

Transcript of Podcast 058: A Week in France

{Intro -

{A badly-recorded live recording of the aircrew announcement of the flight details on a soon-to-be-departing aeroplane. In French.}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

One of my friends, who shall remain nameless but who will be mentioned a lot in this pod, told me recently that while she downloads all my episodes, she listens to my life updates immediately on release but then saves the rest of the pod in her to-be-listened-to list. Given that my new newsletter, the first edition of which came out on the 2nd of June (apparently), is planned to have a brief summary of my podcasts' intro in it, I wonder if that means she'll stop even doing this.

I was wondering what to do this podcast on, and after she said that, I felt it made sense to make it an entire pod-length episode that's pretty much entirely a 'this is what I've been doing recently' introduction. Just so she listens to it. Though, that being said, that she'll be mentioned a lot will hopefully mitigate that.

I jest, of course. In all seriousness, it actually makes sense to do a pod episode on my recent travels. Partly because they're, well, what I've been up to recently anyway, but also partly because it's been my first journey out of the UK since both the start of the Covid pandemic and since the rules and regulations surrounding Brexit have kicked in. Additionally of course having only just recently returned from it, I've not had much time to prepare one on any other subject ...

Since I left for my trip on the Saturday after my podcast on Myths & Legends was released, I didn't really do anything outwith that adventure. In all honesty, I can't even remember what I was doing in those couple of days. I know I had a session with my therapist where we were talking about dating as an aromantic asexual in a large but not huge city, but that's going to be a topic wandered into in my next mainline pod. Because it's Pride Month and I'm sure I need to acknowledge that. I did dye my hair again on the, uhm, so, I couldn't be mythered to do it on the Friday so I got up especially at 4.48am on the Saturday morning to prepare myself and pack before my morning flight. We'll come onto that in a minute, but re hair dye. I dyed it at the start of the year, some flavour of purple, and while it worked, it wasn't quite ideal - whether that was because of cheap hair dye or my lack of skill in doing it, who can say. Anyway this time I took with another shade of purple ("cyber purple", let's be real, I chose it because of the name) and while it took better, it still generally made my hair much generically darker rather than being actually purple. One of the goth shops in Glasgow suggested previously I'd get a better effect if I bleached it first, but honestly do you really trust someone like me to bleach their own hair? Because I'm old enough to be going grey, I don't know how well a lighter colour might go on, like, for example, I always said when I was younger that when I went grey I'd dye it sky blue, but that was before I knew how colours worked. I'd do it lime green but I live in Glasgow. Purple though, purple is grand, purple is asexuality, purple is cool, it's just a shame most of it looks black. Which, though, still, makes a statement bearing in mind it's normally grey, As an aside, I often think about people who dye their hair. And it always strikes me as being two kinds - those who try to dye it their natural colour (which, demographically, includes people like me; we even have a hair-dye brand called 'just for men' that tries to match middle-aged men with their younger-aged hair colour), and those who, er, don't. Who are usually younger and female. So essentially, given my preference for flannel shirts and my experimentations with crop-tops, I have the vibe of a mid-30-something lesbian. This, however, is a discussion topic for my next pod,

All you need to know about my hair dye experimentations this time is that I did it at 5am on a morning in which I had a flight at 11am from an airport in a different city, because that's the way I roll.

So, anyway, about my trip. I spent 9 nights in France. The 9th night was because it was cheaper for me to spend an extra night - the final Sunday night - in France and fly to Glasgow on the Monday, than it was to leave France on the Sunday. The flight price was about £60; the *overnight coach* to London was £119 on its own. Or at least it was when I came to book it. But I'm going to rant about this later. Firstly let me talk about the background to the trip. You'd like to think, because I write the pods in advance, I have everything structured and organised about how to talk about my trip. Listener, oh listener, I don't know what to tell you but right now it's Tuesday evening, I'm in a pub, and I'm just writing what comes to mind as it comes to mind. This is not a blog post that I'm going to edit a couple of times before release; be thankful I even spell-check the document before I issue it as my transcript.

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Many years ago, well, Autumn 2019, my friend in France, Anne-Laure, suggested we take a road-trip around Ireland. Anne-Laure is, I don't know the best way to describe her that doesn't lead to many, oh yes, many, unanswered questions, so let's just be open and honest and call her an ex-girlfriend, although we, and I'm not going to say 'broke up' because that requires organisation and decisions being made and hello do you know me, we stopped 'considering ourselves a couple' probably around 2009. Anyway, obviously Covid put our plans on hold, but at the start of this year we tentatively suggested that we finally make it happen at the end of May. This being significant too as it coincides with her birthday.

If you know me well enough by now, you'll note I don't book things, I don't commit to things. This is partly because I like to be flexible. And partly because I'm scared of commitment. Which might be why she's my ex-girlfriend. But that's a tale for my therapist. Anyway. So. As you may remember from a couple of podcasts ago, I went to London over Easter to meet with my friend Laura. And while I was there, we discussed her future plans, including her desire to pop over to France to celebrate her birthday (which, coincidentally, is the same day as my friend Anne-Laure, although somewhat different years). And Laura was very keen that she not celebrate her birthday alone. And I, being me, am the person she felt most comfortable spending her birthday with.

This initially stressed me out as it meant I'd effectively booked myself to travel with friends in, and to, two different countries, at the same time, and I'd have to upset one of them. Yes, I'm in therapy for my people-pleasing nature. Anyway, as it turns out, Anne-Laure assumed we were going to Ireland at the end of May because that's what I wanted to do, and her birthday was pretty much irrelevant; a mid-July trip was more convenient to her anyway. So that meant I was free to go with Laura to France, which was useful as her holiday was much more time-dependent, not just because it was specifically for her birthday but also given she'd already booked her travel and at least one hotel.

