

The Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.

Jan 27, 2002

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FRANCE; Where Time Glides By; The lakeside town of Anney in the French Alps has captured the hearts of philosophers and royalty through the ages. Now it's a haven for tourists and swans--lots of them.

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Map: France; CREDIT: Los Angeles Times; In the 19th century, European nobility chose Lake Anney as an idyllic vacation spot and built villas at water's edge. The town of Talloires, above, has lost none of its charm.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Craig Lovell / Corbis; Along the rue St. Claire, bistros offer fondue and other local dishes. Three mornings a week the street becomes an outdoor market.; PHOTOGRAPHER: [Peter Wortsman]; Goats head home to a dairy farm on the summit of Le Semnoz, where their owners make and sell cheese.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Peter Wortsman; The perfectly preserved 12th century Palais de l'Isle, a former prison, sits in the middle of the Thiou River in Anney's old quarter, where pastel-hued houses line the canals.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Richard Nebesky / Lonely Planet Images; Bracketed by flowers, one of the city's swans paddles alongside the Quai de l'Isle.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Peter Wortsman

Full Text:

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"God is calling you. Go to Annecy," a clergyman told Jean Jacques Rousseau, a 16-year-old runaway from Switzerland who went on to become the noted 18th century writer and philosopher. Though the clergyman hoped the young man would find a spiritual haven, Rousseau instead found romance in this sparkling lakeside town that seduces pilgrims to this day.

I first experienced Annecy's charms by accident in 1969. A young waiter-in-training at a resort hotel in the Swiss Alps just next door, I had planned a day trip to Geneva but boarded the wrong train, crossing the French border and stepping off in Annecy. About all I remember is the sun shimmering on its deeply blue lake and the stain of a melted Roseau du Lac, a local chocolate and coffee confection that I'd left too long in the pocket of my white shirt. But Annecy called me back.

A brief stopover with my wife and kids in 1999 whetted our appetite for more. Where else can you stroll along flower-lined quays by pristine canals with floating swans, drop in at a downtown castle and dungeon, boat or sunbathe on a vast lake ringed by snowcapped ridges, frolic on nearby alpine meadows and dine on fondue or freshwater fish? Rousseau had the right idea.

When we returned for a five-day stay last summer, our pretext was the Fete du Lac, an annual fireworks and water spectacle held in early August. The celebration dates back to 1860, after Napoleon III helped liberate Italy from Austria and the Italians rewarded the French by giving them the province of Savoy (pronounced sav-WA). Today Annecy is the capital of the Haute-Savoie region and still one of the prettiest towns in France.

Little did our family suspect that attending the festival had also occurred to about 200,000 other folks, who converged on Annecy from all directions and created gridlock. (The city is, after all, only about 25 miles from Geneva and 50 miles from the Italian border.) Even with spectator tickets in hand, it was sheer havoc jockeying for a lakeside spot to watch the 2 1/2-hour extravaganza (last year on a Brazilian theme), surely the most lavish, flamboyant and lengthy fireworks display I have ever seen. Frogmen dragged floats evoking indigenous deities rocking to a samba beat.

And when the rockets finally burst forth, it was like a volcano streaking the sky, the mountainsides and the sloping rooftops of Annecy's old quarter, the whole effect mirrored in the lake. Though my French wife, Claudie, and I, both experienced travelers, initially bemoaned our lack of judgment to have come at such a time, our 6-year-old son, Jacques, and 11-year-old daughter, Aurelie, were in heaven, and Annecy will forever sparkle in our memories.

Dragging the kids away early to head off the crowd, we walked from the shoreline to the city's old quarter, which we practically had to ourselves--except for the languid swans floating by.

Returning the next day after the throng had dispersed, we happened upon a living statue of Rousseau portrayed by a motionless mime in white. A more permanent marble bust graces the courtyard just off the Canal Notre-Dame, where Rousseau first set eyes on the love of his life, Madame de Warens, a 28-year-old who was 12 years his senior. His lover's house here was replaced by a bishop's palace fronting a street now named after the philosopher, but today the building is the city police headquarters.

Human presence can be traced from 3100 BC on a spot not far from Annecy's present site, where the Thiou River empties into the northern tip of Lake Annecy.

The original lakeside village, one of the oldest settlements in the Alps, fell to successive invasions, most notably Celts, followed in the 5th century by Romans. Emperor Anicius Olybrius built himself a grand villa on the lake, Anneciacum, thought to be the source of Annecy's name.

