

# An Extended Vacation

Days of wine and tears.

BY MARY BUTTON

It was Chuck's idea. He lifted his glass, with his toast, "Let's run the Medoc Marathon." Chuck was at our house in L. A. for dinner on a Sunday evening in March of 2000, a month after the Olympic Marathon Trials.

We were sitting in the patio of our hillside home a few miles east of the famed Hollywood sign that spring evening in 2000. We uncorked a bottle of wine. Whenever Chuck joins us for dinner, we tend to uncork more than one bottle of wine. We share an infatuation for running as well as a fondness for wine.

Chuck continued his toast. "It's too late for this year's Medoc. The race fills up months in advance. But let's make a pact to run it together in 2001."

Medoc Marathon is run in the Bordeaux region of France in early September. Aid stations feature wine-tastings, and the participants dress in costume. There could not possibly be another marathon more the polar opposite of the Olympic Trials.

Over the previous dozen years, I had run 24 marathons, *all* of them were competitive. I was always focused on my running time, hoping to lower and improve it. It would be a welcome change of pace to focus on my time running instead.

Our friend Ed lives in Paris and is fluent in French. Ed ran Medoc in 1999 and couldn't stop raving about the event. "It is like no other marathon in the world!" He helped us complete the registration, which was written in French, "Organisation le Marathon du Medoc." A few months later we received written confirmations for the September 8, 2001, race: seven of us from L. A. plus Ed were officially in.

Gerry and I planned an itinerary to include six nights in Bordeaux, followed by three nights in Saint Jean de Luz, a quaint coastal town in the Basque region, 130 miles to the south. We booked our return flight home from Bordeaux for September 15, 2001.

Ed insisted we run the race in costume: "7,500 of the 8,000 runners will be wearing disguise. It is a faux pas not to do so," like showing up at a nude beach wearing a bathing suit.

## Nothing to see here, folks

We came up with the idea to dress as Playboy bunnies. The guys resisted. "No way!" Gerry, Chuck, and Ed proclaimed at first. But eventually we wore them

down. They finally consented. We did cheat a little (base layer of black singlets and shorts isn't exactly a costume), but we adorned it quite well: floppy bunny ears, a fluffy white tail attached to our in-shape toned asses, cuff links of silky-white fabric with gold-colored enamel studs, and shiny white collars with velvet black bows upon our necks. Veritable sexpots we would be.

We left it in the hands of Marathon Tours to work out the details for our six days in Bordeaux. Marathon Tours, based in Boston, is a specialist in running-related travel. It was founded in 1979 by Thom Gilligan, a veteran of over 60 marathons. Thom's company provides package deals for destination marathons worldwide. Sign up with Thom's company and it deals with the planning headaches. Its tours cover the logistics of hotels, meals, sightseeing, city transportation, guided tours, language translation, and more.

In the spring and summer of 2001 we trained for Medoc, focusing on long walks and jogs *and* drinking wine. We had yet to *combine* drinking and running in a workout. How would that unfold?

We tested it one Tuesday evening. Chuck placed a card table on a corner of the track and put upon it a few opened bottles of wine. After each mile (four laps on



▲ The L.A. Playboy bunnies meet the Medoc Marathon.

the track), we stopped at our improvised aid station to sip some wine. Five miles later we staggered off the track. Our designated drivers drove us home. It was a prelude to what awaited us the following month. Marathon du Medoc featured 23 wine stops along the 26.2-mile course.

## Taken under Thom's wing

Vacation time at last! Thom greeted us when we landed at the airport in Bordeaux. He was in his mid-50s and possessed a runner's physique, a gaunt appearance to the layman's eye. I noticed his skinny legs with well-defined calf muscles and the lack of the typical stomach gut you see on middle-aged men. Except for the fine crinkles on his face and his graying hair, he could have passed for a man half his age.

"Welcome to Bordeaux, paradise for runners and wine connoisseurs. We'll be visiting several of the famous vineyards over the next several days. Better pace yourselves. But you're runners; you know all about pacing!" So Thom welcomed us to our soon-to-be-unique experience.

The courtesy shuttle van dropped us off in front of our hotel, Chateau Chartrons, in the Old Wine Trade District, a few blocks from the city center of Bordeaux. I gazed in fascination at the stone gargoyles etched above the curved archway of this Victorian-style building. Inside I was immediately disappointed because it was a modern American-style hotel, similar to what I would find in any major city in the USA. The receptionist boasted, "Your air-conditioned rooms will have TV with remote control, including CNN Worldwide, in English!"

