

2025 Paris and the Heart of Normandy

Part III of the “Christopher is Not a Fan of International Travel” Trilogy

The story began in 2022 with a Viking cruise on the Rhine River, mostly through Germany but ending in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Then, in 2023, my wife and some of my closest friends coordinated a trip to Italy that included time in Rome, a week-long stay in a Tuscan private villa, and Florence. For 2024 I put my traveling companions in a “time out” so that I could recover from damage to my psyche caused by international travel, but not before chatter began about the next group adventure abroad. France.

Early on, I insisted that if they were going to drag my cranky ass across the pond for another not-so-relaxing vacation then I was going to be actively involved (with veto power) with choosing destination(s), accommodations, and certain other details. I was determined to avoid an extended stay in a middle-of-fucking-nowhere private villa with mediocre “private chef” prepared meals. If possible, I very much wanted to include another Viking cruise because of our experience in 2022. I also wanted to keep the plan as simple as possible.

Most of you know that I have a fondness for the occasional glass of wine. Given that, some might think that my “ideal” trip to France would include visiting vineyards and tasting the delicious wines of the more notable wine regions of France. You’d be wrong. I have no interest in hopping around between vineyards for one ounce pours and collecting tasting notes for a bunch of wines I probably can’t find at home. Just pour me a glass of good French wine, preferably white, and keep them coming. You know who’s really good at this? Viking.

When the time came to start planning a trip to France, I reached out to my friend Tom who helped us coordinate the first two trips. With destination, timing, and simplicity in mind – we put together a Viking itinerary that included air fare, transfers, a 3-night pre-cruise hotel stay in Paris, and a 7-night stay on a Viking longship (the Skaga) for their Paris and the Heart of Normandy voyage. I presented the plan to previous traveling companions and 3 couples were quickly on board (so to speak). Dave/Meg and George/Ellen from the 2023 trip plus Mike/Leslie from the 2022 trip. Cue up La Marseillaise... with Suzanne and I, we were a party of eight headed to France in August 2025.

Before I get into my recap of the “adventure,” let me sneak in a Paul Harvey styled “page two” endorsement for Viking. When considering a cruise, ocean or river, there are several options available. Most travel agents, knowing that some people can be price conscience about their travel, often steer travelers to other cruise lines – and I’m sure that some of them are very good. I’ve not taken a Viking ocean cruise yet, but I’m sure I could expect another exceptional experience. Incredibly friendly and helpful

English-speaking staff, delicious meals, smartly designed and appointed staterooms, and no children. For voyages marketed to the United States, it's as if they have found a way to cater to those with wanderlust AND their curmudgeon spouses who dislike international travel. Yes... a bit more expensive than some of their competitors – Because they are worth it. That's Viking. V-I-K-I-N-G.

Monday, August 4 - Paris

We departed Michigan the day before and arrived Monday morning. Amazingly, and seemingly in coordination with Viking, our rooms were available for an early check-in. Bags in room and a short break after an 8-hour flight, Suzanne was ready to GO. "We're burning daylight!" First stop... Notre-Dame Cathedral of Paris. <Ugh...>

Quick note about the 2022 and 2023 trips... Christopher has seen enough churches for SEVERAL lifetimes. "OH... But the architecture, the history, the..." whatever-the-fuck people say to convince me otherwise. Not buying it. I've seen the Cologne Cathedral in Germany, the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica, the Papal Basilica of St. Francis, and literally dozens of other old Catholic places of worship in Europe. I have no desire to see another one. Even if it's the most famous church (cathedral... whatever) in all of Paris. I don't care that it recently re-opened after being closed for repairs since a 2019 fire, and I certainly wasn't going to wait in what appeared to be an hour-long line to get in and catch a glimpse.

Suzanne wanted to go in. Fine. I told her to call me when she got out and that I'd be at the café on the corner enjoying a glass of wine and watching the crowd of people shuffling along to get in. I sat down, the waiter brought me a glass of wine, and I started deleting spam e-mail on my phone. Two sips in my waiter was helping the table next to me and backed into my table, spilling the wine in my lap and down my pant legs. Some of you might be thinking "karma is a bitch," but accidents happen. It was white wine, dried quickly, and he brought me a fresh glass. Screw karma.

The line that appeared to be over an hour long moved more quickly than I anticipated. Suzanne got in, looked around, and called me after just 40 minutes. Which was plenty of time for me to enjoy my glass of wine. No hunchbacks were seen.

