately after the uniting of Strasbourg to France in 1681, a new belt of fortifications was constructed by the French military engineer Vauban - who also constructed the nearby Vauban Barrage. At the summit of the building is a pleasant panoramic terrace, from which one can see the city skyline and its channels.

 Other sites we visited included l'ancienne douane dating back to 1358 where goods and merchandise travelling along the Rhine river were stored and taxed, the Kammerzell House which is a magnificent example of a half-timbered building, and the Chœau des Rohan an elegant eighteenth-century palace visible from the banks of the River Ill. For dinner we dined at the Pont St. Martin on some choucroute - a traditional Alsatian dish of sauerkraut with wine, sausages, pork, and juniper berries.

<HR> <h4>5-19-03: Strasbourg --> Ribeauville</h4>
 Janette steamrolled me to start the day and we spent it again walking about town touring Strasbourg Cathedral where we climbed the tower for the view and visited the astronomical clock before walking through the Jardins Botanique in the afternoon. The clock was particularly impressive. A product of Renaissance artists, mathematicians and technicians, its present mechanism dates from 1842 and it runs daily at 12:30 PM with an automated show displaying the the different stages of life personified by a child, a teenager, an adult and an old man, who pass before Death. Above this are the apostles who walk before Christ.

 At 4PM, we bid farewell to Strasbourg and headed for the Alsatian Wine Road in the foothills of the Vosges mountains. We had some difficulty finding the starting point for the road so once we did we decided to reward ourselves with a little 'degustation' stop at Wohleber-Fehn in Andlau and I ended up buying a bottle of Reisling and Pinot Gris. The rolling hills with grapevines were beautiful and we stopped again to buy some wine at Domaine du Windmuehl in Saint Hippolyte and take some pictures.

 With evening coming on, we stopped for the night in picturesque Ribeauville where we paid 30E for our cheapest hotel room yet at Hotel-Restaurant au Cheval Blanc. After dining on Baeckoffe (stew) for dinner we went for an evening hike up Mont. St. Ulrich before retiring for the night.

<HR> <h4>5-20-03: Ribeauville --> Alpine Highway, Germany</h4>
 After a forced morning stop at a linen shoppe in Beauville for Janette, we visited chateau du Haut-Koenigsbourg. Originally the property of the Hohenstaufen family in the 12th century and the Hapsburgs in the 15th century, the castle rebuilt in 1479 to adapt to the needs of

artillery. Over the following centuries, it fell to ruins until it was reconstructed at the beginning of the 20th century by Emperor Wilhelm II with the aim of making it a symbol of the restored empire and German past in Alsace. It was pretty impressive.

 Afterwards, we crossed the border into Germany and headed for Tribourg and the House of 1000 Clocks along the German Clock Road. The shop was aptly named. There really were a thousand clocks there and it took me a good hour mulling over the cuckoo clocks before finally purchasing this one, which now wakes me every morning with a heartfelt cuckoo. After a lunch of hunter's pork with mushrooms and spatzle, we headed east toward Fussen along the German Alpine Highway. When darkness began to set, we stopped for the night at Hotel Bavaria in view of the Swiss Alps. (65E for hotel)

<HR> <h4>5-21-03: Fussen --> Titisee</h4>
 The main reason Janette and I had decided to take the six-hour detour from France to Fussen was to visit the twin castles of Neuschwanstein and Hohenschwangau. Crown Prince Maximilian of Bavaria discovered the ruins of Burg Schwanstein while out walking in the Bavarian countryside one day and vowed to restore the castle into a romantic royal residence - Hohenschwangau. When his son became King Ludwig II, he began the construction of the famous fairytale castle Neuschwanstein but left Hohenschwangau largely as it was during his youth. Long story short: both are expensive (30E for two tickets) tourist traps and we had hoped that by visiting on a gray and bleary Tuesday, the crowds would be small. We were wrong. So after a German lunch of bratwurst and potato salad we headed back to France making it as far as Titisee where we stopped for the night at Hotel Rauchfang.

