

SKYDANCE
Rendez-vous à P^ARI

Teachers Guide

"SkyDance"

("Rendez-vous à Paris")

Synopsis

"SkyDance" ("Rendez-vous à Paris") is a modern day fairy tale told with breathtaking visual images on the large format screen.

Centered around a fictitious French air Race, the Aeroclub de France Cup, the viewer is taken on an incredible aerial tour of some of France's most impressive sites including the Alps, the white cliffs of the Channel, baroque castles, the plateau of the Auvergne, Chenonceau, Chambord, Mont St Michel and the azure blue of the Mediterranean.

Woven into the film is a romantic plot involving a handsome aerobatic pilot, a jealous female aviator and a rather timid but infatuated journalist who has been assigned to produce a profile story on the man and his aerial undertaking. Through a turn of events, the writer finds herself accompanying, and falling in love with the pilot to the complete chagrine of the female aviator who is grounded by circumstances beyond her control. As the plot unfolds the viewer is treated to some of the most impressive large format images ever seen on the screen, and experiences the freedom and beauty of flight in the most beautiful locales that France has to offer.

The story's romantic resolution concludes in Paris on the Seine as the Conciergerie drifts by in the background.

France As Seen From The Skies

Like any film, "SkyDance" ("Rendez-vous à Paris") is a dream made true. The project originated with two feature film producers, **Marie-Christine de Montbrial** and **Michel Frichet**, associates in aGepro Cinéma, who discovered the 15/70 large screen format. Passionate about the beauty of France, they felt the urgency of making a movie that would allow them to showcase their country as well as this spectacular motion-pictures medium. Imax technology, similarly to other technical innovations (advent of talking pictures, color, cinemascope), reinvents the cinema to tell stories in a new way.

It was at this point that they met the film-maker Eric Magnan, who combines cinematic knowledge and experience with the knowledge of aviation. A pilot, seasoned aeronautical director and maker of *La Patrouille de France* (Maximum Velocity), a Large Format short film for worldwide distribution, Eric Magnan became an enthusiastic contributor to the project.

The film's fictional plot is part of a precise, concrete world, i.e. the world of the big family of flying clubs, joined together by a shared passion for aircraft. Eric Magnan is also part of this world, which has given him spontaneous, warm assistance throughout the making of this film.

Eric Magnan wanted film goes to benefit from unrivaled image definition. The actors were filmed in real situations. None of the scenes contain special effects. The actors were chosen for their parts accordingly, based on their ability to endure stomach-turning aerobatics.

This is a film that excluded improvisation. Every scene required highly disciplined preparation and coordination, with several scenes involving two and sometimes even three aircrafts. Each shot was first drawn (152 drawings in the story-board). The nature of the subject coupled with the specific characteristics of the giant screen format required permanent creativity and rigour.

When using "fixed" camera mounts (with the immobile camera secured to the aircraft), Eric Magnan was his own cameraman, piloting and filming at the same time. For the other shots, the director of photography was in charge of framing, guided by the director working via a monitor. The SpaceCam, the only gyrostabilized camera mount that can be used for an Imax msm camera, made it possible to film complex scenes with irreproachable image stability: aerial comedy scenes, big close-ups shot from another aircraft, substantially ampler and more fluid sequence takes where the traditional camera cranes was replaced by a helicopter. All this minutely orchestrated work required a complementary, unified cooperation between the film crew and the aviation team. More than any other, this film was an adventure and the fruit borne by the efforts of a technically innovative team consisting of exceptional human beings.

Finally, this film would not have come into existence without a series of administrative authorizations that allowed us to shoot many French historical monuments from grazingly close proximity, thanks to the great skills of our exceptional pilots.
Today, filming under the same conditions would no longer be allowed due to strict security and protection measures in the chosen sites.

Making "SkyDance" by Eric Magnan

I discovered the Giant Screen format in the 1980's in Paris, when I went to see the film "To Fly" at La Géode. I was not yet a film director, only a schoolboy. Sitting before the giant screen, I experienced something very powerful, vowing to myself that some day I would make a 15/70 film.

Three years ago, **Marie Christine de Montbrial** and **Michel Frichet** approached me about their project to make a giant screen film on France. It appealed to me right away, though I did not realize that this was going to be my most powerful professional experience.

"SkyDance" is a film with an original way of sweeping viewers away, on a visit to the most beautiful locations in France and Paris. The "aerial" point of view has certain magic on an over-sized screen, which is why it is frequently used. My producers and I quickly realized that we wanted to tell a story. It seemed natural to imagine the story of a pilot. Although apparently fictional, our imaginary pilot is largely inspired by a real pilot, **Jacques Bothelin**. In reality, he is the current world champion in aerobatic competition. We filmed in his offices, on his air-strips and with his planes. All the events that we recount in the film have already taken place. Our fictional story is greatly inspired by reality.