After our visit to Notre Dame, we grabbed a quick lunch and took a cab back to the hotel for a nap. We didn't get much sleep on the plane, so we had gone over 24 hours without real sleep. We met up with the rest of our group for dinner to close out our first day. Special thanks to Tom for making reservations for us and covering the tab. 14,856 steps for the day.



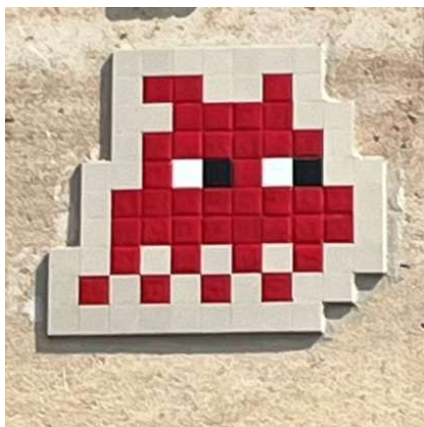
Tuesday, August 5 - Paris

The day began with a guided walking tour of the Le Marais district of Paris. Our guide took our group from the hotel to the area using the Metro (train/subway). A church (of course), a stroll through the oldest planned square in Paris and part of the city's Jewish quarter, some historical jibber jabber from our guide, then back to the hotel.

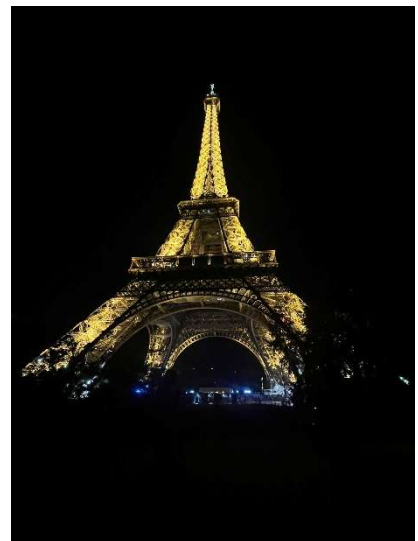
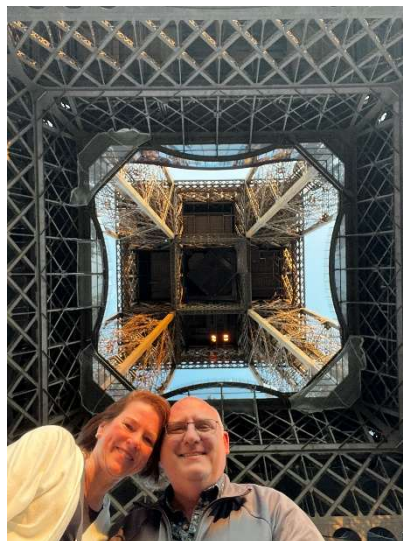


Suzanne and I went off on our own for the rest of the day. She had signed us up for a walking food tour with Paris by Mouth that happened to be in the same area as the morning's walking tour. We took a cab to meet our guide, Stephen, at the previously mentioned town square. Some pastries, cured meats, then a sit down in the cellar of a wine shop for some cheeses with a baguette and (of course) some wine. Ok... this excursion included wine, so it didn't completely suck.

Along the way, our guide pointed out some "art" near corners of some buildings by the French street artist "Invader." Look for his installations in highly-visible locations in 20 countries. We finished the tour with gelato then headed back to the hotel.



After a short rest, we headed to the Eiffel Tower. We had 9 pm tickets to the top for a Champagne toast overlooking the city. Crowds were almost unbearable, but I suppose it is practically a “must-do” if you find yourself in Paris. At least it wasn’t a church. And there was Champagne. 14,297 steps for the day.





Wednesday, August 6 - Paris

We started the day with a walking tour of Montmartre Hill. It is one of the most celebrated districts in Paris, historically a draw for artists and writers in their day, location for some scenes in a show called Emily in Paris, and (do I even have to say it?) there is a church. About 2/3 into the tour, Suzanne wasn't feeling well. She tried to shake it off, but we eventually decided to ditch our friends and the tour to head back to the hotel. Not sure what she ate (or didn't eat), but a few hours later she was back to normal and ready for more.



That evening we had tickets for dinner and the cabaret show at Moulin Rouge along with Dave and Meg. During the dinner there was a small band performing on stage. The male and female vocalists had the look and stage presense of a 1980s hotel lounge act, but I think they were doing it ironically. They even encouraged couples to come up and dance on a small parquet floor in front of the stage. One couple did, but they may have been a plant.

