

Friday September 19th - Day 1:



to the Saint Michel-Saint Germain stop on the left (south) bank of the Seine. We bought our bus tickets from the bus driver. We next crossed the Seine and walked thru Notre Dame cathedral.

-Marcia and Jim flew from Albany NY on a beautiful clear day, arriving in Philadelphia at 2:30PM. We waited for Marie and Kal's flight from Dayton Ohio to arrive.....a little late.....at 3:30PM. -Our US Airways Airbus A330 takes off, on time, at 6:30PM. The pilot announces that we'll have a 7 hour flying time (indicating we will have a good tailwind) which will have us landing in Paris at 7:30AM on Saturday. Paris time is six hours ahead of the East Coast USA.

Saturday September 20th - Day 2:

-We land at 7:30AM at Paris De Gaul airport, just as the sun is rising on a clear day. Cleared customs, reclaimed all of our bags (yeah!), and met an Insight representative (noted TD Virginie Gravier!), who facilitated our transfer to our hotel. -We arrived at the Marriott Rive Gauche with Virginie about 10:30AM. Rooms were not ready, as we expected, so, as planned, Marie, Marcia, Kal and Jim took off to explore Paris. -As suggested in another Tour Tale, we exited the Marriott, turned right, and walked about 100 yards to the bus stop at Glaciere-Auguste Blanqui and caught the "21" bus for a 20 minute bus ride



The line to climb the stairs in the North tower was much too long, so we walked to Saint-Chapelle cathedral but found it closed for security reasons.....disappointed that we could not see the famous stained glass windows. We then walked through the grounds of the Louvre through the Tulleries gardens, past the Place de la Concorde and the Egyptian Obelisk and down the Champs des Elysees to the Arc de Triomphe.

What I had told the team was to be about a 3 mile walk was now probably about 10 miles, so we didn't exactly sprint up the 284 steps to the top of the Arc de Triomphe, but we were glad we did as the view was spectacular!

-The weather today has been perfect.....clear and sunny but not too hot. -Then, we walked to the Eiffel Tower and then along the Seine



River to the Bir-Hakeim



(Grenelle) Metro (subway) station where we bought our tickets at a ticket booth and took the #6 line back to Saint-Jacques station, 100 yards to the east of the Marriott, checking into our rooms at 5PM.

-At 7PM we meet our Tour Director and most of the rest of our tour group for a welcome drink. Our Tour Director is Philippe (Filipe Pereira de Oliveira) who introduces himself as a Frenchman of Portuguese heritage. We will have a full tour of 40 people. We have eight from the USA, four from Canada, two from Scotland, six from New Zealand, and twenty from Australia. All are couples except for a single man and a single woman, both Australians. Philippe asks who has traveled before with Insight, and nearly all raise their hands.....it looks like we will have a tour with experienced travelers!

-After the welcome drink the four of us, very tired from lack of sleep on the plane and the grueling day of walking the streets of Paris, had a quick dinner in the Marriott's restaurant and retired to bed.

Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Sunday September 21st - Day 3:

-Well, we all had a great night's sleep on the very comfortable beds at the Marriott Rive Gauche.....and all are quite rejuvenated after our trip from the USA and the "grueling" day of sightseeing in Paris.

-Wake up call at 6:30AM, bags packed and out at 7AM, down to a good buffet breakfast and on the road at 8AM.

-Our Tour Coach is full, with 40 travelers, but it is a beautiful bus with large windows and extra legroom between the seats, an Insight Travel feature. Our driver is a Frenchman name Joel.

-Today we travel to the Champagne and Burgundy (Bourgogne) region of east/central France



On the way to our first stop in Troyes, our Tour Director Philippe gives a nice overview of the region we are traveling thru, and then a summary of the history of France up to the revolution. He has a very pleasant French accent. Philippe also gives us tips on meeting and greeting the French folks that we will encounter. He advises to always smile and offer a "Bonjour Monsieur" or Bonjour Madame" when meeting a Frenchman, entering a shop, or just approaching a lunch counter to place an order.

-In Troyes, we stop for a visit to their huge Gothic cathedral. Philippe is surprised at the number of people in the church for Mass, and he states that most people in France are Catholic, but do not attend church. He attributes today's high attendance to the "afterglow" of the Pope's visit, last week. We remain happy that we

did not choose the Insight tour that started last weekend (as we had originally thought about, but did not, so as to watch the Ohio State vs. Southern California football game) as we would not had been able to walk Paris, then, as the Pope was in town giving outdoor masses to the masses!



Then onto Chablis, where we enter a wine cave for a wine tasting (guess which type!). The weather today has been sunny and clear, but rather cool and breezy, surprising some of the Australians who dressed in shorts for today's travels!

-Next, we drive to the hilltop village of Vezelay and walk to the top of the village to visit the Basilique, where bones said to be those of Mary Madeleine are on display. Many beautiful views of the countryside from the hilltop. By now it had warmed up to about 65 degrees and is very comfortable in the sun.

-All day we have been driving thru countryside consisting of rolling hills, covered with trees, vineyards, fields of sunflowers and other agricultural products.



Also see many cows.

-Next we drive to Dijon, arriving at about 7PM, and check into our hotel,



the Sofitel La Clouche, which will be our home for the next two nights.
The hotel is a beautiful, older one, located right in the center of town.

-Dinner tonight is an "included one" at the hotel, so the whole tour group meets for dinner at 8PM and enjoy excellent French cuisinepoached eggs in Dijon mustard, beef bourguignon and a desert of a poached pear. The four of us sit at a table with 3 other couples.....one from New Zealand, the other two from Australia.....Kal and I had fun deflecting questions about our upcoming Presidential elections!

Best, Jim

Country Roads Of France

Monday September 22nd - Day 4:

-As we are staying in Dijon for a second day, a late wake up call this morning at 7:30AM, then down to breakfast and then meet at 9AM for a walking tour of the "old town" of Dijon, led by our Tour Director, Philippe. As our hotel is in the center of town, we start from the hotel and walk for a little more than an hour, visiting the main cathedral, the oldest house in Dijon, down streets lined with old timber and stone constructed buildings, many monuments and statues, ending at the "castle" of the Dukes of Burgundy .

-Now, sunrise is at 7:45AM in France, and it takes a while for this country to warm up! It was 45 degrees when we started our walk at 9AM, but with quite a breeze.....everyone was freezing.....except for a couple of the Australians in shorts who claimed they were fine! On the way back to the hotel, Marcia stops at a H&R store and buys a cotton hat to cover her heads and ears.

-Jim and Marcia head back to the hotel to prepare for an optional excursion, departing at 11AM, while Marie and Kal stay behind to start a shopping excursion.