I know a lot about planes. Not only have I made many movies with planes but I am myself a pilot. This gives me a real advantage as a director, i.e. the advantage of knowing what can or cannot be done with aerial means. The 15/70mm format gives viewers an unparalleled image definition. All details are perceptible and all backgrounds become important. I wanted for the actors to act in real situations. Not a single scene in this film has special effects; I did not want that. Casting was adapted accordingly. The film required actors who could act in a flying plane. I asked the pre-selected actors to do a test with my friend Jacques Bothelin who took them on a series of very hard aerobatics. If they could only endure that, nothing would throw them off during filming. After the final selection was made, I started imagining how I was going to film all the aerial scenes, without losing sight of their purpose, i.e. showing extraordinary French landscapes, whether inhabited or not. I imagined a series of mounts that I attached to various parts of the planes. For all scenes including the "fixed" mounts, I wanted to be the one to work the camera, for two simple reasons. In this case, it is the plane that causes the camera to move through the orders of its pilot. As a pilot, I have a greater facility in synchronizing these flying sequences, because I share a common language with the professional pilots with whom I work. The second reason was that, in this precise case, I was directing actors at the same time. The Pilatus PC7 has only two seats, one for the pilot and another for the cameraman. I also used two other planes, the Vietnam veteran Bronco and the wide-bodied aircraft of the French Army, the Transall, more specifically for the sequences in which the supersonic fighter aircraft (Mirage 2000) comes to intercept our protagonist's plane.

For these takes, the camera was autonomous, attached to the plane. My first cameraman **Dominique Gentil** was behind it. I was next to him with a monitor, forever adjusting aerial maneuvers by radio, either with the pilots or the actors, when necessary.

I had already used these filming techniques before, including in the 15/70 format. However, I had never pushed the challenge this far.

On the other hand, for this film I used a tool that was totally new to me, i.e. the SpaceCam, the only gyrostabilized mount for an Imax MSM camera. I was very enthusiastic, knowing that my producers were allowing me not only to use the "Rolls Royce" of mounts but also to work with its inventor, **Ron Goodman**, who stepped in as my aerial cameraman. Still, I was far from imagining the possibilities that we were going to have with this system. My surprise was so great, that I changed my work plan in the midst of filming to use it more than I had planned. Among other things, we were able to film comedy scenes with the actors in full flight, scenes that consisted of many highly complex parameters. We also filmed big close-ups of aerobatics, involving aircraft not quite made for it, with nearly incompatible evolution speeds, except for a tiny delta. We had flying at low altitude under high turbulence, etc...

During certain sequence shots, we started with a close-up on the actress **Daisy Bates**, playing her part, and finished in with a ground action and scenery, at times employing as many as three aircrafts throughout. All this was done with flawless image stability. I also used the SpaceCam to film scenes on the ground. Instead of using a camera car, we used a helicopter, not out of luxury but to be able to do shots that no crane in the world could ever do.

None of the scenes in this film were improvised. I used my story board from beginning to end, although it is certain that it evolved during filming. The story board consisted of 152 shots, while the film has 150.

Finally, I have been living in Paris for many years. I love this city where I spend many long hours walking through the streets. I felt exalted to be able to film it in this particular format. I really think that they deserve one another!

I liked the giant screen format before, but now I have fallen in love with it. "Skydance" will continue to represent an exceptional time in my life, whatever the future may bring ...

The Aerial Photography of "SkyDance" **by Ron Goodman**

"**SkyDance**", a 15/70 film from **aGepro Cinema** of Paris, was shown for the first time at the Euromax Symposium in Berlin. Produced by **Marie Christine de Montbrial** and **Michel Frichet** and directed by **Eric Magnan**, the film centers on a fictitious air race in France and was very well received in Berlin. As the film's aerial director of photography, I was especially pleased to hear the positive reactions to the aerial images in the film.

Magnan, a pilot with an impressive knowledge of aviation, had planned to capture unique aerial shots with a helicopter-mounted SpaceCam gyro-stabilized 15/65 camera system as well as a camera hard-mounted in the rear of a North American OV-10 Bronco aircraft.

The Bronco is a Vietnam-era observation aircraft with a twin tail boom and a high tail. A door in the rear of the center fuselage offers unobstructed rear and side views. This position was used quite effectively to capture aerial shots of a Pilatus PC-7 aerobatic plane flying alongside a Mirage jet fighter for a five-minute pre-production sampler for SkyDance in 2000.

However, when production began in September 2001, insurance concerns arose over using the OV-10 and we decided to shoot the aerials entirely from a EuroCopter AS-350B2. The main problem was flying the camera helicopter fast enough that the PC-7 could maneuver comfortably without flying in an extreme "nose-up" attitude.

Before this, the SpaceCam had performed aerial and other specialized cinematography on 11 Large Format films including Everest, Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure, and Adventures in Wild California. But those projects only required a few air-to-air shots with slow Cessnas or helicopters.

