

## Parslows in Spain, France and London

July 10. After leaving the boat on the River Duoro in Portugal, 26 of us travelled by bus across Spain toward France while the other 65 went to Madrid. We stopped off at two quaint villages, with classic architecture and town squares. For lunch we had some wonderful gazpacho and just had a wander around the town. That evening we arrived in Bilbao to a large room overlooking the Guggenheim museum. Bilbao is a lovely town that has reinvented itself from an old run down harbour town to a modern vibrant place with a great mix of old and very modern buildings. To me the museum building itself and the large art works on the outside of the building were the best part. It has some great art inside, but the building itself is very impressive.



One night for dinner we went down a little side street to a place that seemed to be only used by locals. It was 8.30, so too early for Spanish restaurants to be open for dinner. We went to a tapas bar (see picture) where we managed to order two beers (lighter than Australian beer), a slice of Spanish omelette and a mini burger which cost about \$12 Aus in total.





After spending a day in Bilbao we continued by bus to Bordeaux, stopping at some villages along the way. At *St Sebastian* I managed to have a paddle in the Atlantic Ocean (I am not in the picture).



Due to a bad traffic jam on the ring road around Bordeaux we arrived two hours late at the boat, just in time for dinner. With 120 passengers, this boat was bigger than the one in Portugal and we have a slightly larger cabin. The density of wine regions around Bordeaux (Medoc, Sauternes, Graves, St Emillon and Cognac) means that we do not travel very far on excursions around the region and we only travel at times to suit the tides. Even 40km and more from the ocean the rivers are tidal, with rises up to 6 metres. The prospect of being captured at low tide by the

mud of the Garonne River restricts when and where our boat the *Amadolce* travels.

We have had numerous lessons about French wines and the strict rules that apply for designating the area of origin. The top tier Chateau wineries must only make wines from their own vineyards in the district. Tradition means that they cannot use fans to combat frost or use covers to protect grapes from the birds. Their *Appellation Origine Controlee* system of wine districts and production limits is very strict. They are precious about their history and nothing must be challenged or changed.



Naturally we have visited a number of Chateaus. The definition is a bit rubbery because a chateau can be a building like a castle, or only a vineyard which may or may not be associated with a castle.





## Parslows in Spain, France and London

We have also seen many churches and cathedrals. The one in the picture above was interesting because it had a model ship hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the church. It was in the Basque fishing village of St Jean de Luz.

An interesting trip was to a family cooperage, where we saw the cooper making vats by hand. A finished barrel of French Oak sells for around \$1,200.

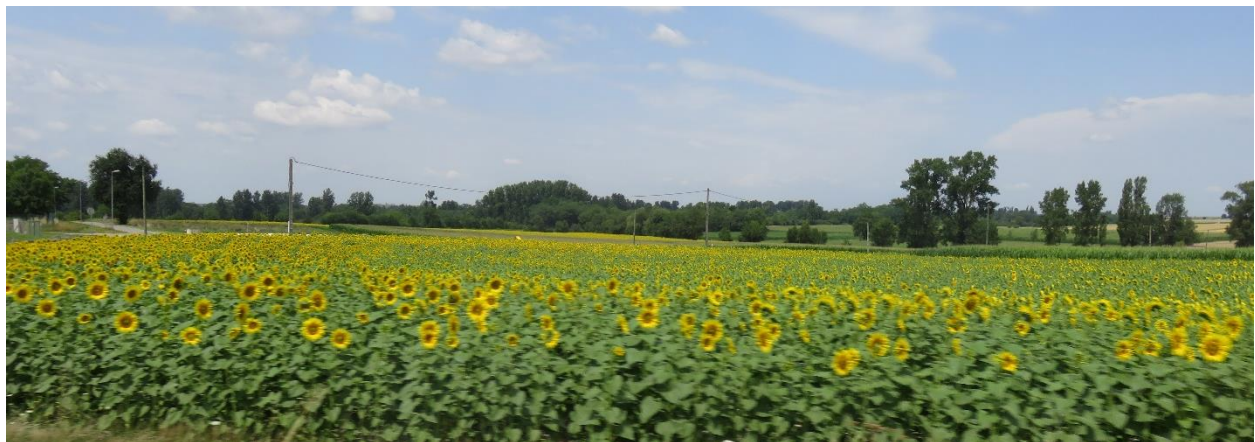


Another trip we enjoyed was to Cognac where, as you would expect, we toured a distillery and tasted the Cognac.

