

DAY 1 : Tuesday, September 8

Off to London!

Unless you have elected to arrive in London early, today you will be winging your way to Jolly Old England! Enjoy your time onboard but get some rest. You will likely be landing around noon, but your body clock will think it's 4am. We have a big day tomorrow!



DAY 2 : Wednesday, September 9

Welcome to England!

You've arrived! After gathering your luggage and meeting your fellow travelers, we'll be boarding our chartered bus to the port of Southampton where we will pick up our cars. The drive will be about two hours unless we decide to stop for some fish and chips.



Our cars should be already unloaded and waiting for us. A little paperwork, transfer some luggage, hit a nearby petrol station, and we're off to our hotel in the village of Sherrill Heath, a mere 25 minutes' drive.

The New Place Hotel, an odd name for an English manor house that's been around for over 100 years, but our home for the next four nights is a quintessential country estate, featuring the original brick main house flanked by modern bungalows with gym, pool, croquet lawn and even a cricket patch!

Pull right through the wrought iron gates, we have exclusive VIP parking in the grand circle out front. After unpacking, we'll meet up in the handsome period bar and lounge, before enjoying a three-course dinner in the dining room, included in the price.



History of the hotel

New Place was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and is a masterpiece of brickwork of exceptional quality. In 1904, Mrs. A. S Franklyn commissioned Sir Edwin to design a house, firstly to incorporate the magnificent interior of an early 17th Century mansion in Bristol scheduled for demolition which she had inherited and, secondly to perpetuate the name of Shakespeare's house in Stratford Upon Avon called New Place with which the Franklyn's were connected though the Arden family branch of Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden. New Place was built in 1906 by J. Parnell & Sons of Ruby who were subsequently taken over by Miller Buckley Investments LTD. New Place was ready for occupation in 1908 and Mrs. Franklyn gave it to her son, Captain Henry Arden Franklyn, as a wedding present. Thus, the Arden/Shakespeare/ Franklyn saga came full circle and once more a residence called New Place came into existence.

In 1956 Mr & Mrs Franklyn Jnr sold New Place for the sum of £12,000 to a Mr Harley. Mr Harley ran New Place as a boy's prep school with 7 boys. He remained Headmaster, teaching Latin and Maths for the following 10 years when he sold the school to Mr & Mrs P. A Deane as the flourishing prep school of 70 boys.

The school closed in July 1978 and New Place and its grounds were purchased by the Simple Impact Company and run as a conference centre. In 1979 the first bedroom block was built and in 1980, the second. The centre was also used for weddings and dinner parties. The remainder of the estate was split up and sold off.

DAY 3 : Thursday, September 10

A Day of Touring! Pick your Pleasure.

Today you have your choice of activities (or none at all) on your own schedule. Perhaps you'll want to sleep in a little to get over the jet lag, or more likely, you'll be up at 5am and waiting for the dining room to open! Once it does, treat yourself to the New Place's fantastic buffet or cooked to order breakfast, included in your hotel rate. You can't go away hungry.

Sufficiently nourished, you'll have to decide if you want to partake of any of the three pre-routed tours, or just go off on your own to explore the leafy English countryside. On offer are:

-A Day at Historic Portsmouth Dockyard. An easy twenty-minute drive gets you to the age-old home of the British Navy. Visitors can tour an array of Royal Navy ships from many eras, including the HMS *Victory*, which played a key role in Britain's battles with Napoleon's navy, and see the remains of the *Mary Rose*, a 16th-century warship that was a favorite of Henry VIII. There are numerous museums and exhibits on the site, tickets range from £18 to £31 with a small concession for over 65s. (<https://www.historicdockyard.co.uk/be-inspired>)



-Beaulieu and the New Forest. First, let's get the pronunciation right: It's "byou-lee". Beaulieu is home to both the Palace House and Abbey and the British National Motor Museum, so something for everyone. The grounds are lovely, and you can ride an open-air tram all the way around. A visit to the Motor Museum can be done in an hour, with an extra half hour viewing the "Top Gear" exhibit. The Palace House is also open for touring and all is included in the approximately £25 ticket (cheaper if purchased online in advance).



Getting to Beaulieu is half the fun (27 miles, about 45 minutes) as you will cross parts of the New Forest, with its roaming herds of ponies, cows and other four-legged creatures. On the way home, check out Brockenhurst and Lyndhurst, both charming villages full of shops, pubs and atmosphere. (www.beaulieu.co.uk)



-Isle of Wight. If you been to both Portsmouth and Beaulieu, you may want to try a tour around the nearby Isle of Wight. The ferry from Portsmouth runs frequently and the trip from the hotel to the island is only about two hours. Once on the island, a circumnavigation takes only about 3 hours. The south coast is the most spectacular area with high white cliffs and long empty beaches. Our tour will take you in a clockwise direction for the best views. (www.visitisleofwight.co.uk)



White cliffs above, Needles Lighthouse below



Be sure to get back to the hotel by 7 tonight, as we are planning a group dinner at the nearby Samuel's Rest Pub.

DAY 4 : Friday, September 11

The Goodwood Revival, opening day

-Time for the Main Event, the famous Goodwood Revival. No rush getting off this morning, enjoy another long breakfast. We'll depart as a group today, just so everyone can find the way, parking, etc. About 30 minutes' drive to the track. Then you will be turned loose and come and go as you please for the next three days. We'll be parking in the "Pre-66" reserved lot, with over 2000 other vintage cars and right next to the best entrance. (Set your "find my car" app!)

-After passing the ticket gates (with our pre-purchased tickets in hand), we will enter the area known as "Over the Road", aka Shopper's Paradise. Whether its vintage clothing, vintage cars, vintage memorabilia or vintage wine you seek, you will find it here in one of the multitude of tents. You can even get your hair done, 40's style, or watch a drive-in movie from the 60's. You may end up spending a good bit of your day here. And it's not a bad idea, as the crowds are not as heavy on Friday.



-But we're not just here for the shopping, the best is yet to come!

-Over the bridge and into the track area proper you'll find more shopping, eating, drinking, music and, oh yeah, some incredible vintage racing too! Your tickets today include the ability to rove amongst a variety of grandstands. You may not want to walk to all of them, but there is a cute tractor-drawn shuttle that goes all the way around the track, at a stately pace.