The two Pilatus PC-7 picture ships in SkyDance would need 95 mph (150 kph) to fly comfortably and maintain maneuverability. We had previously set the SpaceCam 15/65 system's flight speed limit at 80 mph (125 kph), so I was concerned about meeting this new requirement. If successful, we knew we would have the stability to use long focal length lenses as well as exploiting the system's versatility to get sweeping left-to-right fields of view. We could also capture rearward views, mounted between the helicopter's skids, of the PC-7 flying in close formation just below the camera.

Because of scheduling restrictions, our first tests were performed as we rolled film, but they confirmed that we could easily obtain speeds of 112 mph (180 kph) while looking forward, with no loss of camera stability or control. Looking sideways was more of a challenge, but with an adjustment of the SpaceCam “dog house” enclosure, we were able to pan up to 90 degrees left or right while flying at 95mph (150 kph). The same was true for the rearward views. In all positions we were able to tilt 40 degrees above and 60 degrees below horizontal with the 40 mm lens, and more with longer focal lengths. It soon became apparent that we had far exceeded the capabilities of the unstabilized and view-limited Bronco.

Having established our operational envelope, Eric Magnan proceeded to shoot the SkyDance storyboards and more. We found that we could now insert dialogue close-ups of the principal actors during actual flight, which enhanced the realism.

In one memorable sequence, using a 250mm lens looking 90 degrees to the right, with our rotor disc overlapping the left wing of the picture glider, we were able to obtain and hold a head and shoulder close-up of actress **Amanda James** in the glider’s cockpit, then pull back to a full shot of the glider rolling right and descending away from the camera. Other 250mm close-ups included one of actress **Daisy Bates** delivering lines while flying in the rear seat of the hero PC-7.

These techniques are not new. They have been employed in feature films, but have never been seen in Large Format productions for the simple reason that stabilized camera equipment for Large Format has lagged tremendously behind the hardware available for 35mm. Nor have Large Format directors exactly pushed the envelope in aerial cinematography. Primitive and ineffective mounts are still being used with (in my opinion) disastrous photographic results, then defended on both cost and photographic grounds. Some directors apparently believe that a shuddering, shaky image is exciting!

Many Large Format directors also cling to the dated convention of using aerials as ultra-wide establishing shots or almost meaningless bridging images. But Magnan and the producers of SkyDance held no such beliefs and fully embraced the SpaceCam’s capabilities. As a result, the film’s aerials break new ground and enabled Eric to achieve the visual impact that he was seeking.

Shooting air-to-air only works when the camera pilot and picture plane pilots are totally at ease with close formation flying and take a personal interest in the images. In the case of SkyDance, we were fortunate to have some of the best pilots in the world. **Frank Arrestier**, a highly experienced aerial film pilot with Mont Blanc Helicopters, flew the camera ship. **Philippe Laloix**, a former French military pilot, and **Jacques Bothelin**, a highly respected aerobatic pilot, flew the PC-7s. The working relationships were excellent and resulted in a very low shooting ratio. We frequently captured six or eight complex shots in a day, including some rather ambitious air-to-ground concepts and air-to-air footage. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of these three pilots to the success of these sequences.

One of the most exciting shots involved a Canadair Super Scooper firefighting aircraft taking on water from the ocean as our PC-7 with camera helicopter flies close formation on its wing tip and then passes by. Obviously the coordination between all concerned was critical to achieving success. That this shot was accomplished in only three takes is testament to the planning and coordination that prevailed throughout the entire project. The distance from picture ship to camera ship was often less than 12 feet (4 meters)...not the time to learn formation flying!

SkyDance was perhaps the most exciting Large Format aerial project on which I have ever worked. The reason lies not only in the film's unique storyline, but also in the ability of the director and producers to understand all the possibilities made available to them by the personnel and equipment they had selected.

Goodman served as director of aerial photography on SkyDance and on several other Large Format films, including Everest, Adventures in Wild California, and Dolphins. He designed the SpaceCam system and is president of SpaceCam Systems, Inc.

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"SkyDance" ("Rendez-vous à Paris")

This presentation consists of thirteen background sheets of different lengths. Each of the first eight descriptions will concern one of the film's regions (The Loire Valley, Normandy, etc...). It will be introduced by a few lines of general information.

I – The familiar and exotic France

- Which France ?

"SkyDance" ("Rendez-vous à Paris") is a promenade, an initiation journey through France.

The film takes the spectator to a number of locations. Why these particular locations ? Some are well known, others are less so. Some are glorious and others are modest. Although these places do not represent the entire France, each one speaks of France in its own way. The places are well liked by French and foreign visitors alike.

Several of the locations were chosen by UNESCO as World Heritage sites. Showing them is equivalent to pointing to France's role in our great joint effort, the building of humanity.

The challenge was to find a new, surprising way to film these locations.

- The Alps

- . Mont Blanc
- . Aiguille du Midi.
- . Arête des Cosmiques.
- . Grands Montets.

