

Trip Report: The 2002 Mountain Cup competition and Provence, France

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The trip was arranged, so that I could compete in the 2002 Mountain Cup. It is an all-adult international figure skating competition held in Villard-de-Lans, France. The 4th annual event was held from May 17-19, 2002.

I am writing this as a report of the trip that Conchita and I took, and as a guide to other skaters that are thinking about competing in the event. The style might be a little odd, but when you take these two goals into account, it might make more sense. Also, the spelling is anglicized. I left out most of the diacritical marks and the “C” with the curly-que at the bottom.

I felt that I couldn't stand not skating the week before the event, so the trip was planned with the event first, and the vacation after. This actually worked out quite well. It gave us a home base for a few days to get used to negotiating restaurants and hotels. The only bad part is that it gives the body less time to get over the jet lag.

Before we left, I listened to several language tapes in the car, that I got from the library. The best was Travel Talk. I also read French Lessons and A Year in Provence, by Peter Mayle. Anything by him would be great before going.

We also tried to figure out where to go by reading several travel guides. The problem is that France is rather large, and there are many very good things to see there. After our last few trips to Europe and here in the US, we decided we wanted to stay away from the big cities.

We thought that Provence would be nice, but were open to suggestions. Our intent was to talk to other competitors to get their opinions. I also thought it would be nice to see the Mediterranean.

We booked our hotel in Villard-de-Lans, by emailing several of the hotels in the town. Most would reply back in English. For those that replied in French, we used: BabelFish (<http://babelfish.altavista.com>) to translate. We also booked the car by comparing rates on Expedia, Travelocity and AutoEurope.

May 14:

Conchita and I flew from Atlanta on a flight that left at 9:30pm. They had lost everyone's seat assignments, so we were stuck in the back of the plane. This is the first time we had taken a trans-Atlantic so late, but it worked out pretty well. We usually take the one that leaves about 5:00pm. However, we both liked this better. You felt more like sleeping. We arrived in Paris about 12:00 local time. Our flight to Lyon left at 1:30 and arrived in Lyon about 2:30.

Grenoble is the closest airport of any size, but the fare to Lyon was much better. You can also take a train to Grenoble and then a bus from Grenoble to Villard. Or, you can fly to Paris and take the train to Lyon or Grenoble. Check early, and often, on Expedia and Travelocity to find the best deals to France. Also, check Clark Howard's website (<http://www.clarkhoward.com>) for

deals from Atlanta to Europe. Several skaters flew into Geneva, Switzerland, which is just about as close as Lyon.

We found the ATM in the airport and withdrew some Euros. The ATMs are named differently for each bank. Asking for an “ATM” doesn’t work, just ask for a “Cash Machine”. The one in the Lyon airport is just across from the Air France ticket counter #20.

Our car was rented through Thrifty. Thrifty doesn’t have its own rental agency in Lyon, but is fronted by a local company. All the rental companies are outside the airport in the parking lot. Just follow the signs, walk outside and search for a sign for your rental agency. We had rented the smallest car category, but we had a coupon that allowed an upgrade. The clerk did not speak very much English, but we muddled through. She rented us an Opel Corsa 1.6L Turbo-diesel. It was a four-door hatchback. The trunk area just barely held our 2 rolling bags, a small duffel bag, a camera bag, and jackets. It would not have held any more bags.

It was about a 1 and 1/2 hour drive from the Lyon airport (LYS) to Villard-de-Lans. The first hour is on an Autoroute or “A” road. It is much like a US interstate, with tolls. The last part of the drive, which starts at Sassanage, is on a small two-lane road, the D531. This road winds up the mountain and has some really nice views. Villard is in a national park – the Vercors.

We followed the signs to “Centre Ville” and the Tourist Information office. There is a large parking lot at, and the rink is just behind, the Tourist Information office. The pre-competition camp was just winding down, and I recognized a few faces from the Peach Classic and Adult Nationals.

We found the list of practice ice times posted on the wall just outside the ladies dressing room. We also met Barbara Standke, one of the organizers of the event. She was running around with a clipboard, so we knew she was important!