-About 25 of our tour group of 40 (including Marcia and Jim) depart with TD Philippe on our Coach at 11AM for the "Dijon to Beaune Burgundy Wine Road Excursion", which takes us on about an hours drive from Dijon to Beaune thru the heart of the wine vineyards and thru several picturesque small villages. We are lucky that the grape harvest is late this year (it is just now starting) due to the cool and wet summer in France, so we were able to occasionally see groups of grape pickers working in the vineyards. We arrive at Beaune about noon, and discover that it was now sunny AND warm.....probably close to 60 degrees, so we could leave our heavier layers of clothing in the coach. Philippe leads us thru the old section of Beaune, arriving at the highlight of this excursion, the "Hotel Dieu", a hospice built in the 1400's to attend to the sick and dying, and now fully restored.



We see the famous tiled roof of the main building,



visit the rooms, see the old tapestries



and a famous painting "The Last Judgment". Then time for shopping and lunch before boarding the coach for the trip back to our hotel in Dijon. -The four of us sign up for the optional this evening, "Burgundy Wine Tasting & Dinner". This turns out to be great fun. We first go to a real "wine producer", Philippe Bernard, who takes us thru this vineyards



and thru his wine pressing and production plant, then into his wine cellar for much wine tasting (along with freshly baked French pastries, passed around by his wife, Martine, between wine varieties). His English and enthusiasm are great!



Then to the Chateau de Saulon for our dinner

.....great food; fois-gras of salmon for appetizers, fancy fish or a pork dish for dinner, then choice of two different desserts.....everything very well presented.



The four of us sit at a table with two other couples who were most interesting. One couple was originally from South Africa and immigrated to Australia in the 60's. The other couple are from Madison, Wisconsin. She is an artist and he is an archaeologist. The second couple states that a big reason that they came on this tour is to see the prehistoric cave paintings in Lascaux that we will visit on Day 14. They said they had been talking to our Tour Director to see if he can get them into some additional, less famous caves (with similar but authentic paintings) that are in that area.

Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Tuesday September 23rd - Day 5:

-A nice leisurely departure, today, from Dijon. Wake up call at 8AM, bags out at 8:30AM, down to breakfast, then into the coach and on the road at 9:30AM.

-Today, we are traveling about five hours to Chamonix, a famous ski resort that hosted a winter Olympics during the 1960's. During our ride, our TD Philippe describes the features of some of the "optionals" that we can sign up for the remainder of the tour, and gives an interesting talk on the state of the French

economy and the high tax rate for employers (and employees!) in France which is causing a slow down in the economy, as many employers are trying to hire part time workers to avoid some of the tax burden. About halfway thru our drive, we go thru a 3 mile long tunnel, then exit the tunnel onto a mile long bridge over deep valley.....and we have entered the "pre-Alps".



-After a couple of stops.....one for lunch.....we arrive at the ski resort of Chamonix. Chamonix reminds us of Zermatt in Switzerland. Our hotel is the Alpina, and we have very nice rooms with balconies looking out at the mountains towering above the village and a glacier fed river running right by us. Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe, covered in snow, towers above the town.

-Marcia and Jim head out for a look around and some window shopping



while Marie and Kal head out for a hike, looking for the trail suggested by the folks at the hotel front desk. They find the trail head and start on their hike, which turns out to be more of a climb, as the "trail" heads straight up the side of a mountain! Time to modify the plan, they do find a trail on more level ground and have a nice hike.

-We all have signed up for the optional dinner tonight, the "Farmhouse Dinner in the French Alps".



We leave at 6AM and drive across the Swiss border for some shopping at a chocolate/gift shop, then back on the coach to head for our restaurant, Le Caleche. We have a great meal, featuring strips of beef, chicken, and duck cooked on a hot "rock" on our table.....Kal being our table's head chef!
-The weather today had been great.....sunny and in the high 50's.

Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Wednesday September 24th - Day 6:

-Today we leave the French alpine resort village of Chamonix. Our motor coach will leave at 10:45AM, which gives us just enough time to "visit the glacier".
-So, we are up early, bags packed and set outside our room doors for pickup. The four of us, Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal meet for breakfast at 7:30 on the top floor of our Hotel Alpina, which offers a panoramic view of the Alps, including Mont Blanc.

-Then, a ten minutes walk to the cog wheel railway station,



buy our tickets, and board the 8:30AM train, the first of the day, for a 30 minute ride up and around the mountains to "La Mer De Glace",



or the "Sea of Ice". We are joined by only one other couple from our tour group, Janine and Steve from Australia (we find out later that the morning fog over Chamonix caused many to pass on taking trip, as they thought the view would be poor). This cog railway was originally built 100 years ago to take vacationers to the glacier (prior to that, locals took folks to the glacier on donkeys!). As the train gains altitude we break thru the fog that is covering the valley into the bright sunshine. We arrive at the end of the route to beautiful views of the Mer De Glace glacier, in clear sunny and calm weather. We all hike part way down to the glacier, taking many pictures on the way. Reboarded the train for the 10AM departure back to Chamonix. Only a 20 minute ride back, we easily have time to return to the hotel, grab our carry-ons, and meet the rest of our group for our 10:45AM departure from Chamonix.

-On all of our Insight Tours, the TD always has us rotate seats, moving up two rows of seats, clockwise, each day so that everyone gets to sit up front. When we originally boarded our coach on Day 2, we strategically choose seats on the left side a little over halfway back. So.....today the four of us have the front row seats for our trip from Chamonix thru more of the French Alps.

-A 45 minute ride takes us to the town of Annecy, which is located on the shore of Lake Annecy, the second largest lake in France (it's about 10 miles long and up to 2-1/2 miles wide). The town of Annecy is sometimes referred to as the "Venice of France" for the canals that run thru the old town.



We spend two hours in Annecy. Philippe first takes us on a walking tour of the old town, then free time for lunch and sightseeing. We tour the cathedral, walk up to the Castle and enjoy the time walking along the canals, past many shops and then along the shore of Lake Annecy. The water is very clear. The weather, here, is fine.....partly cloudy, a very light wind, and temperature about 60 degrees.

-At 2:30PM we depart for Aix-Les-Bains, arriving at 3:15pm. By this time, the weather is mostly sunny with a temperature around 70 degrees. We spend two hours on foot in Aix-Les-Bains, starting with Philippe leading us on a brief walking tour of the center area and Roman ruins, and pointing out areas that we might want to visit during our free time. The four of us walk up thru the building housing the "mineral springs cures" and reach high ground with a nice view of Lake Bourget, behind the city. Then we walk past the casino, thru a part of the shopping district, stopping for ice cream (glace) and back to our motor coach for a 5:15PM departure. One of the Australian couples is missing.....but they finally find our coach and we leave . Aix-Les-Bains is a very beautiful city!

-We were originally scheduled to spend tonight at the Radisson SAS Hotel in Aix-Les-Bains, but Philippe received a FAX yesterday from Insight Travel's headquarters advising that our accommodations had been changed to the Chateau De Candie in Chambrey. So we leave for a half hour drive to Chambrey, driving along the shore of Lake Bourget, which is the largest lake in France, just 12 miles long. We drive thru the valley with mountains rising above, in the distance, on either side. I don't believe Insight Travel has ever used Chateau De Candie before; in any case, our TD and driver had never been there, but, after a few wrong turns Joel starts up a very narrow road, which turns into a very narrow driveway, and in front of us is a beautiful Chateau, high on a hill overlooking the town of Chambrey. We learn that the original castle was built in the year 1344 and opened as a hotel in 1994. A large outdoor swimming pool was added in 2000 and in 2006 the hotel sold to a professional company that specializes in managing and promoting chateau style hotels. The main building of the castle is



imposing, with additional out buildings housing more guest rooms. The grounds are immaculate.