-Today is practice day on the track, so pick the groups you want to see from your prepaid program and focus on the fun. Saturday and Sunday are more crowded (If you can believe it), so Friday is the day to wander. Don't forget to go under the track into the infield area and see a recreation of the King's Court Auto Show from the early days, as well as the vintage aircraft display. One of my favorite spots is the Veuve Cliquot (champagne) tent. Continuous live music, competitive dancing and roving entertainers. Don't be put off....the £58 price is for a bottle, not a glass!

-When you are worn out, head back to the hotel (allow about 45 minutes with the traffic). Dinner is again included in the dining room and you can eat whenever you please.



DAY 5 : Saturday, September 12

More Goodwood and a special lunch

-Breakfast is usually served starting at 6am on race days, so you can get an early start and park close to the gates. Leave at your leisure. Today the serious racing begins, and many grandstands are again open to you. But don't forget our special lunch at the Goodwood Hotel, if you signed up. Time TBD.

-You will queue at Gate 2 and be shuttled to the hotel in a vintage ride....might be a Rolls, might be a Humber Super Snipe. Great photo op.



Your Ride?



Goodwood Hotel Bar and Grill

-After a leisurely three-course lunch and perhaps a glass of wine or two, we'll shuttle back to the track. Feel free to indulge in whatever strikes your fancy, or just hustle up a chair at one of the many food and music venues and while away the afternoon.



-Dinner Tonight is on your own, either at the hotel or one of the local pubs. Be sure to get packed up, as we will be leaving the hotel late-afternoon tomorrow for our ferry to France.

DAY 6 : Sunday, September 13

More Goodwood or ???

-Something tells me that today will be a mixed bag....maybe most guys back to the track and some gals hanging out at the hotel (spa?). Whatever you fancy. We'll try to get late check outs so those that do go to Goodwood can get back and change from their "costumes" before we head off.

-If you do go to the track, don't miss the Junior Peddle Car races at noon at the start finish line. This is serious business with the antique Austin A40 racers costing thousands and clearly no expense spared on the "drivers" gear either.



-Around mid-afternoon we'll start to regroup and eventually head off to Portsmouth (20 minutes) for an early dinner before lining up to board our overnight ride to St. Malo, France. We'll board about 7 for our 8pm sailing.

-The ferries are really quite comfortable, offering food, beverage and music after boarding and a reasonable breakfast tomorrow.



-All cabins have two single beds and a small sofa, plus a bathroom with shower. Linens and towels are supplied. Have a good night!



DAY 7 : Monday, September 14

St. Malo, France

-Our ferry docks about 8:30am, but if you missed breakfast, don't worry, I know a great crepe place in town! After we roll off the ferry, it's only a ten-minute drive to our hotel for the next two nights, the excellent Le Grand Be, St. Malo. We have reserved underground parking, unique within the walled city complex and the hotel will hold our luggage until we can check in.

-Meantime our *private tour guide* will be waiting to dazzle us with the history and beauty of St. Malo. But first, it's two blocks and up onto the rampart walls to the Creperie Le Corps De Garde for breakfast!



-After all that chocolate and coffee, we need a WALK, and St. Malo is paradise for walkers. Our guide will be showing us around the perfectly preserved ramparts and through the fascinating back alleys where the 2014 Best Seller, "*All the Light We Cannot See*" was set.

-After a good bit of walking, talking, and picture taking, we'll find a nice outdoor café for lunch, and then head back to the hotel to check in. Le Grand Be Hotel features a sunny terrace bar and a spa and wellness center, as well as the above mentioned, impossible to find, parking in the old city.

-Dinner tonight is on your own, I am sure you will have spotted any number of enticing opportunities. Breakfast tomorrow is included.



The walled, and sometimes almost island, City of St. Malo



The Terrace of Le Grand Be Hotel

DAY 8 : Tuesday, September 15

Mont St. Michel and/or Dinan

-Today is another “you pick ‘em” day. Two tours will be planned and you can do one or the other, or if you are incredibly energetic, both! Of course, as always, the third option will be, “I love St. Malo so much, I just want to hang out here.” It’s up to you.

-The jewel of the Normandy coast is without a doubt Mont St. Michel. One look at the photo below and you will immediately recognize this other “sometimes island” medieval architectural and religious treasure. The Mont lies about 90 minutes via the scenic route from our hotel.



-The problem with visiting Mont St. Michel is twofold. One, it is a very small (and steep) little rock, and two, it is *extraordinarily* popular. If you visited years ago, you might have driven up the the village, parked and walked in. No more. Now you must drive to a huge offsite staging area, buy your tickets, wait in line for buses, which must wait for people to leave the rock if it is at capacity. While it is well organized chaos, the process can be quite lengthy. If you go, go

early, REALLY early. Opening time is 9:30 in September. The good news is visiting is cheap. About €10 to park all day and that again if you want to buy an all-inclusive ticket to the four museums. If you have been before, you might want to read on. If not, it might be on your bucket list.

-A lesser known, though surely not unknown, attraction in the area is the medieval center of Dinan, about a 40 minute drive from our hotel and about an hour from Mont St. Michel. Dinan's cobbled streets and drunkenly swaying half timbered houses lead from the upper new town down to the harbor on the river Rance where a Roman Bridge still stands.



-A day spent here might start with coffee in the new town, a shopping ramble down to the harbor with lunch at a waterside fish restaurant. After lunch, there is an interesting (and a little challenging) hike through an apple orchard back up to the city center and the gorgeous Basilique Saint-Sauveur (or call an Uber!).

-Yes you could do both in one long but interesting day.

-Dinner tonight is on your own.

DAY 9 : Wednesday, September 16

The Loire Valley

-By now you might be wondering, “when are we going to start doing some real driving?”. Today. After escaping the walls of St. Malo, we’ll head southeast, around Rennes and Angers, stopping somewhere interesting for coffee and lunch. Early afternoon we’ll enter the Loire Valley and parallel the river all the way to our night’s stop in Villandry. Drive time about 4 hours, 300 km (180 miles)

-Villandry is famous for two things, the lovely gardens at the Chateau Villandry and the local Healey hangout aka Hotel Le Haut Des Lys. First, the Chateau.



