

## Adventuring Overseas

2023 has been a great year for us as Mark and I had the wonderful opportunity to head off to Europe for a much anticipated trip. We have a great love for France and have visited there briefly a couple of times in the past. Having now stepped away from my role at Macandrew Bay School the plan this time was to be able to take our time and try out a bit of a slow travel approach where we could try and explore smaller villages as well as big cities from a home base, stay put for longer, and really try to experience a bit of the French lifestyle that definitely appeals to us. We planned our three months from the middle of May till the middle of August in Europe and then added a relaxing two weeks in Central Vietnam on the way home so that we could arrive home in time for the start of Spring. We find this slower way of travelling more relaxing and it also helps to make your money go a bit further. Pretty necessary when you head to Europe for a prolonged period!

We had a stopover for a couple of nights in Singapore and then flew into Zurich in Switzerland where we stayed for another couple of nights to give us the chance to enjoy the wonderful old towns of Zurich and Lucerne and to visit two fantastic art galleries. It has been a real thrill for us both to see some amazing art on this trip and I have Mark to thank for that. I sorted out all the logistics of our trip and searched for and booked our airbnb's and made all the travel arrangements, while Mark's research was mainly based on great places to see and visit. Together we make a pretty good team and we were able to tailor our trip to our interests and the things we really enjoy doing and seeing. History, art, architecture, gorgeous ancient villages, delicious food and drink, beautiful landscapes and countryside are all high on our list and we were able to experience all of these enjoyable things throughout our whole holiday.

After Zurich we flew into Nice in the South of France and spent 10 nights in Villefranche sur Mer, on the French Riviera just outside of Nice. We stayed in the beautiful old town on one of the narrow steep streets rising up the hill above the harbour and beach area. After having both managed to avoid covid for three years at home in NZ I came down with covid upon arrival in France but luckily initially it was reasonably mild. It did slow me down for a few days initially but by the end of our 10 days we had visited Nice, Monaco (during the Grand Prix), La Turbie up on the hill above Monaco to see the Roman ruin called the Trophy of the Alps, and headed up into the mountains for a day to the Mercantour area near the Italian border on the Train de Merveilles. The next stage of our journey was by train to Aix en Provence where we stayed for 4 nights exploring the city and visiting the beautiful village of Lourmarin in the Luberon Valley. We had hoped to climb Mont St Victoire, a frequent subject of paintings by Paul Cezanne but our lungs and energy levels weren't up to it after the covid encounter.

The next stage of our trip was perhaps my favourite time when we booked a cute little cottage for the month of June in the ancient village of Villeneuve les Avignon, across the Rhone River from the city of Avignon. When the popes moved from Rome to Avignon back in the 1300's the cardinals all built palaces and chapels in Villeneuve and lived there so the architecture and history of the village was fascinating. The village has a huge fort on the hill and an abbey below but best of all it feels like a real community where people know each

other and look out for each other. It was a great home base and we were made to feel very welcome and looked after beautifully by our Airbnb hosts who lived in the main house at the other end of the garden.

June was a very hot month in Europe this year and temperatures reached 30+ degrees every afternoon but we still managed to get away most days exploring many of the nearby cities and villages in this area of Provence, catching local buses and trains from nearby Avignon to get around. It was great to see many buildings and structures dating back to Roman times such as the Pont du Gard aqueduct that carried water from Uzès to the city of Nîmes, we visited the Roman Theatre in Orange that is still used for performances today, and the wonderfully intact amphitheatres in Nîmes and Arles. I had a great day doing a cooking class with Peta Mathias in her own home in Uzès after first buying goodies from the local market sellers. Another highlight was a trip to Marseille and catching a small electric boat to travel along the Mediterranean coast exploring the Calanques which are numerous rocky coves, and swimming off the back of the boat in the warm water. We did a day trip to visit some of the most beautiful villages in the Luberon Valley, including Menerbes which is the village Peter Mayle wrote about in his best selling book called "A Year in Provence". We loved buying wonderful food from the village market each Thursday, goodies from the best boulangerie in town, and also eating at the Monday Night Food trucks that set up in the same market square each week. It was great to head off to explore a historic village in the slightly cooler temperatures in the mornings and then to find a little local café with umbrellas or shady trees about 12.30pm, order a yummy meal and a cool drink and enjoy a bit of people watching for an hour or two. We really had a great month there and I would love to return at some stage in the future.

