

November 2005

Eastern Provence

Meet Eric and Michel. They're a gay couple who run the Brasserie de l'Éveque. It's situated on a little cobblestone square just below where we live in **Grasse**. Actually it's a 100 ft. vertical drop from where we live. You see, the town of Grasse is located on the side of a steep mountain. There's a 30 ft. drop from one parallel street to the next. Not to exaggerate too much, but picture if you will a town carved out of the steep walls of Grand Canyon. That's Grasse.

We rented our apartment on the internet. We wanted to live in Old Town (medieval) Grasse. We got what we wanted. Our building stands on a square on the highest point in Grasse. From our third floor apartment we look out on the valley all the way to the Mediteranean at Cannes – about a 20 minute drive. On the same square rests an ancient clock tower that wakes us promptly at 7:00 every morning. Across the square is Notre Dame Cathedral. The only resemblance it bears to its famous Parisian cousin is that it is indeed a church and that it is old, 12th Century. What's interesting is that within its dark and musty interior hang large paintings allegedly by Rubens and Fragonard. Although they need some restoration, they are still impressive.

In our desire to live in the quaint medieval center, we didn't realize that quaint centers have very narrow streets with no parking. So, the downside of our location is parking. (This was to become a theme for many of our other residences across Europe.) We're forced to use a parking garage that's about a 15 minute walk down and a 25 minute hike back up, which works out to a 300 ft. vertical climb. A chairlift would have come in handy. The garage is 13 stories built on the side of the mountain. Every time we hike between our car and the apartment we pass by Eric and Michel's Brasserie. All of the walls are glass, so we peeked in on our way past. Eric would always wave. On our second day we stopped in for a beer. Any excuse for a rest stop on our way up to the apartment. It was the beginning of a great friendship.

Eric looks like the lovechild of Buster Keaton and Rosalind Russell. Fortyish, he looks like he needs to sleep for a week. He has a wonderful sense of humor.. Michel, on the other hand, could win a Mel Gibson look-alike contest. They just took over the Brasserie a month before. Michel is a hairdresser by trade. Just two weeks ago his salon was burned out. Arson.

At that time France was suffering from riots brought about by immigrants from Africa – The Magrebs of North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) and French West Africans (Senegal, Mali). With a national trend towards conservatism and racism, they are feeling disenfranchised because of the lack of job opportunities. The French economy isn't all that healthy, and they feel discriminated against. Old Town Grasse is filled with Magrebs. It is by no means "gentrified", although

the beautiful architecture of the old edifices cries out for it. All of the old French have moved down the mountain into the new, modern part of town. We saw other evidence of the unrest. A burned out car skeleton lay across our square next to Notre Dame.

Michel's salon didn't appear to be specifically targeted, as three adjacent stores were also involved. The saddest thing about the random violence is that Michel does a lot of work for the community. He deeply cares about women who have lost their hair due to cancer treatment. He makes wigs for them, pro bono.

Michel figures his total damage at around \$24,000, not including lost business. Yes, he has fire insurance; however the insurance company is claiming that the loss was due to a "force majeure", or civil strife, which is excluded from coverage. So he's battling it out. Meantime he, his darling mother and friends are helping to clean up the mess. The timing couldn't have been worse. Eric and Michel had just sunk all their savings into the Brasserie. We're sure that they'll make it, though. Their food is excellent, and the ambience is welcoming.

Grasse is known as the perfume center of France. Companies including Guerlain, Fragonard and Galimard manufacture perfume, cologne, lotion and soap here. You will notice greenhouses dotting the surrounding countryside all the way through Monaco and into Italy. The flowers are converted into essences. The perfumers blend these essences into their final products. A tour through the Fragonard factory reveals how perfume is made. Their museum portrays the history of perfume, the manufacturing process and a magnificent collection of perfume vials.

Some Short Shots:

It seems only fitting that a major, if not the major, perfume center of the world is located in France. Far be it from me to stereotype, but the French are sooo into fragrances. Even the men. Visit a local bistro and you'll note that the blend of colognes give the cigarette smoke a run for its money.

No doubt about it, the women of France are beautiful, sexy and slender. They all appear to spend considerable time and money on keeping up appearances. Wrinkles aren't allowed to show until age 50, if even then. Rumor has it that fat French women are rounded up on a nightly basis and incarcerated in prison spas until their proportions meet the national standard.

Far be it from me to stereotype, but the average young Frenchman is good looking ... in a feminine sort of way. He's slender and wears clothes that accentuate his "svelte"-ness. The Jean Gabin and Jean-Paul Belmondo look is out. Young Pierre looks to David Bowie as his model.

But I digress Back to our travels.