-In an area resplendent with castles and chateau, Villandry stands alone on the strength of its magnificent formal gardens. While the chateau can be toured, most visitors skip the interior and concentrate on the greenery. A walk around the raised periphery trail is well worth the effort. If we don’t arrive this afternoon

in time, you will have a chance tomorrow morning. Castle and gardens €9, Gardens only €5. www.chateauvillandry.fr.

-Le Haut Des Lys (the top of the lily), a Tuffeau stone former convent, was purchased by Nathalie and Pascal Mercier, locals who devoted over two years and much of their own blood, sweat and tears to the renovation which created this charming hotel with modern touches. “Discovery” of Le Haut Des Lys is attributed to Peter Roses and the 2018 Healey Tour stayed for two nights. Subsequently other members have returned to enjoy the wonderful ambiance and pleasant company of the owners. www.lehautdesleys.com/en.



-Tonight’s dinner (included) will be something special. Pascal refers to it as “The Terroir Buffet”. I don’t know if that refers to the dog (Dog’s Breakfast?) or there is some other meaning in French. In any case, prepare yourself for large platters of fresh, locally sourced sliced meats, cheeses, breads and vegetables, kicked off with a champagne toast and capped with a slice (or two) of the Loire Valley’s characteristic Apple Pie, all served “al fresco” in the hotel’s garden.

DAY 10 : Thursday, September 17

Into the Green Venice of France

-This is another “your choice” morning. Everyone should enjoy the included breakfast (fabulous croissants), even if you have to hit the breakfast room in your “jammies” and sneak back to your warm bed. Thereafter, if you want to be out and about, you will have time to visit the above mentioned Gardens, or perhaps one of the nearby Chateau in Langeais or in Azay-le-Rideau. If you are sleeping in, you might want to try one of the hotels two hot tubs.

-Today we have a short 2:30 drive across the Loire Valley again, south in to Aquitaine and eventually reaching Coulon, famously known as the Green Venice of France. The Coulon area, also known as the Marais-Poitevin, is largely marshy and criss-crossed by dozens of scenic drainage canals.



Take a Punt Ride into the verdant marshes

-Our home tonight is the lively Hotel Le Central, which features a bar, outdoor patio, and a renowned restaurant offering local dishes and farm to table ingredients.



Hotel Le Central, Coulon, France

-We will arrive this afternoon with plenty of time to explore the town or take a punt ride into the peaceful marshes. There is a little museum in town which explains the history of the area (lots of pre-historic and Roman artifacts have been found), though how much in English is questionable. Just relax and enjoy the ambience. Buy some cheese and red wine and sit by the canal and enjoy rural French life.

DAY 11 : Friday, September 18

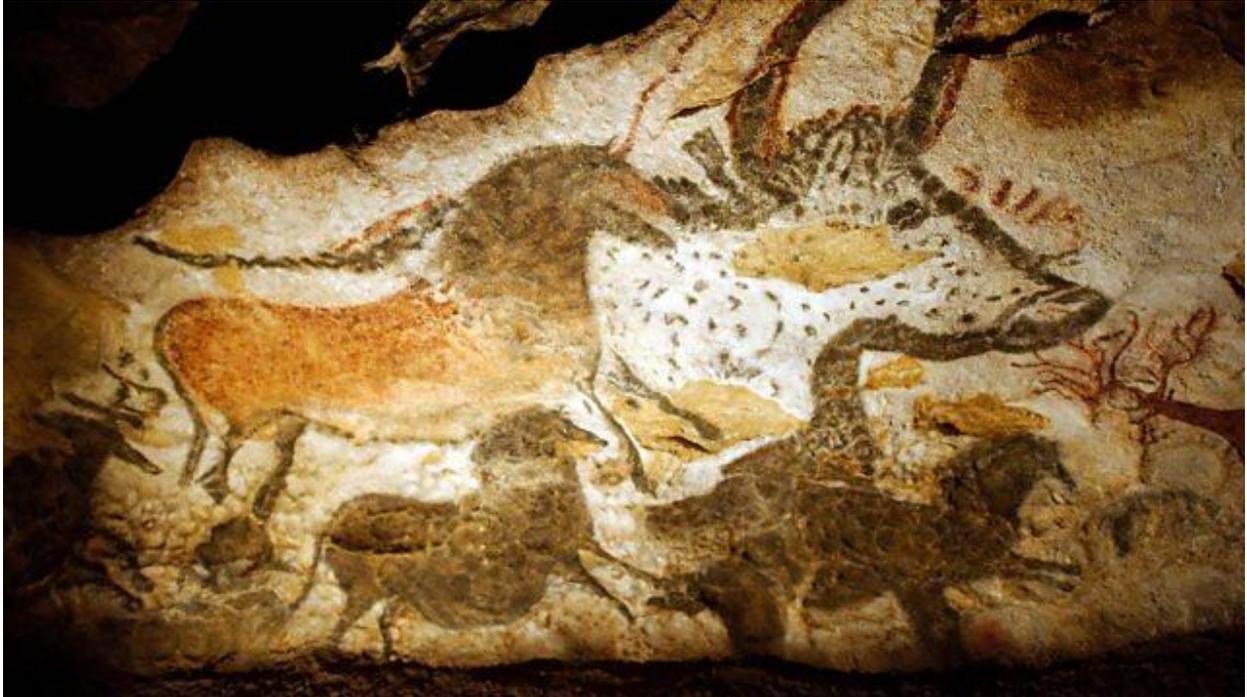
The Dordogne Valley and Lascaux

-After a hearty included breakfast, we'll be off a little early this morning. Most opted for the tour of Lascaux, which we have reserved for 2:30pm. Our lunch stop will be in Brantome, where we will also overnight, and from which the famous cave attraction is another 75 minutes drive.

-Our route takes us into the region known as the Perigord and most specifically into the upper Dordogne Valley (more on that tomorrow), down through the walled city of Angouleme (where a famous vintage race is run each year) before reaching our rivier side hotel, the Charbonnel. The hotel boasts a gourmet restaurant with local specialties.