-We all are assigned rooms, and have fun visiting each others rooms, as each is different. Marcia and Jim's room is a large one, beautifully furnished and with a large outside balcony. Marie and Kal's room is even larger, with a main floor containing living and sleeping quarters and bath, then an upstairs with more beds and baths (obviously for a family with children). The "best room" goes to the nice Australian couple that was a little late for our bus departure in the last town.....theirs is three stories high, built in a round turret of an outer building. The entry is into the middle floor.....the living area. Then up a spiral staircase to the bedroom/bath, and on the first floor is a huge jacuzzi

-Dinner tonight is an included one. We dine at 7:30PM in a beautiful dining room. We are served the best meal of our trip so fara wonderful appetizer, a main course of pork (huge portions) and a great desert.....all served by a formally dressed wait staff.



We are at a table of 10. One couple that we had not yet dined with is at our table. They are from New Zealand, and we learn that he is an author of five books, all in the motivational/self-help genre.

-Everyone loved the hotel, although a few folks had problems getting enough hot water in their rooms. Insight Travel normally puts you in "centrally located" hotels so that there are shopping and sightseeing options during free time, but this was a perfect choice for this night, as we had plenty of shopping/sightseeing

time earlier this day, and we will be up early tomorrow for our trip to the Mediterranean coast.

Best, Jim

Thursday September 25th - Day 7:

-Wake up call this morning is at 6:45AM (although most seemed to be up earlier) bags out at 7:10AM, down to the buffet breakfast, and on the road at 8:15AM, leaving our beautiful chateau.

-Today we will have a relatively long time in the motor coach, driving thru the Alps down to the "Cote D'Azure" on the Mediterranean sea. For the most part, we stay off the divided highways and stay on more scenic roads,



including one called the "Route Napoleon" that follows the route (in reverse) that Napoleon took in 1815 when he escaped from his exile in Elba and traveled north to Paris to overthrow the King and again become Emperor (for 100 days, until he and the French army were defeated at Waterloo). For the first third of our trip, the sky and mountains are very foggy. It is only 42 degrees when we stop for refreshments mid-morning. Then, the clouds clear, we traveled further south, and it is a beautiful sunny 70 degrees when we stop for lunch in the town of Digne at 12:30PM. The four of us find a little restaurant in the old town area and we each have a sandwich on their patio, in the bright sunshine. We've learned that France has very few public toilets and that the cleanest ones are in food establishments, but that you need to order something to eat or drink in order to use their facilities! The Alp mountains extend almost all the way to the Mediterranean sea, and after lunch we have an amazing drive on very winding roads, with steep drop-offs, and many switchbacks for the final 2-1/2 hours to our hotel.

-A couple of days ago, Philippe, our Tour Director, announced that he had received a FAX from Insight, and they were going to have to change our hotel for our upcoming two night stay, from one in Nice to one in Cannes. Now, the plans had been for us to be staying for two nights at the Radisson SAS hotel in Nice. I had read a little bit about this hotel, and it is a good "business class" hotel, with a nice view of the sea, but a two mile walk from the Nice "old town" area, restaurants, and shopping area. Philippe states that our new hotel in Cannes will be right in the city, near restaurants and shopping, and right on the sea, so the change sounds good to us!

-As we enter the Cote D'Azure, at 3500 feet, coming out of the mountains in a light drizzle, we can see the Mediterranean and Cannes, bathed in sunshine! We drive down the mountains thru the "perfume capital" of Grasse, then thru the streets of Cannes, past the theaters used during their famous film festival each May, down the shopping streets with the luxury stores like Cartier, Hermes, Rolex, etc., then onto the main road along the seashore and the luxury hotels. Then, we stop in front of one of the most beautiful ones, and Philippe announces that we have arrived at our hotel for the next two nights, the Palais Stephanie!



-We check in, and this is a real "five star" hotel, in my opinion. A beautiful lobby, great location, large, magnificently appointed rooms. The "rack rate" for our room is 836 Euros a night (\$1150 dollars).....the maximum they can charge.....probably what they get during the Cannes Film Festival!

-We skip the optional dinner tonight, "Provençal Dinner and Petanque". Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal meet at 6:30PM and stroll around the sea front area (in a very light drizzle!) until we find the right restaurant, where we each order a pizza and have a very enjoyable meal,

-Now, I must mention, as Kal points out at dinner tonight, that we have met nothing but nice French people on this trip. We always try to say "bonjour monsieur/madame" when we start talking (and smile) and everyone we meet smiles back and handles our requests and our poor language issues!

Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Friday September 26th - Day 8:

-We wake up on our first morning in Cannes at the beautiful Palais Stephanie Hotel. Down to the breakfast restaurant on the second floor, and we have an excellent breakfast, sitting out on the patio looking over the very calm Mediterranean sea.

-We did not participate in last night's optional "Provençal Dinner and Pantane" but those that did said that they had a fine time and that the food was excellent and plentiful.

-Our group assembles at 9:15AM and we board our coach for our included visit to Monte Carlo, Monaco and Nice, France. We take the motorway (divided highway) to Nice, then down to a road that runs right along the sea. We travel east, past the Nice airport and we see the Radisson SAS that was to have been our hotel, then two more miles to downtown Nice. Then we climb into the mountains behind Nice and continue east. We rise to 1000 feet on this road, and have beautiful views of the sea all the way back to Cannes, and great views of Nice and the Nice harbor. We continue east along what Philippe, our Tour Director, calls the most beautiful drive in France.....



it is spectacular. Philippe points out that in this part of France they limit the heights of the buildings and how far up the mountains they can build. This will not be true when we get to Monaco, where they will build on any available piece of land, as high as they can go. Now, we enter Monaco, and view the beautiful harbor below, filled with yachts.



Our first major stop, at about 11AM, is the "rock" on which the Grimaldi Palace sits. It is the former home of Prince Rainier and Princess Grace (Kelly). We tour the grounds, see the gardens, and the changing of the guards in front of the palace. Back on our coach at 12:30PM. We drive thru more of Monte Carlo, including the same section of street that they start the Formula One Grand Prix on. Then we drive towards Nice on the lower road, along the sea, viewing many beautiful villas, including the famous Rothschild Villa.