The practice times started early and lasted most of Thursday. Some were dance only, pairs only or freestyle only, and most were pretty full. When I sent in the application, I had paid for 2 practice ice sessions. I had one practice on Thursday at 5:30pm and another on Friday morning at 11:45am. I asked Barbara if I could add another one just after the Thursday session, since it wasn’t full. She said no problem, took my 5 Euros and penciled in my name.

We then went to find our hotel. The event provides a list of hotels, and you can see listings at: <http://www.ot-villard-de-lans.fr/uk/>. We had booked a room at the Hotel de Paris, a Best Western. It is a 3-star hotel just across from the rink in a small park. It was about a 5 minute walk from the room to the rink, via a small back entrance road that runs just next to the Le Dauphin hotel.

While checking in, and using my best phrasebook French, it came out that while I had tried to make a reservation for 4 nights, they only had us down for 3 nights. There was a wedding and they were booked full on Saturday night. Oh well, we would just find something else over the next 3 days and move on Saturday.

The hotel was nice, and the room was large. We had both a double bed and a single bed, a desk, a small fridge, and 3 chairs. The single bed made a nice holding pen for the luggage. The windows were large we had a view of the mountains and of the Tourist office and rink.

There was only one small problem with the room: the shower. I love showers – a lot. I really hate to use a tub. Just a personal preference, but... We had found in Belgium and now in France,

that a shower means that there is a showerhead over a tub. However, usually there is no shower curtain! Most of the time the shower head is attached to the wall and is adjustable, but without the shower curtain, you really have to be careful not to drown the bathroom. The extra towels are a great aid in mopping up afterwards.

When we went in search for food, we had our trusty Berlitz French to English dictionary and our Hungry Traveler: France book. We walked to the square, about 5 minutes away and wandered the streets, doing a fairly bad job of deciphering the menus. All restaurants in France, as in most of Europe, have their menus displayed outside.

We had found a couple of places that looked OK and were heading back towards the rink when a couple of ladies approached us and spoke to us in American. It was Gretchen Bosselman (Seattle) and Laura Reinhardt (Brussels/Cincinnati). They had noticed our books and figured we were fellow skaters in search of food. After introducing ourselves, Gretchen told us that Laura spoke French and asked if we wanted to eat with them. It was an offer that we couldn't refuse.

We went back to a little restaurant that Conchita and I had found, the La Grange. It was just off the main square, down a small alley. We sat just inside the open double doors at a large round table. Laura did her duty and translated the menu for us. I had the duck with black currant sauce (Magret de canard), Gretchen had a salad and Conchita and Laura had a Tartiflette. Tartiflette is a local specialty that is like au gratin potatoes. Theirs had bacon, mushrooms and onions inside and was served with a salad. Laura told us that the house wine (Vin de Maison - Rouge, Blanc, or Rose) is usually a great deal and is almost always a very good wine. This turned out to be very true. Some of the best wines we had in France were served in a jug or pitcher!

Conchita and I got to sleep about midnight that night. With the time change and the excitement of a new place, this was doing pretty well. Except for the few hours of sleep on the plane, we had been up for 36 hours.

May 16:

We went down to breakfast about 9:00am. The service was a little slow but we found Irene whom we had met the day before. She spoke French and prodded the server to bring out drinks and more of everything that should have been on the buffet. We also met Jane Koehler (Delaware) and her sister Nancy. French breakfasts are a little lighter than most of the other European countries we have visited. You usually get coffee, tea or hot chocolate, orange juice, croissants, baguettes, jam, and honey. Sometimes you get cereal, yogurt, cheese or salami. The muesli cereal at our hotel had chocolate pieces in it. Later when we went to the grocery store, we found that most of the breakfast cereals are chocolate flavored or have chocolate pieces in them. What a great country!!!

Since my practice ice times were not until late on Thursday, Conchita and I decided to do some sightseeing. One thought we had was to go to visit where Chartreuse is made. It is on the other side of Grenoble. But, on the flight over, they had shown a short video on the Vercors and had shown the gorges that were nearby. We decided to give it a try. What a beautiful drive. The road is very winding, and sometimes is barely one lane wide. Lots of tunnels and overhangs. We can heartily recommend it.

We stopped in St. Martin-en-Vercors and had lunch at the only hotel/restaurant in the village. It was our first attempt at "lunch" in France. We have both read Peter Mayle's novels before going to France and understood the reverence that the French put on lunch. We thought we were up to it. Little did we know ...