-Our route to the Lascaux International Center of Art Preital (the official name, but more commonly referred to as Lascaux IV) is through some beautiful countryside that is well known for its prehistoric sites, many of them caves. Once we arrive at Lascaux we will be met by our English speaking guide who will take us through the various areas of this state-of-the-art exhibition, including the re-creation of the actual Lascaux cave discovered nearby in 1940. Tickets have been paid in advance.



-Following our two hour tour, we'll make our way back to Brantome in time to check in and enjoy a cocktail on the terrace before deciding on dinner. Hopefully those who skipped Lascaux have some suggestions for us!

DAY 12 : Saturday, September 19

The Dordogne Valley

-We have a long day today, with plenty to see, so we will be off early. We will dive deep into the Dordogne Valley region, one of the most beautiful in France, surely for driving. We'll make a coffee stop in the charming village of Sarlat-la-Canada, famous for its foie gras and walnut pastries, then we will continue along the Dordogne River past Castelnaud-la-Chapelle, a striking medieval castle on a hill above the river.



Castelnaud-la-Chapelle

-Then it's on to Domme, known as the "Acropolis of Perigord", where we will stop off for lunch. Awarded the honor of being one of the "Beaux Villages de France", Domme is famous for its panoramic views.



Domme on the Dordogne River

-After lunch, we'll drive southeast into the national park "Causses du Quercy", the location of the famous Rocamadour, another stunning castle on a rock.



Rocamadour

-After a quick stop for photos, we'll head south and hop on the A20 for a quick 90 minute trip to our hotel in Montauban, where the 14th century Pont-Vieux still spans the Tarn River.



-Tonight will be special, as we are booked into the historic Abbaye des Capucins Resort and Spa. As the name implies, this was once a Capuchin Convent, but has been converted into a four star hotel, complete with the original chapel and cloisters. Earlier travelers may remember the Abbey Rolduc in Belgium where we enjoyed drinks in the central courtyard before a group dinner. Prepare for the same. Dinner is included.



DAY 13 : Sunday, September 20

Into the Pyrenées (and maybe Lourdes)

-After yesterday's long drive, we have a much shorter three hours on the road today, so we will check out late, head south skirting Toulouse, and then drive through the foothills of the Pyrenees toward Pau and lunch. From Pau it's a scenic 40 minute drive to our hotel for the night in Bielle (Vallee d'Ossau).

-But wait, there is an option. If you are Catholic, or just interested, the famous shrine of Lourdes is directly on our route. If enough are game, a private guide will be arranged so you can see the most important sites on a skip-the-line basis. Those opting out will have a quiet afternoon at the lovely L'ayguelade Hotel and may choose to take the short drive into the nearby town of Laruns for some shopping and supplies.



Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes



Pyrenees Foothills Drive



Ossua Valley with the village of Bielle in the center and Pau in the distant top left

-It's hard to say if the Hotel L'ayguelade is more hotel or restaurant. The dining room is renowned in the area by local gourmets. Dinner tonight, as well as breakfast, is included, and there is a cozy patio for drinks. This is a secluded location, so you may want to drive into nearby Laruns where you will find a grocery and gas station just off the highway.



L'ayguelade



Come Hungry for Dinner!

DAY 14 : Monday, September 21

The High Pyrenées

-Today we leave the tranquil Valle d'Ossau and cross into the Hautes-Pyrenées (High Pyrenees) traversing no fewer than three Col (mountain passes), including the famed Col d'Tourmalet, one of the highlight routes of the Tour d'France almost every year.



Approach to Pic du Midi and Col d'Tourmalet (glad you are not on a bike!)



Pic du Midi Observatory accessed by cable car

-The highlight of our day will be an optional ride to the summit via cable car for an astounding view of the mountains.



Fear not, this picture was taken in winter!



A highlight of the highlight. If you have vertigo, you might want to skip this!

-Those not enamoured with heights and cable cars can opt to have lunch at the resort at the base of the mountain. Those going to the top will have to make do with a quick quiche from the snack bar, as we need to be on the road to our next stop, Bagnères-de-Luchon.

-Luchon, as it is known locally, has existed for more than 2000 years as attested by Neolithic sites and stone circles. And for one simple reason: Hot Water. The natural thermal springs were enjoyed by the Romans so much that they made Luchon a major permanent outpost. Today the water pours through a modern Thermal Spa, which you will have a chance to enjoy this afternoon.



Our hotel, The Panoramic, right in the downtown area near restaurants and shopping

-If you don't fancy a dip, there is plenty to do in this charming alpine town and our hotel, The Panoramic, is right in the center of it all.



The main soaking pool



The Vaporium

-The Thermes Luchon is housed in a modern building and features two main areas. The round soaking pool and the Vaporium. The Vaporium is actually the original cave and source of the hot waters. Sort of a sauna on steroids. You relax and steam and soak all you like. The hotel even has discount coupons for us!

-Dinner tonight is on your own, plenty of choices nearby.

DAY 15 : Tuesday, September 22

More Pyrenées, Spain and Andorra

-Today is the “Three Country Tour”. Soon after leaving Luchon, we’ll cross the border into Spain where we will largely parallel the highest of the Spanish Pyrenees, again crossing numerous Cols. The scenery today should be the best yet, and the roads uncrowded.



-We’ll take the roughly three hour drive at a leisurely pace, stopping for coffee and lunch when the mood strikes us. But we don’t want to tarry too much, as Andorra beckons. As you probably know, Andorra is a tiny, independent principality encircled by France and Spain. It is known for its duty free shopping, and our hotel sits right on the Andorra la Vella’s “Rodeo Drive”, Meritxell Avenue!



Avenue Meritxell Shopping Street (one among many)

-Of course there is a Plan B....there always is....The National Automobile Museum of Andorra. May sound a bit pretentious for such a small country, but the museum holds 80+ cars, 60 motorcycles and over a hundred bicycles. I'll bet you can even get an "I was there" t-shirt!