-We arrive in Nice a little after 1PM, and Philippe gives each of us a good map of the "old town" area, then takes us on a brief walking orientation, points out areas of interest, and we are on our own until 4PM. It has been sunny with temperature around 75 degrees, but we see ominous clouds gathering up in the mountains above Nice, so Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal decide to first hike to the top of the hill overlooking Nice, to make sure we beat any rain that may be coming in. Up the hill we go, and are rewarded with some great views and pictures of Nice and the harbor. Now we are hearing thunder, so we head back down and find a nice restaurant table, outside, but under an awning and on a main square in the old town. We just beat the rain, and have some excellent Italian

sandwiches for our lunch. The rain stops, and we next go and tour the Palais Lascars, which is a combination restored city mansion and a museum of art objects and musical instruments. The free admission is a plus! Then we visit the cathedral, do some shopping, and meet our group at 4PM for the coach ride back to our hotel in Cannes, arriving a little after 5PM.

-The four of us meet at 6:30PM (opting out of signing up for the optional evening trip to Monte Carlo) and walk to the Cannes harbor area for an enjoyable meal at a dockside restaurant on a night that has turned unusually cool for the Cote D'Azure.



Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Saturday September 27th - Day 9:

-We are up earlier than the 7AM wake up call. Bags out at 7:30AM, then down to breakfast on the second floor patio of our hotel in Cannes, the Palais Stephanie. Insight Travel always includes, as part of the tour package, an "included" buffet breakfast at the hotel we are staying at. The buffet at this hotel is wonderful.....a large selection of fruits, breads and pastries, sausage, eggs, bacon, ham, cheeses, smoked salmon, etc. The price for the buffet breakfast is posted at the entrance to the restaurant.....32 Euros, or more than \$40, so we are getting a good deal, here!



-Our coach departs the hotel, early, at 8:30PM so that we can get to Saint Paul de Vence before big the crowds of tourists arrive. Saint Paul de Vence is a beautiful old town, dating from the 9th century, sitting on top of a high hill in Provence. In the 1920's it became quite an artist retreat. Philippe leads us on a nice walking tour of the town.....we see the church, remains of the central castle, the main fountain and the cemetery with the grave of the artist Marc Chagall. The town is surrounded by a high wall, from which we have great views of the country side and we can see all of the way to the Mediterranean Sea. We then have free time to walk the narrow up-and-down streets of the beautiful town,



past peoples' residences (there are 350 permanent inhabitants) and the many shops. These shops are not tacky souvenir shops, but mostly display artists' works or high quality soft goods, hard goods, and foods. After two hours, we depart on our coach for Aix-En-Provence. By now it has warmed up to 70 degrees and it appears that we will have a nice sunny and calm day.

-We drive for two hours on the motorway (a divided highway.....three lanes in each direction) but the scenery is very nice.....rugged hills covered with trees and vegetation. About 30 miles east of Aix-En-Provence traffic comes to a stop in all three lanes, and we really come to a stop when the truck in front of us slowly rolls back into the front of our coach.....damaging our coach's right side mirror. Our substitute driver Andre (Joel is on his government mandated driving break for a few days), who speaks only French, tries to discuss with the truck driver, who speaks only Slovak.....Philippe doing his best to translate!. Soon, we are back underway, but traffic moves slowly for quite a while.....we are now about 55 minutes behind schedule.

-After another half hour, we arrive in Aix-En-Provence, a large city and the hub of the region. It is a beautiful Saturday.....market day.....and the center of the town is crowded with residents and tourists. We spend 1-1/2 hours in Aix-En-Provence, and Philippe does his usual great job of first finding everyone access to toilets, then a walking tour of the old town and the beautiful cathedral, while leaving time for lunch and a little shopping. Afterwards, we all find our meeting place at the City Hall where various wedding parties are awaiting their turn to enter the City Hall's "Hall of Weddings" for their ceremonies.....very interesting to see the participants decked out in their best outfits!

-Back on the road, and we drive up into the Luberon National Park area. A beautiful area with small towns and farms spread between rocky hills and mountains. I believe Philippe's original plan may have been to drive thru the towns of Lourmarin and Bonnieux, made "famous" in Peter Mayle's popular book A Year in Provence, but we did not, so as to arrive in our next destination, Avignon, not too late!

-Avignon is a large city, but the tourist attraction is the center city, surrounded by a many mile long medieval wall (with turrets!). 25,000 inhabitants live inside the walled portion of the city. We arrive a little after 5PM, and the weather has remained nice.....sunny and about 70 degrees. Insight has "reserved" a Tourist Tram for our group, so we board the little train for a tour of the area, visiting the massive Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes) built in the 1300's when it was the permanent resident of the Popes, the famous Bridge at Avignon (built in the 1100's, and the only bridge across the mighty Rhone river for several centuries), now only stretching across one half of the river, then around parts of the impressive city walls.



- At about 6:30PM, the tram takes us outside one of the arched opening in the wall, across the street, and drops us off at our hotel for the next two nights, the Grand Avignon. Our motor coach had already gone ahead, and the hotel has our baggage in our rooms before we receive our keys! We all like the Grand Avignon, a modern hotel right across the street from the walled Old Town. I believe everyone received rooms like ours.....a very large bedroom with two double beds, a separate small living room, and a large bathroom. The highlight, in the bathroom, is that not only do we have a bath tub, but an actual shower stall, which we did not believe existed in France!

-Philippe asks us to try to pay him (cash or credit cards) for the optional tours we've signed up for, prior to tonight's dinner.

-Dinner tonight, at 8PM, is in the hotel, and is an "included" one (included in the price of our tour package). The four of us sit at a table with a nice couple from Canada and another couple from Australia that we've have gotten to know. Dinner is great (a little less "rich" than most of the other French cuisine we've been having). We start with an excellent pea soup, served in small drinking glass, salad, the main course of fish, and that wonderful French desert that I have forgotten the name of!

Best, Jim

Sunday September 28th - Day 10:

-We wake up on a Sunday morning at the Hotel Grand Avignon, just outside the walled old town of Avignon. Then downstairs for our buffet breakfast, and onto our motor coach for our first event of the day. The weather is beautiful.....forecast for today and tomorrow calls for bright sunshine with highs around 74 degrees.

-We leave the hotel at 8:45AM for a half-hour drive to the amazing Pont du Gard. This massive aqueduct was build by the Romans in 40 AD to carry water from a mountain spring to the city of Nimes and also, our TD Philippe informs, to impress the local inhabitants of the might and technology of Rome. The three-tiered aqueduct carried water, from a system that totaled 50 miles in length, over a large river valley. We spent an hour and a half at the Pont du Gard and, in addition to taking pictures from below and on the first level of the aqueduct, there are stairs up the hill sides on both ends that we climbed to get great views and pictures. The Pont du Gard has held up quite well over the centuries!



-Then we drive thru the beautiful countryside to the Chateauneuf Du-Pape wine museum, where the proprietor describes the proper way of evaluating wine, and we then have a wine tasting (glad I had my coffee this morning.....a little early for imbibing!). A quick tour of the museum and we return to our hotel at 12:30PM.

-Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal next head across the street, journeying inside of the old walled town and walk to its far side. We hike to the top of the high point in town and take pictures, walk down (and out onto) the Pont D'Avignonon (the 12th Century "half" bridge),



then back thru town, picking up a walking lunch. The weather continues to be perfect.....sunny and in the low 70's.