By the time I came to book my trip, not quite last-minute but also more last-minute than Laura might have wished, I had, well, issues. Laura's plan was to take a couple of days in Annecy, in the Alpine foothills, two nights (one full day) in Lyon, for the eminently on-brand reason than she never never had, and then three nights in Paris. I was tasked with finding a Parisian hotel. Which was a snag as, uhm, there weren't any. Literally. There were no hotels with twin-bedded rooms in the entirety of the Paris admin area (we're not the sort of friends who share a bed, even a double bed, but there were only a couple of those anyway). Paris was, according to Booking Dot Com, 97% full for our visit. I have genuinely no idea why; the final stages of the French Open Tennis were on but that shouldn't have block-booked so many hotels. I can only assume it's a legacy of Covid, and a desire to keep hotel occupancy less than full. Anyway, I managed to get a chain hotel, a Campanile, for the record, just outside the Paris border but equally a short stagger from a metro station, so that was all right.

As intimated earlier too, I had problems with my own travel arrangements. Getting there was no issue - as she was starting in Annecy, Laura had booked a flight into Geneva, in Switzerland, and it was a trivial matter for me to book a flight from Edinburgh to Geneva for the same day that was scheduled to arrive not long before her flight, but going back to Glasgow was proving harder. Laura had booked a day coach to London but the prices for that when I came to book were hideous, and Eurostar was, uhm, twice as expensive and either way I'd still have to get to Glasgow from London. I ranted about this before, in my recent pods on environmentalism, and how if we really want to save the planet, we have to make alternatives to air travel be competitive and convenient. Getting from Paris to Glasgow, evidently, is not. But what this did mean is I ended up booking a cheap flight for the Monday (Laura was leaving on the Sunday), and I didn't book a hotel for the Sunday night. My thought had been, I know, I'd go somewhere interesting on the Sunday outside Paris and come back slowly on the Monday. The whole of north-eastern France was my oyster.

What I hadn't accounted for was that the Monday was a Bank Holiday. Urgh.

But that was something for Future Me to worry about. In the short term was travel under Covid Protocols ...

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Now, according to the rules and regulations we'd been reading, France required proof on arrival of vaccination for Covid. As you might know, my vaccination history is complicated by the fact I had my first two in England and my booster in Scotland, and the UK's NHS system evidently isn't national. Proof of the booster was fine, that's an easily-downloadable document from the Scottish system's website (albeit I had to search for my login details which oddly weren't in any kind of confirmation e-mail), but the English website had stopped issuing them. And not having a GP in England meant I couldn't download and use the NHS App to get them. I did eventually manage it, but it was a very last-minute thing, getting confirmation around 10pm on the Friday evening.

Except that we weren't flying to France, we were flying into Switzerland, which had no such regulations or requirements. As mentioned, we flew into Geneva - it was the nearest convenient airport to Annecy. This of course meant we'd be entering France overland, and even though the two countries are in the Schengen Travel Zone, Switzerland is not in the EU and therefore we imagined there'd be some kind of customs check at the border where they'd also check our certifications.

Listener, there was not and they did not. We breezed into France on the local train service without any admin. Making the whole chaos and stress of getting vaccination confirmation almost completely pointless, well, beyond a 'well I've got it now, so it might come in useful in the future'.

As for Covid itself, well ... honestly you'd be forgiven for thinking it wasn't A Thing. We saw a handful of people wearing masks, even in the outdoors, but for the most part everyone was unmasked and life seemed to be being lived as if it were 2019. The cafes and restaurants had moments where they were absolutely rammed (doubly so in Paris during a large thunderstorm), and there was absolutely no concept of social distancing anywhere (except possibly, as noted, in hotel occupancy); a couple of the smaller shops (well, boulangeries) actively restricted entry to prevent overcrowding, which caused a couple of unexpected queues, but other than that it was people everywhere.

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It must be said, boulangeries made up the vast majority of places we ate at, or at least from. It felt almost like we had a quest to find the best baguette, and while a couple of them were quite average, there were a couple of places we went to that were pretty top-notch, which you could tell just by looking at the bread and how it was both coloured and ribbed. I realise that makes them sound like a condom, especially if I told you I had one that was salami, and another that was ham and cheese. But I'm not the right person to do that, for semi-obvious reasons, although that being said I do write ... that's a whole 'nother story, come on Nel, focus.

It tended to be where we grabbed a mid-morning breakfast, or occasionally lunch. We'd take the baguette, some kind of pastry, and/or a sweet thing - I tended to go with the pain au chocolate, the muffin, or the apple tart pastry lattice type thing. One thing that Laura had said previously, and which I can't help but think about every time I make a sandwich back home, is that British bread ... isn't very good. For one thing, our sliced bread is remarkably thin. I mean, yes, we have loaves that go up to 'super-toastie' but even those aren't that thick if you look at them, and even as low as medium-sliced - the standard thickness of bread - you barely have to scrape something hard on them and they fall apart. And our baguettes and the like just aren't very interesting - they're quite plain, quite boring, a bit too soft. The French may have some slightly odd tastes in food but they make the best bread in the world.

Laura's other obsession is kebab. Apparently you can't get decent kebabs in the UK. The difference between a Greek, a Cypriot, a Turkish, and a more Levantine kebab is not something entirely clear to me, but her main irk is the way most UK kebabs are served on pitta bread rather than on a wrap, which to be honest is quite valid. I always found pitta too thin and tended to disintegrate under the sauce. Conversely there've been quite a few takeaways near where I've lived which do kebabs on naan, which I love because they're thick and coherent, but Laura tells me she finds these *too* thick. What can I say, I like something thick between my teeth. [pause]. I really need some kind of sound effect whenever I say things like that.

