

Diary of our trip to Paris 25 March - 1 April

At our 30th wedding anniversary party last October all our guests clubbed together to pay for the visit, and this is the story of our travels with thanks to them - to you - all.

During our week's visit we went to 4 concerts, visited 5 museums, 2 cathedrals, 3 parks and a cemetery, ate wonderful meals in a variety of restaurants, drank wine of varying quality but none of it bad, and walked in all but 3 of the 20 arrondissements as well as in Neuilly sur Seine, Boulogne Billancourt, the Bois de Boulogne and Saint Denis.

Many people suggested things we might do. If we had done them the rip would have lasted a month or maybe a year! But we regretted not going on boat trips on either canal or river, or visiting the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, the Bois de Vincennes and the gardens of Versailles. We would still like to visit the Musée d'Art Juif and the Memorial de la Shoah, the Cités de la Sciences et de l'Industrie and ... de la Musique, and probably many more places we have not read about yet. But we were happy, above all, to wander the streets and parks, to sit in cafés and watch the world go by, and to feel lucky to be in [mostly] sunny Paris in the springtime courtesy of all our kind friends. Here is what we did:



25 March 2009

Up betimes, as Pepys says, and having tidied, unplugged and made sure there was nothing in the fridge to crawl out and meet us on our return we were excited, ready and waiting on the doorstep for our neighbour Chris to drive us to the station. On the local train to Nîmes we met a charming young man who spoke good English so we chatted happily in both languages about his teenage visits to Slough! Then onto the sleek TGV, too little luggage space as always, but not crowded and only one stop before our arrival at the Gare de Lyon shortly before 2.

We walked from the station northwards to our friends' flat in the 11e, and after unpacking we set out on the first exploratory walk south, passing through districts dedicated to different kinds of goods; ironmongery and joinery in one street, while another quite small street must have had over 30 shops selling computer parts and related electronic things. This one, the rue Montgallet, led us to the Promenade Planté which is a long old railway viaduct high among the streets and buildings north of the Gare de Lyon, laid out as a formal garden with shrubs, pools and a winding footpath with



decorative arches. In spring it's full of yellow forsythia and Korea, pink blossom on the trees and deeper pink japonica. There are frequent steps to street level, but we went right to the northerly end and into the Place de la Bastille. Charles had arranged to meet us there for a drink in one of the bars around the huge Place with its commemorative column. Then he took us past the impressive modern opera house to a restaurant he recommended, where we enjoyed a very good traditional French bistro meal while listening to the polyglot conversations at the tables crammed close to us on either side.

26 March 2009



We decided to go west today and took the Métro line 9 all the way across the north of Paris to the smart suburb of Passy to see the Musée Marmottan, a fine old house with a wonderful collection of Monets and other impressionists. The opening hours had changed since even the latest guides had been printed, so first we walked back to the centre of Passy, with our first glimpses of the Tour Eiffel over the rooftops, to the Musée de Vin housed in some mediaeval cellars. The museum is an oddity really, just a huge collection of wine growing and making equipment through the ages, but quite charming and enlivened by a glass of Fronton rosé at the end.

We found lunch in a very nicely restored old railway station (seating 280 max!) on the way back to Marmottan. Not only were the atmosphere and decor good, but the food was light, delicious and well-presented. We found out it's part of a chain of restaurant/bars all over Paris, and shall

look out for others since it seemed very well-run.

The Marmottan collection was extraordinary, as much for beautiful Renoirs and Berthe Morisot pictures as for the huge variety of Monet's mostly later work. The house itself is lovely, light and open with well-integrated gallery extensions, and full of old furniture and earlier paintings too, and a separate room for a bequest of mediaeval illuminated pages and fragments. The whole collection and its setting are the result of a succession of bequests and together make for one of the most satisfying permanent exhibitions we've seen.

We rested a bit before our evening outing to see our friend Alex in his flat near the Canal St Martin. He rents it from his boyfriend Séb, a dermatologist whom we met. There were 8 of us altogether of whom 5 including Alex were American, and we had a good evening of chat, wine and some simple food.

