



# Far from the Madding Crowd

by Sophia Karatsinidis, 2005

How to start? How does one describe the amazing and wonderful experience that is a Walkabout Gourmet Adventures tour? Let me start by saying that this was not my first tour with WGA.

I first travelled with them in 2004 when I did the **Secrets of Provence** and **Pagnol's Provence** tours back to back. I instantly fell in love with this way of travel and I decided then and there that I would be back for more.

I was so impressed; I booked my place on Far from the Madding Crowd for the



following year (2005) while I was still on tour doing Pagnol's Provence. I had an entire year to plan and look forward to this walk.

Just like the first two walks I did, Graeme, Gabriela and Gilles put together an itinerary to please all the senses.

The tour was an amazing experience; it gave me an opportunity to enjoy and experience the variety of landscapes and cuisine that different parts of France had to offer as this tour took in four very distinct and unique regions of France; The Auvergne (in central France), The Loire Valley, Normandy and Brittany.

## The Auvergne

Our first stop was the town of Salers in the Auvergne region of France. The Auvergne is a very green and fertile part of France and the walks we did took us through some beautiful wooded valleys and emerald covered mountains and forest.



On one of our walks, we even came up close with the beautiful chestnut coloured Salers cattle just peacefully grazing on the hillsides, taking curious glances at us walkers making our way up to the summit of Puy Violent. We all took pleasure in the beautiful Auvergne countryside around us, stopping frequently to capture the beauty of this region and to admire the vast array of multi-coloured wildflowers blanketing the landscape.

Whilst in the Auvergne, we stayed in a wonderful hotel in the heart of the small town of Salers. This was a won-

derful town to explore and everyone on our tour took advantage of our free day to take in the sights and marvel at the beautiful architecture throughout the town, not to mention a visit to many of Salers' unique shops. Most of our dinners were taken in the hotel restaurant and along with the wonderful wines, our meals never failed to disappoint. All meals consisted of four or five courses and of course included the very civilised cheese course after all our main meals and before our desserts.

During our stay here we were treated to wonderful dishes such as:

- Confit of Duck,
- Fois Gras (absolute heaven)
- Wonderfully succulent lamb with white beans, and
- Local beef served with the provincial Auvergnois specialty of truffade (a deliciously cheesy mash potato-type dish).



- Those with a sweet tooth weren't disappointed either. Just some of the desserts we were served throughout our stay here included:
- Sponge layers filled with cream and fruit salad on berry coulis,
- Rose ice-cream with strawberry tarts and
- Rose crème brûlée.

Overall, we were based in Salers for 4 nights before moving on to our next destination in the Loire Valley.

## The Loire Valley

The Loire Valley is one of my favourite places in France and I was looking forward to this part of the trip very much. The landscape was totally different to that in the Auvergne being for the most part quite flat. Much of the region is blanketed in vineyards and wheat fields and our walks certainly took advantage



of this. A highlight of our walks in the Loire Valley was a visit to some wonderful chateaux:

The Chateau of Chenonceau – known as the ladies castle due to the numerous queens that have occupied it throughout history, Chateau Cheverney – a classically built chateau owned by the same family for more than six centuries, and Clos Luce – where Da Vinci enjoyed his twilight years and where you can see many of his designs for inventions and drawings which are displayed throughout the house and gardens.

Our hotel in the Loire Valley was right in the heart of the village of Chenonceau, just a short walk to the castle itself. We even started one of our walks one day with a short stroll to the castle to visit the chateau and it's beautiful gardens. We also admired some amazing flower arrangements displayed throughout the various rooms of the chateau. Our walk then commenced via the back door of the chateau across the river Cher out into a beautiful forest setting where our walking route took us away from the chateau. We followed a path along the river on one side and the forest on the other before diverting away from the river to walk amongst wonderfully tended vineyards stretching as far as the eye could see.

