

Viking Cruise "Paris and the heart of Normandy"  
May 29 to June 5, 2018

Traveling with friends Ruth and Phil from Iowa. A trip beginning and ending in Paris, and sailing along the Seine into northern France, focussing on Monet, and the Normandy beaches.

Tuesday, May 29

Arrived very early at Logan airport and had time for a light lunch and wine flights at Vino Volo in Terminal A. Flight 118 was on time and the flight went smoothly. We travelled in economy comfort plus, which was nice. Meyer watched "The Shape of Water" and half of "Black Panther" and Laura watched "Casablanca" on the way. We landed on time at 8:10.

Wednesday, May 30

Charles DeGaulle airport was horrible for our arrival. We waited 10 minutes for the door to open and then had to deplane onto the tarmac and cram onto a bus to the immigration area; the bus was then stuck in airport traffic and the ride took 30 minutes. We finally got through but by the time we cleared immigration we had missed our friends and had to take the next shuttle.

By around 11 a.m. we reached the ship, the Rinda, at Le Pecq, a suburb about 30 minutes (if no traffic) from Paris. Our room was ready, so we unpacked and met up with Ruth and Phil for lunch. After lunch we decided to check out the wine list and spirits selection at the bar (we had the drinks package). It was fabulous — at least 12 kinds of single malt, and Camus XO cognac, as well as a nice wine list that included Veuve Cliquot. The bartender, Gabriela, was Croatian and was happy to chat with us, talk about her favorites, offered us some tastes and then a drink.

At 2:30 we did a walking tour of nearby St. Germain en Laye, a very pretty town. Back to the ship in time for a wine and cheese tasting on board, and then the cocktail hour. We heard an introductory lecture on ship's logistics, and did the mandatory emergency drill, mustering on the sun deck with life jackets to take roll call.

Dinner was excellent. We took the chef's recommendations and had escargot (which Meyer loved even though he had always been skeptical of it), fish, and a beignet for dessert. We commented to our waiter Denis (also Croatian) that the escargot should be available tomorrow as well, and he merely said "anything is possible". Meyer ordered a cheese plate for the table and an enormous platter with many kinds of cheeses arrived. The evening entertainment consisted of two opera singers singing French songs, mainly from opera.

Thursday May 31

Today was an all day guided bus tour of Paris. We toured the right bank, seeing the Opera House, Arc de Triumph, and ended in the morning on Ile de la Cite at Notre Dame, where we went inside, then had free time for lunch and shopping. In the afternoon we toured the left bank, including the Sorbonne, St. Germain des Pres, and had a photo stop at the Eiffel tower. We returned in time for cocktail hour, and since it was our actual anniversary, we had Veuve Cliquot. The captain and the crew welcomed everyone on board, introduced themselves (including program director Guillaume) and then walked around toasting all the passengers.

For dinner we ordered beef tartare, entrecôte, and a Grand Marnier soufflé. And after the appetizers arrived, Denis brought us each another escargot. He remembered! And this time

Meyer forgot to order a cheese plate but Denis remembered that too! And since it was our anniversary, the waiters brought us a cake with a sparkler.

Friday June 1

An early morning departure; the ship is in Vernon and we were bussed to Giverny and the Monet foundation. We saw the Japanese bridges and the pond with water lilies that Monet loved to paint, then toured the rest of the gardens and his house. After that we walked around the town, and back to the ship for lunch. The water lilies were especially gorgeous — they had just started to bloom — and you could just picture Monet's paintings of them with the Japanese bridges.

In the afternoon there was a walking tour of Vernon but it was raining, so we decided to stay on board. We watched (but did not participate in) a class on watercolor painting, and a lecture on French impressionists.

Dinner was brie pane, veal scallopini, and Meyer had a fabulous apple tart while Laura had to try the creme brûlée. It was all very good.

After dinner the skies had cleared and it was still light, so we decided to walk into town and do our own walking tour (nice thing about river cruises is that you can often do that — walk right off the ship and you are in town). The town was adorable, and there was a festival going on, with people in costumes, many vendors out, and displays of farm animals. The quaint town really showed off in the evening light, and we got to watch a sunset.