Anyway, we had kebab a couple of nights. Once in Annecy because she really fancied one, and then once on our first night in Lyon because it was open. A couple of blocks from the hotel was a small area with several restaurants listed on Google Maps, so after going to a nearby pub for more drinks than we anticipated, we set out to go to one of the nearby restaurants, a Vietnamese place which sounded good from the reviews. Which, er, it wasn't even that it was closed, it was that it didn't exist. The small row of shops was derelict, save for what I think was a boardgame cafe, and there was no evidence that anything else had been there for quite some time. The other restaurants in the area didn't fill us with any real joy or inspiration, and we almost ended up with McDonalds until we came upon the kebab place.

We had Vietnamese a couple of nights later, on our first night in Paris. Because it was open.

We also failed to find a decent mug of hot chocolate. What we wanted was one of those really thick ones, that were made mainly of cream and with melted chocolate in, but all the ones we found were just the standard typical milky ones that we can get in the UK. Partly this was down to us not really knowing what to look for on the menus; we didn't know if they had a special name or not.

There were two notable local-influenced evening meals we had on our trip. On our other night in Lyon, we'd been advised to find a 'Bouchon', a kind of cafe restaurant that's typical of the Lyon area that serves up regional cuisine - generally described as 'hearty', bordering on 'you might want to abandon your diet plan for a bit'. The ones we came across in the Old Town, where there are legion, because it's a very touristy thing to do, were all quite much of a muchness, but we found one nearer to the city centre that seemed all right. We had the cheapest of the 'Menu du Jour' that were on offer, but it gave us a three-course meal. When my starter of 'salade lyonnaise' (mainly lettuce and bacon lardons, but with a poached egg on top, for, er, reasons, presumably) arrived, we realised it was a good decision - it was *huge*. Laura was also more than happy with her French Onion Soup. Despite the portion size, it was pretty good and easy to eat; only Laura's desert of cheese stumped her and that was more because it was incredibly rich cream-like cheese that took a lot of eating. And all for €21 each.

The other was in Paris on the Friday night. Having spent two years in Senegal with Peace Corps several years ago, she's very fond of West African food, Senegalese in particular, and it's not something commonly available in the UK. I mean, there's a handful of West African restaurants, even one in Glasgow which we've been to a couple of times, but they're more Nigerian than Senegalese, and there's a whole world of difference between them - in fact it's pretty much exactly 1,000 miles between their closest points. This is very similar to the distance between the UK and Tunisia, which ... are also very different.

Anyway. It took a while of walking to find one that was open, not too full, and which looked okay, but we ended up going to one on the far side of Gare Du Nord, called Chez Zeyna. It was a very small place, about the size of someone's front room, but still stacked with tables and chairs. It wasn't the sort of place you'd see tourists; we clearly stood out. The menu here was small and changed daily, albeit with very similar themes (one option just substituted meat and fish on alternate days).

We shared two meals - maafe (peanut stew) with rice, and thiéré (millet couscous with some kind of meat), and the portions were huge, and pretty tasty. I've had similar things to maafe before, but the thiéré was new to me; it's a different kind of couscous to that which I survived on on my hike across Great Britain - imagine the difference in taste and texture between white rice and brown rice, and it's of the same kind of comparison. We had the same stuff for desert mixed in with yoghurt (Thiakry) which was nice and soothing after the very hot petter sauce I added a touch of to the main course. We had a Senegalese drink too - Bissap, a fruity drink made from what I believe are hibiscus leaves.

Laura said it was good, but not as good as some of the food she'd had in Senegal. I have nothing to compare it to directly - the peanut stew (sauce arachide) I had in Benin was of a different style and texture, so I enjoyed it.

We did not eat in the hotels we stayed in, because, you know, this is France and decent bakeries for breakfast were, as you've already seen, literally right there!

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As previously mentioned, we had trouble finding accommodation on this trip. Partly this was due to a lack of hotels, but also it was down to a lack of available twin bedded rooms. We both noticed a tendency for a lot of places, regardless of whether they were available or not, to only have the facility for double-bedded rooms rather than twin-bedded ones. Me and Laura love each other very much, but not in that way. We're happy to

share a room but we're more than glad of the privacy and comfort provided by our own separate beds. Besides, apparently I fart too much. I don't think I farted that much on this trip, for the record, but only she can answer that.

Laura sourced the first two hotels. In Annecy we stayed in a Campanile, a French hotel chain I'd heard of and even stayed in in the past, somewhere, don't know where, possibly Paris. Or Amsterdam, of all places. Anyway, this hotel was very close to Annecy railway and bus stations, which was pretty convenient as it meant it was easy to find. Surprisingly not very noisy despite this central location, too. There was a slight snag at the start as, despite affirming the room had twin beds, it did not, but we were quickly given an alternative room just down the corridor, an indication that perhaps the hotel wasn't as full as it seemed.

It was a comfortable room, although it did get slightly too warm one of the nights (we were there for three). It had a separate bathroom with toilet, and a decent enough amount of space to store everything. It also had convenient power sockets by the beds, something the other two hotels, for different reasons, did not.

So, convenient, spacious, and with privacy. Everything the hotel in Lyon was not. Actually, that's a bit harsh. This was the second place Laura had booked, originally because she was expecting to be on her own and she wanted somewhere cheap. My coming with her meant she thought she could rebook somewhere more affluent, except the terms/conditions of the hotel meant she couldn't cancel her original booking. So we were in an Ibis Budget, a little out of town. We actually passed it on the coach on the way in - a place off the main highway near one of the sports stadia, and a block or so from the end of one of the tram lines. Not really walkable from the centre of town; we were kind of tempted but on our arrival there was a relatively heavy rain shower

I've stayed in Ibis Budgets before, and this was typical of its type. It's one level above the old Formule 1 chain which was basically a concrete block filled with primary-coloured solid plastic, and with communal bathrooms/toilets (but the one in Coventry was £30/night so you know, you get what you pay for). This hotel at least had a bathroom inside the room, well, a shower room anyway, and two beds - a double bed and a bunk bed across and above it.

