

HIT THE ROAD

A few pointers on how to prepare for the spontaneous surprises, good and bad alike, of a driving holiday

By Rishad Saam Mehta



If you were to think of France as a woman, your mind would most likely flash with images of the glamorous models you usually see walking the ramp amidst a flurry of flashbulbs. France to most people is chic, glossy Paris. Yet there exists a more earthy, simple and charming side to the destination. A beautiful, voluptuous country lass, if you may, rather than an airbrushed runway model.

I discovered this aspect of the country while on a three-week driving trip across the provinces of Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne. I had just arrived in Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace. But before that, I had thoroughly enjoyed a lesser known Alsatian town called Obernai with its Pinot gris vineyards where I'd picked up a bottle of wine. My convenient mini cool box that plugged into the car's 12-volt

ROAD RULES

Elemental details: Stick to your lane and use the indicator when you need to switch. When pulling onto a main road from a side road or gateway, watch for oncoming traffic. Ensure you don't obstruct the driver of the oncoming vehicle.

Honk, NOT OK, please: While entering a roundabout, cars already in have right of way. Blasting the horn is equivalent to giving someone the finger or screaming obscenities.

Flash mob: Flashing headlights mean, 'You first, please' and not the other way around like it does on our highways.

No need for speed: Pay attention to speed limits. Rental companies will charge any fines caught on electronic monitors to your credit card. Though the alcohol limit varies, it's best not to drink while driving; the fines are very stiff.

(Facing page) The scenic Vine Route Motorway in France

(Below) The French interior town of Le Hohwald in Alsace



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RENT IT RIGHT

The budget buyers: Obviously, the cheapest rental is a small car: Renault Twingo, Fiat Panda or Nissan Micra. Remember, with a load of luggage and passengers such cars feel like overburdened lawnmowers.

The Family Guy: For a family of three/four, you'll need a roomy Group C (Grade 3) vehicle like the Ford Focus, Nissan Tilda or Toyota Corolla, with engines ranging from 1.4-1.8 litres.

Awesome twosome: If you're really passionate about driving and it's just the two of you, consider a sports car. More expensive and low on storage capacity, but worth the exciting country roads.

power outlet ensured that it was chilled to perfection by the time I got to the bed and breakfast in the village of Le Hohwald. There I shared the wine with my hosts over a dinner of suckling pig.

The next stop was Lorraine where my sweet tooth guided me to Commercy, famous for its traditional small cake, Madeleine. As the legend goes, this pastry was rustled up in a hurry by a panicky maid in the kitchens of King Stanislas (1750), as the pastry chef had walked out after a disagreement with the butler. The little, golden, sponge cake was an instant hit. The process of procuring a Madeleine in this modern day wasn't as

dramatic, courtesy an intuitive GPS system which directed me straight to the front of Shop 8, Place Charles de Gaulle.

With my taste buds still tripping, I returned to my Citroen DS3 and to my dismay realized that I had a flat tyre. I was dismayed about the delay, but had a compressor and tubeless puncture repair kit handy. So all I had to do was jack up the car, fill the air with the compressor attached to the car battery, find the puncture and plug it. I was ready to roll in all of 15 minutes. A puncture repair kit and a compressor is a boon for long road trips.

I drove into Lorraine on forested roads, through the Parc naturel regional de Lorraine, into the art-nou-

veau city of Nancy. Finding the way these days is very easy with GPS receivers and they are simpler to use than smartphones. I could take any road that caught my fancy without the worry of losing my way. With the GPS enabled, Google Maps work superbly on smartphones, giving you accurate 3D street views too. Remember, you need a data connection for this, and it is best to have a local SIM card.

Nancy was the hot spot for out-of-the-box artists like Émile Gallé, who work with glass and proved that form didn't have to be sacrificed for function or vice versa. This was evident as I walked around Nancy where even my untrained eye fell on stained-glass windows and harmonious grillwork that beautify the entrances to many homes, offices and shops. Place Stanislas, a public square that is the heart of Nancy, is also one big masterpiece. If art