They didn't speak English. I understood the one important word when they asked: Mange (food, eat). They sat us down at a table outside overlooking the valley and asked what I thought was what we wanted to drink. That must have been it, because when I ordered two Coca-Colas that is what we got. Then, they brought us a basket of bread and some "salami". They didn't bring us a menu, so we presumed that this is what we were getting. It tasted good and there was some good mustard on the table. When we finished the salami, they brought out a plate of ravioli and a large meatball in a natural casing. We looked at each other and wondered how we were going to eat this since we had filled up on the bread and salami. But, we girded our loins and waded in. It was very good. The ravioli was stuffed with chevre (goat cheese) and herbs. The meatball, which we think is called Steak hache, was also very good. When we had finished this and the lady came to clear the dishes, I asked for the bill (l'addition sil vous plait?). She looked back incredulously and asked "Fromage?" I nodded yes, and she brought the cheese tray and more bread! We each had a little cheese, which was mostly chevre, and liked most of it. Then she cleared the cheese and brought us ice cream. It was in a fluted plastic cup that was served upside down. Finally, Conchita had a "café" - extremely small strong espresso.

We got back to the hotel in time for me to get to the practice ice sessions. The sessions on Thursday were 30 minutes each. I found that I was really winded after about 20 minutes, and I still had another 40 minutes to go. The altitude 1050m (3445 feet) made quite a difference from the 1000 feet of Atlanta. The skaters from sea level were having an even harder time.

They play program tapes at these sessions. Just skate up and give it to the person in the sound booth. There can be up to 20 people on a session.

After skating, I went back to the room and cleaned up for the party and draw at the La Coupole, the town's festival hall. We met in a large room and you could sit or just mingle. For each event, they called the competitors to the front, one at a time. There, each person reached into a bag and drew the number of their start in that event. There were a few snacks and some wine.

After the draw, we went next door to the "Grill", where we had a Raclette dinner. Raclette is both the name of the meal and the local cheese that is used in it. They bring a small broiler to your table along with cheese and cold cuts. They put a dish of boiled potatoes on top of the broiler to keep them warm. Then, the fun begins. You place a piece of the cheese in a small tray that you place in the broiler. While the cheese is melting you put some of the potatoes on your plate along with some of the cold cuts. When the cheese is melted you drizzle it over your plate using the small wooden scraper provided. The wine was in a pitcher and was very good. Yummy!!

May 17:

Friday morning we got up and walked around the town, looking for hotels for Saturday night and doing a little shopping. I had another practice Friday morning that went pretty well. For lunch, we had crepes at a small café at the town square. They serve crepes stuffed with all sorts of things. I had a Complete. This had a fried egg, ham, mushrooms and cheese inside. Conchita had a Salad Milanese. After this, more walking and browsing the shops.

Skating There:

My freeskate was at 4:55pm. Warm up and stretching space is limited, but the railings at the bottom of the stands work pretty well. And, while you are warming up, you can watch the events before yours. It is very interesting to watch the skaters, especially because it is open judging. The judges hold up cards with each skater's scores, and the scores are announced over the PA system.

There are no monitors putting you on the ice. You are an adult and expected to act as one. Everyone helped each other, letting them know how many competitors were left in the previous group, etc.

I skated second in the event and my skate went really well. Time seemed to slow down and I was having fun. There wasn't the stress or the nerves of Adult Nationals. I don't know if this was because of the jet lag or just having four competitors, but it was a blast. I hit all my jumps and spins.

I had to scoop several stuffed animals off the ice, including a camel from Don Miller. You may remember Don from an article in the October 2001 issue of Skating magazine. He lives in Egypt and has formed the Cairo International Skaters club. It is not recognized by the ISU, so he still skates as an Individual member of the USFSA.

When I got off the ice, I was so excited, I didn't even watch for my scores. I stood next to the door and watched and cheered the next two competitors in my group.

