

# Tour d'Alsace.

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I love this region where Latin and Germanic culture meets. Situated on the northeast border neighboring Germany, Alsace is a very charming place, especially its wine route, one of France's oldest wine routes. Along the wine route, which extends 170 kilometers from Strasbourg to Mulhouse, you could always stop over and meet the winegrowers, taste their wines, wander through a maze of streets in Medieval villages and walk along the vineyard trails to admire the views from high on the vineyard terraces. Sounds charming? Yah, we are going for it!!



Driving our Toyota, we started in the early morning of 17<sup>th</sup> July from Amsterdam, where I lived for 5 months as a visiting guest of the Free University of Amsterdam. We drove all the way from Netherlands to Germany, bypassing Belgium. Most of the journey was quite smooth, except a short disorientation in the German border city Saarsbrucken. We managed to arrive at the town of Obernai in northern Alsace in the evening, only to find no available accommodation in the vicinity. Worried by the idea of not being able to find a dwelling before darkness came, we decided to head uphill to Mont Saint Odile, where our back-up lodge lies. Hotel Mont Saint Odile is

converted from monastery buildings and is somewhat spartan, though the price is quite reasonable.

The next morning, we had to get up pretty early to catch the morning breakfast, whose serving time is strictly set. After the breakfast, we got time to look around and examine the surroundings. The hotel is part of a monastery, founded by Saint Odile in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, who was said to be born blind and recovered her sight when she was baptized. The monastery occupies the summit of the mount (around 700m high), and in that clear day, it offers a spectacular panorama view of the Alsace plane. We enjoyed as well walking round the rock on which the monastery is built. In the afternoon, we headed down from Mount Saint Odile back to Obernai.



Obernai is one of the important tourist towns in the Alsace Wine Route. We parked the car outside the town and walked to the tourist office, where we asked for a list of the local bed & breakfast. It did not take long before we find a suitable one situated almost at the center of the town. The room is quite compact, only enough for the essentials (bed, bath and

a table). The good thing is it is near to the town center. We decided immediately to book 3 nights here so that we can use Obernai as a base station and explore the surrounding towns gradually. In the afternoon, we perambulated up and down the town aimlessly, exploring the beautiful follow-decked 16<sup>th</sup> century town hall, the stone-built corn exchange, the pink sandstone belfry and not least the medieval alleyways. As night fell, the town became



even more alive. There seemed to be a local festival, where some locals dressed in traditional costume and marched around the city square. We tried the famous tart flambé, served with local beer and the hilarious jazz music. What a day...



On Saturday, we drove to Strasbourg, which is only 35 kilometers away from Obernai. Having been warned that finding parking place inside the city can be a nightmare, we parked the car outside Strasbourg and went to the city on foot. Strasbourg is the provincial capital of Alsace and remains a very cosmopolitan city. Landmark of the city- the impressive Gothic cathedral- is impossible to miss, as its high lacelike spire can be seen from almost every direction even from far away. But that magnificent cathedral has only one spire; the southern spire was never built.

Crossing bustling public squares and busy pedestrians areas, we reached fairy tale like la Petite France, a world heritage of UNESCO. We mingled with other flocks of tourist tirelessly making pictures of the half-timbered houses adorned with brightly colored geraniums. Being changed hands several times in history, Strasbourg was chosen to be one of the “European capitals” after Second World War, where the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and some other European institute sit here. We walked along the river and came to the European Parliament. On weekdays it can be visited. As it was Saturday that day, we can only gaze the façade. We made our way back to Obernai in the evening just in

time to watch the local marathon competition. Slapping palms and cheering the runners, I was totally exhausted when the day finished...



