

9 – DIJON AND BACK TO PARIS

Sunday, 7 June

A fine bright morning. I was up by seven o'clock and had a good shower before breakfast. Leaving the hostel at about half past eight, I walked towards the city centre, where I found the tourist office closed. This was not surprising as every other place was closed too. The town was quiet and almost empty of people and traffic. As it was hot, I walked in the shade.



The old quarter, Dijon

Using a basic map and having glanced at a more detailed one, I managed to find my way to the old quarter, which I found quite fascinating. I spent the rest of the morning wandering around, admiring the wonderful old buildings and churches. The first place I came across was the fine Gothic cathedral of Saint Bénigne, where a Mass was in progress. Like many French churches, I found it rather bare inside. A huge organ thundered noisily and, outside again, I heard a carillon in the steeple playing a melody.

Not far away was another church that was smaller and plainer. This, the church of Saint Philibert, was locked. From here I made my way through some interesting old streets, passing several important former *hôtels*. An elderly French man on a bicycle, with a drop hanging from his nose and an extinguished cigarette stuck between his lips, stopped to admire my little Olympus XA camera. He told me that he had a tiny Minolta one, which he said was excellent. He informed me that I was in the oldest and most interesting quarter of the city. On parting, he shook hands with me and said, *'au revoir, mon camarade!'*



Palais des Ducs, Dijon

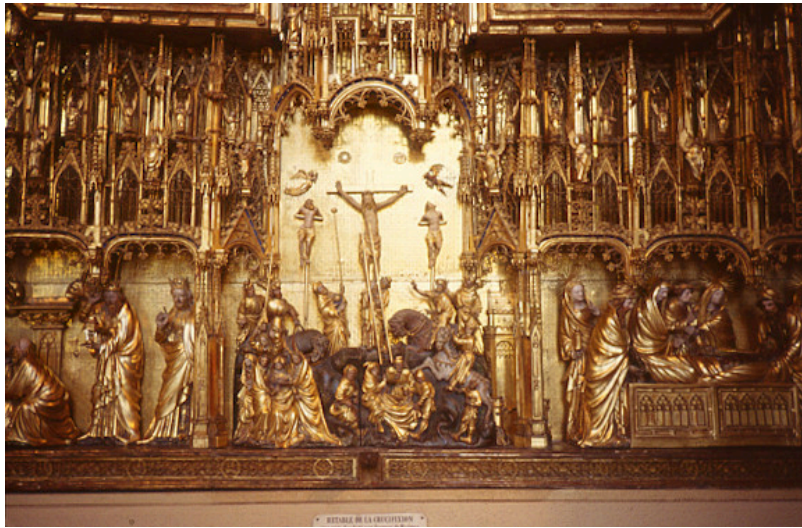
I now returned to the rue de la Liberté and found the fine complex of buildings and squares that made up the famous Palais des Ducs and the Musée des Beaux Arts. It had been my impression that the palace was outside the town and, because of this, I had planned to visit it on the following day. I took note of the opening hours and, noticing that admittance would be free during the afternoon, decided to visit it later today.

I then discovered some charming narrow streets containing half-timbered houses and former *hôtels* behind the palace. I lingered here to admire the fine architecture; the roofs of many of the houses were made of multi-coloured tiles, which shone brightly in the sunshine. Not far away was the Gothic church of Notre-Dame, which was also very plain inside. In the square at the back of the church was a magnificent gateway into the Hôtel de Vogüé. The nearby Syndicat d'Initiative was both fascinating and intimate, with a series of wooden balconies and a stone spiral staircase.

After I had walked around some more of the streets, I bought some bread and began to search for a restaurant. A man whom I had met in the *boulangerie* kindly drove me to a reasonably-priced one; he explained that there was little choice on a Sunday. I could see what he meant, for so many places were closed. The restaurant offered a menu for 35 francs, which I requested. The waiters moved at the speed of lightning; just as well, for the place soon filled up. I had a salad, followed by *coq-au-vin* with rice, and finished with a slice of delicious strawberry tart. As the *demi-pichet* of red wine went straight to my head, I ordered a coffee afterwards and so the bill came to 45.50 francs.

