

Le weekend

Short but sweet city breaks

REIMS

Paola Westbeek explores the city of champagne and coronations on a short break with sparkle

Dominating Place du Cardinal-Luçon in Reims, the 13th-century Notre-Dame Cathedral is a sight to behold, with its monumental architecture and sculptural grandeur. You must really take time to admire the lavishly ornamented facade. It boasts an impressive 2,303 intricately carved statues depicting biblical scenes and nobility – among them, the famous ‘Smiling Angel’ welcoming visitors by the left entrance.

Between 816 and 1825, 33 rulers were crowned here earning Reims the name Coronation City. This cathedral is one of Europe’s most famed Gothic structures and an example of Reims’ rich cultural heritage. But the city’s historic allure is only part of its charm. Situated in the Marne *département*, Reims is also the gateway to Champagne’s prestigious vineyards.

Hunger for culture

Leaving the Gare de Reims, I head towards Place Drouet-d’Erlon in search of somewhere to have lunch. I’ve come here to indulge in the famous bubbly, but after a morning on the train, I’m craving something hearty before my first *dégustation*.

It’s Friday afternoon and the rush for a seat at one of the many restaurants lining the lively square has started.

I haven’t made any reservations, so I’m hoping I’ll get lucky and won’t have to settle for a takeaway sandwich. Sure enough, there’s an empty table right next to the window at Les 3 Brasseurs, a friendly brasserie serving traditional French cuisine and typical gastropub food such as burgers, *flammekueches* and *planches de charcuterie* or deep-fried snacks to pair with the different beers brewed on-site. I order an *entrecôte, très saignante*, and eat while watching the hustle and bustle taking place outside. It may be a rainy day in April, yet the atmosphere in the city is anything but dismal.

After lunch, I stroll to the heart of the square to admire the Fontaine Subé from up close. Erected in 1906 by André Najoux and dedicated to the four rivers that intersect the *département* (the Marne, Vesle, Suippe and Aisne), it is crowned with a bronze statue representing victory and dating to 1989. This monumental landmark endured the bombings of World War I and was attacked again by the Germans in 1941, when they took the original bronze statue that kept guard over the square.

Nicknamed ‘the Angel’, there is something ethereally beautiful about this new symbol of hope with outstretched wings that seem to almost flutter against the wind. ▶

PHOTO: ADT MARNE/TOURISME CHAMPAGNE



History and heritage

I wake up feeling refreshed after a relaxing evening and good night's rest at Le Clos des Roys, a charming B&B just a stone's throw from the cathedral. While enjoying a leisurely breakfast complete with a batch of owner Gérard's freshly made pancakes, I practise my French with his wife Marie Anne. She tells me about her travels and about the history of the building, which once served as a trading house for fabrics and was almost completely destroyed in 1917.

Reims did not escape the ravages of the Great War unscathed, and much of the city had to be rebuilt during the 1920s and 1930s. This is evident in the many handsome Art Deco buildings, including the sumptuous Opéra de Reims rebuilt in 1927 (only the facade remained when it was bombed in 1914) and the Bibliothèque Carnegie, opposite the Palais du Tau, my first stop today.

Founded in the 4th century, this former residence of the bishop and archbishop, which also served as a banquet hall after the coronations, was named a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1991 together with the cathedral and the Musée Saint-Remi. It houses some of Notre-Dame's statues, tapestries and other treasures, among them Charlemagne's ornate talisman dating to the 9th century. Today, Palais du Tau attracts some 100,000 visitors per year, making it one of the city's most popular museums.



Above: The Fontaine Subé, which stands at 17m tall

Below: Have you tried the famous *biscuits roses*?



Taste the difference

After a day of sightseeing, it's time for some serious sipping. Champagne's hillsides, houses and cellars were declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2015 and together with Épernay to the south, Reims is an important centre of the sparkling wine's production.

One of the most renowned houses in Reims is Taittinger. Founded in 1932 by Pierre Taittinger, the house is still in the hands of the family and counts 288 hectares of vineyards that produce various styles of champagne full of elegance and finesse. At its headquarters on 9 Place Saint-Nicaise, I take a tour of the historic vaulted cellars situated 18 metres underground and carved out in the 4th century. I learn that wines were first stored here by Benedictine

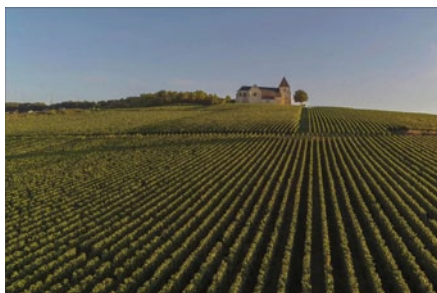
monks in the 13th century. Their abbey, which once stood on this site, was destroyed during the French Revolution, but parts of the chapel can still be admired as well as the remnants of a staircase that led to the vestry.

The tour ends with a tasting, the part I've been looking forward to most. I sample the Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs, Taittinger's Cuvée de Prestige. Made with 100% chardonnay grapes produced in five out of the region's 17 Grand Cru villages, sipping the vintage champagne is a luxury that must be savoured slowly and one of the most memorable experiences during my visit to Reims – a city that, despite a tumultuous history, has managed to retain its unique sparkle. ♥



Left: The Smiling Angel greets onlookers from the west facade of the cathedral

Right: The Palais du Tau, founded in the 4th century



Below left: Swathes of vines surround the city



Francofile

Enjoy sipping and sightseeing in Marne

GETTING THERE

From Paris, the TGV will take you from Gare de l'Est to Reims Centre in 45 minutes. By car, follow the A4 toll motorway to Reims (1 hr 40 mins). From the ferry and Eurotunnel at Calais, the A26 toll motorway will take you to Reims in 2 hrs 30 minutes.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Continental

Tel: 0033 (0)3 26 40 63 83
continental-restaurant.fr
Housed in an attractive 19th-century mansion on Place Drouet d'Erlon, just a short walk from the station, the restaurant (part of a 4-star hotel) serves everything from

breakfast to cocktails and even tea with pastries. Must-try: the foie gras marinated in Ratafia (local fortified wine). Three-course menu €27.

GETTING AROUND

Reims City Pass

Enjoy free city transport, guided tours and entrance to many top attractions. Passes available for 24, 48 and 72 hours, starting at €22.

WHERE TO STAY

Le Clos des Roys

Tel: 0033 (0)6 75 28 34 85
leclosdesroys.fr
Two beautifully decorated rooms, friendly hosts who make



TOURIST INFORMATION:

Tel: 0033 (0)3 26 77 45 00

reims-tourism.com

Département: Marne (51)

you feel right at home and a lavish breakfast. Situated just 10 minutes from the station. Doubles from €110.

WHERE TO VISIT

Maison Fossier

Tel: 0033 (0)3 26 40 67 67

No trip to Reims would be complete without trying the city's emblematic pink biscuits, which should be – quite ceremoniously! – dipped in champagne. To learn more about their history,

book a tour at the Fossier factory and end the visit by stocking up on their sweet delights at discount prices. Open Monday to Friday for visits at 10am and 11am. Registration: €5.50.

