

Castles, moats & waterfalls – driving into a French fairytale

Crossing a drawbridge to enter the medieval 10th century village of Entrevaux - my partner looked up at the citadel - then looked at me a little amused: "I feel like we should be in a horse and carriage."

But we were in a brand new DS4 - a stunning hatchback, that once inside feels and drives like a small SUV - packed with incredible technology.

We've wanted to do a road trip through Europe for years - and researched all the possibilities. Buying, renting, borrowing - surely there had to be an easy and affordable way! And then we discovered Citroën Europass, and the search was over. The best 'traditional' car rental estimate for our four month trip through Europe was almost twice that of the Europass deal.

Pickup from Charles De Gaulle in Paris was a breeze - we were at the wheel of our DS4 within 20 minutes of walking through the arrivals gate.



Our original plan was to head through France towards Belgium, but on the plane we found out the lavender season was in full bloom. It is a spectacle, with southern France being the biggest lavender producer in the world. So, with the hope of breathtaking pictures, we set a course south to the lavender capital Sault.

Our trusty GPS, we nicknamed 'Nancy' was a godsend. We originally didn't think we'd need one - but it is probably the best travelling decision we've ever made. She tells us when to turn, what lane to be in and even what speed to do in any given area. We also told Nancy to avoid toll roads - as we wanted to see the real France - and what a treat we got.

On our way south we weaved through medieval rural Burgundy. We were lured into the village of Vezelay by its 11th century hilltop basilica - and the haunting sound of a choir of nuns echoing through the streets.



Nearby, in Arbois, we followed an enchanting road up a valley to find a magnificent waterfall - all to ourselves - a welcome oasis in the 39c heat.



Our first “must do” was the Lacets de Montvernier – which translates to the “shoelaces of Montvernier.” Built in 1934, the road consists of 18 tight hairpins straight up a steep hill to a church on the top – as if draped from the sky like a shoelace. The road was originally made wide enough for donkeys, so you have to pray someone isn’t coming the other way - or else face having to back up near the cliff to allow the other car to pass. It had virtually no tourists, although locals expect that to change given the Tour de France has just started featuring the hill in its 3500km race.

It was such a beautiful and exhilarating road - we quickly searched the internet to see if there were any other marvels of French engineering to drive en-route to the lavender fields. We had no idea we’d come across one of the most astonishing drives in the world.



Tunneled in the side of a cliff - 700 metres straight down to the gorge below - we discovered the Combe Laval road. We were going to Die. No, quite literally. The town at the end of the road is called Die. The drive is nowhere near as frightening as it looks - a barrier keeps cars firmly on the right side of gravity - and compared to the Lacets de Montvernier, passing is easy.

The views are indescribable; we spent hours on the side of the road absorbing it all. The rest of the road to Die was equally incredible, crossing the heart of the French Alps with jaw-dropping scenery at each turn.



From Die to the lavender fields, we thought it would be a quick drive. But there's no such thing in rural France – we couldn't resist the temptation of beautiful medieval villages such as Montbrun-les-Bains, and its organic bakery and busy market.



The next day we arrived at the lavender fields, near Sault. The air was thick with its sweet aroma – and millions of bees busy pollinating and creating beautiful lavender honey. Every valley was filled with a purple hue – and farmers were in full-swing preparing for the massive lavender festival to take place in the coming days.



Continuing our journey, we had hoped to pop into the southern city of Avignon for supplies - but once again discovered even a “quick” supply trip would be derailed by the beauty of France. We ended up spending three days in the ancient town. The city has a medieval centre - surrounded by an elaborate fortress - and is home to the largest gothic palace ever built.

From Avignon, we plotted a course to Italy through the French Alps – rather than taking the much speedier and direct toll road. And Nancy had a few treats left for us, including the imposing medieval village of Entrevaux. The walled 10th century town has its own citadel - on top of a massive hill in the centre of the village. A drawbridge connects the main road to its network of incredibly narrow streets - designed for a horse! So, of course, we had to give driving it a go!



Sweltering in the heat, we then headed to the “French Grand Canyon,” Gorges de Verdon. It is considered to be the most beautiful river canyon in Europe, and it didn’t disappoint - nor did the beautiful vineyards, castles and villages along the way.



The journey to Italy wasn’t complete until one more swim on the French/Italian border, in the clearest river water I’ve ever seen.

There are too many good things to list about Citroën Europass. But at the top is a simple fact: without the car, we wouldn’t have had these experiences. And that is ultimately what travel is all about – unforgettable and incredible experiences.

And the most exciting part – we’ve only just started our lease – 107 days to go!