Forget the look and “feel” of the dinner entertainment... they sounded great. Excellent entertainment that didn’t interfere with our meal and light dinner conversation. Once our tables were cleared, the stage extended out to cover the area that was once a dance floor and the cabaret show was set to begin. Dozens of dancers, women and men, all with big smiles and moves better than Jagger. Fabulous. And I’m not just saying that because of all the bare breasted women on the stage that was now extended to be one table away from where we were seated.

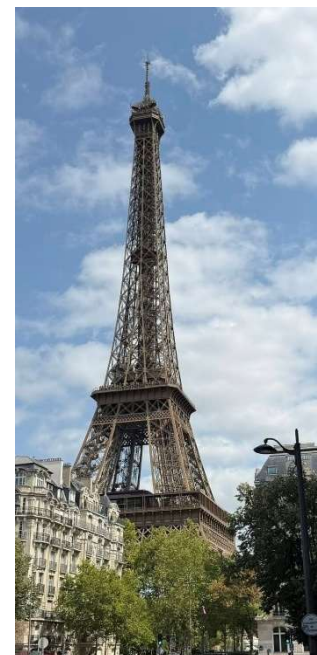
Great music and dancing with pauses for some Cirque du Soliel styled acts and costume changes. Fantastic fast-moving show that keeps you entertained from the moment it begins. I can’t say enough good things about the experience. If you are a curmudgeon and someone drags you across the pond to Paris – See a French cabaret show.

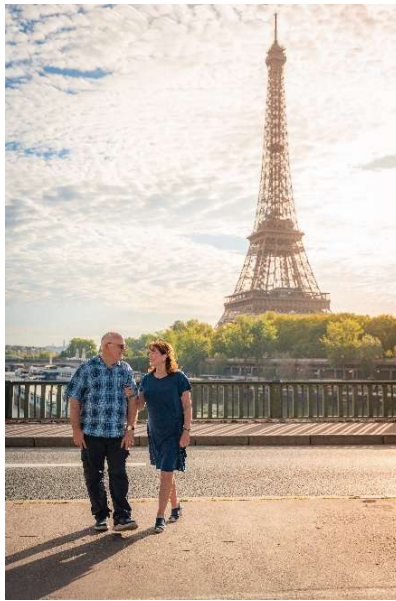


Thursday, August 7 – Paris

Our last full day in Paris and we had a lot to do before boarding the Viking longship in time for dinner with the other couples. Nearly 18,000 steps for the day. We started early with a professional photoshoot near the Eiffel Tower. A bit cheesy if you ask me, mostly because I’m not very photogenic, but Suzanne wanted some nice photographic evidence of our trip that weren’t selfies and that didn’t rely on random strangers.

After the photoshoot we went back to the hotel to pack and hand off our luggage to Viking staff for transport to our room on the boat. We grabbed a light breakfast then we headed to the Louvre. We had gotten tickets via the web site two months earlier (not as part of a tour through Viator) and somehow ended up paying extra for access to a PopGuide app for self-guided tour information by The Walker Tours. Worthless.





In fact, the whole Louvre experience was painful. The crowds were crazy, the museum was difficult to navigate, and the art was underwhelming. (Admittedly, I can't say that I've ever been *whelmed* by a piece of art.) 132 Euro pissed away.

After the Louvre, we made our way to the boat to check in and grab a nap before happy hour and dinner. For part of the way we got taken for a ride, literally and figuratively, by one of the bicycle taxi hucksters. (I'm over it. I think.) We also passed one of the new designated areas for swimming in the Seine. I'm out. I don't care how clean they say it is now, it still smelled like raw sewage to me.



Queue to see Mona Lisa



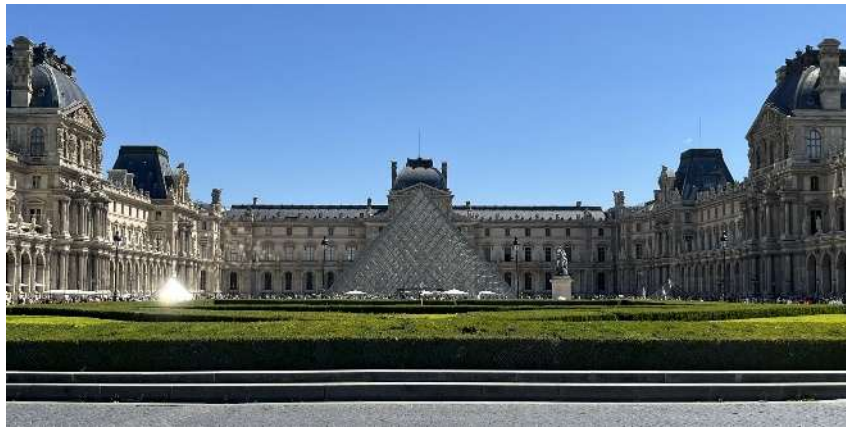
Mona Lisa



Banging 2 coconuts together



Winged Victory of Samothrace



Escargot appetizer with dinner (already out of shells). Surprisingly good. Also good was the wine. A French Sauvignon Blanc from Sancerre. First of many bottles to be consumed over the next week.