I found Conchita and we sat and watched the next few groups. With only 4 competitors in my group, I was guaranteed a medal, and needed to stay in costume for the awards ceremony. The award ceremony is held after the last event. They bring out a carpet and unroll it from one of the doors out towards the center of the ice. They place the stand at the end of the carpet. The carpet allows the judges to walk out to the stand. Over the PA system, they announce the event and the placements of all the skaters, from 1st to last. You skate out to the stand as your name is called. A judge or one of the other officials brings out the medals and presents them to you. For first place, you get a trophy. I noticed that the most of the medallists got the usual multi-cheek kiss, but since the judge that brought us ours, was British, my group didn't (thankfully).

The awards ceremony takes awhile with skaters taking group photos while others are getting their awards. It's like a big party. I hope we can do something like this for the Peach Classic.

After the awards ceremony, Conchita and I went to Le Fairway, a small restaurant just around the corner from the rink. We met Jane Koehler and her sister there and found a table. Conchita and I both had pizzas, and shared a Salad Paysanne (good salad with a fried egg on top!). All was good, but the pizzas were large and to share one would have been enough. For dessert, Conchita had a Colonel (lemon sorbet in vodka) and I had Praline Glace. Jane had a Reblochonade for dinner. This is just like a Raclette, but with a different type of cheese.

May 18:

I had signed up for another practice ice at 7:45am. The practices on Saturday morning were only 20 minutes long. It was a very early morning after the late night of celebration. As soon as I left, Conchita went back to sleep. The practice went pretty well, but my spins were not so good. After I got back and showered, we ate and checked out. Of course, it was raining as we tried to get the bags in the car. We drove the short distance to the Les Bruyeres hotel that was just on the other side of the town square. It is a smaller hotel that is affiliated with Logis de France (<http://www.logis-de-france.fr/uk/index.htm>), with a two fireplace listing. And, it is about a 10-minute walk to the rink.

They weren't quite ready for us to check in, so we parked the car and walked to the shopping area and bought a few souvenirs and some stuffed animals. If you are going to throw stuffed animals on the ice, bring them with you. The pickings are slim, and the prices are not cheap.

Our new room was a little smaller than the last one, but had a deck that overlooked the garden. There was a shower – with a shower curtain – but the showerhead was hand held. After checking in, we went to a quick lunch and back to the rink. It's hard to stay away when you know so many people skating.

After a little while we went back to the room to warm up, change and to get my skates. When we got back to the rink, the place was amazingly full. This was Saturday evening and many local people were in the rink watching!

My group was the last to skate that night and the stands, while not packed, were pretty full. It was the largest crowd I have ever skated in front of. The warm up went well and my spins were back. I skated well, and thought I had a chance at a medal. There were five in the group.

There was some controversy though. One of the competitors in my group used a cigarette as a prop. He actually smoked it during his program. At the end of his program, he dropped it to the ice and ground it out. He then takes off his sweater, and has a no-smoking T-shirt on. The controversies were that first, it was a non-smoking facility and second he had his prop on the ice – against the rules as spelled out in the announcement. Still, he comes in first. Although, I do have to say it was a neat idea and he did skate it well.

I stayed in costume, hoping to have to go to the awards stand, but alas, no luck. So, Conchita and I stayed for the awards ceremony to cheer on the winners. We then went to Le Ranch. There was slight mix-up. We were supposed to meet people there and others were coming later. When we got there the other people were at full tables, and they seated us at small table nearby. The others coming later, ended up being a pretty large group, so were seated across the restaurant. The lesson learned here, is to go to the restaurant together. The Le Ranch is just next to the Le Dauphin hotel. It has a "Texas" theme and does steaks, pizzas, and other local specialties. We started with a Pastis, an anisette flavored liqueur made in Provence. I had the "Dynamite" pizza and Conchita had the Tartiflette Savoyard. We shared a Tulipe Pomme Tiede (Warm Apples in a tulip shaped bowl) for dessert.

May 19:

On Sunday, we packed up, putting all my skating stuff in one bag that we were going to leave in the car for the next week. No need to carry it in and out of hotels. Conchita discovered that one of the choices for breakfast was hot chocolate - a pot of hot chocolate. She was very, very happy. If she had known about this, we may have moved earlier. We found that most of the hotels would serve hot chocolate for breakfast. And, this is not the Swiss Miss category, this is the good stuff.