Because I could hardly move after the wine, I had to sit down outside. I then went into the welcome coolness of the Musée des Beaux Arts, where I had to sit down again. I dozed off for a while and eventually came to my senses. Still feeling a little tipsy, I began a leisurely tour around the museum and stopped to examine some interesting old Burgundian statues, all in marvellous condition, with some of them still retaining their original colours.

Next came a collection of paintings, most of them very early and religious in nature.



The retable of the Crucifixion (1390–99), Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon

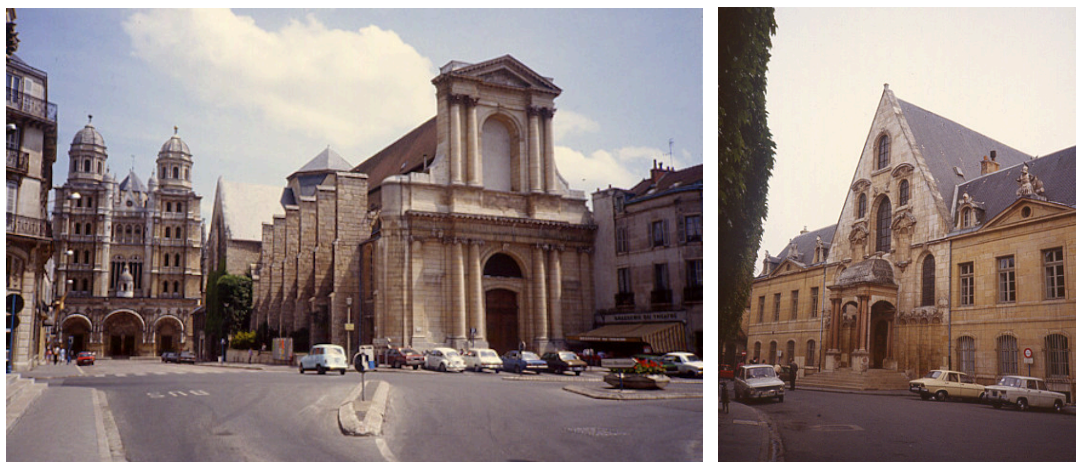


The tomb of Philip the Bold, Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon

I soon found myself in a large, magnificent room, where the sarcophagi of Philip the Good and Philip the Bold lay in all their splendour. On the walls were sculpted triptychs that were gilded and painted. On one wall was a small portrait of Philip the Good: a copy of a work originally painted by Rogier van der Weyden in about 1450.

I spent most of the afternoon in the museum looking at the exhibits: early furniture and religious objects, a section consisting of paintings done in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an interesting exhibition of paintings and drawings by Avigdor Arikha (some of them depicting Samuel Beckett), and finally a contemporary collection of modern paintings, impressionist works (especially by Manet), African masks and even some examples of

Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. This last exhibition was displayed and lit very dramatically.



The Stock Exchange and the Church of Saint-Michel (left), and the Palais de Justice (right), Dijon

Outside again, at six o'clock, I visited the nearby Church of Saint-Michel and then found the Palais de Justice. Deciding that I had seen enough for one day, I slowly made my way back to the youth hostel, stopping at a café to taste a drop of *cassis* and then at a shop to buy a bottle of apple juice, for I was thirsty because of the heat and the walking. The way back to the hostel was most uninteresting; I walked along wide modern roads, passing large apartment blocks, shops and petrol stations. In the hostel I chatted to some Americans and Germans, ate some bread and cheese, then spent some time in the foyer before retiring to bed.

Monday, 8 June

Although I was woken this morning by my companions in the dormitory, I stayed in bed a little longer. By the time I was ready to go out, it had turned into a dismal wet morning. I hung around indoors hoping that the rain would ease off but, as it did not, I donned my rain gear and ventured out.

Feeling rather dispirited, I trudged down the road to the city centre. Today I intended to visit the Musée Magnin, but when I arrived at the building, I found it closed. I therefore made my way in the rain to part of the Ducal Palace named the Palais des États de Bourgogne and entered the splendid interior (the Salon d'Apollon) to see a small exhibition entitled *Dijon vu par Henri Vincenot*: a collection of paintings and sketches of the town. I found the paintings a little too stark for my taste, though I liked the sketches. Although simple, they were very evocative. It was interesting to see this example of local talent and also to admire the magnificence of the state rooms.