-At 2:30PM, we board our motor coach for the optional "Olive Mill Tour and trip to the hilltop village of des Baux de Provence". Well, our driver finds the route to the Olive Mill blocked by a town festival, and attempts to proceed, anyways. He then determines there is no chance to make progress, so we have to back up 100 yards, then take a twisting, winding mountain road thru a fascinating area of limestone rock formations known as the "Valley of Hell". We make it to the Olive Mill about one hour late, but have a nice tour, conducted by the mill owner, of his olive orchard and processing mill.

-Back onto the bus and a short drive to the mountaintop village of des Baux de Provence. Yes, this one has it all.....walled city on a high hill, ancient church, old castle, old town with many upscale shops and nice informal restaurants.....but, we also have the last holiday weekend of the year and the "Medieval Festival" going on! Actually, at the time we arrived (5PM) the crowd was thinning out, so it was not bad duty touring this beautiful town. Much fun watching the adults in "period costumes" parade thru the streets, and the many, many young local children, who were visiting the festival with their parents, dressed up as princesses and knights.....and much sword fighting with the plastic and wooden swords by the young knights!



-We return to our motor coach and depart this great site at 6:20, arriving back at our hotel shortly after 7PM. When we arrive at the Grand Avignon Hotel, we see

a second Insight Travel motor coach. This is the Insight Tour, led by TD Martin Graham, that left Paris one day after we did. They are doing the same tour as we, but one day behind ours. This is the first time we have seen them, as they stayed in different hotels than ours on the previous two stops when we had a two night stay.

-Our whole tour group next meets in the lobby at 8PM for our "Dine-Around" event. This is an "included" dinner in our Insight package, where they give you a choice of three local restaurants to have dinner at, on this night. No one has chosen the hotel restaurant (we all ate there last night!), 13 chose a formal restaurant where the main course will be fish, and 27 of us, including the four of us, opt for the "bistro" where the main course will be a pork dish. We all walk into the walled city portion of Avignon, where Philippe first gets the "fish eaters" all set, and then walks the remaining 27 of us to our restaurant and makes sure that we are all getting good service. We have a most enjoyable meal. The four of us are joined at our table of five by Les, a well traveled gentleman from Australia, and we enjoy trading travel stories.

Best, Jim

Country Roads of France

Monday September 29th - Day 11:

-Bags out in the hallway by 8AM, down to breakfast, and onto the motor coach at 9AM.

-From Avignon we drive south for about an hour to the city of Arles, located right on the Rhone river. Arles was a Roman colony during the first two centuries. We all tour the ancient Roman coliseum (now outfitted for bull fights.....ugh!), and view the Roman amphitheater.



Then those in our tour group that had signed up for the optional walking tour of the "Van Gogh" sites leave with local guide Jacqueline, while Philippe takes the rest of us on a walk to a neat town square containing an ancient obelisk from Turkey (that was transported to Arles by the Romans), a beautiful church, and the town hall. Philippe shows us where to stand to get one photo "covering the history of this area of France", the Roman obelisk, the church, and the democratic government house.



Then, an hour of free time for shopping and exploring. By now, it has warmed up to 70 degrees, on a bright sunny day.

-We all board the coach at 12:30PM and depart for an hour drive to our lunch stop at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, situated right on the Mediterranean sea in the Rhone river delta. The land we are traveling thru is flat, with many farm fields. Soon, we see more areas of marshes. We are now in the Camargue region and we see many of the areas' famous white horses. Alas, we do not see any flamingos; perhaps they have migrated to North Africa for the winter. Also, we do not see many of the Gypsies that like this area.

-We arrive in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, and find it to be like no other French village we have seen. Low buildings with white and pastel colored walls, next to the sea.....



it reminds us very much of the Bahamas. Philippe takes us on the tour of the town cathedral then we are off to lunch and sightseeing.

-We depart this pretty town after an hour and a half, and start towards Nimes, driving past rice fields being "burned off".

-After we arrive in Nimes, a town of 200,000, we drive around a bit and listen to Philippe's overview, focusing on the Roman era ruins.

-We arrive at our hotel, the Imperator Concorde, at about 4PM. Built in 1930, it's centrally located in the middle of the historical attractions in Nimes. Philippe

describes the layout of the town, hands out good maps, and our room keys. There is one ancient (antique!) elevator (lift) that's kind of the center point of the lobby. Some of our folks bravely use it (with no problems) while we take the stairs. Our rooms are clean and comfortable (and a good size for a Europe hotel room) with small balconies.

-Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal meet at 4PM for what becomes a two hour personal walking tour of Nimes. We first walk thru the gardens (Jardens de la Fontaine),



which are very near to the hotel, then to the Roman Temple de Diane, (Tour Magne) for a great view,

then up the hill and a climb up the ancient tower



looking down at Nimes. Then, back down the hill to visit a different Roman temple, then another half mile or so to the Roman coliseum. This coliseum appears



almost identical to the one we visited in Arles, this morning, but a little smaller.

All the time, on this walk, it is so interesting to watch the Nîmes residents and students, many immaculately dressed, go about their daily routine. On the way back from our walk, we scout out possible sites for dinner, and pick a good Italian restaurant, The Dinali, which had been recommended by our TD Philippe.

-The four of us meet at 7PM for dinner. Most of our tour group has already departed for the optional group "Gypsy Dinner" which we've decided to skip. We get to the Dinali restaurant at 7:10PM, but find, like most French restaurant, they do not start serving dinner until 7:30PM. So, we wait at a near by outdoor cafe, in perfect weather, until it's dinner time! After a most enjoyable dinner at the Dinali, we return to our hotel. We invite Marie and Kal up to our room to see our "toilet in a phone booth"



and they let us tour their room to see their more spacious facilities!

Tuesday September 30th - Day 12:

-Bags out at 7:45AM and down to our buffet breakfast at the Imperator Concorde hotel in Nimes. At breakfast we chat with the tour members that went to last nights' optional....."The Gypsy Dinner".....we found that they all had a great time. Their restaurant was a good one, the food was fine, and the entertainment was great. Our Tour Director, Philippe, was the "hit of the show" with his singing and air-guitar playing.

-We leave Nimes, after a one night stay, for an all-morning drive to Carcassonne. Most of the drive is on the motorway (superhighway) and the scenery is OK but not great. Philippe helps pass the time by answering "anonymous" questions about France and the French people that the tour members write down and pass up to him.

-We arrive at Carcassonne a little bit after noon. Carcassonne is a completely restored medieval town, sitting on a high hill.



It was consolidated by the Romans in the second century B.C, reached its zenith in the 12th century, and then fell into disrepair. The French government sponsored a full restoration in the 1800's. Today, its walls, turrets and ramparts are said to have no equal. Philippe takes us on an good orientation tour of Carcassonne, highlighting the walls, castle, and cathedral. Afterwards there's time for shopping and lunch. Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal find a sunny table outside of an Italian restaurant and have a nice lunch. It's a fine day, sunny with a temperature of about 68 degrees, but quite breezy.

