

BACK INTO HISTORY, FROM MARÉCHAL PÉTAIN, GENERAL LA FAYETTE TO KING FRANCOIS 1er:

A TRAVEL THROUGH VICHY , THE CHATEAU OF NIEUIL IN THE MASSIF CENTRAL AND PARIS, FRANCE.



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In the interest of full disclosure: I am a French-educated American of Vietnamese descent. I was brainwashed at a tender age (“Our ancestors are the Gaulois”, our teacher instructed us). Sadly, I know more of the geography of France than of my native country of Vietnam, even though I have visited 49 of the 50 American states. Due to the Vietnam War with its present condition, I could not travel extensively in Vietnam. Yet ironically, I have visited most parts of France. Recently I sojourned in the Massif Central which is the subject of the following article.



My wife and I arrived early afternoon in Vichy after passing the well-known bridge adorned with flags of different western countries (there is another similar bridge about 1km apart on the river Allier). The driving was pretty straight forward, the roads are well maintained with péage (toll) money and the GPS was faithful. The sky in Vichy was overcast with light rain and the temperature was cool. The striking impression at the first sight of The Celestins Vichy Hotel and Spa was a building of a sanitized hospital architecture. The front of the hotel was not impressive: it has a modern impersonal character. It was so quiet: the lounge was empty beside us and the young receptionist. There was no warmth, no coziness in the atmosphere. After a quick sign-in, we were directed to our room: it had an agreeable sighting. The bed linen was so white and fluffy inviting us to jump on the bed right away. The large painting décor above the bed is of a European stylish chic bath landscape. 2 bottles of Vichy water (compliment of the hotel) made me remember the Vichy bottle that my father used to buy long time ago in Hanoi, North Vietnam (circa 1950). Today the Vichy water is now marketed by the Perrier Company and sold under the Perrier name. Also compliment of the

hotel was a sachet of Vichy pastilles (to treat mild respiratory ailments from cold to cough as claimed by the manufacturer). An air of nostalgia enveloped me.

We washed our hands: the water is so soft to our skin. Bathroom décor has some French signature: many toiletries bottles and bar soaps are of French made. No boxes of the ubiquitous Kleenex are seen like in US hotels.

The room opened to a spacious garden which is really beautiful with pendulous Wisteria flowers. Gravel walkways are accentuated with laced trellis of verdure. Landscape seen in Monet/Manet paintings seems to present in my mind. After settling our "valises" we explored the spa/hotel: all facilities were closed for Sunday only the swimming pool was open, we were the only 2 inhabitants of the area which was a privacy delight for us. After that with nothing more to explore in the building we decided to explore the surrounding area. I had already a fixed idea to find the famous source of Vichy water that we could drink freely. Our spa hotel attendant told us it was behind the hotel, just across the street. We did not find it: it is a large shopping style building sparsely populated and there was no water fountain to be seen. We decided to go to the park which our guide book told us that we could find in there. The walk across the park was nice. Many large flowering trees are posted with their Latin names. A local "monsieur" with his parapluie (umbrella) readily explained to us that these are Marronnier d'Inde (a kind of chestnut tree) but the nuts are not eatable: the edible chestnuts that were sold in winter are from the wild marronnier species which are now cultivated. He then showed us to the Vichy water source. It is an elegant building with many spigots that we could fill up our empty plastic water bottle. Contrary to hearsay, it is not true that one can fill legally one free bottle only: we saw a couple of Frenchmen who brought 2 big plastic jugs to fill it. Even so apart from a sudden load of tourists debarking from a bus, the place was empty after their departure. We could leisurely sample the delicious light sparkling Vichy water and took pictures at our own pace.

After that we strolled down the downtown area. Again, it is not crowded: why? Maybe it is a Sunday afternoon or maybe because of the rainy weather or both. There is a long covered concrete path promenade kind which looks like an arc allowing us to see different shops. At one of a stop we discovered that it is the source of the Vichy water described by our receptionist that we missed earlier.

Vichy streets were filled with foreign World War II names of dignitaries and countries like Avenue du President Eisenhower, General Leclerc, Boulevard des Etats Unis, Boulevard du President J. F. Kennedy, Rue du President Wilson, Rue d'Italie (a small and short "rue"). We saw the Hotel du Parc where Maréchal Philippe Pétain kept his residence.

At dinner time we chose randomly one restaurant which was at first deserted but later crowded with customers. The food was pretty delicious, the price was moderate except that a bottle of Vichy water was expensive (3-4 Euros) which made us think that we could go to the natural source and brought the water free for our dinner!

Returning to the hotel/spa, we inquired about buying the well-known trade mark of Vichy bottle, the receptionist told us that it cannot be bought at the grocery stores: it is sold only in pharmacies (because it has pharmaceutical properties, curing different ailments from the simple cold to diseases of the liver/digestive system, and metabolic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, gout and hypercholesterolemia). Naturally she told us it can be bought at our hotel because it is a spa! (obviously expensive!). No Perrier bottles were seen.