The food served in this part of our tour continued on from the standard set in Salers. Our meals in the evening were taken in the courtyard of our hotel. The food served throughout our stay here was a work of art with quite a number of courses including a pre-dessert des-

sert. After a day out walking and taking in the amazing sights, there was no better way to relax than with a cool aperitif served with some delicious nibbles like salmon on toast, calamari crumble in a shell and cheese and pork pastry cases. This was just the beginning. Other delicious dishes we indulged in during our stay here included:

- Julienne of zucchini in delicious dressing and spiced fish (pre-entrée),
- Fois gras and artichoke (entrée),
- Aubergine mousse with crabmeat (pre-entrée),
- Succulent lamb with potatoes gratin and vegetables (main),
- Pike in delicious butter-sauce with mushrooms and asparagus (main)
- Tender steak medallions served with garden fresh vegetables (main)

Again, those with a sweet tooth were very well catered for, even spoilt with a pre-dessert served prior to the main dessert each night. Our sweet delights included:

- Finely diced fruit salad in cider and crushed ice (a pre-dessert designed to cleanse the palate before the main dessert),





our group to join in on the Bastille Day celebrations along with the locals.

Our main walk in Normandy was along the Bay of Mont St. Michel to the Mont itself. The Mont is a medieval abbey whose beginnings date back to the eighth century when the Bishop of Avranches founded the first chapel after the Archangel Michael appeared to him in a dream. Over the years, it was built as a fortification and when the tide comes in, is completely cut off from the rest of the mainland and became an island unto itself. These days, a causeway allows thousands of visitors a year to easily visit the medieval abbey.

Our group actually walked across the bay itself at low tide. Some even walked barefoot and bravely tested the pockets of quicksand dotted throughout the bay.

As we walked across the bay, the silhouette of the abbey in the distance slowly became more and more distinct, and what we originally thought was a mirage of sticks sticking out of the ground in the distance, turned out to be other groups of walkers also enjoying the



beauty of the bay as they were making their way to the Mont as well.

On the day that we visited Mont St. Michel, we had dinner at a local restaurant not too far from the abbey after our walk and then returned to the abbey after dark to see the Mont all lit up standing strong and solitary in the vast Bay of Mont St. Michel.

Our guides Gilles and Gabriela took the group for a night tour of the abbey and it was a great opportunity to peacefully enjoy the splendour of this wonderful landmark without the masses of tourists that descend upon it during the day.

- Whipped crème fraiche floating in a strawberry soup (dessert),
- Chocolate praline slice served with bitter chocolate gelato (dessert),
- Red fruit puree with vanilla cream (pre-dessert) and
- Red fruit compote served with lightly whipped custard on a soft biscuit base (dessert).

Our stay in the Loire Valley was truly memorable. We stayed for 3 nights and quickly became accustomed to our lovely hotel and its surrounds, not to mention the gastronomic artistry that awaited us each evening.

## Normandy

Our next stop was Normandy, famous for its cider, calvados and Camembert cheese. Our stay in Normandy coincided with the 14th July, France's national

holiday and we were very fortunate to celebrate the occasion by a visit to the walled harbour town of St. Malo. We arrived in St Malo after dinner one evening and immediately sensed the atmosphere created by more than 500,000 people gathering within the town walls, all there for the Bastille night fireworks display.

We enjoyed the warm summer's evening by walking along the whole distance of the wall surrounding the old town and taking in the various activities and goings on in the town below us.

There was certainly lots of music, lots of activity and definitely a warm buzz about the place as people moved to and fro and took in all that this beautiful seaside town has to offer whilst the sun set slowly over the English Channel. This was followed by a fantastic fireworks display and was a great way for





Whilst in Normandy, we stayed at the Chateau de Bonaban, an actual real life chateau that had been converted into a hotel. It was a wonderfully roomy and elegant hotel with and we took pre-dinner drinks each evening in the comfortable bar before moving into the dining room for more of the wonderful food to which we had, by now, become very much accustomed.

This included:

- Delicious lamb fillets with vegetables (main),
- Smoked salmon with herbed crème fraîche (entrée)
- Smoked duck breast with cantaloupe and cheese infused with tomato (entrée)
- Fois Gras with salad (entrée) - Red mullet in endive salad (starter)

- John Dory with tender vegetables in butter sauce
- Raspberry tart with meringue ice cream and sorbet (dessert), and
- A wonderful selection of local cheeses for which this region is renowned

We stayed in Normandy for 3 nights before moving on to our final destination in Brittany.