Afterwards I wandered around and found the Musée Rude, but it too was closed for the day. At last I discovered a museum that was open: the Musée Archéologique, situated in a former abbey beside the church of Saint Bénigne. I paid 6 francs but only managed to see some exhibits of prehistoric tools, for

the museum was about to close for lunch. A porter advised me to come back in the afternoon.

I then found my way back to the restaurant where I had eaten on the previous day. As this would be my last proper day of my stay in France, I decided to splash out and sample some of the specialities. As an aperitif, I ordered a *cassis à l'eau*, and for a starter I chose *escargots* (snails), which were on the menu for an extra 3 francs. I was rather mystified by the snail tongs, which I had never seen or used before, but I managed to extract the snails from their shells somehow or other. For the main course I had the *rôti de veau* with *haricots verts*, then finished with cheese. Even though I had only ordered a quarter-litre carafe of wine, I felt sleepy afterwards and so ordered a cup of coffee. I enjoyed the meal very much and took my time about eating it – about two hours. Once again the restaurant quickly filled until it was packed. It was obviously popular! Two men whom I had seen here on the previous day were here again today.

Afterwards I staggered back to the archaeological museum and finished my visit. There was not much to see, and I found it difficult to whip up enough interest for the early statues and artefacts. Most of the exhibits dated from the middle ages and the Gallo-Roman period.

After the museum I went back out into the rain and revisited the church next door. By now I was feeling quite cheesed off because of the bad weather. Listlessly I went tramping around the streets again, passing many fine buildings, *hôtels* and churches. There was an unusual church attached to a hospital in one part of the town and, in another part not far from the Ducal Palace, I discovered an elaborate façade of an early church, that of Saint Anne. I finally made my way to the Palais de Justice, but found it closed.

Feeling rather down and rather unwell by now, I set off for the youth hostel and arrived, wet and miserable, by about six o'clock. I changed into dry clothing and lay down for a couple of hours as I now had a pain in my stomach. It seemed that something that I had eaten had disagreed with me. Later I got up to write my diary. Although the dormitory was invaded by a group of surly Germans, I paid no attention to them and retired to bed early.

Tuesday, 9 June

A dark, dreary morning; I groaned when I heard one of the Germans saying, '*es regnet!*'. As I had intended to hitch-hike my way to Paris today, I would now have to do so in the rain. I ate no breakfast this morning, for I had suffered from stomach cramps during the night.

In low spirits, I set off in the spilling rain at half past eight and decided to follow the signposts for the main toll route to Paris. I should not have done this, for it involved a very long walk via a ring road; if I had gone through the city centre I would have reached my destination much sooner. By the time I reached the main road, I was drenched. Although my inclination was to walk to the nearby train station and save myself a lot of trouble, I decided to try hitch-hiking. I stuck out my thumb for three quarters of an hour, but to no avail. Eventually I gave up and began to walk towards the station. Just as I did so, I met a girl and two fellows who asked me what I was doing, for I still

had my thumb out although I was walking in the wrong direction. I told them what I had been planning to do and learned that the girl was about to hitchhike to Paris. We decided to team up and so I walked with the young people back down the road. We passed the point where there was a turn for Lyon and then, when the girl had kissed the two fellows goodbye, we stuck out our thumbs. Within minutes a lorry stopped for us - no doubt it was thanks to the presence of the girl!



We hopped in, removed our wet outer clothing and set off. We clocked up a good few kilometres until we came to the *péage* or toll plaza of the motorway; once through it, the driver stopped to have a look at the motor. It transpired that something was broken. As I now discovered that the driver was not going to Paris by a direct route, I asked another lorry driver who had pulled up beside us if he could take me. He told me that he was going straight away and that he could take me. I got the distinct impression that the first driver was intent on getting rid of me; no doubt he wanted the girl on her own.

I transferred my luggage to the other lorry, wished the others goodbye and we set off. This second driver turned out to be more pleasant than the first; we chatted for a while and then I settled back to have a snooze.

