

TRAVEL

Great Escapes

FULL

Country Charms

DESPITE MISSING OUT ON **BURGUNDY'S** LEGENDARY WINES DUE TO HER PREGNANCY LAST SUMMER, **ELAINE KIM** INDULGED TO THE FULLEST IN THE WONDERS OF THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE

LAVISH COUNTRYSIDE

FROM LEFT
Miniature ponies grazing on the estate of the Abbaye de la Bussière

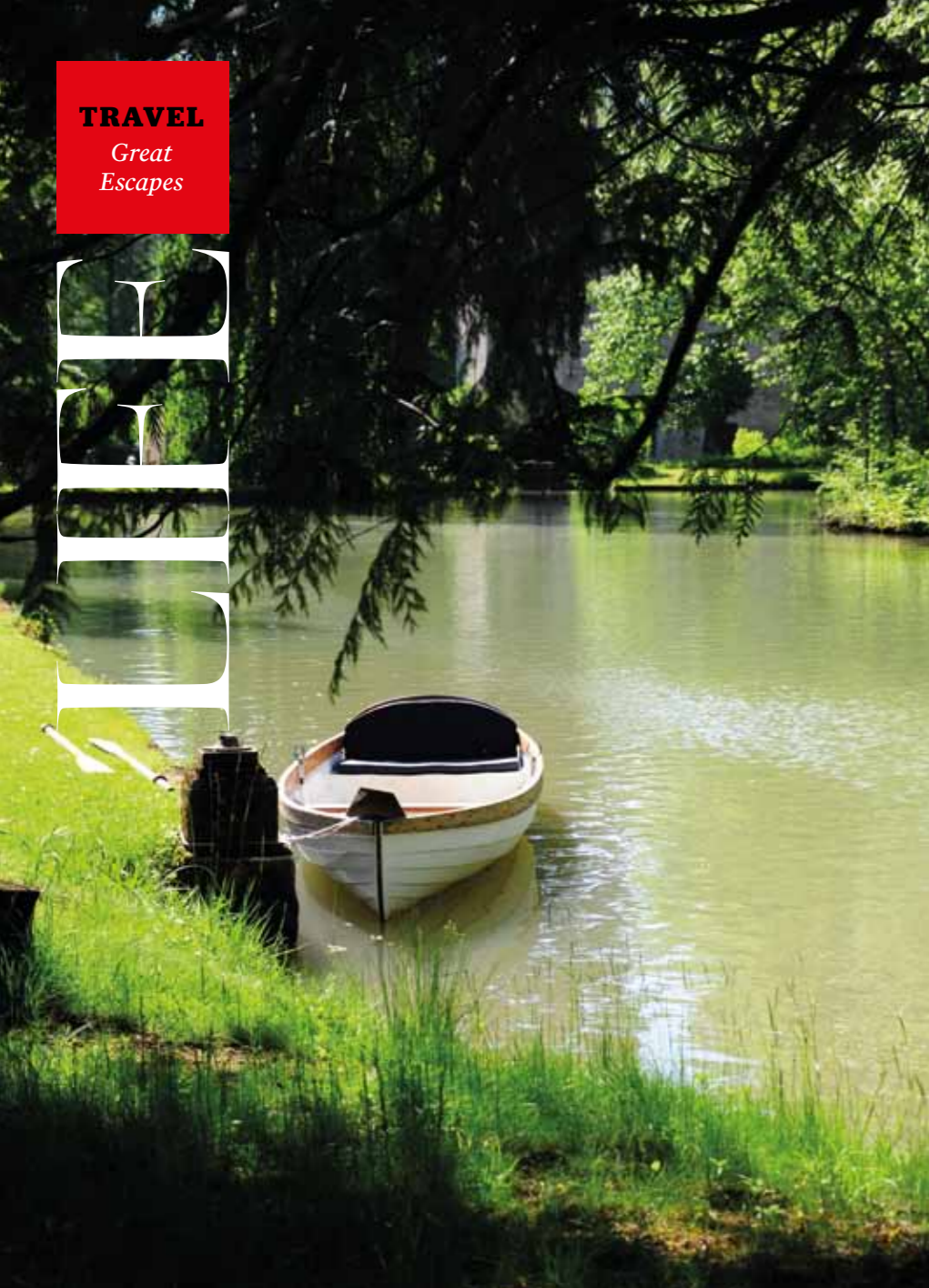
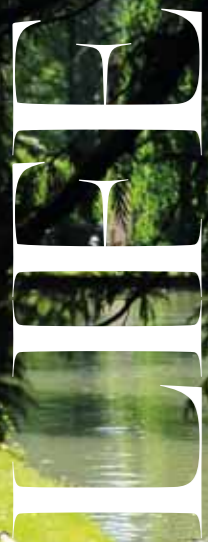
OF ALL THE GREATEST gastronomic journeys to be experienced in Europe, a road trip in Burgundy certainly ranks high on the list. It was with wining and dining in mind that my parents had flown up from Singapore with my aunt from England to join my husband John and I, together with our toddler Kyan, in Geneva, where we were holidaying.