Let's talk about the washing facilities first. The shower room was just that, a shower, which was fine, except for reasons known only to the interior designers, the door had an artistic circular hole in it. Not to worry, the hole only looked out onto the opposing wall, except that in that exact location was a mirror. We ended up covering the mirror with a towel when we showered. Secondly, the wash-basin was located outside the door of the shower room. This meant not only was it ill-advised to use it when someone was having a shower, it also meant that anything we did in the washbasin was visible to the rest of the room. One of my weird social anxieties is I don't like people watching (or hearing, though there's not a lot I can do about that) me brush my teeth, so the combination of the two meant I didn't at all during my time in Lyon. That weird irk is something even Laura didn't know about me, so er, hi, now you know.

The room was quite large, but much of that was spare space by the door on the other side of the toilet. Convenient for getting changed in a secluded place, but meant much of the room's area was kind of wasted. In addition, we only found three power sockets - one by the wash-basin, of all places, one by the bottom of the ladder going up to the bunk, and one not as conveniently-located for the table as you'd might hope. We managed, but it wasn't ideal.

Then there's the question of its location. Not only was it out-of-town, it wasn't really anywhere in particular. A couple of blocks away were a few dodgy restaurants, some closed, and a large pub, but around the hotel itself was nothing but an industrial business park, a mcdonalds, and the commercial port. All jolly pretty and not really much use when you're looking for something to eat upon your arrival. The pub was cool though. Happy Hour was three hours long and sold pints of beer for €5. We took full advantage.

Our final hotel was another Campanile. You already know it wasn't in Paris - the border with Seine-Saint-Denis was maybe 500m West. This was another Campanile, with a very similar room to the one in Annecy though it felt smaller and it didn't have a working aircon unit (as opposed to Annecy which may well have done, we just didn't try to use it). Once again check-in didn't run smoothly - despite arriving over an hour after check-in opened, on our arrival the room we were allocated was still being cleaned, so we waited around a bit but when the head facilities person turned up, she had us transferred to the room opposite to save us waiting any longer. Again suggesting the lack of accommodation option was more a deliberate choice by hotels rather than absolute pundit demand.

That we were so far out didn't feel as much of an issue as I'd feared, given its location within staggering distance of a metro stop, and we were always going to be out wandering the city anyway. Plus the line we were on went through enough convenient metro hubs that we could easily just catch it to somewhere central and walk on (usually Metro Republique).

The smaller space in the room meant it felt a bit more cramped - I ended up storing some of my stuff under the bed. In addition, the location of the power sockets and bedside light switches behind the top of the beds made perfect sense when the cleaning staff insisted on pushing them together during every daily clean, but if we'd wanted to sleep together we'd've got a double bed, and when we pulled them apart they were impossible to access. Bad design.

That I spent my final night in Paris in that same hotel, the Sunday night, once Laura had gone, was because I'd booked my flight for the Monday evening rather than the Sunday, for cost reasons. What I hadn't factored in was that the Monday was a public holiday (Whitsun) so a lot of things were closed. As they were on the Sunday. And travel on the Monday domestically in France was a bit more expensive - trains between Paris and Rouen, for instance, were maybe three times more expensive on the Monday than on the Sunday. So I decided to stay in Paris both days and just, well, rest. And that this was easy to do again suggests the lack of hotel space when we came to book was a supply-side issue not a demand-related issue.

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Travel itself was an important aspect to the trip, as you'd expect from going to three cities in a foreign country. For me it started with the flight to Switzerland, well I mean it actually started with the bus from Glasgow to Edinburgh Airport but that's not a terribly interesting journey. Although I'd flown during the pandemic, including pretty much exactly a year earlier, those flights had been domestic and hadn't required any preparation or research.

The other aspect to my journey was it was the first time I was going into and out of a European-area destination without being a citizen of a European Union state, so it was all about the 'other channels'. In addition, and tangentially related to this, there were also contemporary reports of long delays at airports and regular flight cancellations. As a result, even though I'd checked in online and was only carrying hand-luggage, I made sure to arrive at the airports early - an hour and a half at Edinburgh and a full two hours at Paris Orly.

As it turned out, this was overkill. My flight to Geneva was late leaving, due to air traffic control having fewer staff than normal, but it didn't cause any issues getting through security or anything like that. That side of things was pretty quick; same with arriving in Geneva, where I was processed and stamped in in a few minutes - the walk from the gate to passport control took longer than going through it. As an aside, being stamped into the EU means I might actually get to fill my passport before it expires in August 2024. In addition, my flight was on EasyJet who over that weekend were notably having hundreds of cancelled flights, but evidently not mine. Laura's flight was an hour late arriving but that just means I had time to lurk in Geneva airport and read a book.

As for leaving Orly, again there were no issues at all, no real queuing, no awkward admin issues, everything felt quick and efficient, plus my plane was entirely on time. Maybe I was just lucky, especially given all those tales that have been in the news of late. My flight back was on an airline I'd never flown before - Transavia - who seem to be mainly a domestic French airline, and that showed with the aircrew onboard where I seemed to gather their French announcements better than their English ones. The only issue I had was remarkably back in Glasgow when the automatic gate you can use to scan your passport and have the screen auto-identify your face ... didn't, so I had to slide to a human immigration official. This is not the first time this has happened trying to get into the UK - I know my passport photo is from 2013 but really, dude.