While in Cognac we saw this unusual boat. Two boats row toward one another and the men at the top use their javelin (jousting stick) to push each other off.



We also passed massive fields of sunflowers that looked spectacular.





## Parslows in Spain, France and London

Another visit was to an impressive citadel with two moats (no water) and two outer walls for protection. The moats are now used for horse races.



Shopping in some French and Spanish towns is a challenge as their opening hours appear to be random. Many are closed for long lunches and a siesta, but that could be from 12-2 or 2-5, or any other time that they like. Many are closed on Sundays although the new French prime minister is trying to change that.

The town of Bergerac was one of the most delightful places we visited. Unfortunately the trip was short once again to the rapidly changing tides of the river.

Our last day in France was spent in the town of Bordeaux. Over the last 30 years Bordeaux has been modernised, removing lots of old warehouses on the banks of the river and replacing them with pathways used for walking, cycling, roller skating and a very modern tram.







One of the more unusual sites in Bordeaux is a series of 25 statues of naked men that are scattered around the city. Here are two of them, outside Galeries La Fayette and between old statues on the top of the opera house.



It did not take long for us to adjust to London although it is 17 years since our last visit. This trip is different in that it is the first time we have been here in mid summer. There are so many people – tourists from America, other parts of UK and Ireland, a variety of European countries and a few Asians. They come in families, tour groups, lots of school groups and backpackers. In almost every trip on the underground we saw someone with a traveler's suitcase.

The other adjustment that we have had to make is that we can't walk as much as we did on our last trip. Age is taking its toll. So we started by taking the underground to a different location each day and walked back to the hotel, visiting things along the way. Many of the usual sites, including Buckingham Palace, Hyde and St James Parks, Big Ben, Harrods, Trafalgar Square, Covent Garden etc. We were surprised to see that Carnaby Street is now mostly upmarket brand-name stores, although there are a few more eccentric items available like these shoes.



We spent a lovely day visiting new friends that we met in Madeira just a few weeks ago. We caught the train to Amersham (about half way to Oxford) where they picked us up for a tour of the Buckinghamshire district. We saw Roald Dahl's house, villages where *Midsomer Murders* was filmed,



sampled local beer and had a walk through a farm overlooking the PM's estate, Chequers. After a delightful high tea and later dinner at a local pub we returned to London by train.

We went to Evensong in Westminster Abbey, saw an unusual version of *Much ado about nothing* at The Globe (set it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexican revolution), a great

Parslows in Spain, France and London

musical show called *Beautiful*, the story of Carole King and on our final night we went to *Matilda*. All different and all really enjoyable.

On a trip down the river past Greenwich and the barrages, we were entertained by a very cockney captain giving a commentary pointing out where Judy Dench and Hellen Mirren live, where Charles Dickens wrote two of his novels and where part of *Oliver* was filmed.



On a visit to the National Portrait Gallery we saw portraits of royals, politicians, explorers, writers, artists and scientists. Each came with a potted history and was well worth the visit. Next stop was the National Gallery where we stood amazed in a room full of Gainsborough, Turner and Constable; then moved on to Renoir, Monet and Van Gogh's sunflowers. We had never been there before and had no idea what was in store. I had a print of this Renoir on my study wall for many years; it was exciting to see the original.



Graham also visited the Imperial War Museum and the British museum while Di went to St Paul's Cathedral, a few different markets and Oxford Street.

From our hotel window we could see the London Eye and some of the hundreds of cranes that are all over London. The weather has been very kind, hardly any rain and days in the 20s.



On leaving London we found that Heathrow is now an large upmarket shopping mall – I did not buy the stylish coat in Harrods for €1700 (\$2500 Aus) nor the gold-plated tea strainer in Fortnum and Masons for €125 (\$185). And now we have arrived in Dublin, where we have taken in our first Irish pub with live music and Guinness on tap.