

## TSC Winter Chamonix Expedition 31-Jan to 8-Feb-2020

Chamonix is a gorgeous village in the French Alps and at every turn, another awe-inspiring view presents itself. The local restaurants, bars, shopping, ski areas contained excellent options with a lot of variety and personality.



The CLASC group was pretty small – 6 people total – regulars Dan Willett, Gayle Brown, Bob Williams, Space City Addition Gary Haley, and Trip Leader Kathy Quigley with her daughter Alexandria Quigley.

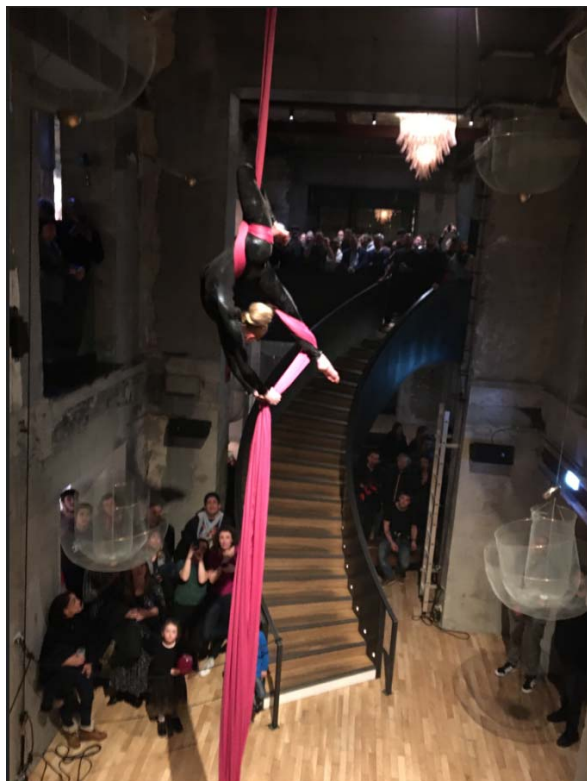
Flying from Houston on Jan-31, we landed in Schiphol, Amsterdam Airport on Alex's 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, Feb 1, and then caught our flight to Geneva, Switzerland, for disembarkation and meetup with the Holidayz coach and bus to the resort. Driving to the hotel, La Folie Douce, was fairly uneventful and we arrived to park at the base of the hotel parking area and offload luggage to pull up to the hotel for storage. As we arrived too early to check in, we were directed to put our luggage in a storeroom and come back after 4 PM for keys. Many took naps on the very comfy sofas in the variety of lobby rooms in the hotel on the main floor and underground floor. Others went to the ski rental in the underground floor and picked up their ski gear and got ski locker assignments.

Getting our keys and luggage to the room was pretty confusing as they handed out keys with no direction on how the rooms were oriented and not all elevators went where you'd expect. It took Alex and Kathy 3 tries to get both luggage and selves to the correct hotel section and the correct floor. Noting the hotel elevators were pretty slow and fit only 2 people plus luggage at a time (very tight.)

Once in the room, they were very modern and accommodating. Small fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, modern shower, and even towel warmer were available. Bathrobe and slippers were provided. Rooms either looked out over the pool/patio/town or to the mountain. Due to the “party atmosphere” at La Folie Douce, there were often pretty loud folks outside the windows fairly late, so earplugs are recommended for the early-to-bed folks. Spa was on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor which included access to the heated outdoor pool, sauna, and showers. No hot tub, though. Spa also had aromatherapy and massage packages available.

Our hotel was very convenient to the adjacent ski area, Le Brévent, and also town was just downhill. A local mall, La Galerie, within a 10-minute walk included a supermarket, restaurants and shopping. Many restaurants, bars, additional gear rental places, were within 10-20 minutes walk outside the hotel door.

Dinner was hosted every evening in the hotel main floor restaurant, with pre-determined courses, each richer than the last. Vegan/vegetarian options were included as long as folks pre-ordered them. Most evenings started with time at the bar, watching an aerial acrobatic show in the 3-story internal atrium,



migrating into the dinner zone, eating a marvelous prepared 3-course meal, then either hitting the sack or staying up to enjoy the bar, deck, or disco downstairs.

With the rain on our first day of skiing, folks tried different options to get a good snow day out of the bad weather. Our group went to Les Houches with the help of our guide, Fred, but it was pretty miserable skiing in the rain. Snow conditions were ok and there was very little traffic on the ski hill. Our group, A.K.A., “EuroTrash” made the most of a difficult ski day – note the very fashionable trash bag ponchos!



From the town of Chamonix, one of the self guided tours anyone could take, and was included in the ski lift ticket package, was the train from town to the local glacier, La Mer de Glace, which was also accessible when skiing down from Aiguille Du Midi.



Many members of the tour group went to see the glacier and noted how much it had drawn back up the valley.



The hotel was situated adjacent to Le Brévent ski area and later in the week provided excellent skiing conditions under beautiful blue skies.



