

### **3 Hour Houdan to Bourdonné Tour**

Like all of the tours offered by French Mystique Tours this is yet another amazing bike tour in the countryside near Paris that will show you a lovely medieval town, beautiful countryside landscapes (like, really beautiful) and charming, quaint French villages which all evoke that romantic vision you have in your head when you are imagining your dream vacation of visiting France. I know because I always had the same vision/dream in my imagination before I moved to France and I designed all of my tours with those criteria in mind.

However, this tour offers something a bit different than most of my other tours since you will have the option of dining in a restaurant on this tour, as opposed to the normal picnic lunch offered on most of my other countryside day trips. Allow me to take a few minutes to explain what is so unique about the restaurant dining experience you could have on this tour. On any of my tours I could show you a wonderful restaurant with great, traditional French food which you would definitely enjoy. But since French Mystique Tours specializes in showing you things "off the beaten path" I wanted to present you with a truly unique and quintessentially French dining experience. The kind of dining experience that even French folks are looking for and yet find so hard to discover.

Well, there is no need to research any further to find such a dining experience because I have found just such a restaurant. And better yet, it's located in the middle of nowhere far from Paris so some trendy Parisian foodie blogger appealing to the masses is never going to discover or write about this restaurant. I will admit that I found out about this restaurant from a not-so-well-known restaurant review website so I can't claim to have discovered this little gem. But despite it having been exposed to a large internet audience, its out of the way location should protect it from overexposure. I feel confident that its quirky charm and refreshing way of offering traditional French dishes, combined with its unique service and manner of ordering from the menu, will not become compromised and you'll surely be offered an experience rarely (if at all) found elsewhere in France (and trust me, I've been living in France since 2009 and have a French born and raised wife so I know what I'm talking about).

With all the temptation and allusions of a wondrous French dining experience having just been explained, I'm going to nevertheless revert back to a photographic illustration of the bike touring experience itself because that is still the star attraction of this bike tour. At the end of this tour summary I will further explain about the tantalizing restaurant dining option noted above but first and foremost it is necessary to inform you of the fantastic bike touring experience you can expect even if you choose not to dine at the restaurant so wondrously described above. So have a look below for a visual presentation of this tour and then afterwards there will be further information about your option to dine at this most unusual restaurant.

We start our tour arriving by train with our bikes in the pretty little medieval town of Houdan (which I can assure you is completely unknown to Parisian/French folks).





After our introductory tour riding around Houdan we'll leave all things medieval behind and focus on experiencing the beauty of the French countryside.



For the next several photos I'll show you (in sequence) what you will see on your tour until we arrive in the little village of Bourdonné (where if you choose you can dine in the restaurant I've mentioned).



Whenever I start researching a potential new tour I never know what I might find once I go out biking to do my exploratory research. Even if I've been thorough in my research (and that is guaranteed) there are still always those things that pop up from time to time that I wasn't expecting to see. And thus, here is one of those things I wasn't expecting to see. I didn't know I was about to discover one of the highest standing sculpted trees on the planet.



It looks pretty cool in photos but it's even more cool when you're standing next to it. And just as cool was the fact that the sculpted tree stood on the outskirts of a tiny little village that was equally as beautiful as the artwork that adorned its entrance. The visitor to this little village is greeted by a lovely former mill (now a private residence). Here we enter the village.



And the picturesque mill (residence).



As I was standing there taking pictures of the pretty mill/residence I noticed that a little old lady suddenly appeared in the window and was suspiciously glaring at me while I was obviously taking photos of her house. I was in a hurry so I pedaled off before explaining myself but I'm familiar with this kind of small town experience where strangers may initially be met with suspicion. I know for sure that if I had smiled and waved at her she undoubtedly would have exited her house and greeted me and once I explained myself it is very likely that I would have received the warmest of welcomes and been invited inside for tea (this has actually happened to me on more than one occasion, I swear). Anyway, let's see a couple more photos of the "suspicious old lady's village" and then some more countryside photos.