Friday, August 8 - Paris

Suzanne and I skipped the morning excursion provided by Viking and took an Uber to the Luxembourg Gardens for a leisurely stroll. Relaxing. No complaints.



After lunch on the boat we went on one of the optional excursions, a walking food tour. The guide took a group of us on the Metro to an area of Paris to experience some Parisian favorites. Macaroons, specialty chocolates, gelato, and finishing up at a café with some escargot and wine plus a ham and cheese thing that was kind of like a sandwich but not really. For some reason a quick visit to a church was included in the walking tour. I'm starting to think there may be a law requiring the inclusion of a church for all guided tours in Europe.



Back to the boat for the evening. Cast off from Paris just before dinner. It was time for (more) wine. And a banana split dessert. Shouldn't there be a maraschino cherry on top? Almost twelve thousand steps for the day. Not bad.



Saturday, August 9 – La Roche-Guyon and Vernon

The day began with an optional tour (which means we paid extra for it) called "French Chateau Life." We started with a walk through the fruit/vegetable garden then we toured part of the La Roche-Guyon castle. Our guide had a pleasant speaking voice, and she was easy on the eyes, but the tour itself was boring. We saw a "time machine" that was built based on an old comic book (pretty sure that it doesn't work), climbed to the top of the castle to see the pigeon room, and participated in some kind of table setting workshop that didn't make any sense. I don't care how they set the table in the middle ages... or whenever. Just tell me which fork I'm supposed to use for my salad. Ugh... I coulda slept in!





During lunch, the boat relocated from La Roche-Guyon to Vernon. We took a bus to Giverny to visit the home and gardens of Claude Monet. We started with a walk through the gardens after a 20 minute wait in line to get in. I'm sure it was lovely, but I didn't really take in much of my surroundings because some enochlophobia kicked in as we shuffled along a 5-foot wide path around the pond in a sea of people. I got tunnel vision, light-headed, and kept thinking "get me the fuck out of here." As we approached the house and I saw the line of people waiting to get in for a peek, I tapped out. Suzanne waited in line and went into the house, but I got the impression that it wasn't worth the wait.

When she was done we had some time to kill before catching the tour bus back to the boat for dinner, so she wanted to walk a few blocks to the church. *Really?! Another church??*



Garden shots by Suzanne



A bajillion people trying to get into Claude's house

Actually, she was interested in finding Monet's grave in the cemetery adjacent to the church. More of a family plot. We walked right by it on the way in but spotted it on the way out. At least the place wasn't crowded. Well... above ground anyway.



A little over twelve thousand steps for the day. I didn't go over 9,000 steps on any of the remaining days for the trip, so I guess that's all I've got to say about that.



Dinner with our traveling clan on the Viking longship, the Skaga.

Sunday, August 10 – Rouen

We spent the morning on the boat as it traveled from Veron to Rouen where we went on a walking tour of the town that included not one, but TWO churches. One was the Notre Dame Cathedral of Rouen, a favorite subject of Claude Monet and final resting place of Richard the Lionheart. The other was a more contemporary church built adjacent to the site where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.



The tour ended at a statue for Joan and we had some free time to visit the little town before walking back to the boat. Mike and I were sitting outside a store when Meg emerged with a small bag and said to us “fleur de douche.” There was a little street noise, a soft breeze, and admittedly I didn’t hear exactly what she said. Neither did Mike, and he wears a hearing aid. So I gave her a puzzled look and asked “wash the bush?” The look on her face was priceless.

Apparently I wasn’t far off. It was a buff puff for use in the shower. Once she realized that we hadn’t heard her correctly, she clarified her purchase and we all had a good laugh. Meg and I laughed about it for the rest of the trip. Good times.



One of the oldest buildings in town.
Now a McDonald's. Or is it le McDonald's?



Monday, August 11 – Museum, Cemetery, and Omaha Beach
D-Day Landings of June 1944 in Normandy

I find it hard to summarize this full-day included excursion in a way that properly honors those who fought and the many who died in Normandy in 1944. The day began with a 45 minute bus ride to the Caen Memorial Museum. So many details and so much history to absorb, but I'm not really built that way. Good thing there wasn't a test. Viking guests had lunch as a group at the museum, then we had some free time to soak up a bit more history or walk through a Nazi bunker below the museum. After the museum, we took a short bus ride to the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial.