- The Loire Valley

- . Chambord.
- . Chenonceau

- Normandy.

- . Mont Saint-Michel.
- . Cliffs of Etretat.
- . Omaha Beach and the American Cemetery.

- Burgundy.

- . Côtés de Nuit.
- . Clos-Vougeot.
- . Vezelay.
- . Fontenay Abbey.

- The Secret France.

- . Mende.
- . Plateau d'Auvergne.
- . The Lot et the Aveyron, Conques.
- . Queribus Cathar Château.

- Provence.

- . Verdon Gorges.
- . Pont du Gard.
- . Gordes.
- . The Bories
- . Senanque Abbey.
- . Cassis.
- . Marseilles.
- . The If Castle.
- . Dentelles de Montmirail.

- Paris

- . Pont des Arts.
- . Notre Dame Cathedral.
- . Alexandre III Bridge.
- . The Louvre.
- . Montmartre.
- . Bois de Boulogne.
- . The Eiffel Tower
- . Place de la Concorde.
- . L'île de la Cité, L'île Saint-Louis.
- . The Conciergerie.

"SkyDance"

("Rendez-vous à Paris")

I - The familiar and exotic France

- Which France?
- The Alps
- The Loire Valley
- Normandy
- Burgundy
- The Secret France
- Provence
- Paris

Which France ?

"SkyDance" ("Rendez-vous à Paris") is a promenade, a journey of initiation into France.

It shows France in its extreme diversity, both from the geographical as well as historical point of view. The film takes us on a journey through all facets of France and suggests the reverie, pleasure and nostalgia that they bring to life. Each place has a soul; the immensity of the screen, the fluidity of the image shed light onto this mystery.

The chosen locations stand out naturally, divided into three categories. They are joined together again through the images.

- First and foremost landscapes: France is perceived as a land of balance, consisting of human-scale landscapes. The beauty of France is rooted in the conjunction of all types of geography and history, superimposed and entangled. The film evokes famous parts of France: the Loire Valley, Burgundy, Provence... It also gives an overview of grandiose spaces, indicating that France can easily be the decor for westerns and epics. They include the Alps, the Auvergne Plateau, the Verdon Gorges, the Dentelles de Montmirail and the Calanques de Cassis.

- Next, must-see locations, because they are in France and beyond, the expressions of the highest share of humanity. They were declared by UNESCO as world heritage sites: Chambord and Chenonceau Châteaux, Mont Saint-Michel, Vezelay and the roads of Compostelle, Fontenay, Conques, Pont du Gard, the Banks of the River Seine in Paris, Notre Dame Cathedral, Alexandre III Bridge, Pont des Arts and the Conciergerie etc.

- Finally, secret places with a harmony that speaks to everyone. France is an old country, where each era has left its mark, now more or less faded, variably preserved by the following centuries. Is there any place in France that has not been marked by Rome, the Middle Ages, Renaissance or the classical age? The film was intended to bring these places to life: old villages, abbeys, ruins of châteaux, difficult-to-get-to landmarks

Finally, and most of all, the combination of the aircraft and IMAX camera makes us see all these places the way they have never been seen before, and probably never will be seen again (see The making of the film). As a result, the film wants to be only a first walk, an invitation to many others, inciting each and everyone to peacefully and gradually discover France and to create a France of their own.

The Alps

The film opens with an aerial ballet of two patrolling Pilatus aircraft, twirling around in perfect harmony. We thus discover two of the three protagonists in the film: Alec the champion and Jennifer, his co-pilot, the charming “witch”.

In this sequence, the two planes are in perfect coordination, tiny red birds, perfectly at ease in their pirouettes. Products of modern technology, these aircraft trace an ephemeral line over the vast mountains, the snow and a flawlessly blue sky. We see the Alps, or more specifically Mont Blanc and its surroundings. The suppleness and skillfulness of the pilots is underlined, exalted by the indifferent splendour of the location, the powerful and jagged mass of the rocks.

We see the side of a cliff, where two mountain climbers, minute against the infinite expanse of nature, are fighting the hardness of the stone. This is where we see the relation between two types of very similar audacities, the daring of the aviator challenging the laws of gravity, and the daring of the mountain climber “conquering the useless”. Always higher! The mountain and the aircraft share a long and painful history. In order to be useful planes had to be able to cross the most hostile mountain ranges. It was in the 1930’s that Jean Mermoz disappeared during the epic of the French Aeropostale in the Andes Cordillera. His photograph stands on Alec’s desk in the aeroclub. Jean Mermoz (1901-1936), the archangel, is one of the heroic pilots who were admired by millions of people during the interwar years. Planes were still of small-scale manufacture and an adventure, timely transporting bags of mail from one continent to another.

As for the Alps, at the end of the 18th Century, they were the experimental testing ground for a new type of adventure: mountain climbing. Before that time, the mountains with their everlasting snow were home of the gods. But, in the end, men always want to discover everything.

