

## 7: From Beaune to Lyon

It is a wonderfully sunny morning, with not a cloud in the sky. In my hot, tiny room I ignore the official notice, '*il est formellement interdit de manger dans la chambre*' ('it is absolutely forbidden to eat in the room') and sit down to my usual breakfast of bread, pâté and an apple. I am ready and out by 8.30 a.m., heading southwards for the vineyards. Cool and fresh outdoors, it will be pleasant to see them in such ideal conditions. Although I am on the main road to Pommard, there are few people about at this hour, even though it is midweek. All I can see are farmers driving the special high tractors that spray the vines. The scenery here is beautiful and the area has a typically dreamy French atmosphere. The quaint village of Pommard is bright with flowers set against yellow stonework, but there is the usual tangle of ugly electric power and telephone cables.



Vineyard at Volnay

I continue to the next village, Volnay, from where there is a fine view of Meursault in the distance. From here I decide to take the *route touristique* to la Rochpot, where there is a château that I have seen depicted on a postcard. I soon arrive at the small village and am rewarded with a spectacular view of the splendid château on the mountainside; its roof tiles are very colourful. Leaving my bike in the square of the sleepy village, I climb up to the castle entrance, where I pay 6 francs to see inside. I join a guided tour, led by a young man with a powerful voice, and we are shown around four or five rooms. The dining room, full of antique furniture, is impressive; on the wall hangs a bracket clock, complete with its ropes and weights, but they are affixed to the underside of the bracket and not to the movement. The not particularly interesting kitchen has fittings that look Victorian. Although the guide tells us about the history of the castle, I can only understand a little of what he says. We are brought into a charming little courtyard, complete with a well, and are allowed to climb the tower, where we can see two more rooms, including one decorated *à la chinoise*. It contains heavy red lacquer furniture and overlooks a fine view of the village and countryside.



The village and château of La Rochpot

Happy that I have taken the trouble to visit the château, I leave and take a minor road, which affords even more spectacular views of the château and the hills. I battle uphill for a while, then go hurtling down to a plain and take a quick look around the village of Puligny-Montrachet. I cycle on to Chagny and stop for lunch at a very basic restaurant with an open front that looks out onto the narrow street. The place is full of locals – a good sign; most of them are elderly men with limps. I sit down to an excellent four-course lunch with wine included. The clientele is friendly and chatty; while I eat, another elderly man arrives by bicycle, parks it outside and, spotting me, comes over to shake my hand and say, ‘*bonjour monsieur*’. He then greets all the other diners, one by one, shakes their hands and repeats his salutation, ‘*bonjour monsieur, bonjour madame, bonjour monsieur...*’ My meal begins with a selection of *charcuteries*, and then comes the main course: a plate of hot pork with a mountain of Brussels sprouts. This is followed by cheese and bread, and the meal finishes with fresh fruit. I take just a few sips of the wine, which is genuine plonk. I relax afterwards and write some postcards before venturing out into the heat.

As I have decided to stay the night in the youth hostel at Chalon-sur-Saône, which is not far from here, I set off on a slightly circuitous route through the surrounding countryside. After stopping to look at the village of Rully, I take the main road and turn off for another village, Mercurey. From here I continue southwards through the charming *Vallée des Vaux*. Here I encounter vineyards on the hillsides, more blackberries waiting to be picked, lots of pretty flowers, quaint old villages and stone farmhouses. I slow down to enjoy this peaceful valley to the full and to enjoy the warmth of the afternoon sun. It is heavenly here, and there is not a tourist in sight; there is no sign at all of modernity or commercialism.

At the end of the valley, after the tiny village of St Denis de Vaux, I make my way uphill and join the road that brings me back down to the plain and Givry, a noisy but interesting little town with some fine examples of old, pleasing architecture. I post my cards here and buy bread before leaving for Chalon-sur-Saône.

Just as I expect, it turns out to be a large, sprawling town, full of modern buildings and shops. After some confusion I find the large youth hostel, situated by the River Saône, and check in. After I have washed myself and some clothes, I fall into conversation with a young German lad who has a reasonably good command of English, and go walking aimlessly with him around the town centre. We find a bar and decide to have a drink. I order a *Ricard anisette*, an aniseed *apéritif* that tastes not unlike Greek *ouzo*, and the German asks for a beer. He tells me that he is travelling to Bordeaux on a motorbike. His interests include motorbikes, penknives and popular music: he plays the trumpet and saxophone in a band. We don't have much in common.

As he wants to eat and as I still have not recovered after my enormous lunch, I leave him and return to the hostel, where I set about writing my diary. However, I do not get very far as I begin to chat with a pleasant young Danish couple and then a Spaniard who is heading for Denmark as it is so cold in Barcelona! It's lights out just before eleven o'clock and so we make for the dormitories, which are like ovens. I lie on my bed in my pyjamas listening to some of the lads twisting and snoring before I eventually fall asleep.

