

# Self drive holidays

## SD10 the Champagne route

8-day & 7-night tour



### Itinerary

#### Day 1 - Arrival at Epernay.

Welcome to Epernay, at the heart of the world's most prestigious vineyard. Around you, 20,000 hectares of vines, under your feet, more than 200 million bottles ageing in 110 kilometres of caves hollowed out of the chalky rock... let the party begin! A visit to **Epernay**, and the champagne cellars. Since it was founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the town of Epernay has survived near destruction on several occasions, it has been pillaged and burnt more than 25 times during countless wars. It also suffered severe bomb damage during the two World Wars. Epernay has retained a few vestiges of its past: the **Portail St Martin** (St Martin's gate), the façade of the **Maison Louise de Savoie** (Louise of Savoie's house) and a few stunning 19<sup>th</sup> century town houses. However, Epernay is above all the majestic **Avenue de Champagne**, where the great Champagne production and sales houses are based. This avenue is bordered by numerous opulent-looking 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, in Renaissance and classic styles. You can visit one – or several – of the wine cellars where champagne is slowly being created in these underground galleries.

#### Day 2 - Cote des Blancs and the Coteaux du Sud d'Epernay.

This circuit will take you through the charming winemaking villages of the **Côte des Blancs**, so called because of the white (Chardonnay) grapevines planted here. You will leave Epernay, bypassing the **Mont Bernon** via **Chouilly**. This will take you to villages well known to Champagne lovers, **Cuis, Cramant, Avize, Oger, le Mesnil sur Oger, Vertus** and **Bergères les Vertus**, most of which boast magnificent churches dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, like the one in Vertus that is built on stilts above a spring. Once past **Bergère les Vertus**, you will climb up **Mont Aimé**, steeped in history – and tragedy. It was here that the **Blanche de Navarre** fortress rose up, of which only a few ruins remain, and where 183 Cathars (heretics in the eyes of the Catholic Church) were burnt on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1329. It was also the site of the incredible **Holy Alliance** display of military might (more than 500,000 men), staged by the Russian Tsar Alexander 1<sup>st</sup>, after the 1815 defeat of Napoleon and the French troops. Then you will climb back up towards **Gionges** and **Grauves** where the church houses a beautiful statue of the Blessed Virgin carved in a grape press screw, which leads the inhabitants to say, "The Grauves Virgin has performed more turns than miracles". From **Grauves**, you will discover the Coteaux Sud d'Epernay, the hills south of Epernay, and slowly make your way back to **Epernay**, crossing at least 10 villages, each more picturesque than the last: **Moslins** and the ruins of a Cistercian abbey, **Chavot-Courcourt** with its magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century chapel built on a hillock surrounded by vines, the **châteaux of Brugny Vaudancourt** and **Brugny**. During this fun walk, you will stop at a few local producers to discover – and enjoy – all the finesse, elegance and subtlety of the Côte des Blancs champagnes. Finally, we have suggestions for a few small walking routes for you to discover the vineyards...

### Day 3 - The Marne Valley, from Epernay to Dormans.

This circuit will take you around the favoured soils of Pinot Meunier, the grape variety that gives Champagne its fruity bouquet. The vines stretch as far as the eye can see towards Paris, on each side of the river on terraced hillsides, where villages, châteaux and churches cling to the sides. From **Epernay**, you will reach **Hautvillers**, the cradle of Champagne. This village is typical of the Champagne region, the houses bear handsome labels, then there is the abbey where Dom Perignon, the famous monk who improved the Champagne making processes, lived. You will walk along the Marne, crossing charming little villages such as **Cumières, Damery, Fleury la Rivière, Villiers sous Châtillon, Reuil** and discovering grandiose landscapes from the hilltops. You will reach the village of **Chatillon sur Marne**, birthplace of Pope Urban II and, at the foot of his immense statue that looks out over the vineyards; you will be able to see the entire valley. Then, you will continue walking through the villages of **Vaudières** (Gallo-Roman site), and **Verneuil** with its Medieval church, to reach **Dormans**, a small town that still bears the scars of fighting during the 1914-1918 war. You will then come back into **Epernay** via the valley's other side. You will pass through lovely, welcoming villages: **Troissy** and the old 'Amour Dieu' (Love of God) Cistercian abbey, **Mareuil le Port, Leuvigny, Festigny, Chêne la Reine** that owes its name to Blanche of Castille (who supposedly lost her comb at the foot of an oak tree...). The numerous rest stops will provide chances to visit a few wine cellars and meet the producers.