It is not by chance that the first ascent to the summit of Mont Blanc (Horace Benedict de Saussure

in 1787) took place at a time when men were methodically exploring the oceans. The Alps and their highest summit, Mont Blanc, trained the first mountain climbers, paving the way for more faraway adventures, those of the Annapurna and Mount Everest.

The Loire Valley

Chambord and Chenonceau

Taking off for the Cup of the Aeroclub of France, the Pilatus flies over the Loire Valley.

The Loire river flows through the heartlands of France, dividing it into North and South. The industrial France lies beneath laden skies in the North, while the South is known as the more luminous, singing part of France. Loire River is the river of poets and kings. In the 16th Century, French Renaissance blossomed along its banks. At the time, the court was still nomadic, travelling from one château to another, sleeping in one location on a given night, and in another the following day. To the kings, Paris was sad and violent. More in the South, the lazy, capricious Loire River promised light and a comfortable life style. Loire is feminine, capable of charming languor as much as unpredictable outbursts of anger. This is where the French Renaissance celebrated its golden age. The epidemics, acts of fanaticism and wars of the Middle Ages were left far behind. The wars of religion that would unfurl in the second half of the 16th Century had not yet commenced. People were enjoying themselves, dancing, falling in love, but also writing, thinking and debating.

Countless châteaux were built on the banks of the Loire River. The Pilatus flies over two of the most astounding châteaux, each one the product of a royal quirk or whim.

We start with the older, the more important château Chambord, which was built between 1519 and 1544, in the midst of Sologne marshlands and forests. Chambord Château represents the dazzling majesty of the monarch – symbol of Renaissance, François I (1494-1547). François I, fascinated by Italy and an admirer and friend of Leonardo da Vinci, loved refinement and entertainment. He wanted a magnificent château, a dream-like stone structure nestling in the thick of the woods. François I chose the most improbable and hence most magical location for his château: Sologne. It was difficult to penetrate due to its humidity but also very beautiful thanks to the multitude of its mist-clad lakes. Chambord combined the Middle Ages with its powerful towers and the Renaissance with its countless fireplaces. For more than a century, from François I to Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King, Chambord was periodically used as the royal residence, hosting many sumptuous feasts. Let us image for a second a hot summer in Sologne, the starlit night punctuated by music, tables bowed down with dishes and ballets with extravagant costumes! Chambord is where Molière played two of his comedies before the king: Monsieur de Pourceaugnac in 1668 and Le bourgeois gentilhomme in 1669. Although in love with Chambord, Louis XIV could not content himself with a simple act of inheritance. He was compelled to have a château of his own: Versailles.

Yet, Chambord has never lost its appeal. The lightness of stone, the black radiance of slate and the thickness of vegetation have rarely made such a beautiful combination. Three decades ago, in 1971, Jacques Demy, a French film-maker avid of fairy tales, used Chambord to film *Peau d'âne*. The film was the story of a princess hiding her beauty under a donkey's skin, in order to protect herself against the jealousy of her father, the king.

Built between 1515 and 1581, Chenonceau was first and foremost the château of Diane de Poitiers. This mature beauty had made Henri II (1519-1559), a very impetuous young king and the second son of François I, madly in love with her. Chenonceau is a "castle over the river". The superb, classic gallery of Philibert Delorme stands over the Cher River. Compared to the royal splendour of Chambord, Chenonceau represents a more intimate Renaissance, attentive to a more enjoyable art of living, where the gardens offer a more gentle pleasure than the great pastime of the times, i.e. hunting. When Henri II died, Catherine de Médicis (1519-1589), the queen and his legitimate wife, daughter of a powerful Florentine banker and a woman of character, took revenge on the omnipresent Diane. She appropriated Chenonceau, which became Italianised and gained refined and a carefully laid out park. While France was being torn apart by the wars of Religion waged between the Catholics and the Protestants, Chenonceau became a place of refuge. The summer's tender twilight, refreshed by the flow of the Cher River, briefly evaded the violence of the world.

The banks of the Loire River have never forgotten the golden age of the 16th Century. For novelists from Honoré de Balzac to Julien Gracq, Alexandre Dumas to Maurice Genevoix, the slightly otherworldly Loire with its sand banks and bygone towns, has the power to stop time and transport those who succumb to its charm into a world of agile, armed knights and beautiful maidens languishing for impossible loves.

Normandy

After the Loire, the royal river, the aircraft arrives in Normandy. How can we imagine that Normandy, today so verdant and opulent, was first a land of war and conquests? Superbly located at the gates of continental Europe, reaching out to the British Islands, Normandy is seen both as a bridge for crossing over to conquer England (as did William the Conqueror in 1066) and as a means of penetration into the continent (the landing of the Allied forces on 6th June 1944). However, the wars did not stop industrious people from building. Normandy, with its prairies, hedges, half-timbered houses, is a country of storytellers. Each farm, each village harbour all sorts of resentments, intrigues and merry stories that inspire Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant.

