

“ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA”

Audrey Hepburn said, “Paris is always a good idea.” She could equally have said, “France is always a good idea” especially if delicious food and wine, stunning art and architecture, and breathtaking nature are things you are passionate about. If there is one thing we know about Meredith travelers it is that you are.

TENTATIVE (ALWAYS) ITINERARY

Day 1—5 June (Monday)—Depart the USA for Paris.

Day 2—6 June (Tuesday)—Arrive in Paris. After a transfer from the airport to our Paris hotel and check-in, we will have a guided coach tour of the city, including the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, the Opera Garnier, and Notre-Dame de Paris (well on its way to being restored). We will, in addition, tour the Musee d’Orsay—originally a railway station located next to the Seine. It houses the largest collection of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in the world. If we can drag you out of the museum, we will conclude the day with a welcome dinner. The chef preparing your meal will very likely be French. Who could ask for anything more? And we are just talking about Day 1.

Day 3—7 June (Wednesday)—Paris.

Our first stop today is to the Louvre. Don’t say to us, “I’ve been there.” So have we, many, many times. The wonderful thing about human beings, however, is that if we have grown and changed, the artworks we are seeing again, no matter how well we know them, will have changed too. This could be the time the Mona Lisa winks at you. ;-)

After the Louvre we will take a walking tour of Montmartre. We will have lunch on our own, experiencing French café life first hand. The rest of the day you are free to do what you would most like to do. We are happy to assist you if you want suggestions. There are 130 museums in Paris so the options are limitless! While we are better on art and dining than we are on shopping, we do have some ideas on the latter as well!

Day 4—8 June (Thursday)—Paris.

Today we begin with a visit to the Musée de L'Orangerie, where you will, we promise, be blown away by Claude Monet's series of water lily paintings, *Les Nymphéas*. In addition, the museum houses a collection of early 20th-century art including Picasso, Modigliani, Soutine, and Braque. The rest of the day is yours. What might you do? In advance of our travels, we will prepare a handout of museums we love, many of which are not necessarily on the radar screen of the general traveler. Our goal will be that you will find what is most compelling for you.

Day 5—9 June (Friday)—Paris—Giverny—Rouen.

Today we will travel west to Giverny, to the home of artist Claude Monet, whose works you will have come to know well. Monet's gardens are beyond gorgeous, inspirational in fact, and not just to the artist but also to his fans. Our next stop is Rouen, home to the cathedral made famous by Monet's 30 paintings of it as well as to the site where Joan of Arc was martyred. A prosperous textile center from the Middle Ages to the early Renaissance, Rouen suffered severe damage to over 45% of its structures during World War II. Somehow its Gros Horloge, a large (very) clock, survived. You will be watching a sound and light presentation at Notre-Dame de Rouen, but not until after attending evening vespers at Saint Wandrille de Fontenelle, a Benedictine Abbey founded in 649. Built, destroyed, and rebuilt repeatedly through the centuries (Vikings, lightning strikes, French Revolution, etc.!) it was reestablished as a monastery in the late 19th century by the duke who then owned the property--and who also happened to be a Benedictine priest. Dinner at a local restaurant will conclude another altogether glorious day.

Day 6—10 June (Saturday)—Rouen—Varengeville Sur Mer—Le Havre—Deauville.

Today we literally follow in the footsteps of famous French artists, who, of course, sought out the most beautiful sights to paint. Coastal Varengeville-Sur-Mer is the site of the custom officer's house painted by Monet and also the Church and Seaman's Cemetery where Georges Braque is buried. The pastoral nature of the day continues when we visit the Bois des Moutiers, an 1898 park co-designed by Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll.

Next, we head for a photo-op at the cliffs of Etretat as we journey on to Le Havre, another location favored by the Impressionists and tourists, where those who would like will tour the Museum of Modern Art Andre Malraux. The museum features an exceptional collection of Impressionist works, 20th-century works-- and old masters!

We will spend the night in Deauville, a popular seaside resort—and in every way an interesting contrast to N.C. beaches.

Day 7—11 June (Sunday)—Deauville—Bayeaux— Normandy Beaches.

