

## Vicky Bishop reports from Champagne

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Three horses on board; Lily and Dromara climb a 16th century tower; the Widow welcomes Pushy Woman home... and one last puncture.

It had been 39 degrees on our last day in Alsace so we got up at 4.30am to ensure that the horses travelled to Champagne in the coolest part of the day. By the time we had reached only Nancy we were into cool cloud - not my choice but good for the horses who happily munched and dozed their way across this part of northern France.

We made a detour north of Epemay to Mourmelon-le-Petit where we collected Eole Pol Roger - Delphine de Billy's horse. He is a very fine chestnut French chap who does some great dressage - but on this occasion he was being taken out to come and stay with our girls and to ride with us. This was the first time we had had three horses on board so all the spare batteries and tyre and horse food were piled high into the living area of the horse box along with our bags as we drove the last 75kms to Château d'Etoges south of Epemay.

Château d'Etoges is set in its own beautiful parkland with an orchard at one end and a moat all the way round. It is a very elegant building with perfect proportions but remains charmingly welcoming without being severely formal. The mint green mean machine scrunched up the drive and we were warmly welcomed by the owner, Madame Anne Neuville-Filliette, who has always lived here.


Lily and Dromara were allocated a corner of the parkland and showed off their best English manners entertaining other guests as they strolled around behind the famous mobile fencing that had travelled so far with us. Meanwhile Eole explored his patch for 24hrs and then decided to use the pickets as a scratching post, sending his whole section of fencing down like ninepins on a regular basis! Delphine came to the rescue and we decided he needed a good ride through the vines.

Claire Gordon Brown who had been with us in the Languedoc had come back for four more days which was great as not only is she a good rider and a Master of Wine but normally an excellent map reader - and I was in need of a break. We set off for Château de Monmort - one of only two châteaux in France with a tower especially designed for knights in armour to take their horses up into the fortifications. However, Claire managed to over-extend the ride right through the whole Forest of Vertus! After cantering down every verge possible we arrived just in time for our appointment to be greeted by Monsieur Hubert Combezde who owns the Château de Monmort and he unlocked the tower door and led the way. No horses had been in the tower for over three years and Lily certainly looked twice before deciding that it was safe and following me in up the spiral brick path. As they munched the grass at the top and we looked out at the ramparts we told them that they really were the bravest, most trusting horses in all of France.


From Château d'Etoges we moved to a gîte in Vouzy just off the edge of the Côtes des Blancs and tucked the horses into lovely shady stables on Christian Deibener's farm in the next village where we met Carole Duval of Duval Leroy. From here we explored the Côtes des Blancs on hoof and by lorry. It was a tale of contrasts and great experiences from Duval Leroy to see their impressive modern winery and learn just how champagne production is controlled, to the small family house of Champagne Pierre Moncuit set in its own courtyard where Madame Nicole Moncuit guided us round their kilometre of cellars.

There has always been a great ride of the region - and when Claire had gone home and Liz Price (who had only ridden racehorses for the last 10 years!) came to join me for the last three days of the whole tour we set out on the one of Champagne. Lily and Dromara climbed out of the box just outside Vertus and we climbed up through the vineyards to ride along the Côtes des Blancs skirting the edge of the forest above looking down through the vines at le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger and down into Avize ending up just before Cramant. The sun shone and the vines glistened green and luxurious as we looked at the tiny buds which had just finished flowering and imagined what might be poured into a glass... from here... in four years time.

Apart from Champagne itself I was keen to see other local products like some of the great cheeses we found in Epemay market. Hubert de Billy of Pol Roger, not only welcomed us to the region with a magnificent dinner but had also researched one of his favourite cheese producers. So we left the girls in their cool stable and set out for Sezanne an hour south of Epemay. At la Villeneuve les Charlesville we found Madame Maltaverne at the Ferme de Chaptou where she makes many different styles of cheese from her own cows. My favourite started out like a Tomme when young and matured from an Emmental consistency though to nearly the strength of Parmesan when really mature. How the horsebox will smell with one on board we will have to see! Madame Maltaverne also makes delicious Terrine de Lapin with Marc de Champagne.

 Christian Deibener, our horses' host, insisted that we visit Hautvillier to see the Abbey and the tomb of Dom Perignon and experience this charming village firsthand. So we set off with fresh asparagus for our picnic from his farm and went in search of another small family business, Champagne Tribut. As we tasted their *Cuvée Speciale* on their front lawn we had an excellent geography lesson of the region looking out over the vineyards stretching to Epemay and on to the Côtes des Blancs. Christian who can smell a party at 100kms downwind miraculously turned up to join in the tasting...

As they say, all good things come to an end and very soon it was time for Liz and I to ride the girls through the beautiful wrought iron gates at the Manoir de Verzy. We had moved the horses one last time to a very smart stableyard at the bottom of the hill leading into Verzy where they were surrounded by trotting horses at the Ferme de Pierre Monnaie owned by Madame Danielle Hautous. Liz, Ben (who had been keen to come back and drive for a third time - was it caused by a love of Lily or champagne, I kept asking myself?) and I had moved into the Manoir de Verzy which is owned by Veuve Clicquot and very much created as the spiritual home of La Grande Dame. For me it was another very special place to return to. I worked here in 1997 when it was still being renovated and now all of Rosalyne de Casteja's hard work and elegant taste has come to fruition as the light shone in through the long open windows.

At 12.35 Lily, Dromara and I completed The Great French Ride as we walked from the *Grand Cru* vineyard of Verzy in through the gates and on to the lawn in this very special part of France to be greeted by friends from England, Paris, Montpellier, Epemay and Reims. I was so touched that even Jacques Peters, Veuve Clicquot's senior cellarmaster had made time to come and welcome us in with an ever-so-fitting glass of La Grande Dame. Lily was adorned with a vibrant Veuve Clicquot Yellow Pashmina round her neck to celebrate over 500 miles on the hoof in France. She certainly lived up to her true breeding name, Pushy Woman, as she posed for one more photo on the lawn before Dromara told her it was time to be back in the mean green mint machine and led the way up the ramp one last time. We turned the truck towards Beauvais and on to Le Havre where P&O were waiting at the dockside. They say home is where the heart is but will Wiltshire ever be the same for these horses? 

For me and all my *'cavalières invitées'* it has been an amazing experience: the great French hospitality, the myriad of different wines that make up these seven regions, the hills and valleys we have climbed, the French love of horses, the dramas of nails in hooves and punctures in vineyards all blessed under virtual continuous sunshine, and above all two happy, healthy horses who have been so very trusting - something none of us will ever forget.

On the lawn at Manoir de Verzy (from left to right): Jacques Peters - Veuve Clicquot, Mark Smyly - The Fortune Centre, Christian Deibener, Brigitte Lund, Ben Attlee - driver, Vicky Bishop, Liz Price - racing commentator, Nerida Abbotts - Abbotts Wines, Roselyne de Casteja - Veuve Clicquot, Nigel Abbotts - Abbotts Wines, Hazel Murphy - The Australian Wine Bureau, Hubert de Billy - Pol Roger, Delphine de Billy - wife of Hubert de Billy