We got to the rink pretty early that morning. There were several groups we wanted to see skate, including Ladies Interp II, Gold Ladies, and Masters Men. The competition wound up about 12:15pm with some exhibitions and another short awards ceremony. It was a very short walk to the Le Coupole, for an optional post-competition lunch. It started with a glass of Kir (crème de cassis and white wine), and a toast.

The Director of Tourism for the town gave a speech, translated by Barbara Standke. He thanked us for coming and described the long heritage of sports in the area. In fact, the 2002 Olympic Gold medallist for the women's downhill is from this little village. They are very proud and have her picture over the Tourist Information office.

The lunch was a buffet of local specialties, ravioli, salads, etc. There was also “boxed” wine. I had to help a French person operate the spout. It must not be a regular thing there. It was good, though. Barbara Standke, along with competing in Dance, Pairs, Figures and Freeskate, is a member of a rock band and they played at the lunch. Many of the skaters got up and danced. Since I was going to be driving, I didn’t drink enough to get me on the dance floor.

At around 3:30pm, Conchita and I decided that if we were going to get somewhere for the night, we needed to leave soon. The only problem was that we didn’t know where we were going. We had investigated Provence, but had no itinerary. So, we said our goodbyes, and headed towards Valence. This was the way to the Autoroute and Provence.

While Conchita was driving, I was looking in the tour books and our other hotel books to see where we ought to go. No schedule. No reservations. No clue. This is the way to travel!

After winding our way through several different little towns, asking for directions from ladies that didn’t speak any English, and following a dirt track for a few miles, we made it back to the main road and headed for Grignan.

Along the way we found a McDonalds (always a good bet for clean bathrooms). Besides, we had to see what they had that was different. Most everything on the menu is the same. The bit from Pulp Fiction is correct: a Quarter Pounder is a Royale. They also had brownies, chocolates and other nice looking desserts in a little “deli” area. They also serve beer and wine.

Grignan is a beautiful hill town in the Cote de Rhone area. It is famous for a duchess who lived there and wrote a tremendous number of letters over her lifetime. These letters are now in a museum. It is also famous for its roses. They have over 150 different varieties growing in the village.

Driving into the village, I made Conchita stop the car so I could take pictures. The sun was low and the light on this village rising from the plain was amazing. We drove up to the Claire de Plume hotel. She sent me inside to the hotel to try my French to see if they had a room. They were full, but the receptionist recommended a 3-star hotel in St. Paul Trois Chateau, about 15 minutes away. I nodded and she called them to see if they had rooms available. They did and we were on our way - a room for the night, in a very scenic area of France.

We arrived at the Hotel L’Esplan and found a very interesting hotel. It is built into the town wall of the walled city. Each room is different. Ours had a vaulted ceiling and a small window overlooking the outdoor restaurant. The manager/receptionist spoke very good English and was very helpful. As we were carrying our luggage in, we heard English being spoken by a couple in the lobby. They were there because their son was playing in an international soccer tournament just across the street in the town’s soccer stadium. We had seen lots of cars parked and a lot of young kids, but just thought it was a school. After getting our things in the room, we walked around this really cute town. We found a couple of restaurants that looked interesting and then walked over to the tournament. There was a large tent set up and lots of carousing going on inside. Just outside, they were selling food and drinks. It was a very convivial atmosphere.

May 20:

We had breakfast at the hotel. It was sunny and warm and we headed off to Le Garde Adhemar, another beautiful hill town nearby with a church that is built on roman foundations. The town has a community garden just below the church on a cliff overlooking the Rhone river valley. Very

nice garden and the view was gorgeous. I took some photos of American bicyclists that were on a tour.

We drove back to Grignan, and walked up to the chateau, which of course was closed until 2:00pm. We went and had lunch at the Le Beffroi. It's a small restaurant just inside the old bell tower (Beffroi). We sat outside in the middle of a small street. We sat next to two ladies, and one could speak a little English. She was from St. Bart's in the Caribbean. She translated D'Agneau for us. We couldn't find it in our dictionary. It was under "A". So, she "baaa"-ed and Conchita nodded and said sheep. The lady then said "petite", and voila: Lamb. I had the Pizza Reine, and Conchita had the Salad Printaniere.