Our Hotel in Andorra, the Centric Atiram

-Tonight's modern Hotel Centric Atiram features private underground parking, a spa, restaurant, bar and outdoor terrace. There are dozens of restaurants in the neighborhood and dinner is on your own (if you have anything left after shopping!). There's even a McDonalds and a Hard Rock Café in the area, if you are getting homesick for some American food.



DAY 16 : Wednesday, September 23

Carcassonne

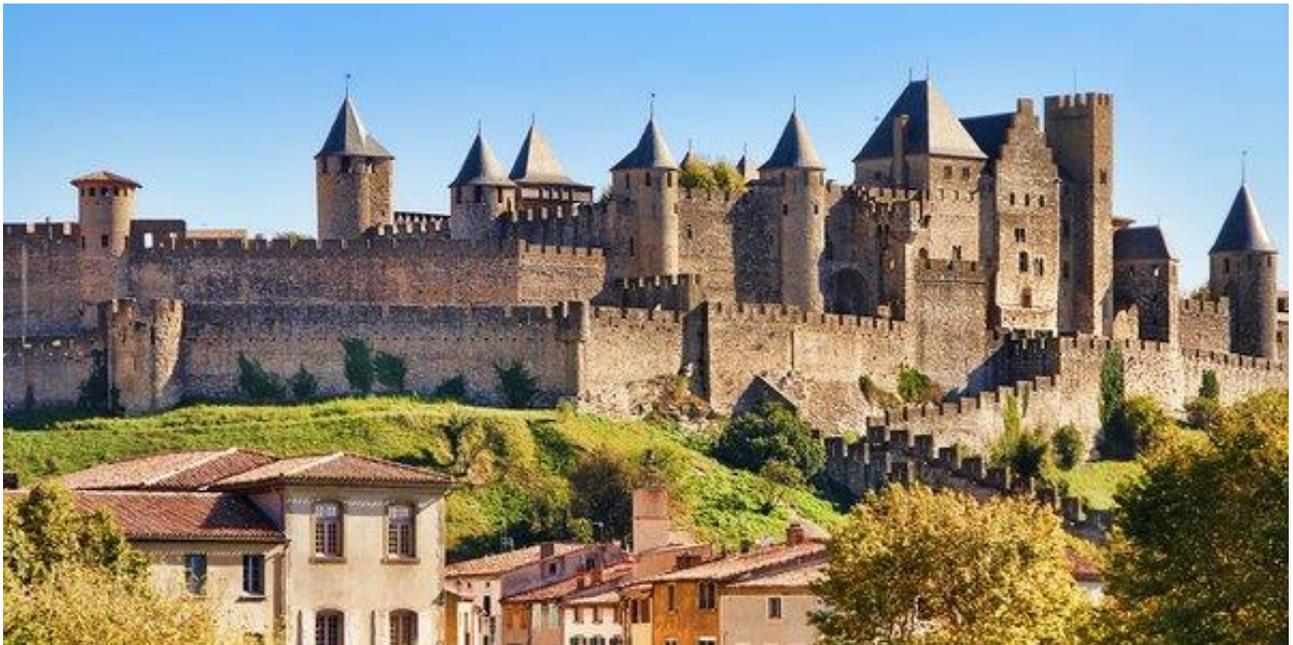
-I will let the Wikipedia listing tell the history:

Carcassonne (pronounced kar-kas-sun) is a French fortified city in the department of Aude, in the region of Occitanie. A prefecture, it has a population of about 50,000.

Inhabited since the Neolithic period, Carcassonne is located in the plain of the river Aude between historic trade routes, linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea and the Massif Central to the Pyrenées. Its strategic importance was quickly recognized by the Romans, who occupied its hilltop until the demise of the Western Roman Empire. In the fifth century, it was taken over by the Visigoths, who founded the city. Its strategic location led successive rulers to expand its fortifications until the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659.

Its citadel, known as the Cité de Carcassonne, is a medieval fortress dating back to the Gallo-Roman period. It was added to the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites in 1997.

-And a picture tell the story:



-Our hotel for tonight, the family run Hotel Montmorency, sits just across from the Narbonne Gate, the main entrance to the walled town. Just in front of the hotel is the pick up spot for Le Petit Train, a touristy but smart way to get an “around the walls” tour with dialogue in English.



Le Petit Train and the Narbonne Gate



Hotel Montmorency (www.hotelmontmorency.com/en)



View from the terrace of our hotel (location, location, location)

-Our roughly three and a half hour drive today will pass out of the Pyrenees and down in the Aude river basin, through miles and miles of vineyards. We'll make a coffee stop in the Chateau city of Foix and have lunch on the road.

-Arriving in Carcassonne in mid-afternoon, you should have time to take the Petit Train tour, freshen up, have a drink on the terrace before wandering into the walled city to find a place for dinner. The fortress should be magnificent after dark.



Or maybe dinner right here?

DAY 17 : Thursday, September 24

Pont du Gard and Avignon

-A beautiful drive is in store today. Leaving Carcassonne, we will head north and east, completely transiting the Regional Nature Park “du Haut Languedoc”, thereby avoiding much of the industrial congestion along this section of French coastline.

-As usual, we’ll stop for coffee and lunch along the way, arriving in the early afternoon at the Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct and bridge built in the first century AD to carry water over 30 miles to the city of Nimes. The Pont du Gard is the highest of all Roman aqueducts and one of the best preserved. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1985.



Photo shows about half the actual structure!

-After spending an hour or so at the Pont, it's a quick 30-minute drive into Avignon, former 14th century home to the Pope and site of perhaps the most famous bridge anywhere, Pont d'Avignon. Immortalized in the French ditty "Sur la pont d'Avignon", the bridge is familiar to school children worldwide (at least those who study French).

-The main attraction in Avignon, besides the bridge, is the massive Palais des Popes (Papal Palace) which can be toured, though frankly the Popes took all the good stuff back to Rome when they left in 1378. The buildings, however, are still most impressive and open until 7pm.

-Our hotel tonight, the Hotel de l'Horloge (www.hotel-avignon-horloge.com/), sits right on the main square of the old city and only a few hundred yards from the Palace and the Bridge. Dozens of restaurants are spread around the square, so you'll have no problem finding a place for dinner.