### Day 4 - La Montagne de Reims.

Vines cover every slope of the Reims Mountain, while the summit is covered with forests and grazing pastures. You will leave **Epernay** via **Dizy Champillon**, pausing at the lookout to admire for one last time Epernay, the Marne Valley and Côte des Blancs that stretches away to the horizon. You will reach **Ay** that was once sheltered by thick ramparts. Numerous French and foreign sovereigns owned wine domains and presses here. The undulating route will lead you to **Bouzy**, famous for its red wine, then to **Ambonnay** where you will discover its press that is more than 100 years old, its majestic fountain and the **St Réol church**. Taking small lanes, between plains and vines you will reach the **Verzy forest** with its famous '**Faux**' the old French name for the twisted beeches crowned by umbrella-shaped branches. Little is known about their origin. Then it is on to **Verzenay**, an unusual village nestled in the base of a small valley, bordered on one side by a windmill and on the other by a lighthouse, built by a winemaker as a publicity ploy and that has now become a museum focusing on vineyards. You will discover the "Grande Montagne" (Great Mountain), kingdom of Pinot Noir with its well-to-do villages. **Chigny les Roses** in particular bears the traces of Madame Pommery and her rose garden. This flower that grows abundantly in the vineyards is a warning sign for diseases that threaten the vines. This walk ends in the heart of the "Petite Montagne" (Little Mountain), which will astound you with the diversity of its churches, such as **Sacy** with its long, elegant spire or **Chamery** with its onion bell tower. You will climb up to the **St Lié Chapel** on the top of a hillock from which you can see the whole region, the vineyards and the town of **Reims** that you will reach via a few small villages.

### Day 5 - Visit Reims.

A town that will be forever remembered for its Champagne and its rich past, which can be seen in its varied and prestigious architectural heritage. For example the **Notre Dame Cathedral**, without question a Gothic work of art, or the **St Rémi Basilica** where Clovis, first king of the Franks, was baptised in 501, or the **Palais de Tau**, or even the **Reims Abbey-Museum**. The town has several museums, town houses and beautiful, grand squares that you can discover during your walk. Reims is also Champagne. The wine cellars and big name labels are to be found around the **Champs de Mars** area and on the chalky slopes of the **Butte St Nicaise**, riddled with galleries often hollowed out by the Romans to extract stone. More than 250 kilometres of galleries house hundreds of millions of bottles from the famous **Mumm, Ruinart, Pommery, Veuve Cliquot-Ponsardin Champagne houses...** Cellar visits and tasting sessions will bring this day to a joyous close!

### Day 6 - The Massif de St Thierry and the Ardre valley

Vineyards and forest combine to create a magnificent world of green, in which lovely villages nestle. Discover **St Thierry** where you can admire the community chapel (12<sup>th</sup> century), the former chapter room with its beautiful sculpted capitals. A little further on, you can discover **Villers-Franqueux** and its mill, then **Hermonville**, a key settlement in medieval times. This village bears the traces of prosperous times past, with the fine **St Sauveur** church (mid 12<sup>th</sup> century). The **Cauroy-lès-Hermonville** church (early 12<sup>th</sup> century) is worth seeing, for its Romanesque panelled nave and its Champagne-style hall, as is the 19<sup>th</sup> century privately-owned **Château of Vaux-Varenes**. Passing by **Montigny-sur-Vesle**, to discover the "**Grotte de la Vierge**" (Virgin's Grotto), 500 metres from the village, our itinerary takes in vineyards, market gardens and former peat bogs, goes along the **Vesle** valley, to **Jonchery-sur-Vesle**.

After the **Château of Irval** (privately owned) and its lake, you will reach **Pévy**, where the Romanesque church with Gothic chancel houses a 15<sup>th</sup> century altarpiece. Stroll around and look at the village's washhouses, fountains and stone houses. In **Trigny**, a specially-designed viewpoint allows you to experience the best of the site's beauty. Below, the designated circuit through the lanes and back streets will reveal the charms of this flower-filled village, with its medieval ramparts. After **Trigny**, as you leave **Chenay**, at the foot of the Resistance monument, you will delight in a view over **Reims**, its cathedral and the different valleys. You will discover the superb quarries of **Châlons-sur-Vesle**, before reaching **Gueux**.

## Day 7 - Visit Troyes

This old town has a very rich history. **Troyes** was well known throughout the West in the 12<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the fairs held in the town, and at the time was a match for Paris. Certain tales recount that **Troyes** had no less than 120 bell towers! Today, the town still has 8 old churches and a magnificent cathedral that dominates the city's old quarter. Lose yourself in the maze of restored streets and alleys, many of which are pedestrianized, and admire this incomparable collection of timbered houses. Timbers, beams engraved with mottos, posts decorated with satirical sculptures, turrets... Every house is different, standing as testament to the genius and imagination of Medieval builders. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Troyes was one of the cradles of sculpture and glass painting with its famous "Ecole Troyenne" (Troyes School) that developed a precious art of elegance and beauty, the last bastion of Gothic art. You will find sculptures that are Troyenne works of art in the churches and the cathedral. Imposing and surprising, a symbol of the flamboyant Gothic movement, the latter is one of the largest in France. Its 1,500m<sup>2</sup> of stained-glass windows relate the entire history of this unique art from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They tell the story of the great biblical scenes, and also bring to life the daily existence of the Champagne region's inhabitants during the Renaissance. A sublime, life-size picture book! Troyes also has really interesting museums with rich collections, like the **Museum of Modern Art** that houses a stunning collection of Braque, Vlaminck and Derain, and 19<sup>th</sup> century sculptures, and the extremely original "**Maison de l'Outil et de la Pensée Ouvrière**" (Trade and Tools museum), the world's largest museum of tools. *Lodging and breakfast in Troyes*

