

Burgundy, France: The Original Wine Country

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

If the only time you've heard Burgundy mentioned before is as a dark red color, then you wouldn't be alone. Before our recent road trip around Europe, that's about all I thought of when I heard the word, but once I started my research, I soon discovered that it's also the name of a region of France and one that we'd be spending a fair bit of time in during our vacation.

It's one of 22 regions in France and is a huge place, even larger than the whole country of Belgium! Despite its size, covering 12,000 square miles, it's hardly packed with people, as it only has 1.6 million inhabitants. That helps to explain why, during our time in the region, we spent a lot of our time on isolated roads that seemed the only sign of life in an otherwise deserted countryside. There were many occasions that we commented to each other that it felt like we were the only people out and about, a very pleasant change from so many places in the world.

Burgundy is pretty much in the middle of France, albeit slightly to the east of the country. It's just to the southeast of Paris, and we were lucky enough to sample a few parts of this beautiful region.

The first place we discovered was the region's capital city, Dijon, famed of course for its mustard. Not being a mustard lover myself, I was more interested in exploring its medieval city, much of it thanks to the Dukes of Burgundy. They built up one of the most powerful states in the 14th and 15th centuries and they left behind a wonderful legacy.

The starting point for our tour was the Notre-Dame cathedral, a Gothic church dating from the 13th century. From there, we made our way down towards the Place de la Liberation, the real centerpiece of the city. It's here that the Dukes of Burgundy held court, although the buildings here, that loop round in an impressive semi-circle, date from the 17th century. They were built to house the Parliament in those days and today it's home to the Museum of Fine Arts.

We loved our walking tour of this city. Literally every corner we turned down, we saw cobbled streets dating from years gone by. We felt that we were getting a taste of the real France here, as we watched people out about their business, dining out on the pavements outside restaurants, and enjoying the city. It had a lovely, vibrant feel to it and we felt that those living here really seemed to love spending time out in their city center.

From here, it was off to the [Abbaye de Fontenay](#), a little to the northwest of Dijon. It's the oldest surviving Cistercian monastery in the whole of France and was first founded in 1118 by St. Bernard. The Abbey thrived until the 18th century, when it fell into disrepair and was turned into a paper mill. Today, as well as seeing the abbey itself, you can also view the paper mill that was set up here. As we wandered around, it was all too easy to be transported back to the days when the abbey was in full use. You could imagine the monks taking prayers in the cloisters or sleeping in the dormitories. We were lucky enough to visit this place at exactly the right time as it was almost deserted, which added to the spiritual feeling here.

As we headed to our next destination, we made a stop at the pretty village of Semur-en-Auxois, complete with a 13th century castle in the middle. There's a lot that remains from many, many years ago, as we noticed when the road we were driving along suddenly turned to cobbles. The Notre-Dame church is another superb sight here, again dating from the 13th and 14th centuries. We left here, feeling very glad that we'd taken this unintentional diversion.

Our final stop in Burgundy was Beaune and there was one reason that I wanted to come here, the [Hotel Dieu](#), or God's hotel. As the name suggests, it was once home to a hospice, which was established in the 15th century. Not only is it fascinating to see how people were treated back in those days, something I would never want to go through, but it's set in a beautiful building. The real draw here is, surprisingly enough, its roof. It's not often you say that, but it's true here. The building's roof is made from geometric multi-coloured Burgundian roof tiles, which are exceptionally striking.

The town itself was a lovely little place, very typically French, complete with an open air market and lots of patisseries, offering wonderfully tempting treats. Of course, we couldn't resist and had to enjoy one while we were there!

Burgundy turned out to be a real treat for us. It's not somewhere that I knew much about before we went there, but it's definitely somewhere I'd recommend to anyone. Although I did try to speak French whenever and wherever possible, we found that the vast majority of people speak English. It's a place of contrasts -- some lovely quiet areas of countryside with stunning views, along with some towns and cities that still have their historic hearts well and truly intact. One of the guidebooks I bought before our trip described Burgundy as "arguably France's richest province -- historically, culturally, gastronomically, and economically" and I'd thoroughly endorse that as a good description of the region.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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