At this point we arrive at the outskirts of the lovely little village of Bourdonné.







If you'd like then this is the point during the tour at which you could dine at the amazing restaurant I previously described (and which is further described below). But if you choose not to dine at the restaurant then we'll continue on from Bourdonné back to Houdan.



After leaving Bourdonné we'll cycle through the countryside.





And we finally arrive back in Houdan to cycle through town on our way to the the train station to catch our train back to Paris.





This ends the most marvelous and beautiful countryside tour I have promised those of you who wish to sample the visual delights of a dreamy biking day trip to the countryside just outside of Paris.

But for those who are hungry for more, then now it's time to further delve into the culinary delights that await the gastronomically curious folks seeking that "out of the ordinary" dining experience you've been anticipating.

This is the point at which I'm going to drop all the superlatives and speak in plain and clear simple language because despite all of my attempts to sound like a world renowned food critic (and certainly I am incredibly intelligent and my gastronomic critique undeniably has you all salivating with expectations of extraordinary French culinary.....um....."goodies") I am truly a peasant at heart. And peasantry, my friends, is what you are going to experience. But I don't mean that in a "McDonald's" sense of the word, but rather in the true essence of what dining and filling your belly should be all about. You will be dining at "Chez Erwan" and 'Erwan' is the guy who will be cooking for you.

Despite my description of 'peasantry' you may be seated next to a top level CEO while dining. Let me explain, and I think the best way to explain is to let you watch the following video. The video is in French but even if you don't understand or speak French I think you'll get the essence of what's going on here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRlmwChq1uk>

'Erwan' is the owner/chef of this restaurant. Don't expect to find a website for his restaurant because there isn't a website. He has a facebook page but even there don't expect to find a menu, or much else. Here's how it works. Erwan does all the cooking. He is the sole chef. The menu is fixed (I'll give you that info below) so you have fixed options to choose from. But, he does offer one or two "plat du jour" (meaning specialty dishes of the day) and those depend on the ingredients he has purchased for the day. He cooks everything on hot stones in a wood fired brick oven. As such, it's a pretty meat and potatoes based menu (literally) so don't expect veggies or salad. They don't exist. **If you have special dietary restrictions this is not a good dining option for you. Your dietary restrictions will not be accommodated.**

Sounds pretty Spartan and restrictive, right? Actually no, it's neither. You just have to be willing to have limited menu expectations and if you've gotten to that point then here's where the fun starts. The "entrées" (appetizers) range in price from 6-8 euros, the "plats" (main courses) range in price from 10-20 euros and the desserts range in price from 6-8 euros. So it's pretty inexpensive, especially if you don't want to eat much.

But what's unusual in regards to ordering are the "help yourself" options, which pertain to the wine and cheese options. The best way to explain is to tell you what happened on my first visit.

I called ahead of time and made a reservation for just myself. When I showed up I walked in (alone) and was met by none other than Erwan himself. After briefly speaking to him in French he noted my non-French accent and switched to English and asked me where I was from. It was at this point that all of a sudden an entire professional film crew showed up and a camera (like a real Hollywood style camera) was shoved in my face and a boom "mic" was thrust in front of my mouth and I realized I was being filmed as part of a news piece for the French national tv station "France 2" (if you're American think ABC, NBC or CBS). "Oh great" (I thought to myself), "I haven't showered or shaved today and I just rode 30km on my bike and I'm all sweaty and disheveled and now I'm going to appear on the French national news". I was approached by the film crew afterwards who gave me a prospective date on which I could expect to be "exposed" as part of their news piece on the restaurant Chez Erwan but as of this date (February 20, 2020) I still haven't seen myself "exposed" on French national tv.