We eventually reached Paris by about half past three, without stopping once, and I was left at the Porte d'Orléans. As the rain had stopped and the weather had improved, I decided to walk to the city centre - especially as I

had been sitting down for so long. I stopped at various points to telephone the Magic Bus office, to buy some food, and to visit the church attached to the Sorbonne, which at last I found open; inside I found an exhibition of modern art. I finally sat down in the pleasant Square René Viviani for a simple snack of bread and cheese. Before me was a fine view of Notre-Dame. After I had finished eating, I took out my diary and brought it up to date.

I then relaxed here for a while, watching some local children playing. By now I was surrounded by pigeons looking for food. Several other people had sat down nearby to chat, read a newspaper or, like me, have a snack. It was a very pleasant way to finish my holiday: to arrive back at my starting point on a balmy summer's afternoon, in no hurry at all, and with nothing in particular to do.

I eventually bestirred myself, picked up my luggage and ambled along the banks of the Seine, stopping to look at the bookstalls. Nearby was Shakespeare and Company, the modern version of the bookstore originally founded by Sylvia Beach, who had published James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922.

After a while I ambled over to the Île-de-la-Cité and crossed over to the Île Saint-Louis, where I looked into some shop windows. Having bought some Camembert cheese in a supermarket, I discovered – much to my annoyance – that there was a proper French cheese shop or *crémèrie* next door. Great blocks of cheese were displayed in the window and it was crowded inside. I then went into a fruit and vegetable shop around the corner to buy some apples, and joined a queue while the assistants rushed about, selecting, weighing, giving change and talking all the time: '*Et avec ça, Monsieur?*' '*Merci beaucoup, Monsieur!*' '*Au revoir, Monsieur!*' All around me were the sounds, sights and smells associated with a busy French shop: the faint clinking of the light coins, the distinctive scraping sound when the coins were gathered up from the little saucer, the sing-song voices of the lady assistants, and the smells of fresh vegetables and fresh fruit in their wooden boxes.

All was peaceful on the Île Saint-Louis; although the shops were still open, they were preparing to close. The neat little *boulangeries* and *patisseries* still displayed their tempting varieties of tarts and cakes, but there was hardly a *baguette*, *gros* or *petit pain* left.

From here I wandered across to the right bank and into the lovely Marais district. As I found the old Hôtel de Sens (or Bibliothèque Forney) still open, I went inside to have a look at a small exhibition of modern Chinese folk art. It was very colourful and included many intricate designs made of cut paper, as well as an interesting selection of photographs.

From here I made my way back to the familiar rue Saint-Antoine and the church of Saint Paul. In the square before the hotel in the rue d'Ormesson, an instrumental group had set themselves up on a platform and were playing ethnic music to an audience seated on deckchairs. It was all very orderly and the audience applauded politely. In the familiar and homely Hotel Pratic I greeted the smiling plump lady, exchanged pleasantries with her and told her about my holiday. I then retrieved the sleeping bag that I had left in the hotel, thanked the lady and her husband, and said goodbye. They begged me to return if ever I visited Paris again, and asked me to write to them in advance.

After a last glance at the square, I returned to the street outside and descended into the depths of the Saint Paul Métro station, using a ticket that I had saved for now. Everything looked pleasantly familiar: the tiles, the blue and white signposts, and the advertisements. There were very few people here at this time of the evening and I had to wait a few minutes for a train.

At last one came rumbling along the tunnel and stopped at the platform. Once seated in the clean and comfortable new carriage, I heard two familiar sounds: the quivering double-pitched warning signal and then the hiss of the doors as they closed. Off the train went and I eventually alighted, after a change of lines, at the Place de Madeleine. A tall American lady who had been in the train now joined me in search of the Magic Bus.

We quickly found the two coaches parked beside the massive church and we boarded one that was not very full. We eased back our reclining seats and, at half past nine, we were driven off through the suburbs, leaving the wonderful city centre behind. Savouring Paris to the last, I gazed out of the window at the distinctive buildings, the shops, the boulevards and the streets, until the apartment blocks, offices and factories began to appear.

So that was it! Goodbye Paris, and goodbye France! I had spent a good five weeks in the country and, although I had been disappointed by some parts of it (mainly due to inclement weather), I had thoroughly enjoyed my first exposure to French culture, people, art, architecture, and scenery. Ambling through Paris earlier today, with nothing in particular to do, had been a very pleasant way to finish this wonderful trip. I realized that I would have to return soon.