<HR> <h4>5-22-03: Titisee --> Beaune</h4>
 My roommate Kim spent four months in the southern Black Forest German town of Freiberg in 2003. Originally, we had planned our trip around spending some time visiting with her but she ended up coming home to Canada earlier than planned - so we made sure to stop and give her a 6 AM wakeup call when we arrived in Freiberg - just to remind her of what she was missing.

 The conversation went something like this:

 Steve : Good morning! What are you doing in Canada? Shouldn't you be here with us?
 Kim: Wah? Huh?
 Steve: Having a great time. Sorry you're missing it!
 Kim: Huh?
 Steve: Bye!

 After visiting the old town square and cathedral, we crossed back into France and headed on down to Beaune, a medieval walled city located at the heart of the wine growing region in Burgundy. In Beaune, we toured the ramparts surrounding the city and craned our necks for views of the glazed tile roofs typical to Burgundian dwellings. After purchasing some wine at Le Cellier de la Cabiote, we took a night off from our sightseeing and bunkered down in a cheap motel (51E) on the outskirts of town.

<HR> <h4>5-23-03: Beaune --> Versailles</h4>
 The following morning we drove along the Cote-d'Or wine road to Dijon, the mustard mecca of the world to visit the Grey-Poupon mustard shoppe. This most famous of the great Dijon mustard firms was founded in 1777 by Monsieur Grey, who had developed a secret recipe for a strong mustard made with white wine, and his financial backer Monsieur Poupon.

 After lunch (a baguette with a kingly condiment!) we moved onward to visit Vezelay - one of the most important places

of pilgrimage in France. It was a point of departure and assembly for the Crusades (including the Third Crusade led by Philip Augustus and Richard Cœur de Lion in 1190) and for pilgrims bound for Santiago de Compostela, and most of all it was a magnet for all who wished to see the relics of Mary Magdalen.

 On our way back to Versailles, we decided to make an unplanned stop at Fontainebleau, a chateau inhabited and cherished by European sovereigns since the Middle Ages. Historians can marvel at its architectural treasures, me, I was pretty engrossed with the carp pond. Arriving back in Versailles that evening we shared stories of our past week's travels over dinner at a patio Creperie with Matt & Anne-Lise.

<HR> <h4>5-24-03: Versailles --> Loire Valley</h4>
 Our route now took us through the Loire Valley with Matt and Anne-Lise as guides as we made our way down to Anne-Lise's hometown of La Rochelle on the Atlantic Coast for the weekend.

 Our first stop was the Chateau of Chambord built over a quarter of century by Francois I. Completed in 1547, the chateau contains 440 rooms, 84 staircases and 365 fireplaces - one for each day of the year. The domain is surrounded by 32 km of walls, protecting more than 12,000 acres of woods which is a huge hunting reserve. There is no clear answer as to who the architect of Chambord was, but aside from the medieval French tradition of having cylindrical towers at the corners of the chateau, all the speculation seems to suggest the influence of Italian architecture of the Renaissance, and at least one Italian architect name always pops up -- Domenico da Cortona. It is suspected that Leonardo De Vinci had his hand in the design -- one of the masterpieces of the castle is attributed to Leonardo. It is a double spiral staircase, with each stairway superimposed on the other so that two people can climb or descend simultaneously without ever having to meet. Some say it was designed so the kings wouldn't have to meet the servants while climbing or descending the stairs. Some say one staircase was for the king's wife and the other for the king's mistress. The staircase is located at the intersection of 4 huge rooms forming a cross, is crowned by a Lantern 38m high, and leads to the magnificent rooftop terraces. In her time, Catherine de Medicis, passionate with astrology, would often climb to the lantern in order to consult the stars.