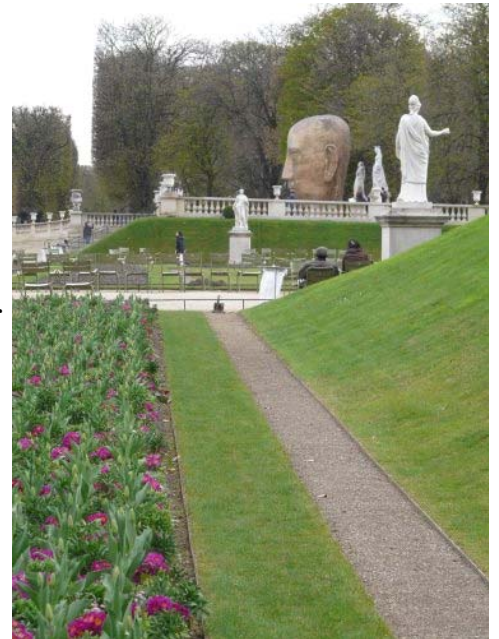
27 March 2009

Our main object today was the Musée d'Orsay, to hear the Schubert Octet, played by

musicians from the Orchestre de Paris in the very pleasant modern auditorium, and to look around the museum and its rich collection of impressionist painting and of sculpture. We were amazed to find ourselves sitting two rows behind our friends from Sommières, Danielle and Sylvain, so we were delighted to share a drink and a chat after the concert.

We walked down the Champs Elysée and past the elaborate Christmas cake palaces across the river to get to the quai d'Orsay, and when we left the museum we decided to walk on in a circuit through the Saint Germain district to the Jardin du Luxembourg, then on through the university area past the Panthéon and the Institut du Monde Arabe, then across the river and back home via the Place de la Bastille. The sun came out as we walked to transform the evening streets.

We ate in the evening at Q-Bar nearby, a very simply furnished but excellent Thai restaurant with delicious food and good wine. We've found the Loire wines here in Paris especially good and will be searching out the St Nicolas de Bourgueil we drank tonight. For our home drinking we've found a reliable Saint Pourçain at under 5€ a bottle in the Nicolas chain.



28 March 2009

Today we planned to visit the Institut du Monde Arabe which is a wonderful and hi-tech building on the left bank east of Notre Dame. The museum of Arabic art and culture is built round the theme of pan-mediterranean influences and is pointedly as much Christian as much as Islamic in influence and imagery. The setting on three floors (7, 6 and 5 in the order you see them) of glass and steel skeleton is dramatic, and the panoramas of Paris. One wall of the building is entirely composed of a windows with a mosaic of diaphragms which are supposed to open and close



with the brightness of light outside, but I'd read in a guide that the computer controlling them tended to break down and so it seemed to have done today. The exhibits - ceramics, carpets, glass, wood and fabric of often incredible age - were full of interest as well as beauty. But like the hi-tech windows, everything seemed only 90% with direction signs to the restaurants missing, toilets rather shabby and the bookshop lacking the books you most expected to find there - the museum guide for instance! But we had a great time there and a nice buffet lunch once we'd found it.



To get there we had taken the métro to the Place d'Italie further south and walked back up to the river. Afterwards we continued our walk along the islands to Notre Dame, but since it then began to rain we cut our losses, sheltered in the covered flower markets and took the métro home. One thing we've found about métro journeys is that buskers quite regularly get into your carriage: I developed the theory that the worst were sent into trains because with luck they or you changed location often so you didn't have to listen for too long. Some we have heard are very limited in talent having learnt tunes but not the right chords to go with them!

In the evening we went to the Opéra Comique for a performance of Italian Baroque music. We'd had little idea what to expect and were truly surprised and delighted by the little orchestra (strings, harpsichord, 2 theorbos and flute) and singers (3 sopranos and tenor) all of whom played and sang beautifully. The music in comic traditions of Naples and Venice included a piece with a page boy sung by a woman and an older amorous lady sung by a tenor that made us think of Mozart and Cherubino. The composers included Strozzi and Giramo (who seems only to have lived to be 21) from the early 17th century and Petrini and Caldara from the early 18th. All this in the Salle Favart, an opera house of astonishing and richly decorated baroque style - we sat in little 6-seater plush-lined boxes or baignoires which added to the atmosphere. The concert was recorded and is to be broadcast on France Musique at 3 pm on 13 April - well worth listening to.

29 March 2009

We walked to the Aligre market this morning, highly recommended by the guides but in truth nothing out of the ordinary if you've seen a good French vegetable market, then on to the street market at the Bastille which was much more interesting with some quite amazing fish stalls. Then we went on to the Place des Vosges, which lives up to its reputation of architectural harmony being Paris's first planned square. As well as beauty it seemed to have life with children playing and strollers and joggers of all ages. After that we decided to visit the Musée Picasso and spent an enthralling couple of hours following his life and work in painting and sculpture; often it was simple drawings and portraits that moved us most, and



many had been familiar to us for years as reproductions but gained fresh life in the originals.