We see the Pilatus fly over the majestic Mont Saint-Michel. This unbelievable mountain surging up in the midst of sand shores of rising and ebbing tides was bound to attract the attention of the great architects of the Middle Ages, i.e. the monks. This is how this astounding, Roman and Gothic, religious and military architectural feat came into being, suspended above the sea and untouched by the wars. Similarly to many other great edifices, Mont Saint-Michel, with its church tower pointing up to the blue skies, miraculously joins heaven with earth. From pilgrims in bygone days to today's tourists, Mont Saint-Michel attracts crowds of visitors. The grace of mystery subsists, a blend of serene splendour (particularly the cloister) and modest beauty (houses pinned to the base of the mountain). Without a doubt, Mont Saint-Michel is never as beautiful as it is against the blue skies of winter: a little forgotten by the visitors, it stands, clear and simple, both near and perhaps inaccessible.

The plane is already skimming past the Cliffs of Etretat. Yet another refuge of painters, writers and poets! The tender whiteness of the cliffs, the foam of the waves, the grey roundness of the pebbles and the blue skies form a landscape that is incessantly transformed by the variations in light and weather. Then there is the strange cliff, the famous Aiguille du Midi. A novelist at the beginning of the last century, Maurice Leblanc, also known as the father of the gentleman-burglar Arsène Lupin, had nearly everyone convinced that the Aiguille was hollow and filled with concealed treasure!

Finally, the aircraft is flying over a long beach. For many Europeans today, Omaha Beach symbolises the end of a nightmare. At this focal point of the June 6th, 1944 landing, American, British, Canadian and French soldiers stood firm against German machine guns. Not far from the beach, one of the cemeteries of countless white crosses honouring these soldiers, reminds us that this was the final battle for freedom. The wounded Europe emerging from this terrible war of 1939 to 1945 was peaceful, full of reconciliation and common effort. The men of Omaha Beach did not die in vain!

Burgundy

After Normandy, the film takes us to another land of riches, Burgundy. While Normandy evokes grass meadows and dairy products, Burgundy is the land of wine, the age-old product of meticulous chemistry.

Burgundy was part of Lotharingia, a 9th Century kingdom founded along the banks of the Rhine for King Lothar, one of the three grand-sons of Emperor Charlemagne or Charles the Great. Burgundy belonged to the rich, urban and bourgeois Europe that stretched between Flanders and Italy's urban republics. With Charles the Bold in the 15th Century, Burgundy aspired to match the splendor of France, although the patient Louis XI put an end to this ambition.

The Pilatus first flies over the massive, vine-surrounded and wine-producing farms. The name of the location evokes a delicious mouthful of vintage wine: Côtes de Nuit, Clos-Vougeot... An entire civilization has organised itself around wine making, with its many trades, ceremonies, monastic discipline and thorough evaluations and vintage rankings. This Burgundy belongs to the Compagnons du Tour de France, the artisans of countless occupations, traveling from one town to another, in search of employment and training. One day, our protagonists Laura and Alec, will go on this pilgrimage of wine, if they share their lives.

Like every region of age-old tradition and culture, Burgundy means spirituality. According to the words of writer Maurice Barrès, Vezelay is the hill where the spirit blows. The Vezelay Basilica combines Roman and Gothic elements. All throughout the Middle Ages, Vezelay was a high place of pilgrimage. This is where Saint-Bernard (1099-1153) rallied support for the Second Crusade before an immense crowd of people on March 31st, 1146. Even today, the harmony, the peacefulness of the vaulted archways bring us closer to a world in which God was omnipresent and prayer a part of daily life. A great diversity of writers – from the Catholic Paul Claudel to the heretical Georges Bataille, from the pacifist Romain Rolland to the former soldier Jules Roy – were overwhelmed by Vezelay. Some chose to live there in the hope of finding peace in small, tightly huddled houses along the alleyway that leads up to the Basilica.

The Pilatus completes its passage through Burgundy at the Fontenay Abbey. The abbeys are the many pearls of a gigantic rosary that once strung around Europe of the Middle Ages. Fontenay was founded by Saint-Bernard in 1118 and built by Cistercian monks. In reaction against the pomp of the official Church, this monastic order wanted to return to the original state of grace, building its abbeys in isolated locations and valleys in the midst of nature. Fontenay is a magnificent incarnation of a peaceful soul, accompanied by a variety of activities: farming, crafts, weaving ... Both the abbey and the monastery were and continue to be two of the most exemplary institutions of Europe. As much as it is absorbed by the frenetic search for material progress, this continent is nevertheless haunted by the ideal of a peaceful life, where spirituality and daily tasks join together in perfect harmony. From

St. Augustine (Canterbury, England) to Lorsch Abbey in Germany, Cluny in Burgundy to the Benedictine convent of Münstair (Switzerland) or Monte Cassino in central Italy (ravaged by World War II), these magnificent edifices, built in the Middle Ages, reveal the European spirit, simultaneously preoccupied with bringing the land to bloom and accepting the precariousness of human life.