The experience was particularly somber when you consider current events in the United States. A subset of our population is being rounded up and arrested, many with no criminal history whatsoever (over 30% of them since early summer). We have a wanna-be dictator using our criminal justice system to go after his political enemies and those who disagree with him. We are starting to see armed military policing our cities. It all seems too familiar if you know anything about late 1930s Europe, and I can't help but wonder how it will end. I've never said that we didn't have problems to be addressed, but doing nothing would be better than doing the wrong things.



Tuesday, August 12 – Les Andelys

Relaxing morning as our longship began heading back toward Paris. For the afternoon, we docked in Les Andelys for a walking tour of the town and (for those interested) a short hike up to the ruins of Chateau Gaillard, a fortress built by King Richard I (Richard the Lionheart) in the late 1190s just before he died.

Oliver, the Viking Program Director, was offering umbrellas as we exited for those interested in shade from the sun during the tour. I was the only Viking guest who took him up on it, and it turned out to be a smart move. It proved to be a handy walking stick for the steep walk up to the fortress ruins and it shaded me from the hot sun for other parts of the walk. George, Ellen, and I were the only ones from our group willing to huff and puff our way up the hill to the ruins. We went slowly and stopped for a minute on the way up, so it wasn't that bad. I found a piece of flint rock on the ground near the top. Pretty sure it was a piece of the fortress about 800 years ago. Now it's on my desk.





Wednesday, August 13 – Paris

Are we done yet?! Apparently not, but one item of good news for the day... 2 excursions, no churches!

For the morning we went on the included excursion to Napoleon's Chateau de Malmaison. A bunch of talk about Josephine and their families, blah blah blah, he crowns himself emperor, gets defeated at Waterloo, then gets exiled.

What an incredible Cinderella story. This unknown... comes out of nowhere to lead the pack...

(Say it like Bill Murry's character Carl in Caddyshack.)

Ok... maybe it didn't end well for him, but at least he wasn't beheaded.

Oh... and we saw a black swan. I think its wings are clipped and they keep it in a fenced area on the grounds for the tourists.



For the afternoon, we went on the optional excursion to the Palace of Versailles. It has a long and storied history better summarized by Wikipedia than by me because I mentally checked out a few days earlier. \$199 EACH for this excursion. Pissed away.



Thursday, August 14 – It's over!

We were up early and headed home. I'd say it was a good trip... but was it? We viewed the Eiffel Tower from multiple angles, saw a cabaret show, went on a few nice walks, and had several good meals with great friends and lots of wine. I guess it didn't completely suck, but in the end... France is dead to me. (For those keeping track, so are Germany and Italy.)

By the way, when I say that “France is dead to me” I mean as a destination. I mean no disrespect to the people of France and I will continue to enjoy French wines regularly. Although... maybe a little less frequently depending on the tariffs imposed by the Orange Menace.

Steve Martin had a bit in his stand-up act during the 1970s that made it onto his *Wild and Crazy Guy* album. In the bit he gives his audience a warning after his first trip to Paris. “Chapeau means hat. Oeuf means egg. It’s like those French have a different word for everything!” And it’s true. I couldn’t read most labels or descriptions at points of interest. One of the nice parts about traveling with Viking is that everyone speaks English and the daily newsletters and menus are in English. The crew was great, but I did start to wonder why so few of them were French. Several members of the crew were from Germany and Bulgaria. We thought one woman might be Russian and we kept trying to think of ways to get her to say “Moose and Squirrel.” Her name wasn’t Natasha, but she had the look and it would have sounded really cool. At some point we learned she was Bulgarian. Eh... close enough.

Special thanks to Tom, my friend and travel agent, for all his hard work. Quick shout out to Oliver (Skaga Program Director), Yanka (Restaurant Maitre D), Adrian (our room steward), and Dimi (our waiter for most of our meals on the boat) for making the Viking experience so enjoyable.

A special “I love you, man!” to each of my traveling companions – Dave/Meg, Ellen/George, and Mike/Leslie. You guys are the best.

Most importantly, thank you to Suzanne for putting up with my schenanigans. I look forward to many more years of traveling with you, here and abroad. Preferably here.



Obviously, the opinions expressed herein are my own and may not represent those of my traveling companions.

To revisit the 2022 European Vacation and Italy 2023 travel reports, look for links at <https://grasshutandcoconuts.com>