

Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

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FRANCE DROPS MASKS AND THE PASSE SANITAIRE, UK ABANDONS ALL

Despite all the belly aching, the gnashing of teeth, the pounding of fists, the flag waving and hands off my body signs, the American anti-science, conspiracy laden, QAnon, types just don't understand how easy they've had it. Quite honestly, the American response to the Pandemic has been very minimal, very patchy and very polarized.

The one thing that America did, that we seem to have no problem doing anywhere at anytime, is throw money at the issue. I'm not going to return my stimulus checks and neither are the million Americans who died from Covid in 2020, 2021 and 2022. Lest we forget.

I like to travel because it offers a view on how it's "done over there." Compared to America, the French took a totally different approach to Covid. They endured a much stricter lock down, they encouraged citizens to get vaccinated and when the unreceptive didn't, they required a digital pass proving your vaccination, to access much of the optional venues in society. These were for places like museums, theaters and restaurants. The "right" to visit a restaurant or cafe was seen by the obstinate as the biggest affront to their freedom. (Why do some people think that individual

freedom exempts them from societal responsibility?)

This French system was effective. They offer free vaccinations to all French citizens 5 and up and they've vaccinated 79.4% of their population (the United States is at 65%). The Passe Sanitaire wasn't without controversy - plenty of French citizens recoiled at the notion and shook their fists at President Macron. He shrugged and famously said, "I want to make it difficult for people who refuse to get vaccinated." Political pundits noted that the vocal anti-vaxxers in France weren't going to vote for Macron anyway. Mr. Macron is expected to cruise to another victory when French national elections are held next month.

I traveled twice in France during the pandemic (wow, look at that, writing in hindsight...). I traveled in summer of 2021 and again just 10 days ago. The country never felt unsafe. Mask wearing was dutiful, vaccination status was checked, and availability of rapid testing was widespread, street corners, train stations, most pharmacies, and inexpensive. Neither I nor the sixteen people I traveled with got sick in any way.

On Sunday, March 6th, when

checking into my early morning flight to Amsterdam, the Air France ticket agent told me that on March 14th they are doing away with mask requirements and also the Passe Sanitaire. I was surprised; she was happy. She noted that her one year old had never seen people's faces. She was looking forward to shopping for lipstick and to seeing smiles again.

But she also said, *la bise*, the French greeting of kissing cheeks, at least for her, was done! No more, she said. She'll happily shed the mask but kissing is finished.

This is a momentous moment. I'm not sure I trust it. I've written about Covid more in this newsletter than about any other topic. I, too, am ready to be done but I, too, have been changed. I might always wear a mask on an airplane. In my mind, it no longer feels stupid. It's moved in my head from embarrassing to smart.

Sara and I are plotting many more trips to France. If you are traveling to France in the future you'll find a changed country too. We've all just lived through an amazing time and like many times in life that we don't choose, I'm bewildered at the memory of the event and am ready to move on. Bring on the lipstick!

INTRODUCING RELAX COMPANION

Astute readers of this newsletter will have noted that in the previous column I said I was in France 10 days ago. And indeed I was in France. Rick Egge and I took a brief trip to Strasbourg to look at a canal boat that is for sale.

Let me explain. In the 11 years that Sara and I have been taking canal boat trips in France (and one in the Netherlands) I always get to the same point at the end of the trip. As I make the final turn into the rental boat base, I look longingly toward the canal yet traveled and think, "I wonder what it's like over there?" Alternatively, during the week, we might find a space along a canal where we'd like to spend another day or more, but we are constrained by our rental contract and the need to return the boat. Seven days is all you get. I can get more by planning more trips but... it's never, ever, enough.

So a few years ago I started thinking about what life would be like if we owned our own boat. We could explore all the waterways and we could stay anywhere we wanted for as long as we wanted (well...sort of). So I started planning, plotting and scheming. I started crunching numbers, checking regulations and searching for boats. I've spent about 4 years thinking, learning and dreaming.

As in any good plan it's best to share risks and rewards with others. Sara and I first talked about owning a canal boat with Rick and Carla Egge while zinging along on the high speed train from Paris to Montpellier in the late summer of 2019. Carla looked at me with a

devilish twinkle and said, "Sure I'm in." Rick heard, "wife, boat, yes" and needed no more convincing.

We came home from two weeks on the Canal du Midi and I got right to work. The pandemic made our plans more complicated but last year Rick, Carla, Sara and I spent three days in the Netherlands shopping for boats.

On that trip we learned: boats with three cabins and three bathrooms ("heads" on a boat) are extremely rare, boat shopping at the end of the cruising season offers limited options, and we may need more money than we thought.

Upon returning home from that trip I knew just about everything I needed to know which was we need at least one more partner.

Paul and Dawn Loraas have taken two trips with us and are set to go again to Cognac this June (a make up trip from 2020). When we met with them in November to figure out the dates for the Cognac trip, I mentioned that we were seeking partners to go in on a canal boat with us. Dawn and Paul, sitting on our couch, looked at each other, Paul turned to Sara and I and said, "We can do that."

I showed them listings for two Dutch built steel boats we had our eye on. A Super Van Craft owned by a Belgian and kept in France and a Moulder kept on the Canal du Midi in Toulouse. Dawn said, "I like either one of these."

My charge was set. Over the winter we've been forming our partnership, I've been contacting boat brokers and we've been meeting to discuss this and that.

That culminated in Rick and I last week visiting the **Relax Companion**. [Click this link to see the listing on the broker's website.](#)

The Relax Companion is a German built steel canal boat. It has three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a nice bright pilot house, galley, inside and outside steering and a large upper deck for lounging, and eating outside. It checks many of the boxes on our wish list.

On Friday the 4th of March I signed the purchase agreement. The boat is registered in France and we will initially keep it in Strasbourg.

This means that Sara and I will be doing many, many, more trips to France and we invite you to join us! We will truly be captains of our own vessel and we hope to welcome all of you on board starting in Spring 2023 as we continue to explore Europe's inland waterways.