Dinner that evening was in the restaurant of the Chartrons. We mingled with 50 other runners who had also signed up with Marathon Tours. By 10:00 P.M. the evening was winding down. Thom took the microphone, "Get a good night's sleep. Load up at the breakfast buffet, 7:00 – 9:00, and meet in front of the hotel at 9:30 sharp."

I don't sleep well when I travel, but I managed a few hours of shut-eye before I heard the beep-beep-beep of my alarm at 7:30 A.M. The best part of breakfast was the croissants: flaky, rich layers of pastry perfectly baked to a golden brown. They tasted buttery, with a slight saltiness, but not so salty that I couldn't resist topping them off with jam. Petite jars of apricot and berry jams, tiny pitchers of honey, and pats of butter adorned each of the small breakfast tables, which seated four. I wasn't even tempted to fill my plate with the typical American fare of eggs, potatoes, and bacon with these croissants as an option.

We boarded the two deluxe tour buses parked in front of the hotel at 9:30 A.M. I don't remember many of the personalities on our tour, but I will never forget Frank, a balding older man in his 60s, with a few straggly gray hairs fighting for survival. Red capillaries zigzagged across his face, which was already a rosy tone

even before we started drinking. He had a pronounced bulbous nose, a perfect complement to the protruding stomach on his very rotund body. I was puzzled, given his physique, “How can he possibly run a marathon?”

Franks’ voice was thunderous. He shouted when he spoke. I doubt that he was even capable of whispering. Gerry and I were seated a few rows ahead of him. I was tempted to stick my fingers in my ears whenever he talked, which was often.

Frank was a high-falutin’ lawyer from New York City. At 3:00 P.M. he pulled the cell phone from his pocket and placed a call to New York, where it was 9:00 A.M. Frank yelled into the phone to, I assume, his secretary. “Anne, tell him I’ll call him back tomorrow.” A few minutes later he dialed another number. “Stan, hold tight. Keep your financial position. It will all work out.” Moments later I overheard him, “Joe, don’t sign anything. I’ll help you with the will next week when I get back to New York” Frank apparently was in high demand in New York. He let all of us aboard the bus know it.

## Putting Frank in the rearview mirror

Two glorious days touring wineries and estates throughout the picturesque region of Bordeaux! Our bus rumbled up and down narrow gravelly roads. Little villages dotted the countryside. It is gorgeous farmland with blooming sunflowers, bucolic vineyards, and medieval castles.

We visited half a dozen chateaus daily, each one with its special charms, such as the Chateau Pontet, contained within an 18th-century castle. We took in the sweet aroma of the wine with every breath.

I drank more and better wine during those two days than I normally do in a month back home. We stopped by the quaint town of Cognac for a tour of Remy Martin. I did know Bordeaux was from Bordeaux, but it was news to me Cognac was indeed from Cognac. I thought it was just a fancy-schmancy name for expensive brandy.

Friday evening we gathered at Fort Medoc, a 15th-century stone fortress built on the marshy banks of the Gironde River. A huge white tent, large enough to accommodate a sit-down dinner for a crowd of 1,500, had been temporarily set up for the prerace “Soiree Mille Pates” or the “Thousand Pasta Party.”

Wine hour began at 7:30 P.M. Copious amounts of wine were poured from the makeshift bar on the lawn. We drank glass after glass of the rich and earthy Medoc wines, as we sat atop the waist-high stone walls of the fort. Ninety minutes later the flaps of the tent were opened. Rows upon rows of tables, covered with elegant white linen tablecloths, were set up. Colorful floral centerpieces and bottles of wine graced the tabletops every few feet. In the center of the tent was a wooden platform stage, large enough for 200 to shake their booties after dinner.

It was impossible for our entire Marathon Tours group of 60 to sit together. At least the eight of us Flyers secured seats across from one another at a table near the stage. A band played pretty much nonstop from 9:00 P.M. until past midnight.