The evening entertainment was a silly dancing game which we skipped, arriving too late for most of it. They did do a fast hasapiko (Greek dance) and we joined in.

A note on the dining: Viking had changed things a bit. Each menu had three courses recommended by the chef — an appetizer, an entree, and a dessert — which featured local ingredients and the cuisine of Normandy. Then there were two other choices for appetizer and for entree which were for that day only, and a dessert; then, on the facing page, were dishes that were always available. The always-available entrees were rib eye steak and poached salmon; the dessert, creme brûlée, The breakdown of the menu in this way tended to be somewhat confusing, at first.

Saturday June 2

Another Monet day. We spent the morning sailing from Vernon to Rouen, which allowed us to sleep in, have a leisurely breakfast and lunch, and catch up on things. A note on the internet: it was always available but sometimes quite slow. The wifi signal was strong in the public spaces and weak in the staterooms. Login was required and after four hours of inactivity you were logged out, so you were constantly logging in. Confusingly, attempting to get a page did not prompt you to log in; you had to go to network settings and select the wifi network first.

Upon arrival in Rouen, we left for a walking tour of the town, and the two cathedrals, including the famous Notre Dame cathedral which Monet painted 28 times, in different lights and seasons. The town is adorable, full of half-timbered buildings and Gothic architecture. Notre Dame cathedral houses the tomb of Richard the Lion-heart (his heart — other remains are buried elsewhere). At the old town market we visited the spot where Jeanne d' Arc was burned at the stake; there is a monument there. The tour guide left us at the old market, where we found a cafe and had wine and beer, then walked back to the ship.

Back on board, Guillaume gave a presentation on Jean d' Arc which we skipped. During the cocktail hour Guillaume gave a presentation on other Viking cruises, both river and ocean cruises.

Dinner was a buffet of dishes of Normandy. Many many cheeses and pates as well as a large assortment of stuff.

In the evening, the captain gave a nautical presentation that was surprisingly boring.

Sunday June 3

A very long day. Up early for the bus trip to the Normandy beaches. This was a two hour drive each way, so we didn't get back to the ship until quite late.

The first stop is at a WWII museum in Alençon. The museum focuses on the construction of a series of piers off the beach that would be used in the coming months for tanks, trucks, troops and supplies that would continue the invasion until it reached (and liberated) Paris. There is a 25 minute long movie that shows what was involved. The piers were actually constructed in pieces in England, carried by boat across the English Channel, and assembled on the spot. In order to anchor the end of a pier, a ship was sunk and used as an anchor. The weather was horrible, with gale force winds, but most of the piers succeeded. Construction started on D+1 and took several days. Parts of the piers still survive today, and you can get an idea of the extent of the project by looking at the remains.

This being the Sunday before D-day, there were various celebrations going on. We got to watch the end of the D-day triathlon. There were numerous fly-overs by WWII vintage planes. After the museum we had lunch in a local restaurant, then moved on to the American cemetery at Omaha beach (there was also an option to go on a Commonwealth tour, which visited Juno beach).

The cemetery was very impressive. Row after row of crosses in neat, perfectly manicured rows as far as the eye can see. Almost 10,000 soldiers were there, plus a memorial inscribed with the names of 2300 soldiers whose bodies were never recovered. The remaining soldiers were shipped home on the families' request.

Viking arranged for a ceremony just for us. We heard a brief talk, then the national anthem was played, and then taps, and then those of us who had been in the service were honored.

The next stop was at the gun batteries between Omaha and Gold beaches, at Longues-sur-Mer. There are four large concrete bunkers, each containing a 150 mm gun trained at the beach. You can go into the bunkers and walk along the beach.

Our final stop was at Omaha beach. A very impressive stainless steel structure has been placed on the site of the landings. We learned that each of the five beaches (Utah and Omaha for Americans, Juno for Australians and Gold and Sword for English) had waves of 1000 soldiers in each wave; the survival rate for the first waves was only 20%. In all, 150,000 troops landed at Normandy. While standing on the beach, you can look behind you and see the locations where German machine gun nests were located, and can imagine those nearby big guns, and it is truly amazing thinking that guys carrying 75 pound packs were coming out of the waves as sitting ducks. Many drowned from the heavy seas, and many more were gunned down. It is a chilling, depressing, and very emotional experience standing there and thinking about what happened 74 years ago.

