

Touring and tasting at the famous champagne houses is top of the list for many visitors, but the region also offers much to discover in its colorful history, gastronomy and arts.



Photos by ANN N. YUNGMEYER | Special to The Roanoke Times

Visitors to France's Pommery cellars are seen in shadow, tasting the house champagnes.

A visit to Champagne offers plenty of pop

By Ann N. Yungmeyer
Special to The Roanoke Times

Holiday cheer may call for celebrating with a glass of bubbly. But the drink of celebration gets a toast of its own.

The French are often admired for their savoir-faire, and making champagne is a prime example of such know-how. The centuries-old method “chamenoise” for producing sparkling wine is a hallmark of the region of Northeastern France; and this year, UNESCO has added the “Champagne Hillsides, Houses and Cellars” to the World Heritage list.

UNESCO's recognition turns attention to the cultural landscape where the legendary history of champagne began, three centuries ago. Stories are revealed of winemakers nurturing a diverse terroir, overcoming bottles exploding, and mastering effervescence — and of pioneering merchants who helped develop Champagne's global reputation.

Touring and tasting at the famous champagne houses is top of the list for many visitors, but the region also offers much to discover in its colorful history, gastronomy and arts. On my first visit to the area, I focused on key attractions near the principal cities of Epernay and Reims.

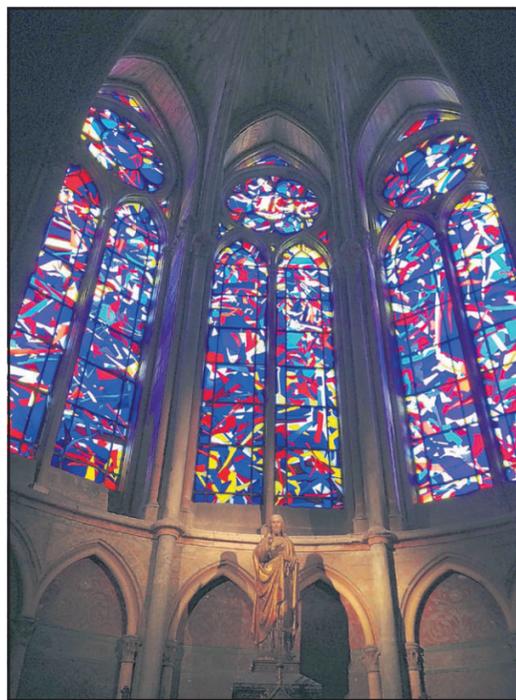
Discover cities, scenery and village charm

The medieval village of Hautvillers, known as the “cradle of Champagne,” is a quaint, hillside retreat overlooking the vines, where the Benedictine Monk Dom Pérignon spent decades perfecting Champagne winemaking techniques. He was cellarer of the Abbey of Hautvillers from 1668 to his death in 1715, and his tomb rests in the abbey church.

Whether one chooses to go by hot air balloon, bike, bus, plane, or renting an ultra-mini electric Twizy car, the transportation options for seeing the vineyards and villages are plentiful. Epernay Tourism office rents bikes for exploring the Marne Valley bike paths, but we aimed high for the best views and took a scenic plane ride with Aeroclub Plivot — a memorable experience with commentary by the pilot, a grape grower himself.

Turning our taste to gastronomy, we ventured out in the countryside

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



Clockwise from top left: Reims Cathedral window designs by German artist Imi Knoebel, dedicated as a gesture for the cathedral's destruction during WWI and a symbol of peace between Germany and France. A scenic roundabout in the charming village of Hautvillers, known as the “cradle of Champagne.” A tour with Bus en Vignes offers a drive along country roads and an epicurean feast.

Holiday extravaganza and Christmas markets in Champagne

Noël de Champagne brings a variety of festive events and holiday markets to towns and villages across the region. Among the favorite celebrations is Epernay's magical **Habits de Lumière** (Dressed in Light) along the elegant Avenue of Champagne. The **three-day festival, Dec. 11-13**, celebrates the region's culinary art and cultural heritage featuring animated light shows, orchestras, fireworks, champagne bars, chef demonstrations and a vintage car parade. The city of Reims holds one of the largest **Christmas markets** in Europe **through Dec. 27**, with more than 125 vendors in traditional wooden stalls. The artisan market takes place in the festively lit pedestrian zone of the city center, with entertainment for children, concerts, carolers and food stalls. A Ferris wheel ride offers unique views of the historic Reims Cathedral; and highlighting the season, its famous sound and light show, “Dream of Colors,” illuminates the cathedral facades.