DAY 18 : Friday, September 25

Verdun Gorge, Cannes and the French Riviera

-Today we will leave Avignon via scenic back roads, making our way through parts of Provence and into the area known as Alpes-de-haut-Provence (the high Alps of Provence), eventually arriving at the the Verdun Gorge, France's Grand Canyon, considered one of the most beautiful river valleys in Europe. Our drive will take us along the "corniche" route (rim of the gorge) for some fantastic photos.



Gorge du Verdun (<https://about-france.com/tourism/verdon-gorge>)

-Along the way we will stop at some of the picturesque villages in these mountains, including Moustiers Sainte Marie, which holds the honor as “one of France’s most beautiful villages” and is somewhat famous for its ceramics.



Moustiers Sainte Marie



Lac de Sainte Croix, Verdun Gorge area

-After skirting the Gorge, we will continue west and then south through the Regional Park “Des Prealpes d’Azur” (loosely translated “the blue foothills of the Alps”), eventually to the perfume capital of Grasse. It might be too late to stop here, unless you want to skip dinner at our next stop, Cannes.



The harbor at Cannes where mega-yachts abound

-Cannes (pronounced khan) is of course home to the world famous film festival. Alas, our budget does not allow us rooms at one of the five-star beachfront hotels on the Boulevard de la Croisette, but we’re not far away at the funky four-star Verlaine Hotel Cannes (www.hotel-verlaine-cannes.com/). Here the lobby and each floor have their own theme décor. Hopefully you will sleep well if you get the jungle room.



Hotel Verliane theme rooms

-Dinner tonight is on your own and there are dozens of choices only blocks away. You might want to take a stroll along the waterfront after dinner to work of the extra calories!

DAY 19 : Saturday, September 26

The Italian Riviera – Camogli

-OK, I hear you, moving hotels every night is a pain. We need some downtime. Well, that starts now. We'll spend the next three nights in the seaside village of Camogli and the fabulous Hotel Cenobia del Dogi, a bit of a splurge, but you are worth it.

-Our drive today is a more manageable three and a half hours, split between a morning and afternoon session, with our usual coffee, comfort and lunch stops. The autostrada parallels the sea, passing Nice, Monaco, San Remo and Savonna, through dozens of tunnels and over a myriad of bridges, with peek-a-boo views of the Mediterranean all the way. Upon reaching Genoa (a traffic nightmare we will bypass), we'll drop down onto the beachside SS1 road for the short trip to Camogli.

-You have probably never heard of Camogli, but you surely know, and may have visited, its famous neighbors, Portofino and the Cinque Terre. Camogli has all the charm of Portofino, without the crowds and high prices. I believe you will truly love it.

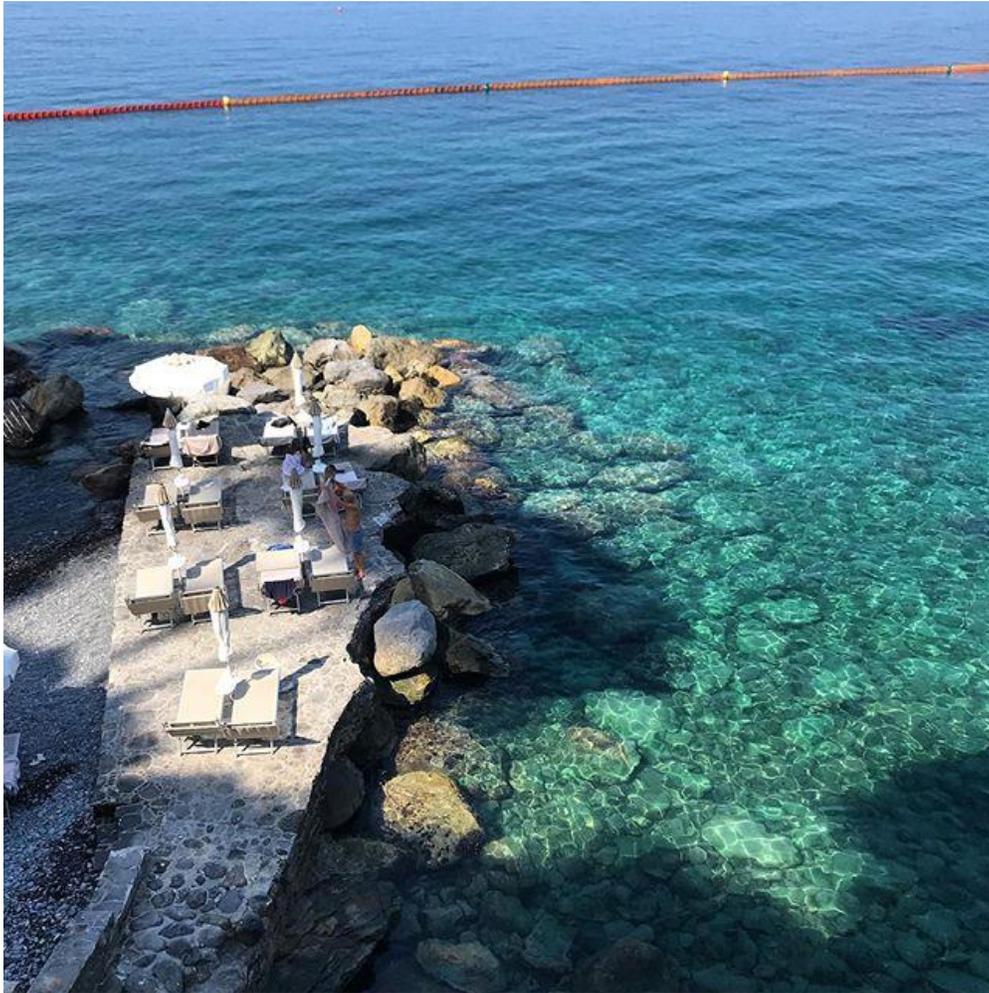


-Our home for the next three nights is the Hotel Cenobia del Dogi (www.cenobio.it/en/home). I would urge you to check out the hotel's outstanding website. Sorry, we don't have the rooms with the sea views, but if you want to upgrade (i.e. 2x the price), let me know!



