

Letter from the Loire Valley

by [James Como](#) (October 2019)



Valley of the River Loire, Jules Dupré

The mainspring of time unwinds capriciously. No matter the fluency of clock and calendar, we know—and this from a very early age—that not all segments of time that our devices register as equal are.

Alexandra and I have been married fifty-one years, yet one hour ago—*one hour!*—we were newlyweds who traveled to France and toured the Loire Valley by car, visiting its chateaux. We

would stop at the side of the road for *charcuterie*, neither dwelling on our past nor reckoning our future. One night we stayed at a B&B that was four hundred years old and there dined by candlelight, when for the first time my wife saw me tipsy.

Later, back in Paris during a downpour, we ducked into an old restaurant on the Left Bank. The only available table was two flights up a narrow, winding, creaking staircase. Seated near the window we could see and hear the rain but only dimly make out Notre Dame cathedral (to the top of which we would eventually climb). The fish, which Alexandra eats like Sylvester the Cat, leaving behind only the skeleton, was the second-most delicious we'd ever had (the first being during our honeymoon in a shed on Koukounaris Beach).

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Now, that one hour later, we would return, in the company of our daughter, her husband, and their two children, Luke (an eyebrow taller than I) thirteen years old, and Scarlett (as tall as her *grand-mere*) eleven. (But we will certainly miss our son, who had been with us to Paris but now had a different agenda, romantic, in Montana.) The plan is to fly into de Gaulle and pick up the car. Peter would drive us to our Loire Valley chateau-hotel where we would spend three days excursioning (pre-arranged, of course: the whole my wife's conception), luxuriating. I would drive us back into Paris, returning the car a few blocks from our hotel.

There we would sightsee, painlessly, wife and daughter being Francophonic. Scarlett has already declared that she would *not* enter the Eiffel Tower but *would* cruise the Seine *and* approach the cathedral as closely as possible. As for me, I am resolved not to discuss politics or any themes even remotely thereunto appertaining. So off we went, wondering if we'd get lucky with weather, what with the recent Parisian heat storm.

One of my interests is in seeing how my grandchildren take to this sort of travel. They've been abroad (Peru, Italy, Lebanon) and we've cruised together. But road tripping and sightseeing with two grandparents eager to *assure* their cultural and historical appreciation—well, fingers crossed. (I recall, with no little shame, how I unconsciously marginalized my grandparents, especially my two devoted and saintly grandmothers). That is one interest. The more important interest is to see for myself if one can go home again, I mean re-visit an intersection of time and place that nourishes a precinct of our conjugal identity.

I pass over the travails of travel, deriving mostly from cranky people, burdensome procedures, and long treks. Truth be told, these were off-set by any number of delightful surprises: an attendant amiable and persistent (this happened twice); a Frenchman at Gare de l'Est going out of his way to guide us to the correct cars on the correct train (I found generally that the more official the French functionary, the ruder or more impatient); restaurant servers willing to smile, chat in English, answer questions (a surprise, given prior experiences).

One miserable exception was the first Frenchman we encountered, a cab driver who had to take us from Terminal One to Terminal Two: a paunchy, balding, grumbling, insulting lout (angry with such a short trip) who crumbled up and threw to the floor of his cab my daughter's exorbitant twenty euros. "Here we go," I thought; but I was wrong.

Two of the most delightful people I've ever met while traveling were farmers from Normandy who joined us on our tour of some chateaux. He spoke some English, she more, and my daughter got us over any hurdles. I asked about farming, they about teaching. I wondered if they trusted Germany, the wife said she did but that her grandmother simply could not. They allowed that the EU is woefully imperfect but has brought peace, which matters above all. (This contrasts with what I found in Berlin, where belonging, being accepted—not least if you can call most of the shots – matters above all.) Before parting, the husband, Jocelyn, inquired into any relatives who might have fought in WWII. I told him of five, my father and four uncles, one terribly wounded. He looked me in the eye and said, "every year we visit the cemetery. We, our children, their children, will never forget. *Merci.*" Terrifically, indelibly moving.

Country headquarters was the Chateau de la Tortiniere, in Veigne. The edifice, the nearby 'cottages', and its setting (especially the cedars of Lebanon, which Peter spotted immediately) were breathtaking; the children were impressed. The first night we dined in the one-Michelin-star restaurant. The *whole* experience delivered more than bang-for-the-buck—not the restaurant. Thereafter we drove around, once getting lost but ultimately saved by Luke, who had the presence of mind to find on his phone a photo of our chateau that included its address, ready-made for the GPS. (Still, I miss roadmaps.)

Then we got lucky at a village restaurant with a server, Norman, who was delightful, straightforward; after promising good food he delivered even above the expectations he had set.

At Tortiniere (where the owners were superbly hospitable, the staff not as well-trained as they should be) we enjoyed the setting, the trails, the pool and, far from least, the breakfasts. The chateaux of Chambord and Chenonceau were as we remembered, resplendent, though not as transcendent. No matter: the family, including the children, loved them.