Across the town of Chamonix, there is the cable car that will take you up to Aiguille du Midi which towers over the town. There are options to ski down, but skiers must hire a guide and the trek to get from the cable car to where to put skis on is harrowing, to say the least. Skiers must don ice crampons to their ski boots, climb down snow stairs, and trek across the mountain ridgeline to get to the first flat spot to put their skis on. For those of us with a fear of heights, this proved insurmountable.





For the sightseers at Aiguille du Midi, the upper open-air decks provided spectacular views of Mont Blanc, Chamonix, Glacier des Bossones, the Drus, and Aiguille Verte. An optional standing point, shown below on the right is called “step into the void” which is a glass box which hangs out over the edge of the

mountain (and over 3000 feet of vertical space below you to the rocks.)



Dan and Gayle at Aiguille du Midi.







Kathy and Gayle at Aiguille du Midi.



## Aosta

Departing from Chamonix, the tour takes the Mont Blanc tunnel to the Aosta Valley of Italy which is also home to many popular ski areas, including Courmayeur, La Thuile, Cervinia, Pila and Gressoney. The tour of Aosta, included a stroll down the historic pedestrian street to the Roman ruins left by Roman Emperor Augustus, who sized this area for its strategic mountain passes from the local Celtic Salassi trip in approximately 25BC. Here we will enjoy a historic tour of the ruins and have some free time to lunch (on your own) and shopping.



Annecy

Traveled approximately 1 hour by bus to reach the historic village of Annecy, considered by many to be the 'Venice of the Alps'. Visited the Palais de l'Isle is located along the Passage de l'Île in the center of Annecy's pedestrianized Old Town.



Toured a church in town.



Verbier (Megève)

Day trip was planned to take a coach bus to Verbier for skiing, but was switched by Holidayze to Megève due to the skiing conditions at Verbier (icy/rainy). This was an excellent decision as the skiing was fantastic at Megève. The resort was huge and had some really great expert, intermediate, and beginner terrain.



## Montreux

Tour began with loading up on the coach bus for a two-hour drive following the route back towards Geneva to the charming village of Montreux. Stopped by the Gruyere Cheese factory for a tour of the cheese-making operation. Picked up some samples of gruyere cheese and shopped in the gift store. Returned to the bus to cross the Swiss countryside to Lake Geneva and the very well-preserved castle of Château de Chillon, nestled between the mountain and the lake. Toured the castle and noted the dungeon, banquet halls, and medieval artifacts. Traveled along Lake Geneva's shoreline to the city of Montreux for sightseeing and late lunch lakeside.



## Château de Chillon



On the shoreline of Lake Geneva in Montreux.



Chamonix tour ended with folks departing to either Houston or Sicily on 8-Feb-2020.

## Sicily

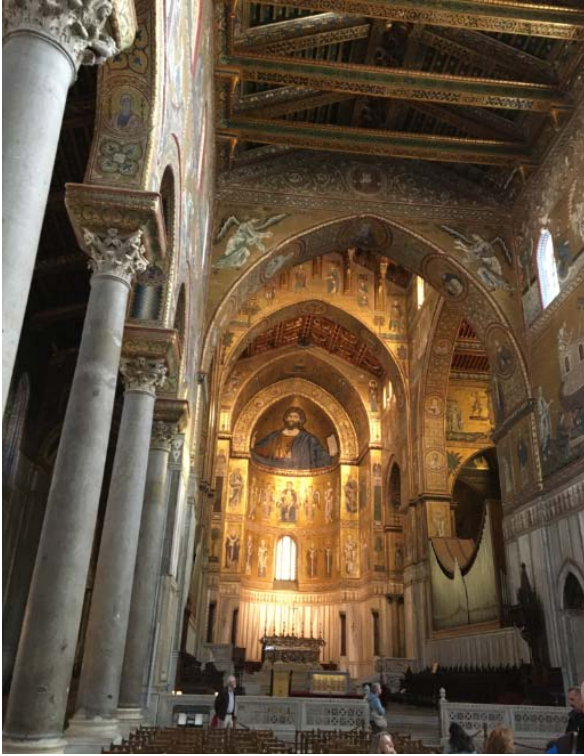
Transfer by coach from Chamonix to Milan. Flight between Milan to Palermo, Sicily, on Easy Jet. Arrival in Palermo airport and transfer by private coach to the hotel. Overnight at Hotel Politeama which is in the business and downtown shopping district.



Shopping and dinner in Palermo.



From Palermo, visited the town of Monreale for the visit of its splendid Cathedral covered of golden mosaics, the most extended in the world after Santa Sofia in Istanbul and San Marco in Venice. Returned to Palermo for the visit of the Palatine Chapel, located inside the Normanni Palace, the ancient real palace, and the Cathedral.



Segesta: Visit of the Doric Temple.



Then continue to Erice, a small medieval town perched on top of the mountain.



Lunch at local farmhouse and olive oil producer, with olive oil tasting and lunch.