Anyway, after my brief moment of celebrity I was seated at a table and shown the menu. Erwan was busy being interviewed and filmed and all the while kept singing out loud and speaking with this customer and that customer. It was pretty amusing. The waiter came and took my order and I inquired about a glass of wine. "No problem", I was told, "just go to the table behind you and help yourself to whatever is there". So I go to the table and there are like 20 bottles of every kind of wine there, of which about 4 or 5 had been opened. I'm no wine expert but after having lived in France for a decade I'm somewhat familiar with the more "classy" names of French wine so I noted there was an unopened bottle of "Gevrey Chambertin". This is a really good wine. I asked if I could open the bottle and pour myself a glass and the waiter says "Ask Erwan". So I ask Erwan and he says "Sure, help yourself". So I did. No matter what wine you drink, it's 5€ a glass. And you just sort of keep track of how many glasses you drink and at the end of your meal the cashier will ask you how many glasses you drank. You know, like the honor system.



But, if you want to choose a specific full bottle of wine you are told to go look in the "wine cellar" and select whatever you want (you just help yourself). The wine cellar is a room next to the dining room and in it there are several hundred (?thousands?) of bottles of wine, each with a price tag. You select your bottle of wine and you pay 10€ more than what is shown on the price tag. Doesn't matter which wine you choose, and there were bottles ranging in price from 5€ to over 100€. After my meal I wandered into the "wine cellar" to see how much a full bottle of "Gevrey Chambertin" cost (I had two glasses) and it was priced at 45€ for a full bottle (meaning 55€ if I had selected a full bottle).

Well, that was a bit strange since I helped myself to two glasses of one of the most expensive bottles on offer (other wines on the "help yourself" table generally ranged in price from 8€ to 20€, not including the 10€ surcharge). Of course, I also wanted a cheese plate after my meal and again, I was directed to a table behind me with an abundance of cheese's from every region of France and was told to help myself and that a cheese plate costs 8€. But it seems you can just keep helping yourself to as much cheese as you'd like. Or, you can return again and again to keep getting more cheese. It still costs 8€. No one is really keeping track of these things. They just ask you when you get to the cash register what you ate/drank and accept your word and then you pay. I had a plate of one of the signature sliced country hams ("jambon") for my entrée (an artisanal Corsican ham) and I must admit that the plate was more than copious, as in overflowing with jambon. For the "plat" (main course) I had the farm raised chicken with its side of potatoes (also copious), plus two glasses of wine, the cheese plate and a dessert (I think I had the chocolate mousse) and though I can't remember what the whole bill totalled I remember being surprised at how inexpensive it was compared to the quantity I was given. But more important than quantity is quality. At Chez Erwan the menu is not extensive for two reasons. 1) Because Erwan does all the cooking himself everything must be cooked (and cooked quickly) on a hot stone in the wood fired brick oven. 2) Erwan keeps a limited menu because he is focused on sourcing quality ingredients.

I was seated at a table next to a couple of French guys (of course I was, it's France after all) and we all had good conversation with each other and the whole restaurant was full of people having a great time conversing with each other. But I was kind of the novelty in the restaurant because here I was, this weird long haired American guy on a bike, in the middle of nowhere in France dining all alone in this completely off the beaten path restaurant so I sort of made a spectacle of myself without even trying and attracted a lot of attention by not really doing much of anything (this happens to me a lot).

After my meal the waiter, waitress and Erwan himself were all super nice to me. Now this is what's important for you, my potential dining customer. I spoke to Erwan and explained about the tour I was creating and how I wanted to offer a dining experience at his restaurant to my customers. Not only was he receptive to my idea but further, he directed my attention to an adjacent window and pointed to an enclosed courtyard and said I and my customers could store our bikes in his courtyard for safekeeping while we dined. He was more than friendly and accommodating to me and if you are seeking a once in a lifetime true "dining experience" like no other on your trip to France then I can honestly say that you will have such an experience if you decide to do this tour with French Mystique Tours. Here is a picture of me with Erwan, followed by a picture of Erwan and the whole film crew :