“Mille Pates” was a four-course dinner served family style. Dozens of waiters started us off with platters of a cold vegetable corkscrew pasta salad, and baskets of thick, crusty, chewy bread. Thirty minutes later, heaping bowls of hot linguini were placed on the table, together with nearly overflowing basins of chicken tenders in a béchamel sauce (a rich white, creamy sauce made with butter, milk, flour, and a touch of onion). Wine glasses were topped off again and again and again. For our third course, we got a break from the pasta when we were served a fresh green salad with juicy local tomatoes. Stuffed as I felt, there was no way I was going to pass on the grand finale dessert: chocolate linguini, doused with chocolate custard, topped with flakes of shaved chocolate. It was the most decadent dessert imaginable, sinfully sweet melt-in-your-mouth chocolate. Pure bliss.

**Oh, yes. We do have a marathon ahead of us.**

Plates were cleared. People headed to the dance floor. When it was filled, people danced in the aisles to top American pop songs. After midnight, Thom came over to us. “It’s time to leave. We got a marathon to run tomorrow morning.”



▲ Dancing the night before our marathon.

The race, officially titled “Les Marathon des Chateaux du Medoc,” lived up to its reputation. The 26.2-mile journey began in the village of Pauillac. We stepped out of the bus, weary eyed and hung over from the night before. I struck up conversations with cloven-footed devils, winged angels, transvestites, cowboys, and Indians. I can’t say for sure, but I suspect the loud and pudgy Bozo the Clown was Frank. I walked by Batman and other comic-strip heroes, pirates, nuns, ballerinas, a herd of zebras, a herd of cows, a school of jumbo shrimp, Cleopatra, Beauty and the Beast, all before the firing of the 9:30 A.M. start gun.

The course is a stunning, beautiful circuit that cut through vineyards of famous wineries. We passed by or through more than 50 chateaus while we ran over country roads through small villages. Townsfolk cheered us, while they waved small French flags and with enthusiasm chanted, “Allez, Allez.” (Go! Go!) The 23 gastronomic support stops along the course offered specialties such as tender cubes of grilled beef, local Arcachon oysters, a variety of cheeses, fruits, salty crackers and chips, even ice cream at mile 25. I approached each station and was asked, “Blanc ou rouge, madame?”

Of course we had to pee. There are no porta-potties. *Everyone* pees in the vineyards, multiple times along the course. I veered a few feet off course, behind some taller vines of grapes for privacy, dropped my drawers, and thought, *Maybe this is the secret to the region’s great wine: rich muddy soil fortified by runners’ pee.*

Gerry and I crossed the finish line together, near 4:00 P.M., six and a half hours after the race start. He gave me a big smooch and said, “I’m so glad we did this!” It was double the time of any previous marathon I had run. It was also more than twice as much fun.

The next day was even better. September 9 is my birthday. What better way to celebrate my 42nd birthday than to do the postmarathon ballade with friends! The ballade is an eight-mile recuperation stroll over rural roads. Everyone walks the ballade and dresses in normal casual attire. The course winds through four grand chateaux, each with live music and bottomless glasses of wine. The idea is to relax, kick back, and stay at each chateau for a half hour. At two of the chateaux the bands played standard rock and roll. At a third chateau we listened to rhythm and blues and jazz. My favorite was the fourth and final elegant chateau where we were treated to a fine orchestral performance of classical music. At the end of the ballade we entered a big-top tent for a luncheon of quiche, chili, salads, crusty bread, and soft cheeses.

I took a much-deserved afternoon nap. Later in the evening Gerry suggested, “Wear your nice dress tonight. I’m taking you to the Dolce Vita restaurant.” We feasted on mussels steamed in a light broth, grilled spicy calamari, steak with marsala sauce, and crême brulee for desert. I thought it *truly is dolce vita* (the sweet life).

## Yet another winding down, until . . .

On September 11, Tuesday, we boarded our deluxe tour buses. The destination was Saint Emilion, a medieval town 40 minutes east of Bordeaux. When we arrived, we were shooed off the bus. “Explore! Enjoy the cafes and shops. Browse about on your own. We’ll meet back here in four hours, at 3:30 P.M.”

Gerry and I escaped our tour group for a romantic afternoon together. We walked hand in hand along the narrow cobblestoned streets.

“Let’s see if we can visit every single shop in town before we have to board the bus,” I suggested. “Only if restaurants and cafes are included in your definition of ‘shop,’” was his response.