After the 2 hour drive back, we were in time for cocktails, the port talk for the next day's events,

and dinner. We each went with the chef's recommendations: eggs mimosa, rack of lamb, and profiteroles. For a change, we decided to eat on the Aquavit terrace outdoors; the views of Rouen were lovely and the weather was gorgeous.

The evening entertainment was a delightful duo; a woman who sang favorites and played the flute, and a man playing guitar. Great songs, great performance; it was a lovely evening.

Monday June 4

We set sail from Rouen and headed for Les Andelys. During the sail, we get a disembarkation lecture from Guillaume about the process of leaving the ship on Wednesday. We sat in on a cooking demonstration by the chef, making lemon tart. We meet a lovely family traveling together — a grandfather, grandmother, father, son, and a 20 year old boy and 18 year old girl. We start talking to them about cooking, and the conversation moved on to travel and the children's plans.

After lunch we hiked up a steep hill to an ancient castle, Chateau Gaillard. We toured the castle, walked around the moat, and got great views of the town. Back down, we walked around the town of Petit Andely, and the tour guide left us there and we got a table outside at the local cafe, and ordered beer and wine. Once again, the weather was so lovely that we ate on the Aquavit terrace.

For dinner we had a mozzarella caprese. Laura had the rib eye steak from the always available menu, while Meyer had the Normandy special, beef and carrot stew. Dessert was a sponge cake with black currant layers. Everything was delicious.

Tuesday June 5

Back to Le Pecq and Paris. We rose early for a bus trip to Versailles. Viking is smart — not only did we use the group entrance, but we were there just as they open, and crowds haven't formed yet. When we arrived there were three busses in the parking lot; later there would be 30.

The palace was lovely. We saw the both kings' bedchambers (the chateau was built by Louis XIV but extended by Louis XV). We saw the hall of mirrors. Afterwards, we toured the gardens, saw the fountain display with music by Rameau. It rained pretty much all day so the garden tour is damp.

Back on the ship, we had lunch and decided to skip the tour to Napoleon's last residence, opting instead for a relaxing afternoon packing, and dealing with checkout details. The captain gave his farewell speech during the cocktail hour. For dinner we chose the chef's regional specialties threesome: pork liver pate, a veal stew with mushrooms, and baba au rhum. The evening is the onboard pianist and we danced and chatted with some of our newfound friends before retiring.

Wednesday June 6

Up at 4:45 for a 6:15 a.m. departure for the airport. The airport people were totally disorganized at passport check. They put us in line A and after waiting several minutes we were told we needed to be in line B. Then someone came over and said "who told you to be in this line?". Of course, they moved us back to line A. Then after several minutes they moved us back to line B! Once through the line, everything went smoothly, the flight home was on time. Meyer watched the rest of Black Panther and then Casablanca. Thanks to the time zone change we arrived at Logan by 12:30 and were home by 1:30 p.m.

## Overall impressions:

This was a really nice cruise, though probably not our favorite. The time in Paris wasn't enough — we could have done the 3 day extension, and in fact we expect we will do that in Budapest next year. Seeing the famous places where Monet did such iconic paintings was really nice. The villages and cities were all lovely, incredibly cute and adorable. The scenery along the Seine was somewhat disappointing. The weather was cool in the mornings, nice in the afternoons, and mostly sunny until the end of the week when rains started to move in. Dress was pants and a sweater that could be lost in the afternoon, but later in the week we were at shorts.

The crew was fabulous. The program director, Guillaume, was quite competent but not our favorite in terms of being personable or mingling with the passengers, and he didn't have the delightful sense of humor we have seen in the past. The bar staff and wait staff were great though. We fell in love with Gabriella and Zanda in the bar, and waiters Lajos from Hungaria, Denis from Croatia, and had a brief but lovely interaction with Dobo from Bulgaria.

The itinerary was fun because of all the towns and featured stops, but there was not a great deal of sailing or memorable scenery while sailing. Still, on balance it is a trip we'd recommend to others — though maybe not first, unless the historical value of the Normandy beaches was tantamount.