Overland transportation was mainly by coach, with a couple of trains. Our first trip was the first of those trains, from Geneva airport to Annecy, as it was the most regular and convenient routing between the two cities. It's not a long journey, a couple of hours including changing trains in Geneva city centre itself, though if you look on a map, it's a bit of a weird routing. Our only problem was buying the tickets from the ticket machine; it didn't accept bank cards so we had to pay in cash; we only had (a small number of) Euros and it wouldn't accept Euro coins, only Swiss Franc ones, so we had to overpay and got change in Swiss Francs which, not the most useful of currencies to get coins in when you're only going to be in the country for effectively a few minutes. Vaguely annoying.

The route itself though was pretty, as once it left the Geneva suburbs it went through the green fields and small villages, and with the Alps as a constant background entity, that make this region seem very 'Sound of Music'-y. Obviously we were on the wrong side of the train for the best views (and we even swapped seats halfway, which made exactly no difference), but it was a lovely ride in.

The two long journeys we made in the week though were both by coach, Flixbus to be precise. These were because, uhm, they were cheap. The journey from Annecy to Lyon took about the same time as the equivalent train, albeit about a quarter of the time we spent on the coach was in the Lyon suburbs stuck in traffic. The one from Lyon to Paris took about five hours (the train would take two), but then the coach was £14 and the train was about £50, so, you know, you get what you pay for.

Both coaches were fairly full – the one from Lyon to Paris was completely so and it turns out this was but one leg of a much longer journey; it had started beyond Barcelona. I'm not sure what kind of budget backpacker would choose to take a Flixbus from Barcelona to Paris via Lyon, well actually I do know cos it's certainly something I'd be tempted with, but experience has shown long overnight journeys like that don't do well on my body or mental health.

We actually almost didn't make that coach; we left our hotel a little later than we should have done, and the tram we caught to the city centre broke down on the way, fortunately close enough for us to walk to the bus station from. And then in the bus station, there was no indication which bay our coach was departing from, so we lurked around by the wrong one for a few minutes. Coach stations in France seem to be quite unhelpful on that score, as Laura had a similar problem on her coach from Paris back to London on the last Sunday. She'd already had notification a few days earlier that it had been retimed and was now running two hours later than scheduled, and then when we got to Bercy Bus Station (not the prettiest place in the world, even by bus station standards, probably on a par with the old one at Digbeth, Birmingham) her coach wasn't listed at all on the departure screens, so she ended up having to ask for confirmation at the helpdesk, the only helpdesk I've ever seen with a security guard at the door checking people who wanted to go in to ask for info. Her adventures didn't end there – for some reason her coach took a ferry but arrived in Calais just after one had stopped boarding so she had to wait there for the next two hours. She was worried she'd miss the last tube home from London Victoria but they arrived just after 10pm.

As mentioned, the hotel we stayed in in Paris wasn't actually in Paris, but just outside the border. It was, however, within staggering distance of a metro stop, so we used the Paris metro system quite a lot. There's not much to say about it really that hasn't already been said – my personal irk about it is because most of the stops are named after the roads they're on, which are mostly named after famous people or other famous places, the metro system gives no real way of determining where in Paris you are. I had no idea who Jacques Bonsergent was until I was writing this podcast (an engineer who was the first execution of a French citizen by the Nazis, seemingly inconsequentially), but we used his station because it turns out it was in a convenient place. Who knew?

The other observation I had is, we got a couple of late evening metros and even out to the suburbs they were busy – I don't think we ever managed to get a seat on Line 5, no matter how late in the day it was. Obviously there are knock-on effects there with regard to Covid precautions but I've already talked about that.

Paris also has a tram network. I didn't actually realise this until this visit, regardless of the number of times I'd been there before, although I guess that's partly because all the Parisian trams are in the suburbs, on the very edge of the city boundary in fact. But I travelled on one to the airport. Normally I'd get one of the Orly coaches from a convenient south-of-the-river Metro stop (probably Denfert-Rochereau, named after an army general in the days of the Franco-Prussian War), which cost, I don't know, an additional €9 or something, but it turns out you can get to Orly Airport on standard local tickets (my research has revealed the transfer I did from Metro to Tram at Villejuif–Louis Aragon was technically illegal as you're not supposed to transfer on the same ticket like that, but no-one checked, so I did the journey for €1.60 as opposed to double that). Obviously taking this route is longer than getting the bus, but as you can see, even doing it legally, it's still substantially cheaper. And you get the glorious views of, er, a large new commercial business park at Rungis. And the largest wholesale food market in Europe. Exciting places.

The other trip me and Laura did together was a day trip on a regional train up to the small town of Vernon, in Normandy, on the last Saturday. I worked out how to get there but didn't buy any tickets in advance, because, well, me, which caused issues when we rocked up at Saint-Lazare railway station and found we couldn't buy the tickets for the train we wanted because it had sold out. This irked me, and confused me, because it's not like you could book seats on it anyway. Laura was gentle with me but I still felt like a bit of a failure. We could get

on the following train, about 45 mins later, which, it turns out, was absolutely rammed with people. Getting back was fun, but in a different way: despite being glorious sunshine for the whole day, we popped into a supermarket to get water on the way back, and came out to moody grey skies. The train was far less crowded, and we could actually look out the window at the passing scenery, and the many bridges over the Seine as we followed the river back to Paris, but in the suburbs we were treated to a huge storm, with heavy rain and big lightning flashes. The storm was so bad the train stopped for ten minutes or so because the electrics on the line had failed due to so much water falling.

You've probably never heard of Vernon. I'd never heard of Vernon until I did pre-trip research. But let's talk about why we were there, and what else we did on the trip.