If you go

Air France flies direct from Washington-Dulles to Paris, and Reims is a 45-minute high-speed train ride. The region offers a variety of accommodations and Michelin-starred restaurants including foodie favorite, L'Assiette Champenoise. www.reims-tourism.com/, <http://en.ot-epernay.com/>

EXCURSIONS CALENDAR

DAY TRIPS

Dec. 7
The Hotel Roanoke Fashion for Evergreens & Buffet Lunch

The City of Salem Parks and Recreation Department is sponsoring this trip for seniors. Thirty trees will be on display decorated by local artists, florists and businesses. Visitors will be able to vote for their favorite tree through Dec. 19. The trees will remain on display through New Year's Day. A buffet lunch in the Regency Room will follow. The cost is \$25 per person. The group will depart from the Senior Center at 10:30 a.m. For more information, call 375-3054.

NEW!
Dec. 8

Christmas at the Biltmore House
Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip for ages 55 and up. Treat yourself to the beauty and holiday decorations at this property in Asheville, North Carolina. An audio self-guided tour is included in the fee so that you may experience more of the detail of the history of Biltmore and the Vanderbilts. Lunch is on your own in the Stable Cafe. You will also enjoy a visit to the Biltmore winery. The price of \$109 per person includes breakfast biscuit, admission ticket to the winery, bus transportation and escort. For more information, call 387-6078.

Dec. 13
Wohlfahrt Haus Dinner Theatre

Join the Joyful Journey Travel Club at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Daleville for a trip to the theater's Christmas program. The cost of \$69 per person includes the bus, show, meal, all tips and taxes. The bus will pull out promptly at 12:20 p.m. from the Kroger store parking lot across from St. Mark's. Contact Julia Greer at 330-7933 for more information.

NEW!
Dec. 16

Holiday Spectacular at Wohlfahrt Haus Dinner Theatre
Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip for ages 55 and up. The event will be packed with Christmas songs, dance numbers, costumes and a nativity scene. The price per person is \$73, which includes matinee theatre ticket, lunch, bus transportation and escort. For more information, call 387-6078.

NEW!
Dec. 19

Cowboy Christmas — Horseback Riding Trip
Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip for ages 5 to adult. Ride along through the scenic countryside and celebrate the holiday season with your family at Reba Farm Inn. We'll first craft-up edible ornaments to be hung on a secluded, trailside Christmas tree reached by means of a horseback ride. We'll then ride over to Reba Farm Inn, enjoy the decorations, warm up by the fire, and enjoy a hot and hearty cowboy-style meal. Conclude the day on horseback, with a ride back to the stables. No experience necessary. The price per person is \$60, which includes transportation, lunch, helmets and all tack. Children must be accompanied by an adult. For more information, call 387-6078.

NEW!
Dec. 27

Christmas at the Greenbrier & Homestead
Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip to the Homestead in Hot Springs and the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. Passengers can take self-guided tours of the historic resorts. There will be a picture stop at Falling Springs Falls and then an all-inclusive lunch at the Mason Jar Restaurant in White Sulphur Springs. After lunch, the group will head to the Greenbrier. The price per person is \$79 and includes roundtrip motorcoach transportation, an all-inclusive lunch at the Mason Jar Restaurant, visit to the Homestead Resort, visit to the Greenbrier Resort, picture stop at Falling Springs Falls, picture stop at Humpback Covered Bridge and a tour host. Passengers can board the bus at the Clearbrook Walmart, U.S. 220, Roanoke; or at the Bonsack Walmart, U.S. 460, Roanoke; and at locations along the way. For more information, call 473-8326 or 366-2888.

OVERNIGHTERS

Dec. 7-9
Savannah, Georgia

Blacksburg Parks and Recreation is sponsoring this holiday trip to Savannah. The price is \$359 for residents; \$369 for nonresidents. Single

rates are also available. The price includes motor coach transportation, two nights' hotel accommodations, two breakfasts, two dinners, a guided tour of historic Savannah, a performance at Savannah Historic Theatre, a home tour and holiday shopping opportunities. Call 961-1134 for more information.

Dec. 12-13
Christmas Train to Washington, D.C.

Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip. DAY 1: The group will travel from Roanoke to Lynchburg by motor-coach. In Lynchburg, passengers will board an Amtrak train for a scenic excursion through Charlottesville, Culpepper, Manassas and Alexandria. It crosses the Potomac River and arrives at Union Station, where passengers can eat lunch and visit the shops. At dusk, the group will visit various monuments and memorials as they are illuminated, stop by the White House and view the lit Christmas Tree on the lawn. DAY 2: Passengers will visit the Smithsonian Museums of their choice. The price per person is \$259, double; \$254, triple; \$249, quad; and \$299, single. The price includes roundtrip motorcoach transportation, ticket on Amtrak from Lynchburg to Washington, D.C., one night's lodging, breakfast at hotel, transportation to monuments, memorials and Smithsonians, sightseeing as listed and a tour host. Seats on the bus are assigned in the order that payment is received. Full payment is due when reservations are made. For more information, call 473-8326 or 366-2888.