The next morning, the weather turned to be worse: it rained profusely. The view of the back yard garden seemed deplorable: heavy rain down poured. At least we could use now the spa facilities, we booked for a "gommage" (skin rejuvenation/peeling session) package for my wife which she described later as not worthy, a pretty rip off touristic kind of service. I had a "2 hands massage under water" (I do not know that can a ONE hand massage exist? if yes should it be half price?). That massage consisted of a procedure done under a row of spigot/douche water pouring on my lying body while a female therapist covered with a plastic "tablier" massages me with her (TWO) hands. Besides the feeling being massaged under douche water, it is nothing special: the massage room itself is again not nicely designed; it looks like a regular large shower room with its cold white tiles of which the plumbing tubes are starting to get rusty.

After our costly packages, we sampled the Hammam area which is a wet hot steaming room, the dry sauna and the Jacuzzi. Again the spa area looks like a hospital environment rather than a chic luxurious relaxing area.

We departed around noon, again under a dark rainy weather which was disheartening. We decided against buying the Vichy bottle despite the nostalgia of having it because we think that it will be a nightmare of having a heavy bottle of water going thru the TSA (Transportation Security Administration).

In retrospect, our Vichy visit did not offer much to us the vestige of the Maréchal Pétain age except for the empty hotels and the WW II streets names. Another impression was the bland sanitized look of our hotel/spa. But surely we can proudly boast that we drank the Vichy water (not the Perrier water) at the source. Otherwise, Vichy is a small French spa town tucked in the Massif Central.

From Vichy we drove to Clermont-Ferrand, a quite big regional city: you can get lost especially if you drive in the Old City with its narrow cobblestone streets (rues). GPS was not helpful either due to the spotty non satellite coverage areas or due to the French highway system (taking a U-turn at a round point (circle) is very challenging).

Clermont-Ferrand whose name derived from a combination of 2 towns, Clermont and Montferrand (1731) was the home of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) who is a mathematician (probability theory with Fermat), physician, philosopher and writer and the brothers Michelin (Édouard and André). We stayed at a Novotel Hotel which is a nice modern hotel and sampled L'Auvergne cuisine which is not really appetizing: cold sausage and boudin (blood sausage), choucroute (sauerkraut).

The next morning we passed by Limoges, well known for its porcelain. Downtown porcelain shops have beautiful collections but the closed Adrien Dubouché National Porcelain Museum (only the reception and shop area is open) is not worth with a stop.

We arrived at the Chateau de Nieuil early afternoon from the Route Nationale N141. There is only one lane road leading to the castle and it can be a challenge because there is no sign leading to the hotel at the 3-way intersections (not covered by GPS). But once we arrived the sight of the castle is quite of a spectacle: a real castle with its moat (but there is no drawbridge because the existing moat only covers a portion of the castle, mainly the tower).

This castle was built in the 16th century as a hunting lodge by Francois 1st (1494-1547) and transformed in 1937 by the Fougerat-Bodinaud family into the first castle-hotel in France (www.relaischateaux.fr/nieuil)

After we parked our car under the trees, we were greeted by a very friendly owner dog wagging incessantly his tail. The entrance is adorned with a motto: "Sans Peur et Sans Reproche" (Without Fear and Without Reproach) dedicated by King Francois 1st (1494-1547) to one of his best devoted guards. The receptionist girl offered us a flute of champagne for us to relax at the garden in front of the castle which was nice.



The Chateau of Nieuil has 14 rooms (with one suite, one junior suite and one apartment) not numerically called but each antique room door is decorated with a picture of a local bird (e.g. Le Coucou, La Pie, La Fauvette, Le Chardonnet, La Mésange, Le Rossignol, La Grive, L'Hirondelle, Le Rouge-Gorge, Le Pinson, Le Roitelet, La Huppe, La Tourterelle and Le Merle Noir). We chose La Tourterelle (Latin name *Streptopelia decaocto*) which is a kind of a wood pigeon. We were offered a larger room (obviously with a higher price) with a prettier window view but we declined because although the view is nicer but the bathroom is not as inviting as our La Tourterelle choice. The bathrooms fixtures are modern while the bedroom furniture is of classic but comfortable design. There is no elevator and WiFi is not available. Lucie, the receptionist showed us the Francois 1st suite which is at ground level: it is large with its contemporary's furniture and decorated with paintings of the king's era. One notable picture is a huge painting describing a hunting party during his reign with its horses and hounds.