We left Grignan and drove to Vaison La Romaine. We walked up to the ruins at the top of the hill. We could hear music and could see some sort of carnival going on in the new part of the city. Coming back down the hill, we stopped and had ice cream. The day was really warm, and the climb had been strenuous. We passed a great smelling shop and went back. It was a cookie shop. All the cookies were hand made with interesting ingredients: lavender, herbs, ginger, etc. The manager, who didn't speak much English, did his best telling us what was inside each. We bought a selection based on his recommendations. Later, when we ate them, they were awesome.

We walked across a Roman built bridge to the new part of the city where the carnival was going on. On the street, there were people dressed up as bugs and walking on stilts. Very interesting. At the carnival, they had a few rides, games of chance, including roulette, and odd flavors of cotton candy: Cassis, Anisette, etc.

We drove back to St. Paul and had dinner outside at the hotel. Conchita had salmon & potatoes in papillote, followed by fish & rice in zucchini boat. I had an artichoke puree appetizer made to look like a cappuccino, followed by beef tenderloin on bulgur and broccoli paste. We had a fromage course and finished with coconut mousse with rhubarb and a warm pudding with strawberries and sorbet.

May 21:

It was market day in St. Pauls. We walked around the three different areas of the market stalls. We bought cherries, roasted potatoes, and bread. We then headed towards Le Baux en Provence. We stopped for Lunch at a rest area across from ruins on cliffs. We ate our picnic on a bench under some trees. Lots of other people were picnicking at the rest area. We drove to St. Remy and stopped at the tourist info center. We headed to Le Baux. In the tour books, it was written up as a wonderful little hill town. It must have been because all the parking at the bottom was full, mostly with tour buses. Since we had seen lots of good hill towns, we skipped it and drove to the hotel we had found in the tour books. However, the hotel was full, except for a \$350/night suite. The other hotels in the area were more expensive.

So we drove to Gordes. Gordes is in the area called the Vaucluse. It is the part of France that is covered by Peter Mayle in a "Year in Provence." It is a beautiful hill town. The first hotel was full, but they recommended Les Romarins (The Rosemary). It was a nice small hotel with a great view of Gordes. We drove back into town and parked uphill. We walked around and looked at restaurants. We settled on a small Thai restaurant. Seating was in a small courtyard under umbrellas. The menu was interesting in that the names of the items were a combination of what we were familiar with and French words. The food was very good, and we had our most expensive bottle of wine - \$12.00.

May 22:

It was rainy & cool. Near Gordes is the Abbay de Senanque. A Cistercian abbey built in 1148. We toured most of the original part of the abbey. And, they had a lot of displays showing how they built the arches and buttresses, etc. The drive to the abbey was along a small winding road on the edge of some cliffs. We had to back up and pull to wrong side of the road to let a tour bus pass us.

We drove to Rousillon. Another hill town, but it is built on ochre colored hills. Also most of the buildings are ochre colored, and they have a museum of ochre. We had Lunch on a small terrace on the main street, overlooking the post office. We both had the fixed price menus. I had the Lamb & Potatoes. Conchita had Tuna la Provençal.

We then drove to Lacoste. It was the home of the Marquis de Sade. After that, we drove to Menerbes. Supposedly Peter Mayle lives just outside this town. I tried driving through the town, but Conchita made me turn around. The street was too narrow.

We drove to Coustillon and the Lavender museum. It shows how lavender oil is made in stills. And, of course they have a gift shop. According to them, true lavender can only be grown in certain altitudes, and most of what we call lavender is a hybrid without the same properties.

We had dinner at Le Provençal, just across from chateau. Conchita had chicken with lavender honey, frites, and salad. Rob had fish soup, Guinea fowl, asparagus, frites, and strawberries & cream. The restaurant was pretty full and we sat next to a couple from Florida. A lot of the people in the restaurant were from the US.

May 23:

It started to rain at breakfast. As we packed up the car, it really started to pour. We were driving south to Mediterranean and thought we would drive out of it. We followed the A road to Marseilles and thought we could skirt the city. However, no such luck. The A road just empties in the city. You then wind around on small one way streets until you get back on another A road. We stopped just outside the main downtown area at a gas station and bought a map of the area. Even with this map, we couldn't see a way around the city, we did the best we could have.

