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Strasbourg: The European capital with 2000 years of rich history

It was during IMEX, Frankfurt that I chanced to meet the charming Mireille Dartus, Director of Strasbourg Convention Bureau. When I mentioned that I was planning to visit Strasbourg post IMEX, with great enthusiasm within a day she set up an agenda as well as my stay in a castle or manor house - Chateau de Pourtalès.

The Château de Pourtalès

Arriving into Strasbourg station (2.30 hrs from Frankfurt), I took a taxi to the Chateau de Pourtalès. A good 20 minutes drive brought me to a magnificent castle hotel. On check in I was given a room on the first floor - access to this floor is through a winding staircase. The room is quite spacious and without any frills. Though I felt being a castle the bathrooms could have been bigger.

The owner, Harald Leibrecht, a politician and former member of the Bundestag (German Federal Parliament) was there to receive



me. This delightful and equally handsome hotelier took me for a show round.

Set in a beautiful park with proximity to nature and away from the hustle and bustle of city life is this 270 year old castle hotel. The Château de Pourtalès was built around 1750 by the Bussièrre family and has been visited by dignitaries like Albert Schweitzer, Franz Liszt, Napoléon III, Empress Eugénie, the Princes of Belgium and Russia, Ludwig I of Bavaria, the Grand Duke of Baden etc. "In 1972 when my father Dr. Walter Leibrecht bought the castle it was in bad condition thanks to the world wars and its aftermath. He began reconstruction and initially students of Schiller International University were accommodated. In 2009 the Château de Pourtalès started welcoming guests from all over the world. Today apart from tourists it is available as a campus for students from international universities and has become a second home for many Members of the European Parliament during the session weeks," said Harald Leibrecht.

The hotel offers 28 hotel rooms that are located in the château or the annex. WiFi is available and free of charge in all the rooms.



The hotel also provides a spa area with Finnish sauna. "Originally this spa area was the stables. So when designing the spa we were conscientious to conserve the original flair of the stables. By using authentic material we created a unique atmosphere," said Harald Leibrecht. In cooperation with "Nomad Wellness" they also offer revitalizing massages and facial treatments.

That night for dinner Harald Leibrecht took me out to an Indian restaurant just across the border. On the way he showcased me the highlights of the city. Over dinner I understood the love and affection that he has for India and some of his anecdotes made me smile.

After a decent night's sleep, I went to the breakfast room. Surprisingly there's no restaurant in the castle. "We are expanding and will soon add 20 more rooms, then we can probably look at a restaurant," said Harald Leibrecht. Over breakfast I was introduced to Pascal Papillon, the yoga instructor. A PhD student in Yoga philosophy from India he conducts regular yoga session which are free for guests and yoga mats are also provided.

Strasbourg Convention + exhibition center

After a healthy discussion over an equally healthy breakfast we awaited my transport that was arranged by the Convention Bureau. The taxi brought me to the convention center where the charismatic Mireille Dartus was awaiting. She introduced me to Catherine McCarty, sales manager at Strasbourg Convention + exhibition center.

"We provide MICE organisers support in organising their events be it large conventions, congresses, conferences or just board meetings. This can be held in a hotel or at our Convention Centre. Located at the heart of a business district and the European



institutions it's a unique, multi-purpose and multi-function complex," said Mireille Dartus.

The Strasbourg Convention & Exhibition Center has two parts. The Congress Palace has three auditoriums of varying capacities of 1,800, 1,200 and 500 seats. There are another 23 meeting rooms from 25 to 450 seats fully equipped with day light availability. There is also a modular dining area accommodating up to 1,500 guests. An additional 10,000 m² of flexible space (exhibition, catering and conference) is there. The other part is exclusively for large exhibitions there is 70,000 m² space including 24,000 m² spread over 4 halls: hall 7.1 (6,650 m²), hall 7.2 (5,700 m²), hall 5 (6,000 m²) and hall 8 (6,650 m²).



After the show round Mireille Dartus provided me with a tram ticket so that I can go around the historical town center. She herself used a bicycle to move around and explained it, “We have dual benefits – exercising as well as eco friendliness. In Strasbourg the bicycle is used by many citizens and tourists making it an ecofriendly city.”

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Strasbourg, the European capital with a 2000 years of rich history also has a UNESCO World Heritage Site - “Strasbourg, Grande Ile and Neustadt” - an entire historic urban centre. The site features high-quality collection of monuments including



the area overlooked by the Cathedral. The Cathedral was constructed between the 11th and 15th centuries it's a symbol of the city with narrow winding and cobbled streets. Its height of 142 m. classified Notre-Dame of Strasbourg as the tallest edifice in Christendom up until the 19th century. I loved the organ chest, the Astronomical Clock, the Pillar of Angels. I was informed that the Cathedral has 500 spotlights that highlight its exceptional architecture. The Cathedral

is surrounded by several picturesque parts like the Petite France that is surrounded by four canals and museums which give an insight of that era.

Strasbourg the European capital

Many may not be aware that New-York, Geneva and Strasbourg are the only cities in the world - home to international organisations without being national capitals. The Council of Europe has 47 member countries and deals with ensuring that human rights are respected as well as social, educational, cultural, and environmental matters. The Palais de l'Europe, built in 1975 where Council of Europe sessions are held is worth a look. This is a vast quadrilateral containing a semi-circular council chamber with an interesting mahogany ceiling.



The European Court of Human Rights houses both the European Court of Justice and the European Commission of Human Rights. The building resembles 2 metal drums on supports, suggesting the scales of justice as a reminder of its function. The European Parliament building is based on a fusion of circle and ellipse.

The Strasbourg Christmas market is a must visit as it celebrates its 450th anniversary in 2020 making it the oldest in France.

Strasbourg through waterways

They had also arranged for a complementary boat ticket on Batorama and the terminus was close to the Cathedral. I met Jonathan Hoffmann who took me on to the boarding point. The boat was quite spacious and we sat in the front row. The tour of 1.15 hours, takes you to the heart of 3 emblematic districts of Strasbourg and as you witness the beauty of the buildings - modern as well as half-timbered houses which can be seen in the reflection of the canals. You can listen to the stories in English as the boat navigates through canals and old coolers. Cross two locks and discover the Covered Bridges and the Vauban Dam, witnesses of the fortifications of the city under Louis XIV, the imperial district of Neustadt, or "new city", the Palace of the Rhine, the Opera, the Library or the University Palace and finally the symbols of unity and European construction - the European Parliament, the European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe, all built by renowned architects.

After the boat ride I met Christine Harter, Promotion Manager, Tourist office of Strassbourg and its region. She gave a few insights on the city and all of a sudden I felt I should have spared a day more. She fondly remembered her visits to India, “India is certainly a beautiful country and I feel a top market with a huge potential. We hope to tap this growing market soon.”

After that I proceeded to the railway station for my train to Luxembourg.