Today is a day of further contrasts. The common theme, alas, is war. We will start out by visiting Queen Matilda's Tapestry, better known as the Bayeux Tapestry, which chronicles the Battle of Hastings, 1066, and the Norman conquest. After a group lunch, we will visit many of the memorial sites of World War II on the Normandy beaches, where so many gave their lives. We plan to visit Pointe Du Hoc, Omaha Beach, Mulberry Harbor, the Juno Beach Center, and the American Cemetery. We will return to Deauville for dinner, grateful to be by the soothing sea.

Day 8—12 June (Monday)—Deauville—Honfleur--Mont Saint Michel.

Our first stop of the day is Honfleur, where we will wander about in what could vie for the title of prettiest harbor town in France and win. We will make a brief visit to its Eugene Boudin Museum. You will love his paintings of the seaside.

Mont Saint Michel is our next stop and definitely one of our most exciting, requiring us for the first time to consult foreign tide tables as we were planning a tour! With a population of only 50 persons, Mont Saint Michel sees an influx of 3 million visitors per year. And they all leave with the tide each day. Except for us. After our guided tour of the abbey, we will spend the night in the tranquility that can only be experienced when all the other tourists leave. In the quiet of the night, you can begin to feel what the island abbey fortress was like when it was founded in the 8th century. Like many other church properties, it was confiscated after the French Revolution. Since 1874 it has been a national historic monument and is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. We will have dinner together, tired but happy after all we have seen, and no doubt rather smug because of where we are spending the night.

Day 9—13 June (Tuesday)—Mont Saint Michel--Rennes—Angers—Loire Valley.

Today we head south to the beautiful chateau dotted Loire Valley, stopping in Rennes and Angers on the way. Angers is home to one of the oldest Meredith international affiliations, serving well over the years our students wanting to improve their French. We plan to have our dinner cruising the Loire River.

Day 10—14 June (Wednesday)—Loire Valley—Vineyard and Distillery.

Today we will visit both a winery and a distillery (run by the eighth generation in the same family!), recognizing that the French are masters of both wine and liquor making—and that the Loire Valley is known for both its dry white and sparkling wines. A big part of the pleasure of such tours is the lovely French countryside, with vineyards as far as you can see, and the Loire emerging when you least expect it.

Day 11—June 15 (Thursday)—Loire Valley—Orleans.

On our final day in the Loire Valley we will visit Orleans, the city famously saved by Joan of Arc from the English in 1429. The Parc Floral, the Old Town, the house Joan stayed in during the siege (destroyed by a bomb in World War II but rebuilt)

and the Cathedral of Sainte-Croix are all worth a visit. We will have our lunch aboard a floating restaurant.

Day 12—June 16 (Friday)—Loire Valley—Versailles—Chantilly Area.

This morning we say goodbye to the Loire Valley and head north to the Palace of Versailles, a World Heritage Site for 40 years. Undeniably one of the grandest palaces in the world, it contains over 2,300 rooms. The story of its evolution from Royal Palace to a national history museum is rich and complex as well. It is one of the top tourist destinations in France.

Our final stop is a place carefully chosen for your last night. We are not in an airport hotel. We are not in the center of Paris, which would require you to rise before the sun to get to the airport. We are in Chantilly, a town of approximately 11,000 inhabitants within the metropolitan area of Paris but only 30 minutes from Charles de Gaulle. It, too, is popular with tourists, but French tourists. Fewer than 15% of the annual visitors are foreign. A 19th-century chateau, a 25-square-mile forest, a racecourse, and the palatial Living Museum of the Horse attest to its history and account for its charm. We think it is the perfect place to have our final night. And did we mention that Chantilly cream comes from Chantilly?

Day 13—June 17 (Saturday)—We depart Paris, happy and exhausted, keen, we hope, to plan your next tour!

Our tour of France, in sum, embodies the well-known French expression, *Vive la Difference!* It juxtaposes country and city, centuries-old museums and brand new ones, and ancient and modern artworks and the places that inspired them. Along the way in our journey together we will share spectacular landscapes (countryside, seaside, riverside, and even roadside), amazing churches, monasteries, cathedrals, and royal architecture—and wine and food. Or should we say cuisine? Yes, we should. Do join us!