Then we traversed a rather dead set of streets in search of lunch - Sunday life obviously occurs elsewhere than in the 3rd or 2nd arrondissements. We found simple but excellent steaks in a Chinese-run café, then sought out the Opéra Comique to take the photos we'd omitted the night before. After an afternoon trip to visit a friend in Boulogne-Villancourt we walked a bit again around the area south of the Arc de Triomphe (and saw the underpass where Di and Dodi were killed, crammed with graffiti), back pas the Arc itself and on eventually to our evening concert venue.

This was in the Musée Jacquemart-Andrée, a private house turned into a museum by its collector-owners, simple and elegant outside but crammed with decoration of tapestries, ornate plasterwork, painted ceilings and elaborate furniture within. People here seem rather awed by it but we found it excessively grand, much as some stately homes in England are, and were glad to get enough of a glimpse with our pre-concert champagne to avoid the need to pay for a separate visit. And the house had been used in the past for musical soirées so, as the organiser explained, this was an appropriate revival of the tradition of the place.

The music however was another matter and superb. Paul Badura-Skoda was playing Schubert: his great posthumous piano sonata in B flat major, preceded by some dances and 3 Moments Musicaux and followed as encores by 3 waltzes. We'd wished for less scanty and bland programme notes (those yesterday evening were equally thin) but he introduced each piece eloquently and played them all with a passion and absorption which belied his great age. We were sitting near the piano and so felt very involved in the performances. It was not a long concert but for us a perfect way to round off an evening.

30 March 2009

A whole day spent walking, first from the Champs Elysée to la Défense, then through the Bois de Boulogne. The Grande Axe from the Louvre past the Arc de Triomphe is impressive and an enjoyable 6 km of walking despite all the guide books say to put you off. You leave Paris, cross the périphérique and pass by Neuilly sur Seine to cross the Seine on its way north after its loop west of the city.



We lunched in a pleasant oasis by the Seine before going on to the Défense area itself, which is at once a huge glass and concrete business park, a symbol of national power and prestige, and of location and place besides with the long straight road from the Grande Arche to the Arc de Triomphe constantly visible and in a way inspiring. On the sunny day we went it was also beginning to be a magnet for tourists. The Arche or cube itself is also impressive, but we soon felt we'd had enough steel and stone and went in search of green.

So we went back across the river and into the Bois de Boulogne. This is not so much a real wood as a cross between a common and a park in English terms - Chorleywood common or Hampstead Heath, with a dash of Hyde Park around the more formal plantings along the lakes, crisscrossed with roads as well as paths and bridleways with regular glimpses of the Tour Eiffel. It was an ideal counterweight to the bustle of the highways and business districts we'd been in. After a rest for aching limbs and feet (and a bottle-shaped apéro) we rounded off the day with a meal out with friends.

31 March 2009

A day of cathedrals. To Saint Denis in the morning to see the Basilica famous as the first gothic church. We found the open space and light from the high windows impressive even though we are used to seeing later and airier cathedrals built following this inspiration in England and in France. Part of the church is sectioned off as a museum for which you pay, full of the tombs of the kings and queens of France which although fascinating interested us less than early stained glass and carvings.



We ate lunch outside in the sunshine facing the cathedral and reflected on the difference from our English experiences of being fenced off by barriers and sterile cathedral close lawns. We also noticed the contrast between the rather rarefied atmosphere of restored church glory and the distinctly seedy town square and market nearby - St Denis is one of the poorest communes of the greater Paris area. Then we made our way back into Paris to visit the Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Afterwards we walked across the Parc Monceau to Saint Augustin.



In the evening we went to a lovely concert, 2 Mozart violin concertos, and 1 symphonies by Boccherini and Haydn, The Italian violinist had been a pupil of Szering whose recording of the second concerto I had known well years ago. Both soloist and l'Orcheste des Champs Elysées played beautifully: the orchestra is a French specialist ensemble for classical and early romantic works, playing today with no conductor but a leader/concert-master. The Salle Gaveau was built in 1907, decorated but not over-ornate with double galleries around 3 sides of the hall. It's named after the harp manufacturer whose showroom is next door, and we commented on the link between concert halls and instrument-makers in Paris - another (Pleyel, pianos) also has an adjacent showroom.

1 April 2009



Our final morning which we spent roaming the cimetière Pierre Lachaise. This is Paris's answer to Highgate, full of extraordinary memorials and monuments cheek by jowl in completely discordant styles. There are many famous people buried here and we strolled for hours without discovering more than one (Balzac) that we recognised. There were school parties of all ages, and tourists of all nationalities.

So finally we returned to one of our favourite discoveries, the (Thai) Q-Bar in the rue de la Roquette, for a good lunch before collecting our things from the flat and heading for the Gare de Lyon and home. We left Paris in spring sunshine and arrived in Lunel on a very wet evening. But the sun will reappear...