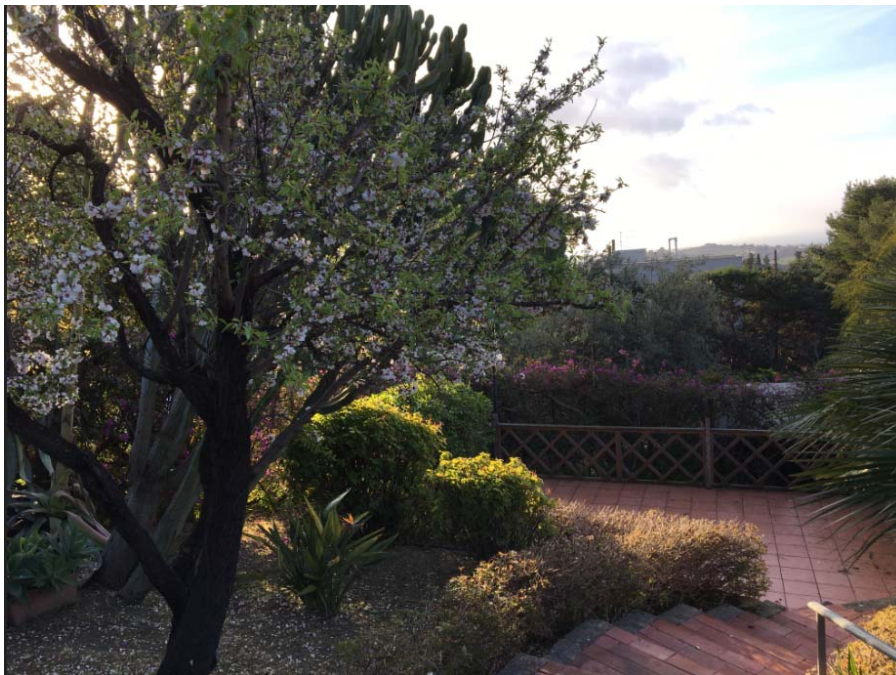


After lunch departure to Selinunte: guided tour of the archaeological zone.





Departed Palermo for an overnight visit to Agrigento. The hotel had a lovely patio and garden area overlooking the city.



Visited the Valley of Temples of Agrigento, which was one of the greatest cities of the ancient Mediterranean world, it has been preserved in an exceptionally intact condition. The color of the temples changes from deep yellow to pink during sunset. The "Valley of the Temples" is a World Heritage Site (UNESCO) since 1997.

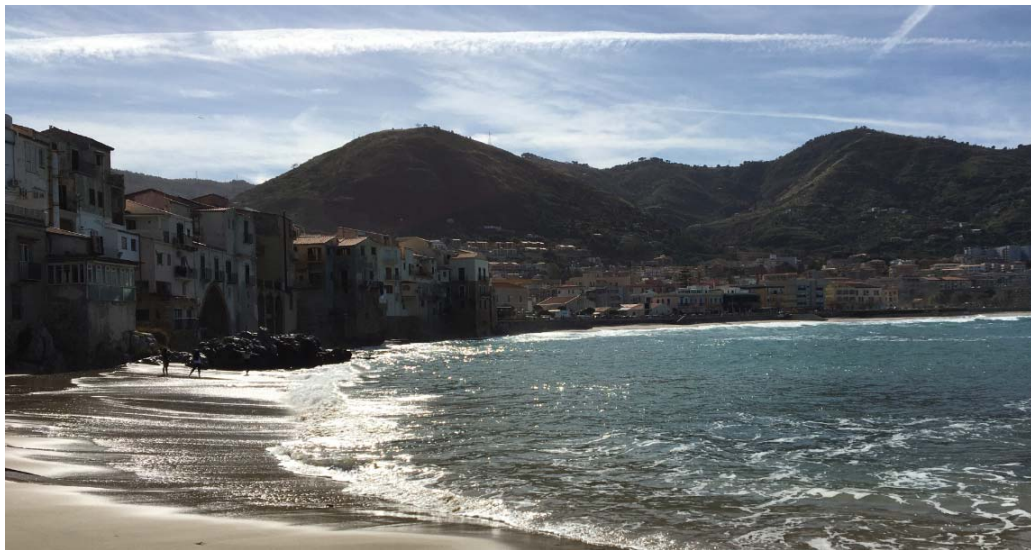


The Villa Romana del Casale (UNESCO heritage site) near the town of Piazza Armerina has perfectly preserved mosaics dating from the late fourth century. A.D. Noted as a governor's palace during Roman times, the site was buried during a volcanic eruption. Excavation began in the 1800's which uncovered the decorative mosaics, exceptional in their artistic quality and for their sheer size.



Returned to Palermo and checked back into our rooms.

Our last touring day included visiting Cefalù, an enchanting small village on the sea that offers a beautiful artistic view of colors and lights.



The main square included the "Norman Cathedral" (UNESCO heritage) which dates back to 1131.



Returned to Palermo for final shopping, dinner and pack for the early departure.

Breakfast was packaged for us (as we left at 4 AM) at the hotel and transfer to Palermo airport for departure flight from Rome to Atlanta then on to Houston. Due to the progression of the COVID-19 virus, when disembarking from Palermo, passengers were asked to stop for personal temperature readings before being let into the Rome airport terminal. Personnel movements to the Delta terminal were slowed and extensive questions were asked of fliers before boarding. The flight left on time and flew from Rome to Atlanta, we changed planes and then flew to Houston without delay and arrived on schedule Feb 13.