 Like true french, we stopped at a local boulangerie for some lunchtime baguettes before continuing on to Chenonceaux in the afternoon. Chenonceaux is best known for two its rival inhabitants and the gardens they designed: Diane of Poitiers, the mistress of Henry II and one of the most influential women in the Kingdom who received the castle as a gift from her paramour and Catherine de Medici, Henri II's wife, who envied her influence over the King and the affairs of the country. To discover why Henri preferred a mistress twenty years his senior, she even went as far as to have a hole drilled in the wall of their bedroom. After Henri II's death, Catherine de Medici took her revenge and forced Diane of Poitiers into exchanging Chenonceau for the castle of Chaumont. Catherine was both ambitious and authoritarian and devoted all her energies to erase the presence of Diane there. The castle became a royal residence where lavish entertainments were given, the most famous one being the feast for Francis II and Mary Stuart following the tragic outcome of the Amboise conspiracy in 1560. In May, during the feast given by Catherine in honour of her son, the new king, Henri III, the grand gallery of the castle with its arches that spanned the Cher was inaugurated. Two other queens were also present: Louise, Henri III's wife, and Marguerite de Navarre, the wife of the future Henri IV. The reception with its songs, dances, shows and concerts remains the climax of the golden era of Chenonceau. We had dinner in nearby Chinon

before retiring that night at our very own Chateau de Bonaventure, a bed and breakfast (110E) that Anne-Lise recommended.

<HR> <h4>5-25-03: Loire Valley --> La Rochelle</h4>
 The next day we visited Amboise, one of the cities of the Val de Loire region with the most ancient history because of its particular geographic features - an abrupt rise of the Plateau des Ch◆eliers that dominates the fork of the Loire and Amasse rivers, creates a natural protection and an ideal spot for the construction of a fortification. Among its occupants were Charles VII, Louis XI, Charles VIII, Louis XII, Fran◆is I, Henri II, Catherine de Medici and even Leonardo de Vinci who lived in the Clos-Luc◆until his death in 1519. History galore passed through these walls. The wrought-iron balcony on the second floor bore witness to the Amboise Conspiracy where a Protestant uprising in 1560 was uncovered in time to save king Francois II, his wife Mary Stuart and the queen mother Catherine de Medici. More than 1,500 victims were executed and hung from the castle balcony in retribution. Religious wars continued until Henri IV, a Protestant Bourbon, converted to Catholicism, and ascended the throne in 1589 and guaranteed peace and freedom of religion through the Edict of Nantes in 1598.

 After a picnic lunch including goat sausage on the castle ramparts, we continued on to La Rochelle and visited with Anne-Lise's family. Wonderful people. Her mum stuffed our faces with raclette for dinner and her father plied us with wine. They made us feel very welcome and Janette and I really enjoyed practicing our French with them and eating fresh cherries off the tree in the backyard.

<HR> <h4>5-26-03: La Rochelle</h4>
 Monday morning, Mssr. Veyssiere took us for a tour of La Rochelle and then we visited nearby Ile de Re on bicycle. We spent a lazy afternoon biking around the island, trekking around the harbor, eating ice cream, and tossing rocks in the ocean.

<HR> <h4>5-27-03: La Rochelle --> Versailles</h4>
 Tuesday we bid adieu to the Veyssiere's and drove up along the coast to visit the eight wonder of the world: Mont St. Michel. The abbey dates back to the eighth century, when the archangel Michael supposedly appeared to a bishop of Avranches, Aubert, who duly founded a monastery on the island poking out of the Baie du Mont St-Michel. Since the eleventh century ? when work on the sturdy church at the peak commenced ? new buildings have been grafted onto the island to produce a fortified hotch-potch of Romanesque and Gothic buildings clambering to the pinnacle of the graceful church, forming probably the most recognizable silhouette in France after the Eiffel Tower. Of course, we took our shoes off and tramped through the mud around the rocky island while the tide was down to get a good number of photos and Janette made sure to take many a photo of me taking a photo of the abbey. For dinner we stopped in Cabourg on the Normandy coast at a little seafood bistro called la Brasserie de la Mer where I tried sea snails called 'bulots' for dinner. Yum Yum. Just like chicken!

<HR> <h4>5-28-03: Paris</h4>
 On our last day in France, we visited the old downtown core again this time focusing our attention on Sacre Couer church in Montmartre. Janette tried to lose me in the brothel district (so she could make some money I think but I gallantly protected her innocence.)

<HR> <h4>5-29-03: Paris --> Montreal</h4>
 Home sweet home.