Around Eastern Provence:

We selected Grasse not only for its uniqueness, but for its location. 20 minutes driving time from Cannes, 40 minutes from Nice, one hour from Monte Carlo. Many unique little “villages perchés” – little mountain towns perched on the side, or top, of a mountain. Before we left Africa, Anzie bought a book, “The Most Beautiful Villages in Provence”. **Gourdon** and **Gouzeilles** are perfect examples. Located in the Petites Alpes, we could see their snow-capped big brothers in the distance.

St. Paul de Vence is one of the most popular tourist villages in France. Rightfully so. It's a charming town made popular by many famous inhabitants from the worlds of art and film. It's also known for its art museums. This brings up the good news/bad news of traveling this area in late November. The good news: few tourists. The bad news: many of the places we want to visit are closed.

Fortunately for us the **Maigret Foundation** was open. This gorgeous museum was built in the early 60's. The design blends right into the surrounding hillside. It features the work of 20th Century artists: Miro, Chagall, Calder, Leger, Giacometti ... to name a few. The architectural layout provides plenty of natural light. The surrounding gardens are also a treat.

Antibes and **Cap d'Antibes** give you a peek into the lives of the Rich and Famous. Don't know anyone who lives there but, judging from the estates, they certainly know how to live. The market in Old Town is worth a visit. We bought olive tapenade and sundried tomatoes. We ate at an adjoining restaurant. Wonderful fish soup.

I ordered fish soup at several restaurants in Provence. It's a bisque that's served with a side of rouille, grated cheese and croutons. Never had a bad one!

Near the Old Town we visited the **Picasso Museum**, located in the **Grimaldi Mansion**. The Grimaldi family is the reigning family of Monaco – Prince Rainier, Princess Grace and all that. While we were in France the newspapers were full of the scandal that the young Prince had sired more than one child out of wedlock.

The mansion was worthwhile. The Picasso museum was not --- lots of etchings and studies. Nothing noteworthy. Could there be just too many Picasso museums?

The **Matisse Museum** in Nice is well worth the visit. Located in a large French Empire-style building in the center of a park, it is probably the most expansive exhibition of the artist's works in the world. It gives adequate space to his huge,

magnificent panels. Did you know he did sculpture? Neither did we. Also exhibited are his designs for the Matisse chapel in St. Paul de Vence. We went there for a visit ... closed for the season.

Spent 40 minutes driving around Nice trying to find the **Chagall Museum**. It was closed for the season. Lots of construction going on. Should be open by summer.

Visited the **Glass Factory in Biot**. Reminded us of Corning Glass. We watched as several glassblowers fashioned exquisite glassware and bowls. I struck up a conversation with one of them as he was taking a break. Raymond Winowski immigrated from Poland 25 years before. He became a master glassblower, and now teaches others. I mentioned that I was born and raised 20 miles from the Corning/Steuben Glass factory. He knew it well. I went on to say that one of my failed objectives in life was to make glass. "Come with me.", he said.

I followed Raymond through the door that led from the spectators' gallery to the shop floor. He grabbed a blowpipe, stuck it in the mouth of a furnace, rotated it a few times, and pulled it out. There on the end was a glowing glob of molten glass. He laid it over the edge of a metal table, and gave it to me. "Blow!", he ordered. So I blew ... not very hard. I had always understood that one blew softly; that the breath expanded with the heat as it approached the molten glass. Not so. "Blow harder, but don't inhale!", instructed my master. And I did. Once the glob began to expand, I didn't have to blow so hard. "Keep blowing!" So I did. The glass ballooned out to the size of a very large eggplant before it drooped, then shattered. Boy, I'd love to learn that craft someday. Thank you, Raymond.

Anzie took some great photos. Yep, they're in the camera that was stolen from our car the following week.

The factory is connected to a wonderful gallery of contemporary glass art. Several American artists are represented.

Toilet Technology

Leave it to the French to come up with something new in toilets. At the Maight Foundation we first discovered that, when you flushed the toilet, the seat rotated through a small compartment that wiped it clean. At the Hotel Carlton in Cannes the toilet seat rotates and is wrapped with a fresh paper napkin. At the Brasserie overlooking the picturesque harbor in Villefranche, the seat rotates and is sprayed with disinfectant. Unfortunately the next person must sit on a wet seat, or else wait a few minutes. At any rate, the new technology is generations ahead of the Turkish "squat" toilet that we had suffered in Africa.

Au Revoir to All That

On our last evening, Eric and Michel fixed us a special dinner:

Salade Nicoise

Rabbit Stew a la Bourguignonne over Tagliatelle

Bottle of Medoc Red

Crème Brulée with Lavender

Orange Dessert Wine (made by Michel)

Truly Memorable!

The next morning we said goodbye to Charles, our landlord, packed up the car and drove down to the Brasserie de L'Éveque for a last breakfast. Here it was Sunday morning, and the place was full of men drinking wine and playing cards. We partook of a continental breakfast; then took pictures of each other in front of the restaurant. We all promised to e-mail the pix to each other.

And where are those photos? In the camera that we lost the following week.

A la prochaine,

Chuck