View of Camogli from the Terrace of Hotel Cenobia del Dogi

-The hotel features a terrace where you can have your included breakfast or afternoon drinks, a pool and a private beach. Bring your swim wear!



Private "Beach"

-Perhaps the nicest thing about the Hotel is it's position in relation to the fishing village of Camogli. With a flat walk of only about 50 meters you will arrive at the waterfront promenade where you will find several excellent restaurants and many small shops, some preparing to close down for the winter and offering excellent deals. Dinner tonight is on your own.

DAY 20 : Sunday, September 27

The Italian Riviera – Portofino and San Fruttuoso

-Today and tomorrow are a bit of “suit yourself”. I know that many of you have already visited Portofino and the Cinque Terre and may not want to revisit one or both. Maybe you just want to hang at the hotel, or venture off on your own to explore the beaches or some of the back country. No problem, these two days will have planned adventures, but feel no pressure to partake of any or all.

-This morning we will do a “Healey Lap of the Golfu Paradiso” taking in Santa Margherita Ligure, San Michele di Pagana and Rapallo, with a lunch stop at a harbor side restaurant in Portofino. Total about 90 minutes driving.



The harbor at Portofino

-In the afternoon, you'll have an option to visit someplace quite near, but I'll bet you have never been (or even heard of), San Fruttuoso. That's because this picturesque village is only accessible by water taxi. The taxis leave Camogli hourly from 10am to 4pm and return hourly from 11:30am to 5pm. The trip takes about a half an hour and is a sight in itself and costs €9 roundtrip. An inexpensive way to get out on the water, even if you just ride the boat out and back.



-Once in San Fruttuoso you can a.) visit the Abbey which dates to the tenth and eleventh centuries and/or b.) visit the beach and beachside cafes. Neither should be very crowded during our visit.

-Dinner tonight is on your own, but perhaps before we will meet up on the terrace to share info about where we ate last night and work up some dinner groups.

DAY 21 : Monday, September 28

Cinque Terre

-I will presume that not everyone has been to Cinque Terre (Five Lands), so will begin with a little background. Cinque Terre would more appropriately be called “five towns” as the region consists of five villages perched on dramatic cliffs overlooking the sea. Each village has its own character. I would suggest the website: <https://www.cinqueterre.eu.com/en/the-five-towns> for a brief summary of each. It is probably not a good idea to try to visit all five in one day and depending on the amount of time you want to spend shopping and eating, two, maybe three villages at most is more practical.



Cenobia lies about 70 km (40 miles) north of Monterosso

-Driving to some of the villages is possible, but inadvisable. The roads are torturous, parking is very tight and usually located high above the villages making for a long trek back up to your car. And the villages are conveniently connected by both water taxi and train.



Village of Manarola, note the water taxis. Train station way at the top of the hill.

- Here's how you might do a Day in Cinque Terre
 - 8:30am: Catch the train from Camogli to Monterossa (the northernmost village in Cinque Terre). Trains leave twice per hour, cost about €15 roundtrip and take about one hour to reach Monterossa.
 - Arrive in Monterossa about 9:30, have a coffee and a look around Monterossa and catch the 10:30 water taxi south.
 - In about 20 minutes, arrive in Vernazza and get off the taxi. Spend the rest of the morning and have lunch in Vernazza.
 - Catch the water taxi to Riomaggiore and spend the afternoon shopping or take a dip in the sea. Catch the 4:30pm water taxi back to Monterossa and then the 6:00pm train back to Camogli, arriving at 7:00pm and with plenty of time for dinner.

- Alternatively you can travel between the villages by train. The trains run frequently and stop at all five villages. Cost is about €10/day for unlimited rides.
- Several of us have travelled extensively in this region and will be happy to give suggestions and recommendations.
- Alternatively, if the weather is good, that pool looks mighty good!
- Dinner tonight on your own.



Vernazza, great restaurants and bars and a tiny little beach

DAY 22 : Tuesday, September 29

Tuscany here we come!

- Today is another transit day, but your reward at the end is FOUR days in the same hotel! Depending on the route we take, we'll drive a couple of hours in the morning and the same in the afternoon.
- We'll be passing by the area of Carrara, world renowned for its marble, and the quarry faces can be easily see from the highway.



-Depending on the interest level, we may make a stop at the Leaning Tower of Pisa, but my guess is most have “been there, done that”, in which case we will press on into Tuscany and get settled into our new home, Hotel Belagaggio.

<https://www.belagaggio.it/en-farmhouse-siena-tuscany/>



Agriturismo Belagaggio - Look at the PARKING!



We are seeing a real aquatic theme to this trip!



Every room at the Belagaggio is different, but this might be typical



Belagaggio Dining Room

-Our accommodations are near the hilltop town of Montefollonico. Largely bypassed in favor of more heavily touristed and nearby Montepulciano and Pienza, Montefollonico remains a “real” Tuscan hamlet where life goes on pretty much as it has for centuries.



Montefollonico

-Tonight’s dinner will be at the nearby Il Botteghino, considered by many to make the best pizza in Tuscany. Chef Danieli creates pizzas from the very finest locally grown ingredients and prepares a truly memorable white pizza topped with fresh porcini mushrooms and shaved local truffles! *Mangia!*



DAY 23 : Wednesday, September 30

We Cook It Up! Plus, Montepulciano and Pienza

-Today, one of the Tour highlights I am sure: Our Cooking School! At a reasonable hour this AM, we toddle down the road about 10 minutes to Tenimenti Andreucci Winery (<https://www.tenimentiandreucci.com/>). There we will be met by owner Flavio Andreucci, vintner and chef. Not only are we going to be (generously) tasting a number of his wines, but we are going to enjoy a hands-on, al fresco cooking class taught by nonna (grandma) Lorella and Lara. We will be making our own lunch!



Flavio explains the intricacies of one of his favorites

-Depending on your stamina (and your sample consumption), you might head back to the hotel for a nap, or venture the twenty minutes to hilltop Montepulciano, Pienza, or both. Montepulciano is home to the renowned Vino Nobile and wine shops abound, along with ceramic shops known across Italy.