But my poor son-in-law. Here and there I had driven around Veigne, and driven well, as always. Alas, the scaredy cats (back-seat age bigots!) howled as though I were Mr. Toad rampaging through *The Wind in the Willows*, so Peter became the official chauffeur; thus in violation of our deal, but yielding to popular demand, he drove to Paris.

With Allie navigating by phone we found gas, lunched decently at a highway All mega-mall (a far cry from roadside *chacuterie*), then (after a seating quibble between the siblings and four hours) we found our way to Citadines-Saint-Germain-de-Pres, part of a convent converted into an apartment hotel: on the Left Bank, one block from the Pont Neuf. We disembarked, then Peter, Allie and I returned the car. When we got back to the hotel all were ensconced, one room for us, a suite for them. Soon we realized that a second segment of our vacation would become, in effect, a second vacation: for the most part they went about their business, we ours, and all were happy, though differently.

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The children, especially, surprised me. They were energetic, curious, attentive, uncomplaining about the absence of this or another hand-held screen. Luke rented an electric scooter and zipped through pedestrian traffic for several kilometers. Here was their happiness: a family together, discovering and marveling, improvising (e.g. with a picnic near the Tower), and that made us very happy. The dinner cruise on the Seine satisfied more deeply and thoroughly than I had expected: on the upper deck in the twilight with a glass of wine, the lights of Paris beginning to glimmer—we were all variously enchanted, excited and touched.

A different sort of delight, though, came through our own excursions, one to the Vaux-le-Vicomte, a grand chateau some thirty miles southeast of Paris, the other to the Grand Hotel above the Café de la Paix (across from the Place de l'Opera) with lunch there.

The ecstasy visited upon us by the chateau was worth the agony of the trip there. That began at the hellish Gare de l'Est and a train thirty minutes late, which lateness caused us to miss the chateau shuttle, and thus a thirty-minute wait at a desolate bus stop. The chateau, which became Louis XIV's model for Versailles, is as impactful as the wedding cake palace that is Chambord: a dazzling architectural wonder but more stately, its gardens even more resplendent. Its mover and shaker, Louis' minister of finance Nicolas Fouquet, so annoyed the king that an embezzlement (not untypical) caused the

minister's downfall, and a rumor sprouted: Fouquet was the man in the iron mask. The tale is too good to completely debunk, but what we do know is that one week after the inaugural ball he was arrested—by Charles de Batz de Castelmoré, better known to us as D'Artagnan. This was Alexandra's second visit there, and she made me promise to one day take her back, a visit I would happily repeat (though not by train and shuttle bus).

The Café de la Paix is a quite different story. I had eaten there before and never forgot the place, a *Fin de Siècle* splendor that exceeds its grand reputation. But in this case the visit was something of a pilgrimage. Alexandra's maternal grandfather—vexing to me that I never met that extraordinary gentleman—was a European born probably in Moyobamba, in the Peruvian jungle. (In certain sections the boundary between Peru and Brazil was not fixed until, as magistrate, he fixed it.)

While still a very young man he had become rich by way of rubber and had sailed to France three times before ever visiting Lima, the Grand Hotel being his Parisian headquarters. He was an occasional companion of La Belle Otero (famous actress, dancer and . . . companion), knew the opera-lover Fitzcarraldo, and lost his money when a Liverpool shipyard building his ship went bankrupt before WWI. He would make some of it back.

Alexandra speaks lovingly of him, of his tales and his manners and eccentricities, and of his consideration for all with whom he came in contact: a man who did good and made others happy. When in her decline, my mother-in-law remembered him with great devotion above all others. So you see, the Hotel and the Café de la Paix are together a single sort of time machine,

and with its polished oak, brass, beveled glass and chandeliers it is as effective as any madeleine.

In Paris we all dined together twice. The first time was, except for the food that mostly did not appear, a debacle: an Italian restaurant next door to Shakespeare and Company; owing to the schizo service—amiable but phantasmal—I was not able to re-visit that haunting establishment. The second, final, meal was quite different. Luke and I had the specialty, beef bourguignon, and special it was. Peter insisted on picking up the tab (maybe to compensate for having beaten me at pocket billiards). We strolled and found an Italian gelateria, with real Italians and real gelato.

The next day we were met by a pre-arranged car and made it to the airport with much time to spare. Once there, Peter and Luke parted from us; they would go to Lebanon for a family function. We four pressed on, and pressing it had to be, but for the kindness of a stranger or two.

And the weather, that looming threat of a French August mimicking its July from Hell? . . . in fact, Heaven-sent.

‘Conjugal identity’ seems a cold concept; in fact our life has been a shared adventure, all of it, together. Therein lies that identity. Unlike Alexandra I am certainly no Francophile, and truth be told this trip was a belated birthday present from me. So in that light, I thought, No, you really cannot go home again, not to that same, earlier home. But variations on it—founded on freshness, decorated with memory, more blessedly populated? Well, if we talk to each other (grandmothers?), fix

our memories, and, especially, are piously grateful, it will take you in, this other home, that one hour later.

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