In subsequent centuries the Savoy region kept changing hands. Sacked and rebuilt, Annecy went from mountain metropolis to backwater burg to strategic stronghold, probably reaching its peak in the 17th century, when it became known as the Rome of the Alps as Catholic theologians and intellectuals fled Geneva after it embraced the Reformation.

In the 19th century European nobility rediscovered Annecy as an idyllic vacation spot, building lavish palaces on the lake. The commoners soon followed, but the city has kept its air of grace and elegance, upheld by geranium-filled flower boxes at every bend and symbolized by those regal long-necked swans.

"Don't they ever get a neck ache?" asked my son, more accustomed to pigeons.

The pedestrians-only historic district is filled with buildings from the 16th and 17th centuries. But Annecy's oldest structure and centerpiece is the perfectly preserved 12th century Palais de l'Isle, a former prison and mint that sits in the middle of the Thiou River.

Immediately catching your eye and triggering your camera finger, its squat gray facade sits there like a petrified gnome taking a foot bath. Circled by those ubiquitous white waterfowl, if you block out the surrounding souvenir stands in your imagination, you can transport yourself back to the Middle Ages. The Palais de l'Isle houses a museum devoted to the history of Annecy and contains a dungeon (complete with shackles and

vintage graffiti) used during the German occupation to incarcerate the French resistance fighters of World War II. There's also a bulky 14th century coin minting apparatus, the ATM of its day.

Emerging from the dungeon, we stopped for a bite at Le Milton Pub, one of the many outdoor cafes clustered on the Rue St. Claire. On Tuesday, Friday and Sunday mornings, the street becomes a sprawling outdoor market where vendors hawk fresh produce, fish from the lake, local white wines and mammoth cylinders of Savoyard cheese that will get melted down into fondue and other local specialties.

Traveling families like ours must occasionally resort to bribes to keep the peace, so it seemed expedient to meet the children's demands to visit Le Monde Merveilleux des Alpes Miniatures (the Marvelous World of Alpine Miniatures), at 10 Rue St. Claire, a museum and shop of tiny Alpine tableaux inhabited by miniature bears and marmots. Admission is free, but micro-furniture for our daughter's dollhouse and mini-armaments for our son's toy castle nearly broke the bank.

But the souvenirs bought the parents a momentary reprieve, and we marched together up to the Chateau d'Annecy, the former hilltop residence of various counts and dukes who once ruled Savoy. Dominated by a massive 12th century tower, the castle's vast cobblestone courtyard could hold an army of mounted knights. Another tower, this one from the 15th century, has some striking period ceilings and doubles as a modern art museum.

Back in town, the children kindly let us take in a church or two, notably the 15th century Church of St. Maurice and the 17th century Church of St. Francis, where the remains of Annecy's most famous son, Francis de Sales, are enshrined. De Sales, a cardinal and erudite theologian known for his spiritual writings, sparked an enlightened cultural renaissance in Annecy, fostering the study of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He tolerated diverse views, including Galileo's astronomy theories, banned in Rome at the time. He co-founded the Florimontane Academy, one of France's earliest literary societies, which became the prototype for that bastion of French learning, the Academie Francaise.

Enough civilization already. The natural splendor of the Savoy Alps beckoned. At nine miles long, Lake Annecy may not be the largest Alpine basin but, surrounded by wooded peaks, it has an unspoiled beauty that has not succumbed to pollution, unlike lakes Como and Garda in Italy. Lake Annecy cleaned up its act about 35 years ago when the towns bordering its shoreline got together to build an underground pipeline, deflecting sewage to a treatment plant. The result is what the Annecy tourist board claims to be Europe's cleanest lake.

There are multiple ways to savor Lake Annecy. You can swim in it; there are many nice beaches. You can take a cruise on a big steamer out of Annecy or rent a pedal boat for

a short hop or a motorboat for a longer private spin.

You can sail, windsurf or water ski. You can bicycle or jog along a pathway that circles the entire lake. You can drive it too, as we did, stopping along the way for a view or a dip.

The view is particularly striking from the terrace of the 13th century Chateau de Menthon, near the charming town of Talloires, birthplace of St. Bernard (namesake of the big dogs).

Duingt, a lakeside hamlet on the west bank, likewise merits a visit. Just off the road, hidden from view beneath the cliffs of the Roc de Chere, this rustic Savoyard village has preserved many of its trellised stairways and vintage brown tiled rooftops.

Our hideaway was a bit more remote and no less rustic. Les Rochers Blancs, a cozy inn, sits high atop a wooded mountain ridge known as Le Semnoz. At its restaurant we dined on fondue and la petite friture (literally "small fry" from the lake). And we slept like babies, awakened by the gentle tinkle of cowbells in the morning. One day we followed a herd of goats to a lone farmhouse where cheese was made and sold. On a clear day, they say, from the top of Le Semnoz you can spot the most recognized summit of the western Alps, Mont Blanc.