The Secret France

There are few areas of France that either completely elude its network of roads or are only sparsely penetrated by it. They are located at the very heart of France: the Massif Central and some of its surrounding areas. This part of France is beautiful and rugged, marked by plateaux and forests. Difficult to penetrate for those who are not familiar with it, this area of France is a refuge. It welcomed the Protestants persecuted by Louis XIV. Two centuries later, it also granted shelter to those fleeing forced-labour camps, the young French men who refused to work in Hitler's Germany.

Our two heroes, Laura and Alec, were bound to lose their way in order to benefit from this unexpected, lucky evening that provides them with an opportunity to talk and get to know one another.

The Pilatus touches down in Mende (this is where our charming "witch" Jennifer, Alec's co-pilot upsets the course of events). Mende is the main town in the least populated département (county) of France. The landscape is vast, often rocky, made for sheep and their transhumance.

Later, Pilatus is forced to land unexpectedly on the Plateau d'Auvergne, a volcanic, strong and austere country, which every Frenchman recognizes as a source for his stubbornness and capacity to face up to the whole world. Auvergne brings to mind the Gaul Vercingetorix and his invincible younger brother, Asterix. The film shows the volcanoes and the vast craters that today stand in silence. This is the landscape of the world's beginnings, where the infinite forests may still conceal prehistoric monsters.

This secret France is laden with history. Taking off in the morning, Pilatus flies over two locations anchored in the past and yet seemingly so close. We see Conques, an important stepping stone in the road to Compostelle! In the Middle Ages, the Basilica and the heavy-set houses have seen thousands of pilgrims abandoning everything in search of salvation, taking them to far-away Spain.

Finally, we see the Quéribus Château, perched on a mountain peak, like a stone eagle! This stronghold takes us once again to the Middle Ages, an era when France is in gestation, fragmented by feudal lords. The fortified castles leave a permanent mark not just on the landscapes but also on social life. The lord is simultaneously the master, protector, arbiter and sometimes tyrant in a world of peasants living out their hardship under the constant menace of famine, epidemics and war.

Provence

Provence is always superb and in the morning – when the Pilatus is gliding over it – particularly glorious. Huddling against the summits of the hills, the villages fill with people, humming and the scents of fruits and vegetables, along with the rising sun. Provence blooms, just as it does every morning. For the traveller, Provence is embodied by an open-air market on a village square, suffused with warm summer light and protected by the shade of plane trees. The displayed goods exhale thyme, laurel and lavender. Everything looks delicious, from tomatoes brimming with flavour to countless goat cheeses, from scented soaps to rough cloth dishtowels.

The film shows a luminous and tortured land, rocky and open to the sparkling Mediterranean. Man is omnipresent. Provence has been continually shaped and reshaped since the Antiquity.

It is true that nature's splendors are abundant: the Verdon Gorges; fields mauve with lavender; the Dentelles de Montmirail– stimulating the acrobatic talents of Alec the Champion. Yet, man's history is never remote.

First, we see the Pont du Gard, an admirable aqueduct that supplied Nîmes with water, at the time of Roman dominion. Roman Provence was cherished by the Empire. Beautiful towns such as Nîmes and Arles were erected, together with their temples, arenas, amphitheatres. Several are still intact today, providing a magnificent backdrop for summer festivals.

Senanque Abbey is a symbol of another Provence, dating back to the Middle Ages. After the fall of Rome, there was a need to rebuild and colonise. Senanque Abbey is one of the more beautiful examples of the work accomplished by the Cistercian monastic order (also see Fontenay –Burgundy), which looked for and identified isolated locations in order to turn them into the centres of activity. In the hollow of the valley, in the middle of the woods, Senanque Abbey stands tall, manifest, discrete, with its clearly delineated chapel and cloister, as well as its vegetable gardens and fields. A kind of perfect but modest city.

Finally, the Pilatus approaches the Mediterranean. From afar, we see the profile of Marseilles millenary port, steeped in trade and traffic. In the 6th Century B.C., Marseille was founded by Greek settlers under the name of Phocea. Rome confirmed Marseille as one of its major ports. Marseille brings inspiration and ignites imagination with its impressive combination of North and South, East and West. Marseille was the port of the French colonial empire, receiving the full range of colours and fragrances from Maghreb to Indochina. Marseille is also represented by the Old Port: Marius, Fanny, César... Who has not laughed and cried at their misadventures?

At last rises the black mass of Château d'If, the prison of Edmond Dantès. This nightmare, together with the friendship of Abbey Faria, gave rise to Count of Monte-Christo, one of the most extraordinary protagonists imagined by the world renowned French novelist: Alexandre Dumas.

