

Springtime in Lyon

TRAVEL / TOURISM

N-2

Editor: ANTONIO R. PANO

Friday, July 15, 2011



Roman Theater. The Amphitheater and adjoining Gallo-Roman Museum recall Lyon's history as capital of an important Roman province.

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

How to Choose a Restaurant.

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- No pizza, especially not in Italy (there is good pizza there, but you, a tourist, will not find it).

If you follow all these guidelines, not only will you wind up with a good restaurant 30 percent of the time (up from zero percent), you will also be able to skip a few meals and save money.

Of all the cities in France, Lyon most prides itself on its food. As a market town at the joining-point of two great rivers, it has always had the freshest and most diverse produce, which gave rise to a culture of gourmet dining. Traditionally, more Michelin rosettes were awarded in Lyon than in Paris or anywhere else. Thus it was with high hopes that I began my culinary adventures here, where I wound up after a jaunt through the Cote d'Azur, before catching my flight out of CDG-Paris to Hong Kong.

Getting in the Mood. Following my guidelines, for my first lunch I chose a bistro somewhere in the Old Quarter that had no menu at all, only a blackboard (good sign in France — low overhead; bad sign in the US — will charge for ambience). Immediately I hit pay-dirt, roast veal with wild mushrooms. Now, the truth is that the veal was only so-so. However, whatever the wild mushrooms were, they made up for it, because an hour later at 2 p.m. I felt — as Americans would say — “frisky.”

Too bad there was no attractive girl around to feed some of those wild mushrooms to. Thus I spent much of the afternoon in a kind of state of heightened sensitivity, where everything I saw, smelt or touched reminded me of hot, steamy — but this is a family publication. Nonetheless I can reveal that by late afternoon I fell in love with a lovely pair of legs, with narrow, thoroughbred-like ankles and silky-smooth, alabaster skin. Always a man of action, I stalked the owner of those legs for a good 10 minutes while pretending to be taking pictures of the skyline. (See picture) It's even better if you pretend you ate wild mushrooms.

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ist attractions like Paris — no Montmartre artists' quarter to buy a Chinese-made beret in, no Musee d'Orsay to wait three hours in line to get into. If you can get over this fact, it is actually quite a lovely place. The buildings look just like those in Paris, only there are more parks and plazas. (See picture) It is much cleaner, and people pick up after their dogs. Then there is the indisputable fact that two rivers — four riverfronts, which is good for real estate values.

Always and ever a city for the bourgeoisie (prosperous tradesmen and merchants), Lyon is somewhat self-conscious about the fact that hardly anything historical ever happened here, except that it opposed the winning faction in the French Revolution. This caused some consternation for three years, but since then it has been pretty quiet.

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A Little Gallo-Roman History. Founded as the Roman capital of central Gaul, Lyon was originally called Lugdunum. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire this was eventually corrupted by barbarians with lazy tongues into

“Lyon.” Sometime around 1100 AD it was absorbed into the Kingdom of France. By the way, this “Kingdom of France” was the Pac-Man of the Dark and Middle Ages. Starting out in a small pocket of Gaul, through royal marriages and intimidation it relentlessly acquired terrain, absorbing one neighbor after another such as Burgundy (including Lyon), Aquitaine (Bordeaux), Provence, Nor-



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Eager to Please. As I have sometimes said, you can tell a lot about a city by the kinds of shop that predominate in its downtown. Well, in Lyon's downtown, on almost every other street corner there is a shop selling sexy undergarments. Even in sex-obsessed America there is generally only one Frederick's or Victoria's Secret per large city, with perhaps one or two local competitors. But in the center of Lyon, I counted well over a dozen boutiques offering bras, panties, teddies, camisoles, baby-dolls, thongs, garter-belts, slips, bustiers, chemises, and so on, all of a design clearly intended to put a smile on a man's face.

(This reminded me of a time in London when a friend and I walked by Harrod's at midnight, three-quarters-drunk, and suddenly noticed the beautiful, realistic, and only partially clothed mannequins in the display windows. We spent the next hour glued to the spot, trying to decide which one we would most like to — ahem — date if they were alive — but that is another story.)

Anyway, I thought long and hard about Lyon and its undergarment businesses, and finally came up with this very PC explanation: the good women of Lyon are so anxious to please their hard-working menfolk that they regularly go out and buy sexy under-things to spice up the action — a mindset that is sadly lacking among women in most parts of the world. I realize that there are other, less-flattering possible explanations for Lyon's preoccupation with lingerie, but I am sticking with this one, being ever-hopeful that more women of my acquaintance will take the hint.

Spanish Find. When one is traveling alone, fine dining is not especially enjoyable, so I declined to eat at any Michelin-rosette establishments. Nonetheless, I had a number of very competently executed meals, though the simplest one was the best. My hotel had only five items on

its room-service menu, and one of them was *Jamon Bellota*. Now, the truth is that I had no idea what Bellota ham was, as I am pretty sure most people don't, but I soon found out.

Jamon Bellota is the most indescribably delicious ham on earth, made with free-range Iberian hogs fattened on acorns, then cured for up to three years. Perhaps you know of Serrano or Jabugo hams, which are also Spanish (fortunately, the Lyonnais are open-minded about the sources of their gourmet foods). Well, Bellota ham costs five times more, but is worth it because it tastes 10 times better.

My platter cost 28 Euros, which made it about 280 Euros a kilo, not much more than retail price (if you can find it at all). Someone in the hotel had evidently made the decision — a very Lyonnais-type decision — that they would offer the best ham in the world at the most affordable price possible, just so their guests could enjoy this rare treat. All hotels should reason this way.

Best Hotel in Lyon. For the Bellota ham alone, I would break my normal policy of declining to name my hotel. But my choice of lodging turned out to be fortuitous on several counts. Located on the Place Bellecour at the very center of the old town (surrounded by restaurants and shops, facing a huge open plaza), it was also right across the street from a Metro station served by two lines. For a tourist, there is simply no better location in the whole city. My room was very nicely furnished in a sort of Belle Epoque style, though not overdone, and the bathroom was retro in look while fully modern in function. Finally, compared to what I paid elsewhere in France, it was downright affordable. Hence, for a change, I can recommend my hotel wholeheartedly: the Royal Lyon.

Not everyone will be able to spare four days for a visit to Lyon, but it is a lovely city with good food and some worthwhile (if not quite world-famous) attractions. If you ever have the opportunity to go there, take a couple of days to see it, and I'm pretty sure you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you find.

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As archeological museums go, the Gallo-Roman does a pretty good job of presenting ancient Lyon, with a large collection of artifacts, scale models, and well-thought-out displays.

Lyon and the Movies. The other museum in Lyon that will interest many visitors is the Lumiere. As the people of Lyon will proudly tell you, motion pictures were invented by the Lumiere brothers of Lyon. Whereas Edison only invented what amounted to a peep-show box, it was the Lumieres who invented both the motion-picture camera and the mechanism for projecting a moving picture onto a large screen for an entire audience to watch. You need to be a little bit of a cinema buff to fully appreciate this museum – housed in the Lumiere mansion built with cinema-industry profits – but if you are, it's a necessary pilgrimage.

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