[section separator jingle]

I'm fully aware I've got this far through the pod and not really said much about what we actually did. So let's change that, and start almost at the end, on our last full day together when we went to Vernon.

In truth, Vernon was not our destination - while it itself is quite a pretty town with old buildings, cobbled streets, a big church, and a ruined castle, for our purposes it served as mainly a transport stop for an onward 5km journey to the even smaller village of Giverny. This is famous for being a spot where creatives tended to congregate towards the end of the 19th Century in order to find peace, beauty, and inspiration. One of the first, and pretty much the most famous, was a chap called Claude Monet. You know, the impressionist painter. Did that painting of a bridge over a pond with water-lilies.

His house in Giverny is now a museum, covering both the building itself and the surrounding gardens. Given it was a Saturday and (during the hours we visited anyway) blue skies and blazing sunshine, the place was absolutely crowded with other tourists, but that didn't detract as much from the experience as you might imagine.

I'm going to divide the experience into three parts; the house, the gardens, and the pond. The house is weird. It's a two-story building with several small rooms, each of which is decorated roughly how it would have been during Monet's residence. You get to see, for instance, his bed, his kitchen (mostly blue), his dining room (mostly yellow), his inspirations (the walls are covered in Japanese art from one and two centuries prior to him), and many everyday household items of the kind he would have used, as well as, obviously, lots of his paintings, or at least those in his style. What you don't get is much in the way of explanation as to what you're actually looking at, so, and given the sheer numbers of other people in the place at the time, it felt a bit like looking around someone else's house at relative speed without knowing or understanding really what you're looking at. Pretty, certainly, just a trifle odd and without context.

The gardens outwith the house are bright, colourful, and essentially divided into gridlines. I know very little about flowers, but what I can tell you is that there's a series of straight paths going through them, and you definitely feel like you're invading nature's space, rather than being central and nature serving you. They're quite extensive, although most of it you're not allowed to enter, just view from the edge. It's all very green and quite high, and of course lots of pollinating insects. Little tip, don't go there wearing a yellow t-shirt under red dungarees; my otherwise traffic-light vibe made me very much resemble a flower myself.

Off the garden was a path that went under the main road and into a different section of the grounds. This was more serene and felt wilder, with flowing paths through wide and drooping trees that ran around a couple of large ponds (or small lakes, I'm not sure where the boundary line is). It is of course these lakes that formed the backdrop for his famous water-lilies paintings (he evidently liked water-lilies as he painted them over 250 times). My personal observation about this is I can only presume there's a water-lily season as although it's clear exactly where and what we drew and painted, there was a definite and distinct lack of water-lilies in the ponds on our visit. Maybe they're scared of tourists.

The rest of Giverny isn't very big but it is very pretty, with cottages standing behind trees on what would normally be quiet and unassuming roads. It's linked to Vernon by a country lane or, if you fancy it (and we did, a combination of the weather being good and the shuttlebus back to Vernon only running every two hours) a dead railway line that has been turned into a footpath and cyclepath. It felt very much like we were in the countryside, like England but hotter and with sharper cliffs rather than rolling hills.

Hills, well mountains, were the background to our time in Annecy, although we never went up any. Rather, it was just nice to appreciate them at a distance from ground level. Or, from 448m, I believe one of the cafes in the town centre identified itself at.

Although not a very big place, Annecy is very pretty and walking its streets is very rewarding, as long as you do it slowly and take in every building, every vista. It's dominated by an old town, a series of streets with cobbled pavements, cafes at every corner, and a series of canals and waterways that feed into the nearby Lake Annecy (for UK listeners, it's twice as big as Windermere, and just marginally larger than Loch Morar and Loch Tay. Or half as big as Loch Ness, albeit a very different shape).

There's plenty you can do in Annecy but we did very little of it. We did not hire a pedalo for an hour on the water, we did not hire a bicycle to go riding around the lake (though Laura would have done had we stayed an extra day), and nor did we climb any mountains. On one of the days we were there, we noted there was an ultra-marathon competition going on, the longest of which was 88km and saw a total ascent of 5,000m. The winner of the male race finished in 8hr 44m 46s, the winning female in 11hr 21m 54s. The winning mens' time works out at 29m 48s per Parkrun, a speed I can just about do on one running of my local Parkrun which, even if I did it 17 times, still wouldn't give me an elevation of 5,000m (that would require a gain of 95m per lap, which, I know it's hilly, but it's clearly not that hilly).

What we did do is walk around the town, walk around the lake, and, on the first Sunday we were there, get sunburn because it was bright and sunny. And the redness stayed with us for the whole of the trip. That's what you get for wearing a crop-top, I guess.

I guess the main thing about our visit was just ... well, being there. It's the sort of place you see on Instagram, and with good reason. The buildings are old and, while not 'impressive', have a lot of character and work very well on photographs. The streets are very French, very charming, and there's a lot going on - on the Tuesday morning there was a large market occupying what felt like half the old town centre. The lakefront is bordered by a footway and a large parkland area with trees and sculptures, including an odd and over-elaborate small sundial. And of course the views out over the lake and to the mountains beyond are just stunning in themselves.

Lyon didn't have the mountainous setting, and of course it's a much bigger city (the jury's still out on whether it's the second or the third biggest city in France), but it was still prettier than you might imagine. It's not a city I knew at all, having only ever been there once, to change trains (ironically to reach Geneva), and I'd never set foot outside Part-Dieu railway station. Laura had been told it was a really exciting and pretty place (!) (as this is a podcast you can't see the interrobang I've written in the transcript notes, but be definitely aware it's there), but initial impressions weren't favourable. Our coach arrived at Perrache station which is a huge complex that's almost impossible to get around without going through, and not the prettiest place this side of the Rhone River, and the journey to the hotel equally didn't fill us with excitement.