## Day 8 - The Côte des Bar

You will leave **Troyes** to reach **Bar-sur-Seine**, making a detour to the quiet village of **Rumilly-les-Vaudes**. You will visit the remarkable and vast **St Martin** church, a sumptuous 16<sup>th</sup> century building. At the confluence of six valleys, **Bar-sur-Seine** has always held a strategic trump card. Dominated by the "**Tour de l'Horloge**" (Clock Tower), the town contains numerous timber-framed houses. **Les Riceys** - three villages in one! - closely guards its remarkable, and superbly restored, heritage: three churches, two châteaux, nine chapels and eight wash houses... all of which you can discover on a stroll through this village. It is also the only village in Champagne to hold three AOC designations including the famous Riceys rosé, a rare wine (80,000 bottles a year), and Louis XIV's favourite. Then you will discover **Mussy-sur-Seine**, a medieval city and former summer residence of the Langres bishops, with its rich monuments and interlacing picture-postcard streets. You will pass **Essoyes**, in Renoir country, before reaching **Chaunay** and its feudal château. You will continue walking, still in the vineyards and reach **Bayel**, home of the Royal Champagne Crystal Works, founded in 1666 by a Venetian master glassmaker from Murano. A few kilometres from there is **Clairvaux Abbey**, founded in 1115 by St Bernard. The monks developed this region, planting vine rootstocks from Hungary that - a few centuries later - produced Champagne! You will visit **Colombe-le-Sec**, a small village, with magnificent floral displays that boasts a strange circular washhouse. Finally, you will reach **Bar-sur-Aube** at the foot of a rocky outcrop: the **St Germaine** hill. The town retains several buildings from its golden age in the Middle Ages, when its fairs were renowned throughout Europe: the **St Pierre** and **St Maclou** churches, the **St Jean** chapel and the "**Cellier aux Moines**" (Monk's cellar). *Return to Troyes in the late afternoon and of the tour*

## More details and tips

**The car** - You can do this tour with your own car or with a rental car (not included in the price).

We can get a rental car for you (Please contact us)

**Hotels** - On this tour, we suggest you stay in hotels of different categories.



**Prestige self drive tour SD10-P** – 5-star hotels and palaces

**Luxe Self drive tour SD10-L** – 4-star hotels or chateaus

**Comfort Self drive tour SD10-C** – 3-star hotels

**Standard Self drive holidays Standard SD10-ST** – accommodation in 2-star family-run hotels handpicked for you and very often listed in Tourist French guides as Red Michelin or Gault et Millau guides

## Price includes

- 7 nights on B&B basis in hotels handpicked by us among the best.
- Parking fees if the hotel has one (only for Prestige and Luxe tours)
- The detailed road book with the GPS waypoints of the main landmarks, villages, attractions and hotels. It also contains maps of cities you will explore. (see below for more details)
- IGN maps of the area (scale 1 cm = 1 km)
- Green Michelin guide (tour guide) of the region
- Emergency phone number available 24/24 and 7/7

## Not including

- trip to the departure city of the self-drive tour
- Lunches and dinners (except if written in the tour description)
- Entrances fees to the different tourist sites
- Personal expenses...

## Starting and ending cities of tours

Tours start and end in cities or airports where you can easily pick up or return a rental car.

Tours start in the morning of the first day, often with a visit to the city. We recommend you to arrive the day before in the afternoon to better recover from your trip from home.

Tours end in the late afternoon in the last city or airport.

We can book a room for you for the night before or for the last day.

## Getting from and away

**By car** - You can easily reach Epernay from A4 motorway (exit chateau-Thierry or Reims) or from A26 motorway (exit Chalons en Champagne)

**By train** – TGV trains from Paris Gare de l'Est to Champagne-Ardenne TGV station sited at 8 Km from Reims – (50mn journey). Several car rental agencies in the rail station. Some TGV from CDG2 airport to Champagne-Ardenne TGV staton.

**By plane** – Nearest airport is the international CDG airport where you will rent a car to reach Epernay (110 Km from the airport) and to do the tour.

## Other services

On request we can offer this tour with accommodation in charming B&B (manors, private chateaux, stylish villas...)