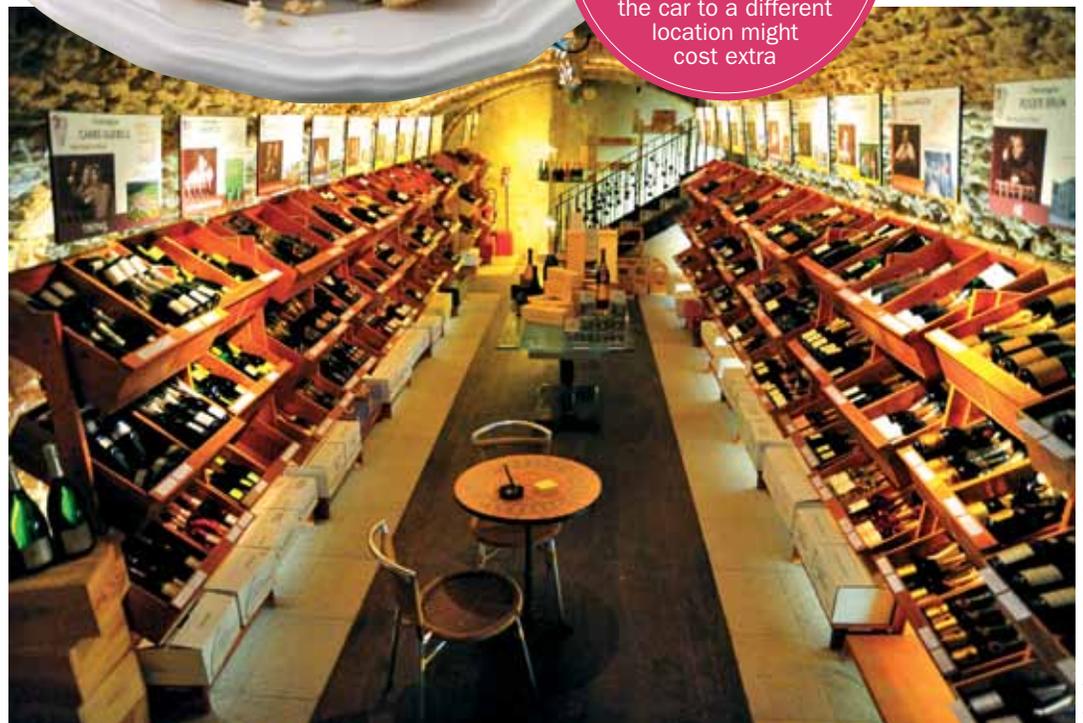
does it for you, you'll be on a perpetual high in Nancy even without visiting its fantastic museums like Musée de l'École de Nancy, Musée des Beaux Arts

PICK & GO

Choose a car at the airport as most rental companies have a wider selection there, compared to their city offices. Remember, dropping off the car to a different location might cost extra



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(Clockwise from right) Boutique champagne supermarkets, like C Comme Champagne are aplenty in Épernay;

Madeline, a speciality sponge cake, is a must-try in Lorraine;

Food and drink apps like Foodspotting are handy restaurant guides in new places

(Facing page clockwise top left) Place Stanislas in Nancy is a UNESCO World Heritage Site;

An iOS app, Wine Simplified helps you pick the right wine;

Grande Cuvée Spéciale and Champagne de rosé réserve from the house of Champagne G Tribaut in Hautvillers



MIHAJ BOGDAN LAZAR/DREAMSTIME.COM

complemented by the popping of corks and the soft effervescent sigh that follows – the unmistakable sound of a champagne bottle being opened. Not surprising, since the district has cellars spanning over a 100 kilometres, housing some of the world’s best bubbly. Boutique champagne supermarkets, like C Comme Champagne, is where connoisseurs can indulge in tastings at plush lounges with sink-in sofas. With over 3,000 champagnes on offer the sampling list is regularly revised. They can then make notes, chew on canapés and shop for champagne. All very chic and stylish. If you’re feeling a little lost, or spoiled for choice, you could always refer to Open Air Publishing’s Wine Simplified app for a crash course in oenology, or apps like Vivino, Snooth Wine Pro, Drync Wine Pro or Cor.kz which offer you reviews and ratings.

Incidentally, there are plenty of food and drink apps, such as Foodspotting, available for Android and iPhones that tell you about the best restaurants in many cities of France. These apps give you detailed reviews and recommendations. When it comes to accommodation, Gites de France is a location-based search service for smartphones which offers you options. Besides that there are a lot of apps for French language translation and common phrases.

Hautvillers, 20 minutes away, is a little village that in contrast to Epernay wears a very rural air, but is the mecca of champagne because here dwelled Dom Pérignon, the French Benedictine monk who perfected the art of the bubbly. Though he was a monk he was laid to rest in a section of Hautvillers Abbey that’s generally reserved for abbots. It just shows the high reverence that he is held in.

One of my last days in France was spent at Champagne G Tribaut, the vineyards of Valérie Coudrain-Tribaut – looking back on the three weeks I’d spent at the lesser known but stunning French provinces – as her Tribaut Rose Reserve Brut Champagne mischievously danced on the tongue. ■

FYI

Plan

Start planning your visit at in.rendezvousenfrance.com. Most cities/communes have their own websites. Strasbourg (www.otstrasbourg.fr); Nancy (www.ot-nancy.fr); Epernay (www.ot-epernay.fr); and Hautvillers (www.tourisme-hautvillers.com). Route planners: AA Route Planner (theaa.com); ViaMichelin (viamichelin.co.uk); Googlemaps (maps.google.co.in) and Green Flag (greenflag.com)

Drive

Avis is a car rental service that accepts payments in Indian rupees. Book in advance for early-bird rates; look for ongoing offers and discounts. www.avis.co.in

Stay

La Forestièreor is a quiet bed and breakfast in Alsace, close to Obernai. www.laforestiere-alsace.fr



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and Musée Lorrain.

My next drive took me 200 kilometres west, into the province of Champagne and the city of Epernay. I drove through deserted country roads and such pretty scenery that instead of taking my coffee break at a fuel station, I stopped over in a little, wooded area. I plugged in my portable Bialetti Moka Express that once again, runs off the car battery. With a few minutes I had percolated rich, aromatic coffee which I enjoyed in the solitude of rural France.

In restaurants at Épernay, the clinking of cutlery and hum of happy conversation is often