This morning it is pleasantly cool outside. I leave the hostel by 8.30 a.m. and head southwards again; today my destination is Mâcon.

First of all I make my way towards Buxy, which is south-west of Chalon, but turn off the main road to see a couple of tiny hamlets, la Charmée and St Germain-les-Buxy. Here the scenery is very beautiful yet simple: it is not unlike what we have in Ireland. I then return to the main road by a rough, twisty lane and resume my journey to Buxy, which turns out to be a pleasant small town with an interesting stone church and a fortress with a tower. The Thursday market is in full swing; there are stalls with fruit, vegetables and cheeses for sale.

I then leave and continue along the vineyard route to Cluny through what appears to be a valley, but the road turns out to be rather hilly. The scenery is pleasant but not as spectacular as what I have seen yesterday. Surprisingly, there are few vineyards in the region. Three girls on bikes pass me but they stop and I catch up with them later. I chat briefly with one of them, clad only in a bikini (it has turned quite warm by now), say *au revoir* to her, and continue in the direction of Cormatin, whose château I want to visit, for I have seen photos of its splendid interior.



Château at Cormatin



I reach it by 11.30 and pay 10 francs for a guided tour. I join a noisy group of Australians who ask for an English-speaking guide for their children, but nobody is available. The husbands decide to translate and off we go. Despite the children constantly asking, 'What's he saying?', the tour is successful as the guide speaks slowly and we are given more time to see the place and take in our surroundings.

We begin in the great hall with its magnificent staircase built in the Italian style. We then descend to the prison and come up to take a look at the turn-of-the-century kitchen, where a clockwork spit is demonstrated for our benefit. Our guide explains that this seventeenth-century château once had an enclosed courtyard, but now two sides of it have been demolished. I was interested to hear that members of the famous *Ballets Russes* (the ballet company founded in Paris in 1909 by Serge Diaghilev), together with famous musicians and singers of the time, had performed to the public in the grounds, free of charge.

We then are brought into the main apartments, most of which have hardly been touched since the seventeenth century, though a minimal amount of restoration has been done in recent times. Although dark, the rooms are decorated in bright colours; gold, elaborate mouldings and fine paintings adorn them all. To give us an idea of what they would look like in candlelight, our guide escorts us into the last room, which is in its original condition, and partially closes the shutters. This also enables us to see the paintings on either side of the window. Everything is splendid and in excellent condition; as the rooms are not too big and grand, they feel cosy and intimate. Our guide explains how the château was saved at the outbreak of the Revolution: the owner cleverly left a table full of food for the local peasants and removed the feathers from the top of the royal emblems that we have seen in the last room.

After this enjoyable and rewarding visit, I walk along the Lamartine pathway in the shade of trees and admire the main façade of the fine building. Once I have finished seeing this fascinating place, I leave in search of somewhere to eat. As the restaurant across the road is closed, I cycle along the main road and very soon find a restaurant that is almost in the middle of nowhere. Here I enjoy another excellent four-course meal for just 30 francs.

When I leave in order to continue my journey, I discover that a stiff breeze is now blowing, which makes it difficult to cycle along the main road. However, I keep going and eventually arrive at Cluny, where I stop to visit the famous Benedictine abbey, founded by Duke William I of Aquitaine in 910. The earliest basilica built here was the world's largest church until the construction of St Peter's Basilica in Rome was begun in the early 1500s.



The abbey at Cluny

The abbey looks impressive from a distance; however, the foyer is full of tourists. I pay 3 francs (the student rate) to join them and listen to a French guide, whom I can neither hear nor understand. The visit is rather a waste of time as there is so little to see. However, it proves to be a good way of escaping from the heat. Nonetheless, I notice a French lad wearing a heavy white suit, and two Scandinavians wearing thick motorbike gear and boots. I am sweltering in my tee-shirt and shorts. We are brought into what remains of the first basilica, then, passing a building of a later period, we are led across the grounds to a chapel, in which we see stone pillars and decorations from the abbey. We leave after an hour and in the town I wander to another church, where I find a man practising on an interesting little chamber organ. I listen for a while, purchase some more food in a nearby shop and cycle off across the hills to the larger town of Mâcon.

On approaching the town, I pass a couple of interesting châteaux perched on a hillside and notice some spectacular spiky mountains in the distance. I arrive at 6.30 p.m. and set off in search of a hotel. I eventually find a one-star place that has a room for me, and I am charged 65 francs for bed and breakfast.

After a welcome shower and a simple meal in my room, I saunter out and put in an hour walking aimlessly about the city centre, avoiding some rather shady-looking characters, and return to my humble lodgings in order to write my diary and prepare for bed. It has been an interesting day.