-Pienza, named for the 15th century Pope Pius II, is home to many galleries and the famous Pecorino cheese that plays such an important role in Italian cuisine.



Montepulciano, don't worry, we know where to park near the top!



Pienza side streets where the local artisans sell their wares

-Technically, you are on your own for dinner tonight, and the restaurant at the hotel (also a cooking school) does the best stuffed fried Zucchini flowers and pasta al forno (lasagna).

-However, if you are adventurous, I highly recommend Ristorante La Grotta in Montepulciano. It sits near the San Biagio church that was the original Bramante/Michelangelo design for St. Peter's Basilica. So, your day might go:

-Cooking school and lunch

-Pienza

-Montepulciano

-Dinner at La Grotta (www.lagrottamontepulciano.it). Budget about €50 per person for this gourmet experience. In fact, there is a 6-course tasting menu available for two or more at €53 per person. Note that La Grotta (and the famous San Biagio church) sit outside

Montepulchiano, so you do not have to go into the hilltop town to visit the restaurant. Reservations are recommended.



San Biagio Church, La Grotta is just across the street

-Sweet dreams, especially those of you in the “Love Rooms”!

-FYI, very little driving is required this day. Hotel to Winery less than 10 minutes. Winery to Pienza, 10 minutes. Pienza to Montepulchiano, 20 minutes. Montepulchiano to Hotel, 20 minutes

DAY 24 : Thursday, October 1

Siena

-Surely some will have visited Siena in the past, but there is so much to see and do, especially when we have our own private, professional guide to show us around and explain, much better than any guide book, the fascinating history of this city that at one time rivaled Genoa, Rome and Venice in importance. After breakfast we'll take the approximately one-hour drive through the countryside to reach Siena.

-The heart of Siena is Piazza del Campo, some would call it the people watching center if the world. It is here that the famous *Palio di Sienna* horse races are held twice a year, which determine the pecking order amongst the city's *contrade* (neighborhoods).



The Palio in the Piazza del Campo

-The other must see is the cathedral, and especially its unique interior. Our guide will point out details you may never have seen before.



Siena Cathedral Interior

-The highlight of our visit to Siena, however, will be lunch at the acclaimed *Osteria le Logge*, arguably the best restaurant in Siena. Prepare your taste buds!



Osteria le Logge, a traditional Italian gourmet experience

-After lunch you will be free to wander Siena to your heart's desire. The open-air market is huge and highly recommended if you need to pick up some souvenirs. Leather goods are particularly affordable and attractive. And do linger over a coffee at one of the outside cafes in the Piazza del Campo, imagining that you are on one of those balconies watching the races!

-The short one-hour drive back to the hotel will be via a different scenic route.

-Dinner tonight is on your own. If you didn't go to La Grotta last night, this might be an opportunity, or the hotel restaurant, or maybe another shot at the pizza!



Piazza del Campo, minus the horses

DAY 25 : Friday, October 2

San Gimignano, Volterra and San Galgano Abbey

-We will head off a little early today, our last full day of touring. The drive to the ruined Abbey of San Galgano is a picturesque 90 minutes. The ruins of the 13th century abbey church are very impressive, and quite evocative when viewed in the early morning before the (modest) crowds arrive.



-There is a nice little hotel, with a restaurant and coffee shop, just next door that will make a good break for us after seeing the Abbey.

-From the Abbey, it's another scenic hour to San Gimignano, a walled, medieval hill town that retains many of its defensive towers. The "torre" were actually personal security systems employed by the wealthy against the threat of roving bandits and enemy attack. The towers had no doors or windows on the ground floor and could only be entered by way of a ladder, which was then retracted into the tower to secure the occupants. Most medieval towns in Tuscany had towers but few survive, as the advent of gunpowder made them obsolete. San Gimignano is unique in that 17 of its original 72 towers remain.



-Along with a very good town square, San G. also boasts 13th century ramparts and a 12th century Duomo (cathedral). Lot's to see and plenty of nice places for lunch too.



-Those that have been to San Gimignano may instead opt to visit nearby Volterra, which boasts a vibrant Etruscan (pre-Roman) culture and houses numerous artifacts in its fine museum. There is also a 3rd century Theater complex that includes ruins of a Roman bathhouse.

-Whichever you choose (or both), allow about 90 minutes to return to the hotel, you will need to start thinking about packing for tomorrow.

-Dinner tonight is at La Botte Piena (“the full barrel”) in Montefollonico. La Botte boasts Michelin ranked chef Claudio Porro. It’s only ten minutes away.



La Botte Piena, Montefollonico

-We are leaving early tomorrow, so it would be good idea to get the bulk of your packing done tonight, keeping out just what you will need for tomorrow night and the flight home.

DAY 26 : Saturday, October 3

Back to Genoa, Bye-bye Cars

-As much as I would like to say, “it isn’t so”, it is. Our Tour is over, and we are faced with the not so insignificant task of getting ourselves and our cars home. We’re going to have to leave early and push along, mostly by Autostrada, to get to Genoa by noon. There we will drop our cars at the port and board our private motor coach to Rome.

-We could get from Genoa to Rome by train, or by plane, but the time and hassle just don’t make sense. At least with the coach, which is just as fast as the train, we will have point to point service with no schlepping of luggage, security lines, taxi transfers, etc. We will have lunch already stocked on board with a few brews and bottles of wine, so we can eat, kick back and snooze away the five hours to the Rome Airport.

-Tonight’s hotel is the Isola Sacra near the airport. As airport hotels go, this is a pretty good one, clean, relatively inexpensive and with good facilities.



-Upon arrival at the hotel, hopefully by 7pm, we'll enjoy a little farewell dinner buffet (included), where we can console one another about car problems, directions that didn't work, and showers that were too small! There may be some prize giving too!

-Be sure to book the airport shuttle tonight before you turn in. It's run by a private company, so costs about €6.

DAY 27 : Sunday, October 4

Back Home Again

-Those not staying in Rome will be heading back home on Sunday morning. Enjoy the very elaborate Sunday breakfast (included) before catching the shuttle. It only takes about 15 minutes to get to the airport, but it can be a zoo, so allow plenty of time. HAVE A GREAT FLIGHT!