When we planned this visit, the main event on the itinerary was going to be vineyard visits and wine-tasting. However, just before this trip, I found out, to our surprise, that I was expecting number two. With this turn of events, we decided to shorten our sojourn in France and skip the vineyards. We climbed into a big car and set off for the culinary delights of France, just 30min away on the other side of Geneva.

Halfway en route towards Dijon, we felt a little peckish and decided to stop at the first restaurant we saw. We pulled up at a restaurant in a quaint wooden building just off the motorway, and sat down at a checker cloth-covered table to order in whatever little French we could. We had the escargot, steak and apple pie.

The significance of this first stop on our road trip was that this simple meal at a random restaurant off the highway, ordered without any expectation in mind, was really, really good. The escargot in rich garlic herb butter was succulent, the steak wonderfully tender, and the homemade pie oozing with delicious fresh apple chunks. It was sobering to realise that this is what the French eat every day. Food of a quality that would have been de rigueur in a fine-dining French restaurant in another country is what the French enjoy at a highway rest-stop. This gourmet trip was going to be interesting!

IMAGES: ELAINE KIM



Abbaye de la Bussière

Burgundy's bucolic countryside is scattered with host of old chateaux and castles that have been converted into lodges and hotels for visitors to rest their heads. We had chosen as our base an ancient abbey that has been converted into a grand yet intimate country house hotel.

The Abbaye de la Bussière is situated in a beautiful countryside within a half hour's drive from Dijon, Beaune and Nuit-Saint-George, which makes it a perfect base to explore Burgundy's vineyards. Towering automatic gates swing open to welcome guests into 6ha of beautiful parkland, complete with a lake and miniature ponies wandering about.

A man stood ready at the sweeping driveway to help us with our bags. He checked us in at the reception, and then led us up to our rooms. This porter-receptionist-manager introduced himself as Clive Cummings, the very hands-on English proprietor of the Abbaye de la Bussière. We later also saw him in the role of gardener (mowing the grass), concierge (planning winery visits and hot air balloon rides for guests) and zookeeper (gone in search of a lost pony).

Cummings lives in a house on the grounds with his wife Tanith and their children, all of whom were the warmest of hosts and made us feel thoroughly welcome in their dear luxury retreat of an estate.

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The Abbaye de la Bussière, which is a Relais & Châteaux hotel, is clearly a labour of love for its passionate owners, and their dedicated efforts have resulted in a wonderland of a hotel. The abbey has been painstakingly restored; the intricate architecture, cloisters, stained glass windows, vaulted ceilings and painted frescoes remain, but there's no sign of any austere little cells that the monks presumably would have stayed in during the Abbaye de la Bussière's days as a monastery.

Today, there are 16 luxurious bedrooms thoughtfully and individually furnished in a classical French style with antique furniture but modern amenities. Our Bussière room had a huge four-poster draped with heavy velvet, and a little balcony overlooking the expansive gardens and lake. Every room has a huge en suite bathroom with Bulgari amenities and a whirlpool bath, and ours was no exception.