Another splendid morning. By seven o'clock I am downstairs, eating my *petit déjeuner*: three slices of bread and jam with *café au lait*. That may be enough to start the day for most French people, but cyclists like me need a proper breakfast, and so I return to my room for more bread, some cheese and an apple. By eight o'clock I am on the bike, leaving the town. It is delightfully fresh outside at this hour of the day; the road, which skirts the River Saône, is level, well surfaced and free of heavy traffic. I am heading southwards for Lyon – a city that I have no great desire to see, but feel that I should see it as I'm heading in this direction. As it is not too far from here, I take my time and enjoy the view. In this area, I might as well be a million miles from civilization, yet the main *autoroute* to the south is nearby. Singing to myself, I make my way to the villages of Thoissey and Trévoux. Just before I reach the latter, a French cyclist joins me and we keep each other company. The man tells me that he is 67 years of age. We chat in French and compare life and the cost of living in France to that in Ireland. As he lives in Lyon, he knows the way and so I do not have to refer to my map, which is not very detailed.

Very soon we reach the horrid town of Neuville and then approach the sprawling suburbs of Lyon. However it is not too bad as we follow the river for most of the way, avoiding built-up areas. My companion eventually turns to the left and leaves me, having given me directions. As soon as he is gone, it starts to rain heavily – not too surprising as we have heard thunder and seen lightning. The rain comes down in large, heavy drops and I quickly change into my cape.

After a convoluted journey that brings me through a long, hot tunnel (in which I feel close to suffocation), I finally arrive in the city centre soon after half past twelve. I wander around in a state of bewilderment and eventually find a small Tunisian restaurant, where I sit down to a good lunch of spicy Tunisian salad, followed by a generous helping of delicious fish, more salad and chips. Stuffed, I pay, spruce myself up and head off to explore the city. I procure a map of the town centre and work out where everything of interest is.



Lyon

I set off to visit some of the many churches, beginning with St Nizier, a flamboyant Gothic pile, of which only part can be seen because of renovation work being done to it. Its name is derived from Nicetius of Lyon, a bishop in the sixth century. Next I find the nineteenth-century Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, a rather ugly building at the top of a hill by the river, overlooking the city. I cross over to this old part of the town, but decide not to go up the hill because of the load on my bike. Instead, I walk down a road to take a look at the magnificent Gothic Lyon Cathedral, in which I find a huge and very old astronomical clock with complicated dials and an impressive array of automata. At three o'clock, the cock at the top crows, the bells play a tune, the Angel Gabriel comes out of a doorway to salute Mary, God bestows a blessing with his hands, an angel wags a staff and a town crier strides around the dome. It is a magnificent piece of machinery; unfortunately it is too dark to photograph it.

I now return to the other side of the river, where I find the *Syndicat d'Initiative* and help myself to some literature. Armed with brochures and a better map, I tramp off to see more sights, starting with the rather plain Romanesque church of Saint-Martin d'Ainay, which I find quite interesting. Next is the Hôtel-Dieu, which contains a magnificent church in the Classical style. Finally, I make my way down to the Place des Terreaux and the large Musée des Beaux Arts. Here I am able to leave my bicycle and luggage with the porter so that I can view the gallery unencumbered. I am surprised to discover that the admission is free.

I climb the staircase and begin my tour. There are dozens of rooms full of pictures painted by local artists, whose names I have never heard of before. Most of what I see is of high quality and nearly all the paintings date from the turn of the century. Some are rather melodramatic and look rather Victorian; others are painted in the style of the Impressionists. When I finish one wing of the building, I cross over to do two more. One of them is filled with even more paintings by artists from Lyon, and the other with Greek vases, and Roman and Medieval art. The amount of pictures and artefacts to be seen here is truly mind-boggling.

As if this is not enough, I then go upstairs to view paintings of a more general nature, from all countries, starting with Medieval religious works, then the art of the Italian Renaissance. Another section is dedicated to the French school, from classical to Impressionism. As it is nearly six o'clock by now, and we are being asked to leave, I can only take a fleeting glance at what must surely be the best in the gallery.

I now make my way down to the cool and tranquil inner courtyard, where I rest with some local people, whose children play quietly on the grass under the trees. When I have recovered, I collect my bicycle and belongings and go outside to the square, where I take a look at the Hôtel de Ville.

I then set off on my bicycle to find the youth hostel, which is in the south-east suburb of Vénissieux. It is a tedious journey through heavy traffic, but I eventually find the place. They have a bed for me; after I have paid for it I set about taking a shower and then having a bite to eat. I finish the day in the usual way, by writing my diary – this time in the quietness of an empty dormitory.

This morning I rise at seven, having slept lightly because of the twisting, turning and grunting of one of the men in the dormitory. I leave at 8.30 a.m. on my bicycle, with my luggage on the back, and head for the city centre. My plan is to see the places that I have missed yesterday and cycle to Vienne this evening, in the hopes that the hostel there will be quieter and cheaper.