2016 TRIPS

Jan. 16-23
Ski Trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming

The Roanoke Ski Club is sponsoring this trip for members. The cost is \$1,647 and includes a five-day ski lift ticket, hotel room for double occupancy in the town of Jackson, daily breakfast, all transportation for group, group airline tickets for round trip from Roanoke to Jackson Hole and return on Delta Airlines. Call 989-9305 for more information on the trip and how to become a club member.

Jan. 30-Feb. 6
Ski Trip to Big Sky — Montana

The Roanoke Ski Club is sponsoring a trip to Big Sky, including five-day lift tickets at Big Sky and Moonlight Basin ski resorts. The cost is \$1,947 per person (double occupancy) and includes air from Roanoke, accommodations at the Huntley Lodge, happy hour at Lone Peak Brewery, wine and cheese reception and more. Call 529-0804 or email renee.lavin819@gmail.com for more information.

March 16-22
California Rail Discovery

The City of Roanoke Parks and Recreation is sponsoring this trip. Discover the state of California featuring San Francisco, Lake Tahoe and the Napa Valley. Enjoy San Francisco and visit famous spots like the Golden Gate Bridge and Vista Point. Travel through the Napa Valley on board the Napa Valley Wine Train. Catch a view of the snowcapped mountains during the Sierra Nevada Rail Journey to Lake Tahoe. This tour includes six nights in first-class hotels; roundtrip airfare from Roanoke; nine meals; sightseeing and admission per itinerary; hotel transfers; baggage handling; motor coach transportation; and a professional tour director. The trip cost is \$2,645 per person/double occupancy; \$725 single supplement. A deposit of \$300 per person is due with registration. Final payment is due 75 days prior to departure date. Save \$100 per person with the early booking discount. Call 853-1027 for a more detailed itinerary; registration; and trip information.

March 19
Highland Maple Festival Bus Trip

Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip to Monterey. The group will view the process of tapping maple trees for syrup making. Festival Fare includes food vendors with local specialties, more than 160 artists and crafters, clogging groups, folk singers and story tellers. The price per person is \$69 and includes roundtrip motorcoach transportation, Hardee's sausage biscuit and juice on departure, ticket to Highland Center Arts and Crafts Show, sugar camp tour, dinner at Country Cafe and a tour host. The full amount is due when the reservation is made. Seats on the bus are assigned in the order that payment is received. The bus will depart at 6:30 a.m. from the Clearbrook Walmart, U.S. 220, Roanoke; and at 7 a.m. from the Bonsack Walmart, U.S. 460, Roanoke. The return time is about 8:15 p.m. to Roanoke. For more information, call 473-8326 or 366-2888.

March 26
Spring Mystery Trip

Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism is sponsoring this trip. Passengers will travel to some places that they have never been to on previous trips. Will it be north, south, east or west? Come and see. The price of \$69 per person includes roundtrip motorcoach transportation, an all-inclusive lunch, admission to all attractions and a tour host. Passengers can board the bus at the Bonsack Walmart, U.S. 460, Roanoke; at Food Lion, Exit 137, Salem; and at Hardee's, Exit 118, Christiansburg. For more information, call 473-8326 or 366-2888.

April 18-20
Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg & Smoky Mountains Show Trip

The City of Salem Parks and Recreation Department is sponsoring this trip for seniors. Spend three days and two nights in the Smoky Mountains dining, shopping and enjoying award-winning entertainment. The price is \$275 and includes charter transportation, lodging, two breakfast meals, two dinner meals and admission to attractions. For more information, call 375-3054.

April 20-May 1
Scotland and Northern Ireland

The Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring this trip, which will include Edinburgh, Inverness, Loch Ness, Loch Lomond in Scotland, and Belfast, the Giant's Causeway, Derry, the Ulster American Folk Park and Dublin in Ireland. The cost is \$4,149 per person, including air from Greensboro. Call 444-0033 for more information.

April 23
Belize; Cozumel, Mexico

The Dazzlin' Dames Red Hat Chapter 4652 is sponsoring this five-night cruise on Royal Caribbean's luxury ship "Independence of the Seas." Cruise rates start at \$640 per person (rates based on double occupancy); inside staterooms, \$640 per person; ocean view staterooms, \$975 per person; balcony staterooms, \$1,010 per person. For reservations and more information, call 798-9222, 488-4884 or 977-0505.