But, but, then, then came the next morning, and even the tram ride northwest of Perrache looked hopeful. Some cities have better riverfronts than others (I disagree with Laura on the vibe of Glasgow's, though I concede there are prettier ones), but Lyon has two - either side of the effective city centre are the Rhone and Saone rivers, creating a kind of small peninsula lined with vibrant old buildings that make you want to stand on the bridges and just ... watch a while. Whisper it quietly, but I preferred the view from the Saone to that on the Seine in Paris but ... we'll come to that later. To the west of the Saone though is Lyon's Old Town, which had been widely lauded by Laura's friends.

Not going to lie, I expected it to be two short streets surrounded by modern construction. I expected Lyon to be a bit like Birmingham but with less spicy food. Listener, it most certainly was not like Birmingham. I'm not going to compare it to Annecy as the two are very different, in terms of layout and setting, but Lyon's Old Town is probably of a similar size. It's filled with cobbled narrow streets, lined with old buildings (and rather more horologies, or clock-makers, than you might expect, though to be honest even one would be more than I'd expect) and the occasional large church. Because France. Although the Cathedral St Jean Baptiste is definitely worth popping in to - it has some lovely stained glass window panelling, for instance, as well as a small museum dedicated to, well it's *called* the Treasury Museum but contains things like vestments and excessively-ornate incense burners and crosses from the middle ages.

Also in the Old Town is the Museum of Lyon's History, a very ... it's housed in an old building with ornate furnishing and ceiling design and the actual structure of the museum is perfectly ordinary, It's just, well ... peculiar. The very start of the museum has some interactive displays on things Lyon is famous for, before it has

a level all about a very brief overview of Lyon's history. The signage then suggests that's the end of the museum and what's left is a bit about the waterways around Lyon, mostly designed for children, and a signpost to a cafe and a ... 'lookout spot'. We found neither of these. Rather, what we did find were a further 20-something rooms going into great detail about different aspects of Lyon, including its history of socialist activism, the city's expansion and development in the face of flooding, industrial development, and, for some reason, Napoleon Bonaparte's bed. I'm sure the museum had a structure and theme, but we were at a loss to quite understand it. Very informative, but also very confusing.

It must be said though, calling the area the Old Town is a bit of a misnomer. I mean, sure it's old, but ... just to the west is a hill called Fourvière. It's quite a steep hill, and we walked through the quite nice rosary garden to get there, waving at statues of yer man Jesus as we passed. At the top, and just behind the imposing Basilisk of Notre Dame, is what remains of Roman Lugdunum, pretty much the original city here and from which the rest of Lyon grew. Founded in 43BC but based around a previously existing Gaulish settlement, in European terms, you don't get much older than this.

There's a museum here that goes into part of the history of the city, but mainly it's an excuse to wheel out sarcophagi of dead Romans (and their servants), statues (and plinths on which statues once stood), and huge mosaics that, because they've been buried underground for the best part of 1500 years, are rather well preserved. Outside the museum are two Roman amphitheatres, both nicely preserved, and some extensive ruins that at the time would have made up the surrounding streets. One of the amphitheatres is still in use today - on our visit there was a modern stage with lighting rigs and amplifiers set up and techies were doing one heck of a sound check, whilst other techies mingled with tourists sitting on the same stone laid out two millennia earlier for Roman audiences to watch their equivalents perform live. Though perhaps not quite as loudly.

From both here and the top of the Fourvière hill you get a good view over the city skyline of Lyon, which is remarkably low-rise apart from five or six skyscrapers that look very much out of place. You're also supposed to be able to see Mont Blanc and the Alps in the distance, but even though by the time we got up there the rain had stopped and it was becoming quite a nice day, the air was still heavy with mist and haze, so anything beyond the city limits was just a vague sweep of shades of white. It could have been worse; my experiences of hill climbs rarely end in views at all.

The city centre itself has a long, wide, shopping street called Rue de la République, which Google Maps informed us at the time is a UNESCO-protected shopping street, though I honestly couldn't tell you why. It was, though, definitely more aesthetic than Birmingham's New Street and Corporation Street, and even had a pleasant square in the middle with a large shallow pool, complete without a dodgy sculpture in the middle of it. [pause] One day I ought to blog and pod about Birmingham and the Black Country. It might be quite fun.

But that was Lyon - more pleasant than Laura was expecting.

Obviously there's not a lot I can say about the last place we stayed in. Everyone knows about Paris, right? Well, I mean, obviously, just like London, there's a whole expanse of even the city itself that tourists rarely venture, never mind the near-suburbs, but Paris is one of Laura's favourite cities in the world, and what she most likes to do there is to wander around the streets and take photographs of the architecture. And Paris certainly has a lot of wonderful and aesthetic architecture; along some streets even the most mundane of buildings carries off a certain character and vibe. Her second-favourite structure to look at though is the Eiffel Tower; when we'd last visited, back in May 2018, we sat down on the nearby Champ de Mars and just looked at it for about an hour and a half. The floor was too wet to do that this time so we made do by wandering the streets nearby, and taking pictures from the bridges over the Seine.

And this got me pondering. Cities with rivers. Taking a purely independent approach to this, objectively, the Seine isn't very big, and there's a huge number of bridges over it. This makes the river quite accessible, especially as there are riverside paths you can walk along at your leisure, and it means it's quite easy to get a riverside view, but the river itself ... whisper it quietly but it's not that interesting, not as compared with, say, the Thames or the Douro. And while there's not a lot of difference between it and the Rhone, Lyon is blessed with the similar-sized Saone, so even there you get two rivers for the price of one. The Saone has the prettier view of the two too, I'd suggest. That said, it's got more vibe than, say, the Trent through Nottingham, and the oft-derided Birmingham might well be the biggest city I've been to not to stand on either a river or a lake/sea. I am aware of the existence of the River Rea, but any river I can more-or-less jump over, when I can see it at all and it's not been built over, doesn't count.