The gruff innkeeper with the handlebar mustache claimed he remembered us from a previous stay. We remembered his wife's cooking. And here, every night before closing our wooden shutters against the mountain chill, we could catch a glimpse of Annecy flickering golden- -unreal--in the distance below.

In old age, Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose writings were an inspiration for the French Revolution, grew nostalgic about Annecy, longing to return to the place "around which my heart has never ceased to wander." Not one to depend on a fickle memory, I know I'll be back.

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Guidebook: Lakeside in Annecy

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The heart of the old town being off-limits to cars, parking in Annecy can be a hassle during the summer high season. When the nearby parking garages were full, we twice found spots in the outdoor lot near the Centre Nautique, just below the medical center.

Telephones: To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international access code), 33 (country code for France), 4 (area code for the southeast) and the local number.

Currency: France is in the process of converting to the euro; the franc will not be accepted after Feb. 17.

Where to stay: On the lake, at the end of its own private peninsula, is the luxury Imperial Palace, 5009-3000, fax 5009-3333, www.lacannecy.com/french/hebergement/himperial.asp, complete with private beach, spa and casino. Double rooms start at about \$200; lake-view suites are \$670.

For a simple but well-appointed lakeside option outside town, try Le Clos Marcel (5068-6747, fax 5068-6111). Doubles begin at about \$49 per night in low season and go to \$62 in high season; there is a three-night, half-board minimum in high season.

My favorite is the Hotel Les Rochers Blancs, 5001-2360, fax 5001-4068, a rustic inn on the summit of Le Semnoz, about a half-hour drive from Annecy up a steep, winding mountain road but well worth the effort. Doubles about \$35.

Where to eat: The local specialties are heavy on the cheese: tartiflette, a kind of cheese and potato casserole; raclette, melted cheese on prosciutto; and fondue Savoyarde, the classic pot of melted cheese for dipping with pieces of crusty French bread. Annecy offers a gaggle of bistros specializing in these gooey dishes, mostly clustered around the Rue St. Claire. We have come away stuffed but satisfied from Le Freti, 12 Rue St. Claire.

The hunting-lodge-style restaurant at Les Rochers Blancs serves up a savory Savoyarde fondue (about \$10); also offers a three-course meal of the day (about \$17).

For the choice catch of the lake in elegant surroundings, the Auberge du Lyonnais in Annecy is worth a splurge; 14 Quai de l'Eveche, 5051-2610 (Reserve a table on the terrace overlooking the canal.) One night the three-course menu (a steal at about \$18) included a terrine of pike topped with creamy basil sauce, roast filet of perch with buttery lentils and a souffle topped with a coulis of wild berries; a la carte offerings included a ragout of monkfish (\$21) and langouste (\$26).

A good snack spot is Le Milton Pub, 21 Rue St. Claire, 5045-0838. Its specialty, aside from beer, is Flammekuche, a kind of Alsatian pizza served on square wooden boards (\$5-\$6, depending on topping).

For more information: To find out more about the Fete du Lac (Aug. 3 this year), contact Annecy Evenements, 1 Rue Jean Jaures, 5045- 0142. We rented a medium-size motorboat for about \$34 an hour at Deronzier Location Pedalos Bateaux, 5044-3433, in Doussard, a small town at one end of Lake Annecy, but pretty much the same deal can be had at many other locations.

French Government Tourist Office, 9454 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 715, Beverly Hills, CA 90212-2967; (410) 286-8310 (France-on-Call hotline), fax (310) 276-2835, www.franceguide.com.

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[Illustration]

Caption: GRAPHIC: Map: France; CREDIT: Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: In the 19th century, European nobility chose Lake Annecy as an idyllic vacation spot and built villas at water's edge. The town of Talloires, above, has lost none of its charm.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Craig Lovell / Corbis; PHOTO: Along the rue St. Claire, bistros offer fondue and other local dishes. Three mornings a week the street becomes an outdoor market.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Peter Wortsman; PHOTO: Goats head home to a dairy farm on the summit of Le Semnoz, where their owners make and sell cheese.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Peter Wortsman; PHOTO: The perfectly preserved 12th century Palais de l'Isle, a former prison, sits in the middle of the Thiou River in Annecy's old quarter, where pastel-hued houses line the canals.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Richard Nebesky / Lonely Planet Images; PHOTO: Bracketed by flowers, one of the city's swans paddles alongside the Quai de l'Isle.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Peter Wortsman