May 4-15
London, Paris and Rome

The Salem Museum is sponsoring a trip to these three major cities plus the Swiss lake region, Pisa, Florence and Tuscany. The price is \$4,640 per person based on double occupancy and includes air from Roanoke, accommodations, most meals transportation in Europe and more. For a brochure, call 982-2200.

May 13-15
Renfro Valley, Kentucky

This trip is being sponsored by Ferrum College Golden Panthers for alumni, parents and friends. The bus will depart from Rocky Mount with pickups in Roanoke and other points along the way. The group will stop for lunch at Tamarack near Beckley, West Virginia, and then head to the Fairfield Inn in Berea, Kentucky, for two nights. The return trip will include traveling through eastern Tennessee with a stop in Sevierville for a lunch break and a visit to the Russell Stover Candy Outlet. Costs for the trip are \$395, single occupancy; \$310, double occupancy; and \$280, triple occupancy. Two nights' lodging, two evening shows at the Renfro Valley Entertainment Center, a visit to the Shaker Village at Herrordsburg, Kentucky, and one dinner are included. A \$50 per person deposit is required with reservations. For information and to make reservations, call 365-4221 or email sjamison@ferrum.edu.

May 19-23
Cuba
(Orientation Meeting — Dec. 14, 2015)

The Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring this trip. **Dec. 14, 2015:** Attend an orientation meeting from 5 to 6 p.m., Roanoke Regional Chamber Board Room, 210 S. Jefferson St., Roanoke. The orientation meeting is free. Please RSVP by contacting Judy Chambliss at 983-0700 ext. 100 or emailing business@RoanokeChamber.org. The cost of the trip is \$3,195 (based on double occupancy) and includes round-trip international airfare, first class accommodations and more.

June 9-17
America's Canyon Country

The Salem Museum is sponsoring a trip to visit three states and four national parks. Bryce, Glen Zion and the mighty Grand Canyon join a list of national parks and monuments that will

delight and amaze. Price is \$3,149 per person and includes air from Roanoke, accommodations, 14 meals, sightseeing, transportation and much more. Call Freda at 989-6373 or email FredaHarrison@hotmail.com for a brochure.

July 23-31 or Aug. 7
BOOKBAG SANTA trip to Belize

Each person brings two boxes of school supplies on the plane. Approximate cost is \$1,300 for plane, hotel and food. The second week comes to about \$200. Mayan ruins, scuba, snorkeling, sailing, river floats, boat trips and more. For more information, call Gary Hunt at 342-2083 or bookbagsanta@verizon.net; www.bookbagsanta.com.

NEW!
Sept. 9-15
Kings Wharf, Bermuda

The Senior Social Travel Club is sponsoring this cruise. The group will sail on Royal Caribbean cruise line, Grandeur of the Seas, out of Baltimore. The price per person of \$1,069 interior stateroom and \$1,169 ocean view stateroom includes roundtrip transportation from Roanoke and Bedford to Baltimore, one night's lodging in the Baltimore area, 5 nights' lodging on the ship, taxes, fee and port expenses, meals and entertainment on the ship and a tour host. For more information, call 366-2888 or 293-1124.

Sept. 10-20
Romantic Rhine and Mosel River Cruise

The Senior Social Travel Club is sponsoring this deluxe river cruise on the mighty Rhine, Europe's longest river. Enjoy 11 days and 23 meals. Travel aboard the brand new riverboat, Amadeus II, visiting iconic ports, sampling the cuisine and absorbing the local, old-world atmosphere. The seven-night cruise plus two extra days in Lucerne, Switzerland is \$4,594 per person and includes air from Roanoke and most expenses. Call Freda at 989-6373 for more information and a brochure.

Oct. 7-15
Danube Delights by Riverboat

Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring this river cruise. Cruise from Nuremberg to Budapest on the Emerald Sky, one of Europe's newest riverboats. Special group prices start at \$2,345 per person and include the cruise with all meals, sightseeing, transfers, all taxes and gratuities. Upgrades are available beginning at \$90 per person. Air fare from Roanoke will be available by mid-November 2015. A \$500 deposit is due with registration. Space is extremely limited so call today for more information and a detailed itinerary at 444-0033.