-We leave about 2PM for our final destination of Albi, driving west on the motorway to Toulouse before turning northeast for the final leg to Albi. So far, we have not detected anyone becoming ill on this trip, either with stomach distress or a head cold. This is always something of a concern on a coach tour, as it can spread quickly in tight quarters!

-Toulouse is the aerospace capital of France, where the European Aerospace Consortium assembles the Airbus commercial airliners. As we near Toulouse, Philippe points out to us a giant Airbus A300 aircraft approaching an airport for a landing. This is the new plane that can hold 1000 people on two passenger decks. A little while later we pass the home of the French rocket industry, and see a full-scale model of the satellite-launching French Ariene rocket on display, next to the motorway.

-We arrive in Albi a little after 4PM, under partly cloudy skies and temperatures in the mid 60s. We first check in to our hotel, the Hostellerie Sainte Antoine. It's a small, older hotel with "quaint" rooms somewhat like last nights' hotel. It is centrally located next to the Albi "old town" and historical sites, and should be just fine for our one night stay.

-Now, all during our tour, whenever we've seen a church, Philippe has "begged" all of us to accompany him to visit the Cathedral Ste-Cecile when we get to Albi, as it is "the best". So, our entire tour group assembles at 4:45PM in the hotel lobby and follows Philippe for a short walk to the spectacular cathedral.



It was built between 1260 and 1350, after the Christian "heretics" were pretty much wiped out in this area, to remind this region of the strength of the central church. It is a huge brick building with a beautiful interior and an imposing fresco of "The Last Judgment" in front of the alter.



Philippe explains it all with great enthusiasm, and it is most impressive. Some folks then walk over to the nearby Toulouse Lautrec museum, but we walk around the old town for an hour and a half and return to the hotel to prepare for dinner.

-Dinner at 7:30PM tonight is an "included" one and is great. We start off with an excellent large salad, seasoned with grilled chopped pork, apple slices, and a nice dressing. The main course is a large serving of broiled chicken in a mushroom sauce, fried potatoes and a baked tomato, with a slice of chocolate pie for desert. A nice Australian couple, who we had not yet dined with, joins us at our table for six. After dinner, in the French tradition, we all move to an adjoining room for our coffee and more conversation.

Best, Jim

Wednesday October 1st - Day 13:

-We wake up this morning to the smells of breakfast being cooked. The Hostellerie Saint-Antoine seems more like a large Bed-and-Breakfast than a Hotel. The same small staff of three people seems to do it all.....cook and serve the meals, man the front desk, and collect and deliver the luggage.....all very

efficiently and with enthusiasm. A leisurely departure this morning.....bags out at 8AM, down to breakfast, and departure from Albi at 9AM.

-All on our trip are happy to see the US Stock Market rebound, yesterday, from the 777 point sell-off the Dow Jones Index experienced on Monday. While most of our tour group are not from the USA, they know that their "home" stock markets follow or are affected by events and trends in the USA. It also appears that many of the ex-USA folks with retirement savings have their money in some sort of a government fund that's highly invested in equities.

-We have a two hour drive this morning to our first stop, the city of Cahors. The first two thirds of the trip are on "National" (two lane) scenic roads, all thru farming country. Very interesting seeing the farm houses, the crops and the layout of the fields and, of course, the animals. Today is quite cloudy and in the low 60's.....and it appears it will stay this way. It looks like our string of sunny days is over, and there is rain in the forecast for tomorrow.

-We arrive in Cahors about 11AM and our first stop is at the Pont Valentre, a fortified bridge with seven arches and three towers that spans the Lot river.



It was built between 1308 and 1360 and is in great shape, today. We spend a little over half an hour walking around and over the bridge. The landscaping and flowers in the area are wonderful. Then, into the "old town" area of Cahors, where we spend 1-1/2 hours shopping at the stalls at their Wednesday outdoor market and window shopping the stores. Many of us enjoy a slice of pizza, from a vendor recommended by Philippe, for our quick lunch.

-Next, an hour drive to the highlight of today, Rocamadour, a Medieval cluster of towers, churches, houses and turrets sprouting from a cliff.



To reach Rocamadour, our motor coach needs to negotiate a narrow, winding road with steep fall-offs, a curving tunnel thru a mountain top, just wide enough for one motor coach, and finally, an impossible turn into an extremely narrow parking space that requires great work by our driver, Joel.



Our Tour Director Philippe leads us up the 220 steps of the Grand Stairway, where the main pilgrim chapels are located. In earlier centuries, many thousands of pilgrims would come to Rocamadour each year, and climb the Grand Stairway on their knees. We used our feet; in fact, Marcia took the elevator! We viewed the Chapel of the Black Virgin, then some of us continued on a walk up a winding pathway past small shrines marking the thirteen stations of the cross, arriving at the chateau on top of the cliff. There, we climb to the ramparts, and have an amazing view as we walk around the catwalk that goes all around the top of the chateau. We all really enjoyed the visit to Racamadour; it's really been one of the highlights of our trip.



-We depart Rocamadour at 4:15PM for an hour drive to our final destination of today, the town of Brive La Gaillarde, and our hotel for the next two days, the La Truffe Noire. We check in and are very happy with this old hotel.....we have great rooms.

-Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal meet at 7PM, walk around the town for a bit, find a great restaurant that was recommended by our TD, Philippe, and home at 10PM.
Best, Jim

Thursday October 2 - Day 14:

-It has rained most of the night, while we slept, and is still raining fairly hard when I came down to the lobby at 6:30AM. Then, the rains stops and we are hopeful that today may not be too wet.....we've really only had rain one other time.....for about one hour as we ate lunch in Nice.

-We all are enjoying our hotel in Brive-La-Gaillarde, La Truffe Noire, and we will be spending a second night here, tonight. Today's breakfast buffet is a bit sparse, but OK. As always, part of the breakfast conversation, between our tour members, covers "French Plumbing" and the layouts of our bathrooms. Whether it's the placement of the toilets or exchanging tips on how to shower with one hand (while holding the shower "head" in the other hand), we all have fun describing the particular layouts of "our" bathroom, as they all seem to vary, even in the same hotel and on the same floor.

-On to our motor coach at 8:45AM and head to the famous Lascaux II cave in the Perigord region. Our Tour Director Philippe explains that in 1940, four teenagers and their dog discovered an underground cave when their dog fell into a hole and thus into the cave. They rescued the dog, came back the next day with lamps to explore, and discovered paintings of animals on the cave walls. It was soon determined that the cave paintings were 17,000 years old. The caves were opened to the public in 1948, but closed in 1963, due to deterioration of the paintings from the human presence. Lascaux II was opened in 1984, and it is an accurate replication of 90% of the original Lascaux cave, with the surface geometry an exact match and the animal paintings correctly reproduced by an artist, using the same natural pigments and painting implements that the scientists believe were used by the ancient artists 17,000 years ago. We arrive at Lascaux II shortly before 10AM, and are the first group to go thru the caves, today. Our cave guide is excellent and she does a wonderful job of describing the discovery of the original cave, how the replica cave was designed and produced, and then describing each of the significant paintings as we journey thru the cave. The ancient paintings are amazing, done in three colors, with some measuring over 5 yards in length. For the most part, they are all animal paintings.....bulls, bison, horses, and antelopes. The paintings use the irregularity of the cave surface to add dimension, and are rendered, in some cases, in a 3D perspective, something that we learn did not occur in modern painting until the Renaissance. This was a memorable excursion.