We made our way to Cassis and it was still pouring. When we parked the car, we sat in it a while to see if we really wanted to get out and get soaked. It lightened a little and we did get out and walked to the harbor. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. We walked to the light house, which is at the end of the jetty at the harbor. Beautiful views of the Med and the town.

Just as we walked back off the jetty, the rain stopped. We browsed the menus at the row of restaurants along the harbor. As we did this, the sun came out and the café started rolling back their awnings. We had lunch at Cafe Manou. I had the Crepe Complete, and Conchita had Curry Chicken.

We drove up the cliff road toward La Ciotat. This is a great drive that follows tall cliffs along the Med. You can pull off at many different places to get great views. By this time the sky was blue and you couldn't have told that it was raining that morning.

We drove to the Pont du Gard - the largest remaining Roman aqueduct outside of Italy. The central arch is the largest that was ever built by Roman engineers. We hiked up to the one end and then down to the river below it. Got some great photos. We couldn't decide where to stay the night, but decide to head back up the Rhone. We checked our guide books and found a small chateau in Bollene - Chateau Le Rocher. It was just at the edge of town, with large garden and

parking behind. Our room overlooked the garden and had French doors onto a terrace. My tummy wasn't feeling all that good, so we decided not to eat in the gourmet restaurant in the chateau. They seemed a little put off by this, but they got over it. We wandered around town and found a small pizza place - La Malle Poste. Again, we shared a salad and pizza. The wine was served in a jug was very good and only 3 euros.

May 24:

It was another pretty day. We stopped at the Intermarche (supermarket) and bought picnic supplies. We drove to the Gorges l'Ardeche. This is a gorge formed by the Ardeche, which feeds the Rhone. The road follows steep cliffs with wonderful views. After spending several hours driving the scenic road, we tried to figure out where to stay that night. Conchita had marked a hotel in one of the books before we ever left Atlanta. It was a Chateau in the grand style, and from the map, not too far from Lyon. This was our last night, and we wanted to make sure we weren't too far from the airport. We decided not to drive the A road back up, but took the N road. It followed the Rhone and took us through several cute little towns. The road to the hotel, which was in Lamastre, was very scenic. It was very curvy and had quite an elevation change, much like the road from Grenoble to Villard. In fact, the little town of Lamastre reminded us of Villard. The Chateau d'Urbillac was a couple of miles outside of town on a large estate. The road to the Chateau was only one lane wide and there were gates at the entrance. The outside was beautiful. A round tower at one end, and lots of decorations. We had a room on the first (second to us) floor with a view out the front of the hotel, overlooking the pool and the valley. We went with their half-board rate that included the room, dinner and breakfast.

Dinner was excellent. The wine was a bottle of the rose that the area is known for. They started us with a small plate of ravioli, which was unbelievably good. Conchita had soup with pureed peas and mint, and a fish entree. I had a salad with duck medallions, and the veal entrée. The cheese tray was very good, with lots of local cheeses. We each had the chocolate dessert – very good.

May 25:

The breakfast was the best we had the whole time there. The breads were made there. Of course, it rained as we packed up and drove to Lyon and checked in the car. The flight was on time, but we had no time in Paris to do any duty free shopping. So we ended up bring back about 70 euros with us. They lost our seats again for the flight. They had us sitting behind each other. Luckily, a guy from Louisiana switched with me. During the flight, they made an announcement that if there were any doctors aboard to notify a flight attendant. We guessed that someone was sick, and were correct. A little later, we noticed from the on-screen flight update that we had changed course and were heading to Iceland. About 15 minutes later, the pilot came on and announced that someone had had a heart attack, and we were diverting to Reykjavik, to take him to a hospital. We were on the ground for about an hour, but they wouldn't let us off the plane. However, many of the passengers, including myself took pictures from the windows. I had my GPS receiver with me and now have a waypoint in Iceland! This diversion cost us about 3.5 ours. We were supposed to get in about 7:30, but instead got in at 11:00pm.

Summary:

The competition was great, and highly recommended to all adult skaters. No stress. Great camaraderie. Good rink, and a nice little town in which to spend a few days.

The area of France around the Rhone is very beautiful and laid back. Great restaurants.

References:

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Frommer's Provence
Travel Talk: France – cassette to listen to in your car
Berlitz French to English pocket dictionary
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