

Cotgrave U3A goes to France – eventually

On Thursday 21st April 14 of us set off from Nottingham Station to travel to St Pancras Station where we were joined by Anna and Brian Franks. We boarded the Eurostar to Paris where we were met by Keith the Riviera Travel representative who stayed with us for the remainder of the visit. We travelled onwards by coach incidentally driven by Anja who drove us a few years ago when we went with Riviera to Rouen.

The first night of the trip we stayed in a delightful hotel in Vernon a small historic town on the River Seine and from where we travelled to Giverny the following morning to see Monet's garden. It was a delightfully place, the gardens were full of spring flowers mainly tulips, wallflowers, peonies and azaleas. The wisteria, growing over the famous green bridge spanning the lily lake was in bud, however we were a week too soon from seeing it as Monet would have painted it.

From here we travelled to Tours, our base for the next 4 nights. Tours is a historic town and centrally situated for all our excursions. The old town was very interesting and had many timber framed old houses.



The remainder of the visit consisted of a variety of visits to chateaux, cathedrals and gardens. The most

notable was Chenonceau, a beautiful chateau built over the river Cher. Villandry was a spectacular chateau noted for its amazing gardens. The flower beds were in fact made up of vegetables consisting of several types of lettuce, cabbages, herbs and brassicas and were encased by box hedging.



We also visited Fontenay, an abbey where the remains of Henry 2 of England are interred alongside those of his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, their son Richard the 1st (the Lion Heart) and one of their daughters. We were shown around here by a very amusing, flamboyant American guide. I felt she missed her calling and should have been on the stage. This was a very stark building, but it was interesting to see how the building had survived the revolution and various wars afterwards including its time used as a prison,

The other places we visited included the cathedral at Chartres, the Royal Fortress of Chinon and the Chateau Clos Luce, the final home of Leonardo du Vinci. Here we could see a number of replicas of his inventions in the house and the grounds. There was also the predicted tour of a winery to taste wines of the region, these were sparkling wines made in the champagne style - very palatable.

The final visit on the final morning was to the palace of Fontainebleau. This palace consisted of 1500 rooms and was set in fabulous grounds. The state rooms were magnificent but obviously we only got to see a small section of the palace, enough to stimulate the imagination as to how royalty lived there in the 16th/17th century.

From here we travelled back to the Gare du Nord and home. The whole experience was, I felt, very enjoyable with a good mixture of things to do. There was no pressure to do any of the visits and you could take things at your own pace. The weather was great, having only one hour over a lunch time of rain. Riviera certainly packed lots into the visit, it was excellent value for money and definitely worth the three year wait to go. There were a few hiccups along the way but none that were not solvable.



The task now is to find a holiday that can surpass that one.