There is one castle Tower which is now rented as an apartment with 3 floors. In the backyard there is a very well manicured garden ("jardin à la française" to differ with "le jardin anglais" with its picturesque nature). Bikes are available for us to use free of charge to explore the surroundings which include a pond populated by a couple of swans, both males, the female being killed by a renard (fox) recently. There is a restaurant by the pond which was

burned down and not restored. A vegetable fine herb garden nearby furnishes the produces for the Restaurant 'La Grange Aux Oies' serving guests of the hotel. There is a swimming pool which is not been used and needs upgraded work (personal observation). Close by a flowering parcel of meadows offered a relaxing welcome to the campagne. It was quiet, we did not hear much of bird songs as boasted by the hotel staff while strolling the "Chemin des Oiseaux" (bird route along the moat) but we appreciated the still nature of the surroundings.

At dinner time we went to the above restaurant La Grange Aux Oies (Geese Barn). It is better to have a reservation because it can be filled completely as we were told by the management. It has an excellent cuisine: we ordered roasted pigeon ('Pigeon de Mr. Guilbot'), a local specialty which was so good that I ordered a second plate (I was thinking that it will be impossible to find such of a delicacy like that in the States). A wood burning fireplace was close by and fed by the uniformed waiters who were attentive to our wishes.

After dinner we took a stroll on the gravel path circling the castle, again no birdsong was heard (was it because we ate the pigeons and the birds hate us, we never know). We retired later in our medieval room while dreaming that Francois 1st and his entourage of courtiers and courtesans were drinking and cajoling gaily downstairs.

In the Massif Central area (Department of Auvergne) besides the three famous sons (Blaise Pascal and the two Michelin brothers) there is one well known figure both to the Americans and the French, he is Marie Joseph Gilbert

Motier, Marquis de La Fayette, or General La Fayette to us, born in Chavaniac (1757-1834).



← *Cemetery gate, 35 Rue de Picpus*

General La Fayette had quite a colorful life: he came to America to help General George Washington fight against the British in the America War of Independence. He spent his own fortune in arming the soldiers then returned to France and enjoyed being the symbol of liberty. He even challenged Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte many times and after Waterloo he demanded that Napoleon be deposed. At one time the French Chamber of Representatives even considered him as head of state when King Louis XVIII died childless: he refused.

Being an aficionado in American and French history, I had visited La Fayette statue in front of the White House but like the majority of us I did not know where he was buried. I asked many friends of mine, French and Americans and astonishingly nobody in my circle knew where his tomb is. One even advanced the direction to Mount Vernon, Virginia in General Washington's compound. A few years ago I had the chance to read the book "Portraits of France" by Robert Daley (Little, Brown and Company, 1991) and found out that La Fayette was buried in Paris. Further reading pointed me to the Picpus Historical Cemetery at 35 Rue de Picpus, Paris 12th arrondissement.

Between June 14th and July 27th, 1794 during the Great Terror in France, 1306 persons from various social backgrounds, aged between 16 and 85, were executed for petty, absurd or imaginary grounds. The massacre only stopped on July 27th when the main instigator of the horrors, Maximilien de Robespierre, was himself condemned and then guillotined by his sidekicks who were scared of becoming the next victims of this murderous folly. Among these perished were the grandmother, mother and a sister of Adrienne de Noailles, wife of General La Fayette (which explains why he is interred in this cemetery). Their corpses were thrown under cover of the night into two hastily dug mass graves in the bottom of the garden of a requisitioned former convent which is now the Picpus Historical Cemetery.

Now having some free time in Paris, I decided to explore on my own General La Fayette's tomb. That was a Sunday afternoon, after zigzagging across the Boulevard de Picpus and the Rue de Picpus, I localized the number 35 of the Rue de Picpus. It was a high walled compound closed to the public. There is nothing special pinpointing to a cemetery. No church cross, no fenced gate, no tombs seen, no tourist buses etc... Only at close look that one can notice a small marble plaque beneath the number 35 (of Rue de Picpus) with the inscription that here were buried the bodies of more than 1300 persons who were guillotined in June- July 1794 in two big mass graves.



Unluckily for me, the cemetery was closed on Sunday and holidays, I had to return the next day during the block of open time for visit. After paying a hefty 11 Euros for fee, I was allowed to pass through two big wooden doors. At the entrance there is a small gravel yard in front of a chapel. The concierge did not offer to show me where the tomb of La Fayette is, only her enigmatic look made me think that I had to find on my own. Inside the chapel there are two victims' lists. You have to pass a small wooded garden at the back of the chapel to arrive at an adjacent area where the family of victims were buried (the two mass graves close by are fenced to the public). An American flag far at the corner stood at the tomb of General La Fayette with different military recognitions and decorations. Many US quarters coins were seen on the tomb probably thrown by American visitors. I was told that on July 4th, 1917, General Pershing and his staff having just landed with the first units of the American Expeditionary Force visited the tomb and said "La Fayette, nous voici".

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