Oct. 18-26
Travel to Pompeii and the Amalfi Coast (Orientation Meeting — Dec. 14, 2015)

The Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring this nine-day, seven-night tour of the Amalfi Coast, Ravello, Naples, Salerno, Pasternum, Pompeii, Rome and more. **Dec. 14, 2015:** Attend an orientation meeting from 6 to 7 p.m., Roanoke Regional Chamber Board Room, 210 S. Jefferson St., Roanoke. The orientation meeting is free. Please RSVP by contacting Judy Chambliss at 983-0700 ext. 100 or emailing business@RoanokeChamber.org. The cost of the trip is \$3,099 (based on double occupancy) and includes round-trip international airfare flying from Dulles, first-class accommodations and more.

Nov. 1-9
Best of Italy

The City of Roanoke Parks and Recreation is sponsoring this trip. Visit Florence and Rome and enjoy famous spots like St. Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel. Travel through Italy's Tuscany region, which is packed with some of the world's most recognizable Renaissance-era art and architecture. This tour includes seven nights in first-class hotels; roundtrip airfare from Roanoke; 10 meals; sightseeing and admission per itinerary; hotel transfers; baggage handling; motor coach transportation; and a professional tour director. The trip cost is \$3,795 per person/double occupancy; \$650 single supplement. A deposit of \$500 per person is due with registration. Final payment is due 75 days prior to departure date. Save \$200 per person with the early booking discount when your deposit is received by May 31. Call 853-1027 for a more detailed itinerary; registration; and trip information.

We welcome trips organized by schools, clubs, churches and other nonprofits. Send to travel@roanoke.com or call 981-3340.

FROM 6

for a gourmet lunch with Bus en Vignes, prepared in a mobile kitchen that rolls along through the vineyards. Our mobile multi-course feast of unique creations began with escargot on a bed of seaweed, followed by soup, buttery local perch and avocado mousse layered in milk chocolate for dessert. The bus also offers a mobile chocolate-making and wine-pairing workshop.

The historic city of Reims is a highlight of any visit to the region with its famous cathedral where all the kings of France have been crowned. Countless restorations over time have left a symbiosis of old and new in the cathedral's stained glass windows. Featured in the chapels are designs by Marc Chagall and German artist Imi Knoebel, who dedicated his work in 2011, as a gesture for the cathedral's destruction during WWI and a symbol of peace between Germany and France.

Adjacent to the cathedral, the Tau Palace, previously the residence of

bishops and archbishops of Reims, is now a museum that features a remarkable collection of holy objects and rare royal treasures. Among the most precious items are the talisman of Charlemagne and the jeweled chalice of coronation, believed to date to the 12th century.

Sip and learn
Champagne's legends and lore

Epernay is home to the prestigious Avenue of Champagne, the seat of many big-name champagne houses and, below the street, a network of historic cellars that stretches for many miles, where more than 200,000,000 bottles of champagne are kept at a constant cool temperature and high humidity level.

Prominently featured on the avenue, Moët & Chandon is newly reopened for tours, following a year of extensive renovation. We walked from our convenient Hotel Jean Moët and were greeted by a statue in the courtyard of Dom Pérignon and a wall of portraits of the Moët family found-

ers, before our guided tour led us through the maze of cellars, the largest in the region. Visitors can specify and pay accordingly for sampling traditional or Grand Vintage champagnes.

Among numerous champagne houses in Reims, we chose to tour Vranken-Pommery, known for its emphasis on art in the ancient cellars and in the Villa Demoiselle, a restored mansion well worth a visit for lovers of Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles, stained glass and sculptural art. After touring the mansion, we descended 116 steps, 100 feet underground to enter the caves — true underground cathedrals that were once chalk quarries dug by the Gallo-Romans nearly 2000 years ago. Some contain large-scale art installations and lighting effects, and the storage galleries are fancifully marked with plaques showing worldwide export destinations for Pommery champagnes.

With a branding focus and attractive presentation, the big-name houses offer plenty of pop, but many boutique producers give



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Champagne house Vranken-Pommery in Reims offers tours and tastings.

informal tours if visitors call ahead. The personable owner of Domaine Tournay in the village of Bouzy was pleased to show us his modern facility and share tips for tasting the subtle flavors of his blends.

Champagne's inscription on the World Heritage list comes at a time when sparkling wines, in gen-

eral, are wildly popular with increased availability of choices from around the world, including Prosecco, Cava and Sekt. Though Champagne produces only about 10 percent of the world's sparkling wines, its producers have stayed focused on preserving the revered methods and protecting the essence of their

unique terroir. The people of Champagne are extremely pleased that UNESCO brings their traditions and heritage into view, and the recognition surely calls for celebrating often with a bottle of bubbly.

Ann Yungmeyer is a freelance writer in Kingsport, Tenn.