Anyway. Paris. One thing the city has that I didn't realise until we walked past it is a kind of equivalent to New York's High Line (and indeed was created much earlier than it). It's a dead railway line (closed in 1969) that ran from Bastille in the east-of-centre of the city, to the town of La Varenne-Saint-Maur in the eastern suburbs. Just under 5km of the track has been turned into a cyclepath-and-footpath. At one end, just north of Daumesnil, it runs through a woodland grove area that feels completely at odds with the surroundings, before entering a wide tunnel under Rue de Reuilly which is lined with artwork and some sculptures. Much of the rest of the route towards Bastille then rises onto a viaduct running alongside Avenue Daumesnil, with views across the roads to the architecture and the occasional piece of artwork and small garden area - it's even called the Promenade Plantée (tree-lined walkway) and the Viaduc des Arts. Very pretty, and much easier than walking at ground level.

At the other end of the scale, at Laura's suggestion, we took a short gander at the Palais Garnier, a 19th Century Italian-style opera house. They do still perform opera here, although it's more likely if you're going to watch opera you'll do it at the Opera Bastille, built on the site of the railway station the Promenade Plantée would have ended up at when it was a railway line. The Palais Garnier however, well, it's definitely a building, for sure. There's not much of it you can actually explore - the main entranceway and staircase, and the long corridor on the upper level - but you can also stand on the balconies and look out across the city (and pretend to be, I don't know, a monarch or something waving to the tourists below). You can also pop into one of the seated boxes in the auditorium and see the main seating, the stage, and the curtains.

If all that doesn't sound terribly interesting, be aware that podcasting is an audio medium and the Palais Garnier ... isn't. I mean obviously opera itself is, but we were there to look at the building rather than people performing in it. It is, quite possibly, the most opulent building I've been inside. And I've been to a good many Catholic Cathedrals where it's clear what they spent their tithes and tax-breaks on. Everything is gold. There are thick shiny columns, built on ornate plinths, rising to ceilings way taller than my flat in Glasgow. From the ceilings come huge chandeliers which, even though lit with small bulbs rather than candles, still provide appropriate gravitas. The walls are covered with decorative motifs, panelling, artwork, all in yellows and oranges. The doorways and the landing overlooking the stairwell are wide, tall, archways that let huge amounts of light and air through, and the ceilings, oh my god, the ceilings wouldn't look out of place in the Vatican, with delicately-painted scenes bordered by gold frills and floral decor.

The other major place I went to was on my last day. As I say, my original plan had been to leave Paris on the Sunday and go somewhere else, Rouen maybe, or Rheims, or Versailles even, but that proved too awkward logistically, so instead I just rested in Paris. On the Monday, my flight was about quarter to six in the evening, which meant I had a casual and easy day to wander down to Orly. I was tempted to walk the whole journey; I always find there's something excitingly illicit to walk to or from an airport; but as it happens I got distracted on my way there and ended up getting the equally illicit (albeit for different reasons) metro/tram combo.

What I got distracted by was a graveyard. The Pere Lachaise cemetery was conveniently close to the hotel, on the way south, and I thought I'd pop in for a few minutes and have a look around. I ended up in there for about two and a half hours, partly going 'where the feck is this grave, why can't I find it', and partly also going 'just one more, just one, it's on the way anyway, oh shiny'.

In case you don't know, it's the largest cemetery in France (44 hectares, where a hectare is about the area of a rugby pitch. Or Trafalgar Square), and contains upwards of a million dead people. That's not to say a million gravestones or monuments, since many graves themselves have more than one person in, and there are quite a lot of mausoleums and family plots. This actually makes the site much prettier than you might imagine, since the pathways through are generally wide cobbled streets (and even given road names), often lined with the larger memorials, some of which resemble The Doctor's TARDIS. There's also lots of overhanging trees, and everything comes together to give a calming, restful, low-key vibe. Well, until you reach one of the more popular graves, like Oscar Wilde, Jim Morrison, or, on my visit at least, the most popular was Edith Piaf.

Obviously many of the more notable people had distinct memorials, but the majority of the graves were fairly unique, or at least distinctive, with different designs, little touches like pieces of artwork on top, or carved busts of the people buried, or some kind of representation of what that person did. One early motor racing driver had a bust of him holding a steering wheel, for instance. In addition, the gravestones were often flat rather than upright, and squashed very close together. It's a far cry from typical graveyards in the UK where all the graves are marked with more-or-less uniform stones pointed upright from the grass in well-defined rows. Our graveyards are pretty boring.

What's strange is that I've visited Pere Lachaise once before, in very similar circumstances; it was a Sunday rather than a Bank Holiday Monday but still a day when things were largely closed, and it was a day when I had a plane to catch that evening from Orly Airport, and figured Pere Lachaise was a great way to spend some easy time.

[section separator jingle]

So what did I learn from my trip to France? Sometimes it's great fun to travel with people, as you get to visit places you may never have thought of yourself. Doing things at the last minute isn't always beneficial, but in general terms things tend to turn out well in the end. Greggs would have to change a bit if they wanted a foothold in France. And if you take everyday people as a guide, the Covid Pandemic is believed to be over.

And don't trust Google Maps to find you restaurants. At least, not ones that exist.

{standard end jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join my next time for, I mean it's Pride Month so I'm gonna be talking again about the crossover between LBGTQIA+ and travel, and let me tell you now, it's not going to be pretty. Even less pretty than the thought of me in a crop-top. Until then, faut jamais les oublier les trois mots qui terminent en "té" [you know you listen for the niche content!], and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}