We came pretty darned close to our goal. We laughed at ourselves as we attempted conversations with the shopkeepers. My two years of high school French were hardly adequate.

We took dozens of pictures of each other and of this delightful medieval village. At every jewelry boutique Gerry insisted, “At least try it on. I want to buy you a necklace or a pair of earrings.” I settled on a pair of pearl teardrop earrings.

“Good. Now when you wear these back home, you’ll remember this glorious day.” The afternoon went by far too quickly.



▲ Strolling the streets of Saint Emilion after the marathon.

We boarded the bus. Damn, once again we were sitting two rows in front of Bozo the Clown—Frank. I had been trying to avoid him ever since the first day of the bus tour.

Minutes after we boarded, his phone buzzed. “What do you mean, ‘They hit the World Trade Center?’ Make certain and call me back.” He hung up.

Seconds later his phone rang again. “OK, you *are* sure. A plane flew into the World Trade Center. And then a second plane flew into the World Trade Center? Find out more and call me back.” He hung up again.

I looked at Gerry, “This can’t possibly be true. It’s just Frank being Frank. Right?”

It was the world’s longest bus ride back to Bordeaux. I sprang from the bus, sprinted into my hotel room, and turned on the TV, for the first time grateful to be in this Americanized hotel, with CNN Worldwide in English. My eyes were glued to the TV as I watched over and over again a jet plane crash into the World Trade Center. I was in agony. I cried. I wished I could be Dorothy and simply click my heels together three times and then, like magic, be back home in L. A. I felt confusion, anger, and fear. Why did this happen? For several hours I tortured myself and watched the relentless coverage with the wrenching images and tried to understand this. I simply could not comprehend. I didn’t want to be in a foreign country anymore. I wanted to be in the same country as my fellow Americans. I craved the sense of security of familiar surroundings and a language I could speak, a newspaper I could read.

## The opposite of vacation

We carried on half-heartedly and drove to Saint Jean de Luz the next morning as scheduled. I went through the motions of being on vacation, but I no longer was. The beautiful sandy beaches didn’t register. I can’t remember what the famous Basque cuisine tasted like, though surely I ate it. Those three days remain a blur. I came down with a cold, which developed into the full-blown flu by the final night. I passed on dinner and lay in bed alternately shivering and sweating as I suffered with a fever.

We returned to Bordeaux. Chateau Chartrons welcomed us back kindly. “You poor Americans!” They offered us half-priced rooms and threw in free breakfast buffets for as long as we were their guests. September 15, our scheduled departure date, came and went. I was no longer physically sick but was emotionally drained.

I called our airline, US Air, and got a busy signal. I dialed my parents and asked them to try to get hold of US Air and speak on my behalf. Surely they would have better luck reaching the airline calling from their home in Fort Collins, Colorado. My dad got through to US Air the next morning. The airline representative assured my dad she would call him as soon as they could book us a flight home.

Dad gave us advice. “You are in Bordeaux! There are worse places to be stranded. Buy yourself a bottle(s) of wine each evening. Drink it and talk to us in the morning. We’ll give you the update. If you don’t have a flight booked, go out and sightsee, buy another bottle(s) of wine. Bordeaux will not run out of wine.” *Yes, Dad, but we might run out of cash.*

We walked up and down the streets of Bordeaux for five days. I memorized the merchandise of every aisle in every store and recognized the faces of the shopkeepers. We drank wine each evening, but it didn’t taste as good as it had the week before. On September 19, my dad gave us the good news that he was able to book us a flight on September 20.

Our final night in Bordeaux, we were seated at an outdoor café. I watched couples stroll by, hand in hand. They looked happy. I became irrational and angry. It wasn’t fair. How can they be smiling and laughing?

September 20, early evening, our plane touched down at LAX. Tears streamed down my face as the pilot announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Los Angeles.” 



**Mary Button** is a retired long-distance runner. She was a competitive marathoner in the 1990s. She ran 20 consecutive sub-three-hour marathons between November 1991 and April 2000. She qualified for the Olympic Marathon Trials in 1996 and again in 2000 when she was a master (over 40). She and her husband, Gerry Hans, founded and operated a successful running apparel business, RaceReady. They were the first to manufacture the pocketed short. Mary lives in Los Angeles and hikes in her “backyard,” Griffith Park. She is one of the founding board members of the nonprofit organization Friends of Griffith Park.