The next day, we began a leisurely driving trip on the well-marked wine route. Following the Route des Vins south, we stopped first at Ribeauville, arguably the most touristy places of all the villages on the wine route. We drove up the steep street and left the car in the parking lot. It was lunch time and we dipped into a cozy restaurant right alongside the street. There Jinghai ordered the famous local cuisine – chouckout (sauerkraut with sausages) while I ordered something I believed to be ham. To my surprise, what I got was a whole pork knuckle rather than ham. So what went wrong? Well, it did not take much effort before I realized that it was the misunderstanding of French on the menu. I mistaken “jambonneau” (pork knuckle) as “jambon” (ham)...Another lesson learned...Having said that, I did enjoy the taste of the dish, only if it were smaller...Finishing the abundant lunch, we ambled across the steep streets and fountains back to the parking lot. Then we moved on to the medieval castle, which seems easily reachable if we followed the road up. But things are not always what they

seem to be. This time, we were wrong again. Somehow, we picked the wrong direction and before we realized, we were already in the heart of the Vosage mountain. Encouraged by the idea of exploring areas off the beaten tracks, we continued. Finally we managed to arrive at a top. The area is surrounded by forests and it affords a spectacular view of the wine yard and the villages. Making several detours, we were on the main road again. The next village that stopped our wheel is the beautiful Riquewhir. Going up the cobbled street we stopped at the stone and half-timbered gate, topped by a pink bell tower. We sat at a nearby cafe to take a break as well as appreciate the view...Overnight at Obernai.



On the sunny Monday morning, we loaded the suitcases and left Obernai. Following the wine route south, we arrived at Beblenheim at noon. At the entrance of the village, we found an ideal dwelling. It is a home run bed & breakfast,



situated right at the foot of a great vineyard. We booked 2 nights there. The owner suggested to taste wine at “Cave de Beblenheim” , which is free for individual tasting and there we go... In the wine cellar, we tried all the 6 variants of white wine (from the very dry Sylvaner to the crisp dry Riesling to the intriguing fruitful Gewurztraminer.) , the only red wine produced in the region (Pinot Noir, a bit bitter taste), and the sparkling wines (Crémant, very delightful taste). Unlike other region of France, where wines are named after village or region, Alsace wines are identified by its grapes. The seven Alsace grape varieties are: Sylvaner, Pinot Blanc, Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer and Pinot Noir. I personally enjoy Muscat and Gewurztraminer the most. Not being able to drive after the wine tasting , we walked through vineyard trails to the nearby town Riquewhir again (only 3 km). This time, we headed lazily up hill along the vineyard trails, far from the crowds, high on the vineyard terraces, admired the picturesque villages, in a moment’s pause, alone.



Tuesday, we set off to the famed Ligne Maginot (Maginot Line), named after the French minister of war from 1929-1932. This remark defense network stretched all the way along the Franco-German frontier and was once believed impossible to get through. Ironically, the Germans, rather than attack the Maginot Line straight on, simply circles around through Belgium and invaded

France across its unprotected northern frontier. They then attacked the Maginot Line from the rear. The part we visited is relatively small and well preserved. Traces of the war can still be seen from the firing posts. Afterwards, we hit the road to the lovely southern Alsace city Colmar. The city is abundant in Alsatian style buildings, painted in bold colors, like



blue, orange, red or green. We strolled along the cobbled pedestrian street, intensely delighted by some of the fancy areas like the Petite Venise (Little Venice). Left Colmar, we headed into the Munster Valley. We had a stop at the town of Munster to see the Cignognes with their well-balance storks. Our final stop of the day was the battle site of WWI at Le Linge, south to Colmar. Some 10,000 French troops and 7000 German died in the bloody assaults in 1915. The memorial site has one of the best preserved WWI trench network.



At our final day in the Alsace wine route, we started by buying bottles of wines at the “Cave de Beblenheim” where we tasted wine days before. When we waited for our wines

to be packed, the winemaker offered us to try to late-harvest Gewurztraminer, which is really sweet and fruity (actually too sweet for me). The late-harvest Gewurztraminer is said to be divine when served with Alsace’s foie gras. In the afternoon, we began our driving “home” (Amsterdam). The only stop over we had on the road was in Luxembourg, where we fail to stop the car outside the city and before we realized, already dipped into the city center directly. In Luxembourg, we enjoyed the cheapest gasoline during the whole journey – almost 1/3 cheaper than all the neighboring countries. Around 10 in the evening, we finally arrived at my small apartment in Amsterdam. Hurra!!

*Xiaomeng Su  
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