It is a fine, sunny morning at first, but it quickly clouds over. As it is cool by the time I reach the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, I decide to tackle the steep hill on which it is situated. From the top I have an expansive view of the ugly city. I take a quick look inside the basilica, then leave as I find the style of the interior too severe and depressing for my liking.

From here I make my way down to the Gallo-Roman Museum. I have not intended to visit this, but as it is close by and the admission is free, I'm happy to have a look. Leaving my bicycle and luggage near the entrance, I amble around this modern, well designed building, admiring the exhibits: stone tablets with excellent examples of classical lettering carved on them, pottery, statues, figurines, glassware, bronze artefacts, jewellery and large, well-preserved mosaic floors. I am particularly fascinated by the latter, which are viewed from walkways that have been constructed over them. From the windows I admire fine views of the Roman theatre and Odeon next door.

In the museum I meet a chap whom I have met in the youth hostel. Although he is English, he speaks with an American accent. He tells me that he has lived with his parents in America and Belgium for several years. We spend some time chatting and looking at the artefacts, then leave. I cycle down the steep hill and we meet again at the cathedral. We then amble around some of the old part of Lyon with its dilapidated buildings, which I find rather depressing, and head over to the Musée des Beaux Arts. I go upstairs to pick up where I have left off yesterday, only to be told that the museum will close in ten minutes. I glance at my watch and discover that it is fast approaching midday. Frustrated by this second unsuccessful attempt to see the collection of French paintings, I leave reluctantly and join my companion who is sitting outside in the square. We look for a restaurant, find one nearby, and have lunch together.

Afterwards we walk around the Croix Rouge district, ascending the silk weavers' staircase. I am not very impressed, as the area is sleazy and dilapidated. We then return to the Musée des Beaux Arts at two o'clock.

At last I am able to see what I want to see: masterpieces by artists such as Daubigny, Corot and Rousseau. I stop to study Monticelli's paintings with their rough brushstrokes, a lovely portrait and a copy of a Rembrandt work by Henri Fantin-Latour, works by Courbet, and landscapes and rustic scenes depicted by Millet. The Impressionists come next: Monet's *Thames from Charing Cross*, beautiful scenes painted by Sisley, and mysterious sketchy paintings by Pierre Bonnard and Édouard

Vuillard, which I love. I then discover a painter whose name is unfamiliar to me: Joseph Rossi. I am enchanted by his very evocative but extremely simple oil painting called *Le départ pour les champs* (The departure for the fields). Next comes the work of Maurice Marinot, a member of Les Fauves, and Albert Marquet, also associated with the Fauvist movement. After admiring the simple street scenes and cityscapes by Maurice Utrillo, I finish my visit by taking a look at some of the more modern artists.

I am very glad that I have returned to the gallery to see these masterpieces. The ladies on duty recognise me from my earlier visits and two of them have a long chat with me in French. I explain to one of them that we have paintings by Daubigny and Rousseau in Dublin. She kindly gives me lots of useful tips on where to go in Provence, for that is where she comes from. Both she and the other lady are intrigued by my cycling trip.

When I leave, I bid my companion adieu and take myself to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, where I spend the remainder of the afternoon. This museum is in a fine old house situated in a courtyard; it contains lovely old furniture and many clocks, all dating from the Louis XV to XVI era. Some of the furniture is not particularly elegant, but everything contributes to a very pleasing and refined atmosphere. There is an endearing and homely feel to this museum and there are very few people in it. For me, the most interesting exhibit is a harpsichord, placed on a stand of a later period, with an inscription that reads, 'Donzelague · A · Lyon · 1716'. The soundboard is beautifully decorated with painted flowers and patterns, and a classical scene is depicted inside the lid. According to the label, it is the earliest dated French harpsichord known.

Satisfied that I have seen this excellent museum and as much of Lyon as I want to see, I change into my shorts, leave the city and head southwards for Vienne. The route is uninteresting, offering only industrial views, but I do not have to endure it for long, as I arrive at 7.30 – two hours after my departure from Lyon. As I discover that the youth hostel will not open until eight, I spend time in the *Syndicat d'Initiative*, where I study a map of the town, planning tomorrow's visit. Back at the hostel, I meet two French cyclists and an elderly man who opens the gate. As the rate is only 18 francs, I decide to spend two nights here. Once I have freshened myself up, I sit down to a knocked-up meal and later bring my diary up to date in a rather tatty upstairs room, where I find tables and chairs.

I then climb the stairs to the even tattier dormitory in the attic and go to bed in the dark as the lights have been switched off and there are no windows. Here it is hot and stuffy. A mosquito buzzes around my head and I eventually manage to swat it. At last I manage to drift off into some semblance of sleep.