Paris

A journey through France must start and finish in Paris. It is true that Paris does not represent all of France, but is merely one of its important components. At the same time, France has grown unified from and around Paris, as demonstrated by the French highway and railroad system.

Like France, Paris is diverse, informal and solemn, merry and melancholy. At the beginning of the film, Laura and her confidant friend Carole take us on a walk across the Pont des Arts, located between the Institut and The Louvre, at the heart of a city that breathes literature, sciences and its royal past. In the minds of the Parisians, this bridge is impish. Built from cast iron in 1803 and reserved for pedestrians only, Pont des Arts is the bridge of lovers, according to a song by Georges Brassens. This is where the mischievous winds gleefully chase young girls, lifting up their skirts.

However, great History is never far away in Paris. We see Laura and Carole at the top of the Notre Dame towers! For Paris, the Notre Dame Cathedral represents first and foremost the Middle-Ages. Both massive and aerial, decorated with saints and demons alike, the cathedral guards the capital. When Victor Hugo wanted to tell the story of Paris in the turbulent times of Louis XI, he imagined the Hunchback Quasimodo and the beautiful bohemian Esmeralda, with the Notre Dame Cathedral as his leading protagonist and the soul of the city. All throughout the history of France, Notre-Dame is present both during times of tragedy (e.g. in May 1940, in the middle of a military offensive, a procession hopes to save the capital) and moments of glory (e.g. Te Deum of 26 August 1944, celebrating the liberation of Paris).

After Notre-Dame, we see the Pont Alexandre III, a magnificent example of the aesthetic principles of France's Third Republic. This bridge is a political act. It celebrated the French and Russian Alliance (1892) against William II Emperor of Germany. Its bronze and gold statues representing peace and war are an admirable expression of the spirit that reigned throughout the Belle Epoque, a time during which great European capitals competed for greatness by building countless monuments.

Laura and Carole arrive at the Esplanade of The Louvre. This former palace, home to the kings of France, austere and majestic as every centre of power must be, has also participated in every turbulent incident of French history. The Louvre embodies Louis XIV, the famous Sun King. As a child during the Fronde, Louis, hearing the commotion caused by rioters, was forced to flee The Louvre at night, together with his mother, Anne from Austria, and his right-hand advisor, the discerning Mazarin. Louis XIV ordered the construction of the Grande Galerie and the Cour Carrée, perfect expressions of absolute monarchy, combining the rigor of classicism with baroque effusion. Today, the Louvre is a full-scale museum, magnificently renovated and marrying tradition with modernity. In the middle of its Esplanade stands the transparent pyramid designed by architects Pei and Macary, an exemplary structure of glass and steel.

After so many monuments, Laura and Carole had to part their ways in an intimate, charming place, at the foot of the Montmartre stairway. Montmartre is the last village in Paris, still harbouring some vines that overlook the urban immensity of the city. Montmartre is where magical characters cross their paths, from the flamboyant anarchist poet Aristide Bruant to the delicious Amélie Poulain.

The movie never completely forgets Paris. It takes us, together with Carole, to the green expanse of the Bois de Boulogne. Far off in the background, we see the Eiffel Tower. The Eiffel Tower makes us dream. Telling its story would require many pages. Made entirely from iron beams, nuts and bolts, this lean and slender structure is the perfect object. Its amazing beauty is its only *raison d'être*. Initially built for the World Fair in 1889, the Eiffel Tower has remained and become the most recognizable landmark of the Seine River. One day, Général de Gaulle was asked if Paris would be prepared to give up the Eiffel Tower. In his customary fashion, the general answered that it was in the world's order for the Eiffel Tower to be and remain in Paris.

Next we see through the dusk the Place de la Concorde and the outlines of the Champs Elysées winding its way up to the Arc de Triomphe. For an instant, the screen glows with two other splendid images of steel and glass constructions in the capital: the Grand and Petit Palais, built for a World Fair at the end of the 19th Century.

The film could only end on the Seine River, along its two islands: the Ile Saint-Louis and the Ile de la Cité. This is the cradle of Paris, where the city was born under the name of Lutece. This is also where one of Paris' daughters, the future Sainte Genevieve, stopped the influx of barbarians. Poets and writers alike have hailed these islands and their boundless mystery. Every street and every building enclose an endless number of stories. The shadowy outlines observed in the light of the evening may be guests returning from a *soirée* with the novelist Balzac or the loveless poet Apollinaire.

The film's last image shows the black façade of the Conciergerie. For the French, this building will forever evoke the terrible prison of the French Revolution, where hundreds of aristocrats and bourgeois citizens, politicians and poets awaited their fate at the guillotine. But tonight, for Laura and Alec, the Conciergerie looks softened and gently radiant in the evening light. The Conciergerie vanishes into the tender night of the beginning fall, still pervaded by the summer's warmth. It is time to leave Laura and Alec to their *tête-à-tête*.