-Tony, the archeologist from Wisconsin, has arranged with the help of our Tour Director Philippe to tour another, original, cave about 20 miles away. He and another tour member, Steve, catch a taxi that Philippe has secured.

-At 11:15AM the rest of us leave Lascaux II to drive our next stop, the medieval village of Sarlat-La-Caneda. We arrive about 11:45AM, and are given until 2:25PM to "explore". Philippe does an overview and gives each couple a good tourist map. Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal use the map to explore the "old town" area which contains the highest concentration of medieval houses and buildings in France. Many photos are taken before we have lunch on an outdoor restaurant patio in front of the old town hall on a main square. Then, time for shopping.

-All morning the weather had been improving (fewer clouds, more sun). We meet to walk to the bus at 2:25PM, and Philippe hurries us along to beat the rain. Sure enough, as soon as the motor coach gets under way to return to our hotel in Brive-La-Gaillarde the rain starts coming down. Oh well, we completed all of our scheduled "tourist activities", today, before the rain came. We drive back along a real country road and by the time we arrive back at our hotel at 3:45PM the rain has stopped and the sun is breaking thru the clouds.



Time for a little more sightseeing and shopping in the "old town" area of Brive before our "included" group dinner at the hotel tonight.
-We all sit down for our included dinner at 7:15PM for a "surprise" from Philippe.



We are all served a glass of Kir, and the Philippe hands out small awards to each of us who have traveled on a previous trip with Insight Travel. Almost everyone in our group of 40 has previously traveled with Insight, in most cases multiple times (this is Marie and Kal's fifth trip, and the fourth for Marcia and Jim). There have been absolutely no "issues" on this trip, that I have seen, with any of our fellow travelers. Everyone is always on time (or early), I have heard no complaining (serious or trivial.....except about French plumbing!), and the trip is meeting or exceeding everyone's' expectations. I think this may be due to having so many experienced travelers!

-We are still missing our two fellow travelers, Tony and Steve, who took the taxi to another cave with ancient paintings. I guess Philippe has been on the phone with them throughout the day. They both arrive back at 7:30PM, and join us (Tony is at our table) as dinner is being served. He tells an interesting tale.....their taxi arrived at the cave at noontime.....just as it was closing for a two hour lunch break. It finally opened at 2:20PM, and they joined the first tour.....unfortunately, only given in French. Their taxi driver, who had remained with them throughout, then drove them to a train station recommended by Philippe, and they took the train back to Brive, just making dinner.

-Tonight's' dinner, at the hotel, is outstanding.....some sort of tasty "chicken cake" on mushrooms and sauce for an appetizer, a chicken and asparagus "pot pie/pastry" for the main course, and walnut ice cream for desert (walnuts are an area specialty). Now, drinks are extra with "included" dinners, and Marcia orders a rare drink tonight. As they could not make a Pina Colada, she settles for a Bloody Mary, which they serve nicely in a small glass. I am surprised when I receive an "itemized" bill at meals' end.....6.5 Euros (\$8) for the vodka and 4.5 Euros for the tomato juice.....maybe 5 ounces!

-Tomorrow.....we return to Paris!

Best, Jim

Friday October 3rd - Day 15:

-Today we end our two day stay in Brive at the hotel La Truffe Noire and travel back to Paris. Bags out at 7:45AM then down to breakfast and we aboard our motor coach for the 8:45AM departure.

-We travel on a rather boring motorway for a little over an hour to Limoges.....although the leaves are starting to change, adding some nice color. Our Tour Director Philippe keeps everyone enthused by passing out, to each couple, a blank piece of paper then giving us a "20 Question" quiz about France.....covering items that he talked about or that we saw on our travels.....much fun!

-In Limoges we spend 45 minutes at the Haviland porcelain showroom where we watch a video on their production process and have time to shop.

-Back on the coach at 11AM for a two hour drive to the Poitiers TGV train station.



We arrive in Poitiers and exit into the train station with only our carry on bags.....Joel will drive our motor coach to Paris, empty of passengers, and deliver our suitcases to our Paris hotel. We are told that our motor coach has traveled 3300 kilometers (2100 miles) since we left Paris. The last 350 miles of our trip, Poitiers to Paris, will be via the train.....where we will be traveling much faster than the coach could accomplish, and avoiding most of the notorious Friday afternoon Paris traffic.

-We have time to grab a quick lunch at the train station. A bit chilly waiting on the train platform.....in the upper 50's, partly cloudy, but breezy. We board the high speed TGV train a little before 2PM and depart on time at 2:02PM. Philippe is busy making sure that no one is sitting in one of our reserved seats and he quickly finds seats for all of us. From Poitiers to our second stop in Tours, we cruise at about 126 miles per hour. After Tours, it's non-stop to Paris, and we cruise at 185. The trip is incredibly smooth. If it were not for the view from the windows (and the GPS system I have hooked up to my laptop) we'd never realize how fast we are going. We drive thru some rain, but it has cleared by the time we arrive in Paris, where it is 55 degrees, sunny, and windy.

-We arrive at the Paris Montparnasse station, south of the center city, at about 4PM. Philippe leads us to a motor coach that takes us on a nice half hour ride thru the center of the city, arriving at our hotel, the Concorde St. Lazare at about 4:30PM.



- The Concorde St. Lazare is an older hotel, but we have been looking forward to our two night stay. It has a beautiful, huge lobby. The rooms, while not large, are comfortable and well appointed. Our bathroom is quite large and we have a shower head! The hotel is located on the Opera district, a little north of the Champs de Elysees, in a great shopping district. -Those of us taking the Moulin Rouge optional were told to bring our "night club" clothes along with us in our carry ons, as Joel and our suitcases might not arrive back in Paris in time. This was good advice, as Joel was just arriving with our Insight motor coach as we pulled away from our hotel in another bus, at 7:15PM bound for the Moulin Rouge. At the night club, we were seated right away. There were 14 from our group that signed up for this optional. Marie and Kal sat at a table of eight, while Marcia and Jim sat with two Australian couples from our tour that we had not yet dined with. The food was good; salad or French onion soup for appetizers, then fish or beef for the main course and a weird desert. Each couple received a bottle of white or red wine, and each table received a bottle of champagne at the start of the show. The show started at 9PM and ended at 10:45PM. It was spectacular, with many production numbers as well as "breaks" with a juggler, gymnasts, and a ventriloquist. -Back to the hotel by midnight, and we find that our suitcases have been delivered to our room.

Best, Jim

Saturday October 4th - Day 16:

-Today is our last full day in France. We wake up in Paris at the Concorde St. Lazare hotel, enjoy an excellent buffet breakfast at the hotel and then meet for the 8:10AM departure of the Monet/Giverny excursion.