At the end of June we headed north to Paris for 9 days and had a wonderful time visiting art galleries and museums and exploring some of the best known Paris neighbourhoods, such as the Marais, St Germain and Montparnasse. We did heaps of walking but also caught the metro all over town as well. We were there at the same time as the Paris riots after a young black man was killed by police in an outlying Paris neighbourhood, but we didn't see any signs of rioting or trouble in the Bastille area where we were staying, though we heard plenty of sirens in the distance and were aware that some big concerts had been cancelled at the Stade de France. Paris is a very beautiful city and it was lovely to be there in the warmth of summer in July and to get to know it a bit better. I think we visited 13 Museums in our time there and once again were blown away by the wonderful art on view.

After Paris we headed to Burgundy and the Jura area for the next three weeks, a little south of Paris and in the east. We began by staying a week in the ancient and very pretty town of Auxerre. Auxerre sits on the Yonne River, which is popular with canal boats and many boats are moored up in the evenings. It has three huge churches on the hill above the river dating back to the days when it was an important religious centre. A feature of the architecture in Burgundy are the beautiful half-timbered houses and we really enjoyed wandering the narrow, cobbled streets looking at all of them. Joigny was another town nearby with similar buildings and we caught the train to spend the day there, as well as travelling to Vézelay for another enjoyable day trip. It was great to see fields of sunflowers, many vineyards, lots of haymaking and the occasional paddock of white cows out the window of the trains on our

travels. The French countryside is incredibly pretty. The next week was spent further east in the Jura area in Besancon and Ornans. We loved getting out in the countryside in Ornans and being able to go for walks up in the hills above the town. This had been a real challenge in Provence as all the walking tracks seemed to be closed because of the high risk of fire in the south in the summer months. Beautiful rivers ran through all these towns and cities and were a real feature. We had a day trip to Colmar in Alsace Lorraine and there were more fantastic half-timbered houses and some wonderful art to see in this pretty town but we found it very touristy and crowded. Our last week in Burgundy was spent in Dole and Dijon and we really enjoyed both places. It was great to walk through the largely pedestrianized town centres and to find out all about the Dukes of Burgundy and the rich history and heritage of these cities over the centuries.

At the start of August we headed by train from Dijon to Basel in Switzerland. We had two nights in Basel and then caught the train to Switzerland's capital Bern. Both cities were great and it was good to be back in Switzerland and tapping into the wonderful art in their museums and art galleries and enjoying wandering around their historic city centres, admiring the architecture and lively feel. Switzerland is incredibly expensive though and even a cup of coffee is more than double what you would pay here so our time in Switzerland was brief! We caught the Flixbus through the beautiful Swiss countryside to Lake Geneva and then through the French Alps to Grenoble where we stayed for a couple of nights before heading south by local bus through the mountains to Dignes les Bains for the weekend of their annual Lavender Festival. This was an excuse for a big party weekend with many bands in the streets, parades and fireworks. It's a small village but many people had come to town for the weekend so we really enjoyed the fun atmosphere and beautiful mountains all around. Our last 5 days in France were spent further south in the lovely small town of Vence in the hills looking down on the French Riviera. We have stayed here twice before and it has a special place in our hearts. We re-visited three of the special nearby villages over the next few days, and our favourite restaurants in town and just had a wonderful time being back in a place that we love.

Our time in Europe was nearly over and we were flying out from Milan so we caught trains from the coast below Vence through to Milan. We only had a couple of days in Milan but we had never been there before and really loved exploring its sights and treasures. The Brera Gallery was fantastic and it was great walking around Milan and seeing its beautiful architecture. The Duomo is certainly something very special and even the train station is magnificent. It was great eating pasta and gelato in Italy again to finish our time in Europe.

The trip home was a slow one as we detoured from Singapore into Vietnam for a couple of relaxing and inexpensive weeks in Hoi An and Danang in the central part of Vietnam for the last part of our trip. We enjoyed staying on the beach, doing lots of swimming and eating delicious Vietnamese food in little local restaurants and chatting to the locals. The only drawback with Vietnam was that it was incredibly hot and humid in August and every day it was already 35 degrees by about 9am in the morning. We started dreaming of our lovely cool temperatures back home and although we had loved every day of this amazing trip away and had so many special moments and memories that we will treasure forever we were happy to arrive home at the very end of August to the magnolia and camellias in

flower in the garden and the water sparkling on the harbour below the house. It's always great to have time away having adventures and lovely to come home too!