## Brittany

I had never visited this part of France before and so it was a first for me. I can honestly say that I was more than pleasantly surprised. We stayed in the coastal town of Morgat in a hotel right on the beach. Just a step down from the terrace and your feet are immediately immersed in the Atlantic Ocean.

At high tide, the water comes right up to the first couple of steps leading off the hotel terrace. At low tide, you can enjoy a wonderful walk along the soft expanse of sand that a couple of hours ago was immersed in metres of water. Brittany is the only place in Europe it is said, where the difference between high tide and low tide can vary by as much as 15 metres.

Our coastal walks here were amazing with paths along the rugged cliffs and crystal clear turquoise waters below. The cliff sides covered with purple

heather just added to the palette of beautiful colours provided by the marriage of landscape, ocean and sky.

Our walks took in coastal tracks known as customs officers' pathways. These were created during the French Revolution by the customs authorities for surveillance of the coast and to combat smuggling and the pillaging of shipwrecks.

Thanks to customs, we had some wonderful tracks to explore which took us into some of the most dramatic scenery I've had ever seen. Another walk, which began in the gorgeous town of Pont-Aven, allowed us to spend a bit of time in the town itself and to explore the wonderful galleries and art museum for which the town is renowned.

The walk from Pont-Aven was along a beautiful tributary with the river on one side and the cool green forest on the other. Intermittently, the sun would break through and would create a wonderful effect of light coming through the trees and leaves; a very special walk and one of my favourite of the whole trip.

We also had a free day during our stay here and many of us took the opportunity to share a taxi and visit the beautiful medieval town of Quimper. I was amazed at the pride the French took in how their towns look. Every single





bridge and footbridge in Quimper was totally covered in flowers and was an absolute feast for the eyes.

The old town itself was a beautiful place to explore with its cobbled streets and cathedral right in the centre of town. We also took the opportunity to visit the faience factory and browse through some of the unique pottery made in this part of the world.

Now for the food: there is only one way to describe the food in this part of the tour, absolutely magnificent. I thought that the food we had had up until now had really spoilt us and certainly was of a standard I had never experienced before.

However, the last five nights of the tour which we spent in Morgat took us all into gastronomic heaven. Our dinners were taken in the hotel restaurant and the chefs here presented us with some of the most amazing dinners I have ever tasted. The list below just doesn't do the experience justice and this tour is worth doing just for the food of the last five nights alone:

- Creamed goat's cheese and small-diced tomato in olive oil and pesto

(Pre-entrée)

- Lobster in a crispy pastry case with greens on a bed of sliced nectarine in a cantaloupe sauce (entrée)
- Succulent fillet of beef with blanched garden fresh vegetables (main)
- Red berry fruit salad with a light sorbet (dessert)
- Crabmeat between avocado cream and flavoured mayonnaise (pre-entrée)
- Succulent and lightly seared scallops in a delicious sauce with chicory (entrée)
- Sea Bass in a plum sauce with julienne vegetables and light mini spring roll (main)
- Warm chocolate pudding with vanilla bean ice cream and homemade caramel wafers (dessert)
- Lobster claw appetiser (pre-entrée)
- Scampi with buckwheat crepe and soft warm orange segments (entrée) - Black tea crème brûlée with ice cream and homemade caramel snaps
- Foie Gras with fig relish (entrée)

- Fillet of Canard with Foie Gras (entrée), and
- Pigeon with lightly sautéed vegetables on a sweetbread base with a smooth mash of potato, eggplant and bacon on a bed of cabbage (main).

I've gone overboard on the food here simply because it deserves the rave. And being right next to the sea ensured that the seafood that was served, was as fresh and fresh can be all prepared to perfection by the wonderful chefs of our hotel restaurant.

In finishing up, the only thing left to be said is that Graeme and Gabriela's company is known as Gourmet Walkabout Adventures for good very reason.

It more than lives up to its name with wonderful walks in some of the most amazingly beautiful parts of France combined with delicious mouth-watering gastronomic delights all washed down with fantastic local wines. It just doesn't get better than this.

» Guest's story by Sophia Karatsinidis