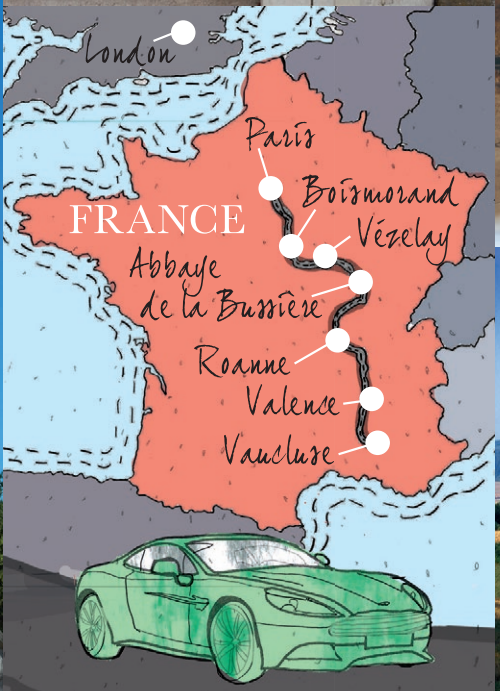




RELAIS DRIVING

Starting out in Paris, **Stephanie Plentl** embarks on a gastronomic tour of France, following a 'Route du Bonheur' that links Relais & Châteaux hotels and restaurants



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The façade of the St James Paris. *Tourteau* (crab) at the hotel's restaurant. The famous Route des Grands Crus. The dining room of Hôtel Crillon le Brave. A view of Vézelay from the approaching road. The terrace at Maison Pic. Abbaye de la Bussière

Stepping in from the brilliant Paris sunshine on a spring afternoon, the gilded interiors of Le Grand Véfour are equally luminous. One can almost hear the tuning of an orchestra: with its elaborate interior – painted columns, chandeliers and crimson seats occupied by eager patrons – the oldest gastronomic restaurant in the city promises a culinary performance. The maître d', Christian David, provides me with an overture: 'After the Revolution, the nobility escaped Paris leaving behind their chefs and staff. Gastronomy came to the street – in particular here, in the arcade cafes of Palais Royal – where forks and a menu were first introduced to the newly established bourgeoisie.' More than 200 years later, Le Grand Véfour is the last of those Palais Royal restaurants, with chef Guy Martin now at the helm. Sitting in Emile Zola's favourite seat, I'm presented with the main act: creamy foie-gras ravioli with a truffle emulsion, shredded oxtail and a show-stopping artichoke crème brûlée.

From this cradle, the French desire for fine dining and exceptional surroundings flourished. Later, in the Fifties, when droves of discerning Parisians were escaping by car to the heat of the Côte d'Azur, certain high-achieving restaurants and hotels en route enticed travellers to refuel on their refined hospitality. It was exactly 60 years ago when eight of those establishments merged together to form the association that would become Relais & Châteaux. This string of epicurean pearls became known as 'La Route du Bonheur' – 'the Road of Happiness' – and there are now 62 different Routes du Bonheur that connect several of the association's establishments across five continents.

Keen to explore this indulgent itinerary of travel between Paris and Provence, I'm spending my first night in the capital's Saint James hotel. A stately chateau hidden in the heart of the 16th arrondissement, it has whimsical decoration by Bambi Sloan – think a cheeky mishmash of leopard print and Napoleon III – that elevates it above its haughty neighbours. Quite at home on the hotel's circular driveway is my choice of car for this road trip: an Aston Martin Vanquish Volante.

Stymied by hours of hideous traffic on Paris's Boulevard Périphérique, the Vanquish delivers me to Auberge des Templiers in Bois-morand too late to enjoy its enchanting gardens studded with century-old oak trees. This hotel – a former post house – holds the distinction of being one of the original eight Relais & Châteaux properties, which explains its all too convenient location on the N7 trunk road. The

Michelin Guide has scattered its stars across several properties on my chosen Route du Bonheur, but here it's the vast wine list that impresses most.

The next destination is the artistic centre of Vézelay, deep in the Burgundy region; the Vanquish rumbles through medieval villages and hugs corners of verdant blankets of wild flowers. After a delicious rustic lunch of *pâté de campagne* and a glass of rosé on arrival at Cheval Blanc, there's time for a look inside Vézelay's basilica, revered for its relic of Mary Magdalene. The interior architecture and sculptures harness beams of light to dramatic effect.

When I arrive at Abbaye de la Bussière – a stunning former monastery set within acres of tranquil parkland – the British owner is standing outside to greet me. For Clive Cummings and his family, their hotel and home are synonymous: it is reflected in his personal welcome, their eclectic – and supremely chic – antiques and interiors throughout the 35-room property and the fact that his daughter's two Shetland ponies mischievously roam the lawn. Dinner that night is exquisite: the decadent tasting menu is served in an atmospheric candlelit cloister.

Another cachet of the Abbaye is its proximity to the Route des Grands Crus – an oenophile's red carpet of matinee idols from Domains Romanée Conti to Leflaive. For serious buyers, the hotel can organise visits to notoriously exclusive wine houses, but for me it's an exhilarating drive south just knowing that I'm flanked by these priceless vineyards.

I have lunch in Roanne at Troisgros – a restaurant and family famed for pioneering nouvelle cuisine and sustaining their three Michelin stars for over 45 years. Dishes are disarmingly simple and contemporary – mullet with tamarind broth, pigeon with peanut sauce, then rhubarb and yogurt. It's all hauntingly elegant.

By now, the bar is set high, but Maison Pic in Valence, on the bank of the Rhône, nudges it further. Anne-Sophie Pic's eponymous restaurant and hotel is a pure temple to gastronomy. Anne-Sophie is distinguished by her feminine and delicate approach to cooking, which is beautifully balanced by the bold furnishings of her hotel – the long-haired armchair in reception being a particular personal favourite.

I'm enchanted by the memory of Pic as I wind through Vaucluse, its Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyards and up to the hilltop hideaway of Hôtel Crillon le Brave. Enjoying my last lunch of the journey on the terrace and drinking in the panoramic Provençal view, I wonder what could be more civilised than abandoning airports and autoroutes and savouring the slow lane of the road of happiness □

WAYS AND MEANS

Stephanie Plentl travelled as a guest of Relais & Châteaux (00800-2000 0002; www.relaischateaux.com) and Aston Martin (www.astonmartin.com). All Routes du Bonheur can be tailor-made, from a choice of 520 Relais & Châteaux properties worldwide. This itinerary included one night each at Saint James, Auberge des Templiers, Abbaye de la Bussière, Maison Pic and Hôtel Crillon le Brave, and costs from €1,240 B&B or €2,132 with an inclusive à la carte dinner at each property (excluding drinks). Dinner at Le Grand Véfour costs from €208 and lunch at Troisgros from €110. A Paris pick-up/return seven-day rental of an Aston Martin costs €5,760 for a Vanquish V12 and €6,250 for a DB9, from the Hertz Dream Collection (00-33-825 861 861; www.hertz.fr).