-27 of our group of 40 (including Marcia, Jim, Marie and Kal) have signed up for this "optional" excursion. Philippe advises that we are getting an early start to "beat the crowds". Traffic is very light on this Saturday morning, and we have a nice drive from our hotel to the Place de la Concorde, up the Champs de Ellesse, around the Arc de Triumphe and thru west Paris before joining the motorway that runs towards Rouen, Northwest of Paris. The drive to the small town of Giverny, located on the Seine river just inside the border of Normandy province, takes about an hour and twenty minutes. On the drive, our Tour Director Philippe gives us a good overview of the life of the painter Claude Monet and the impressionist movement in the second half of the 19th century. At Giverny we tour the extensive formal gardens and the buildings on the Monet estate.



It's a clear sunny day, but only about 48 degrees when we start our tour, warming up to about 56 when we reboard our motor coach at 11:20AM for the return trip to Paris.

-Back at our hotel at 12:45PM, and time to pick up one of the great French sandwiches from one of the ever present storefront delis for a quick lunch before our Paris City Tour.

-Our whole tour group meets at 1:40PM for our "included" Paris City Tour. Today's automatic seat rotation has put the four of us in the two front rows of our motor coach again.....good planning on our part! We have a local guide for this tour, Carlos, but our Tour Director Philippe also comes along to help with logistics. This turns out to be a really great tour. Carlos is a good guide and speaks excellent English. The tour, which totals nearly four hours, falls into three parts:

---2 hours in our motor coach driving thru some areas that we had not seen before, in addition to the usual sites.

---45 minutes at Les Invalides, where we exit the coach and view Napoleon's tomb.



---A 1 hour river cruise. Our boat starts on the Seine near the Eiffel tower,



and goes up river, well past Notre Dame cathedral before turning around and coming back to our starting point. It is sunny with temperatures in the low 60's, and we have quite an enjoyable ride. We sit in the back of the boat, outside of the roofed in area, and enjoy the clear sight lines and fresh air.

-We are back at our hotel at 5:45PM with just enough time to get ready for the "Farewell Dinner". 32 of our group of 40 have signed up for this optional dinner. We board our motor coach at 6:30PM for a short ride to the Les Noces de Jeannette restaurant where we are seated in a private room. Shirley and Noel from Australia join the four of us at a table for 6. This meal is excellent! We all start out with a glass of Kir, then three choices for appetizers.....snails, quiche Lorraine, or pink and white terrine of fish, three entre choices.....leg of duck in orange sauce, burgundy beef stew, or cod fish in butter cream sauce, assorted cheeses, and a nice desert (along with unlimited wine). An accordion playing lady serenaded us at times during dinner, and after dinner Philippe joined in the singing, leading the group in a few songs.....



great fun was had by everyone.

-Back to the hotel by 10PM, we say our goodbyes to our excellent coach driver Joel,



and assemble on the steps of the hotel lobby for a quick, unofficial group picture.



Best, Jim

Sunday October 5th - Day 17:



-Today will be a long travel day back to our homes in the USA.

-I have noted a fair amount of discussion on the Insight BB about the possible need for credit cards with "implanted chips" or PIN numbers to have them work in Europe. I will comment that we had no issues using our standard USA credit cards (without the chips or PINs) in France. We did, of course, contact our credit card providers and let them know to expect charges from France during the time period of our trip. Our cards worked in restaurants, in "swipes" at cash registers at rest stops on the motorway, and in ATMs. FYI, my primary credit card is an American Express card, and it was accepted at most merchants (where they did not accept AE, I used my VISA card with no problems). Also, 100% of the ATMs in France seem to accept VISA and MasterCard, but only 50% take American Express. However, there seems to be about two ATMs on every corner in France, so I never had a problem with getting Euros, easily, at an ATM with my American Express card!

-Now, our flight from Paris does not depart until 1:30PM, and when we received our travel documents from Insight Travel they pointed out that they would only be running one shuttle from the hotel to the airport on October 5th.....the early one at 7AM.....rather than the two shuttles (the early one and a later one) that they usually do. We figured that this was because the touring season is over, and they do not have any new tours starting that require a later shuttle to take folks from the airport to a hotel at the start of their trip. We planned that we'd either have to get up at 5:30AM and take the early shuttle, or pay about \$70 for a taxi to the airport.

-Then, three days ago our Tour Director Philippe asked us to give him our flight departure times so that he could assign us to one of the two shuttles. Several of us questioned him about the "only one shuttle" communication, but he was firm in stating that he would run two shuttles.....great!

-So.....this morning we were able to sleep late, pack our bags, catch a nice (included) breakfast at the hotel restaurant, and then depart for the airport on the 10AM shuttle with Philippe (there were only 3 other couples on this shuttle). The other members of our tour group either departed earlier on the 7AM shuttle, or had additional travel plans. Several were taking the Insight eight day river cruise, up the Seine to Normandy, or were staying additional days in Paris, or traveling to another part of Europe for more vacationing. This was especially true of the folks from Australia and New Zealand.....the transit times between their homes and Paris is 24 hours, and quite expensive, so they often tend to do more than just one tour when they get to Europe.

-A quick, 40 minute ride to the airport in the very light Sunday morning Paris traffic. Overcast and rainy.....a good time for a rainy day! Check in/customs/security goes reasonably well, and our US Airways Airbus A330 takes off on time at 1:30PM for a scheduled arrival in Philadelphia at 3:35PM (we

pick up 6 hours in route).

-Marcia and Jim arrived home to Malta NY at 9PM and Marie and Kal arrived back home in Dayton at 11PM.

Best, Jim

SUMMARY (the four of us all agree that this has either been our "favorite" tour, or is tied for first place):

Tour Director: Philippe (Filipe Pereira de Olivera) - Excellent - We feel that we have always had great TD's on our previous Insight Tours, but Philippe is the best. His knowledge,

enthusiasm, energy, humor, attention to our needs, and presence were all top notch.

Driver: Joel - Excellent - Got us in and out of all the tight spaces and has a very easy touch on the throttle and stirring wheel; assists all with exiting the coach and very helpful with

all of the luggage (we were able to store any large carry-ons under the coach during the day, and then retrieve when arriving at the hotels).

Motor Coach: Excellent

Hotels: Two were "good"; the rest were very good or excellent

Food: Very good

Weather: Very good; rain only two days for brief periods. I believe we picked a good time (late September/early October)

Itinerary: Excellent

Pace of the Tour: Perfect for us. The four 2-night stays at the same hotel were great, most morning start times were not too early, no really long days in the motor coach, and we

always seemed to either have an "event" stop or a rest stop after two hours of coach travel. Most days had some extra time for personal sightseeing, hiking, or shopping.

Optionals: Good

Safety: No Problems - Philippe warned us about areas where there may be pickpockets or "aggressive gypsies", but we saw neither in late September/early October

The French People: We met nothing but helpful and pleasant folks on this trip

Our Tour Group: Excellent, experienced travelers. Ages from the late 30's thru mid-70's.