After a long soak in the hot tub, we dressed for dinner and headed through the pillared corridors and down the spiral stone staircase to the gastronomic restaurant. Under the high vaulted ceilings of the restaurant, head chef Emmanuel Hébrard, one of the youngest chefs with a Michelin star under his belt, presents on the candle-lit tables exquisite Burgundian cuisine created with locally sourced ingredients. The

degustation Menu de l'Abbaye was a delight, and particularly memorable was the main course of tender Charolais beef sliced *tataki*-style that simply melted in the mouth.

Breakfast and lunch in the abbey are served at the casual Le Bistrot des Moines, and you can find equally delectable dishes in Burgundian tradition, such as fresh pastries accompanied by stewed fruits poached with vanilla mousse at breakfast, or escargot with pearl barley risotto and goat cheese foam at lunch. In the summer, guests are also invited to take their lunch out in the sunshine on the garden grounds.



LA BELLE VIE
CLOCKWISE
FROM FAR LEFT
 View of the lake; head chef Emmanuel Hébrard; Lily Neo with Kyan; Elaine Kim; panorama of Abbaye de la Bussière; romantic ambience at sundown

Hospices de Beaune is a 15th-century hospital that has been immaculately preserved and serves as a museum



IDYLLIC BURGUNDY

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Hospices de Beaune; one of the local shops along Beaune's cobbled streets; escargots in cups at Le Jardin des Remparts

Beaune Beauties

Following our stay at the Abbaye de la Bussière, we drove to the charming town of Beaune, the unofficial wine capital of Burgundy in the heart of Côte d'Or. Within the ramparts of the city are cobbled streets lined by shops with a wide assortment of offerings, from artisanal chocolatiers, patisseries, fromageries and charcuteries tempting passersby with their mouthwatering displays, to a moutarderie with over a dozen different flavoured mustards to sample, to colourful bookshops and shops selling a dazzling array of wine accessories. In a corner store, local wine boutique Denis Perret sells Burgundy from producers like Louis Jadot, Bouchard Père et Fils and Joseph Drouhin.

A colourful merry-go-round sits in a square, adding to the fairytale quality of this little town. At its heart is the Hospices de Beaune, a 15th-century hospital that has been immaculately preserved and serves as a museum of Renaissance tapestries, furniture and art, while still serving as a geriatric hospital, partially funded by a huge gala charity wine auction held there each November. Right across the street is Marché Aux Vins, a gorgeous cellar in a vaulted building that was once a Franciscan church, where you can have a guided tasting of Burgundy crus.

Just a short stroll away, behind an overgrown wrought iron gate in a secret garden-esque setting is Le Jardin des Remparts, our dinner venue. The setting is quite stunning – you may take your dinner on the shaded terrace surrounded by wisteria-covered hedges, or within the maison, which is beautifully decorated with scattered splashes of modern art and a hot pink chaise longue in a sunny ochre dining room.

Roland Chanliaud's inventive cuisine included a charolais beef and Gillaudeau oyster tartare and eggs cooked at 63°C with soubise and cress. The amuse bouche platter included escargots cooked in a garlic pesto served in tiny cups, and when the staff saw how enamoured we were by this dish, they obligingly brought out a half-dozen more for our party, which was a touching gesture. After dinner, we left with a parting gift of a box of madeleines.

We set off from Burgundy to Paris, knowing full well that we'd only touched the surface of what the region has to offer on our abbreviated trip. Burgundy is home to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Domaine Leflaive and Armand Rousseau, and I hadn't had so much as a sip of pinot noir! We know we'll be heading back one day. **T**

RESOURCES

Abbaye de la Bussière; www.relaischateaux.com
Beaune Tourist Office; www.beaune-tourism.com

BEAUNE HOSPICE IMAGE: TINTIN/DREAMTIME STOCK PHOTOS & STOCK FREE IMAGES

