

Nancy, France's city of flowers

By SUSAN JAMES

It was like walking through a gothic fairytale. Just before dawn the sky was beginning to lighten on the narrow streets of the medieval quarter. In the French city of Nancy, lamps still glowed behind mullioned windows and the tower of Saint Epvre Basilica pointed faintly at the night sky. The scent of freshly baked bread floated out of a small bakery as I passed. This was the time of day when the quarter was filled with the past, before crowds came and shops and markets opened.

EXPLORING NANCY'S HISTORY

In the 15th century Ducal Palace, with its elaborate stone arches and life-size equestrian statue of Duke Antoine over the door, I could see two curators in a small room fronting the street discussing the arrangement of a new exhibition. Like me, they were up early. Here in 1560 Claude de Valois, the hunchbacked daughter of French queen Catherine de' Medici, had held sway.

Next door, behind the stone walls of the Church of the Cordeliers, Lorraine's ancient rulers slept beneath their stone effigies. At the end of the Grande-Rue, the narrow street that bisects the quarter, lay the formidable bastion of the Craffe Gate. The oldest part of Nancy's fortifications and once the town's prison, it stood in sinister shadow. Around the Craffe Gate Nancy is a medieval city but that is only one of its many faces.

Like a secret treasure, the city lies in the rich heartland of the French countryside, 90 minutes from Paris by train. Nancy was still the capital of the powerful duchy of Lorraine when in 1725 Louis XV married the daughter of Stanislas Leszczynski, king of Poland. As part of a plot to absorb the duchy into his kingdom, Louis appointed his father-in-law its duke and the future of Nancy changed forever.

A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

With visions of Versailles before him, Stanislas initiated a massive building program in his new capital, endowing the town with what is now a prestigious UNESCO World Heritage Site. Moving out beyond its medieval walls, the centre of Nancy became the Place Stanislas, reputed to be the most beautiful royal square in Europe.

Palisaded by 18th century white and gold classical buildings, the corners and street entrances into the square are decorated with hanging lanterns, wrought iron gates twisted into ornate arabesques, and elaborate Italian-style fountains guarded by mythological statues.

Together with two adjacent squares, the Place de la Carrere with its hedge of lime trees, and the Place de L'Alliance with its central fountain modeled on the Piazza Navona in Rome, they form the town's social and economic heart. Here, presided over by a statue of Duke Stanislas, are the busiest cafes and most elegant hotels and today these squares have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

On the north side of Place Sta-



ROYAL SQUARE: Place Stanislas is sometimes considered the most beautiful square in Europe. SUSAN JAMES

nislas lays the Musée des Beaux Arts, Nancy's eclectic art museum. Although the museum boasts a Caravaggio and a Tintoretto, it's the basement that most people head for. Enclosed by the massive foundations of the town's medieval walls is an unbelievable selection of delicate Art Nouveau glass created by the internationally renowned company of Daum.

EMBRACING ART NOUVEAU

At the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Germany annexed part of Lorraine and many wealthy merchants fled to Nancy where they commissioned entire neighbourhoods of stunning Art Nouveau houses and shops. Recently developed building materials of concrete and rebar made possible the installation of big arches and large shop windows.

With decoration inspired by natural curves and a passion for asymmetry, Art Nouveau reshaped Stanislas's city. One of the dispossessed was a lawyer named Jean Daum. When he came to Nancy, all he had left were a few shares in a failing glassworks. Too poor to raise money to hire a manager to run it, he took over the works himself and was later joined by his two sons.

Together they built a company that put Nancy on the artworld map. In defiance of Germany, Daum produced protest glass celebrating French heroes and symbols like Joan of Arc and the fleur-de-lis. The collection of Daum art glass in the basement of the Beaux Arts Museum comes in spectacular rainbow shades and

infinity of shapes and patterns.

Going with the Art Nouveau theme, I had lunch at the Excelsior Brasserie near Rue Stanislas. It is an exquisitely maintained Art Nouveau restaurant from France's Golden Age and I expected to see Toulouse-Lautrec redheads from the Folies-Bergère drinking absinthe at corner tables. Absinthe wasn't on the menu but the region's signature dish, quiche Lorraine, was superb.

A PLACE FOR FINE CRAFT

Like Jean Daum, other master craftsmen settled in Nancy and together in 1901 they founded the School of Nancy, an alliance of artists, architects and artisans who built and decorated the town's homes and businesses, turning out works that transformed Nancy into an urban Art Nouveau gem.

Today the most beautiful shrine to the period is the Musée de l'École de Nancy. It was once a private home built between 1900 and 1934 by a department store owner named J.B.E. Corbin. The house, its outbuildings and gardens are, like the Excelsior Brasserie, an unchanged time capsule of Art Nouveau. Corbin and his fellow aesthetes led a revolt against the culture of the time which copied the past but was unable to create a new aesthetic.

Japanese design, as it had with Van Gogh and the Post-Impressionists, exercised a great influence on the Art Nouveau revolution. Wandering around the Corbin home with its heavy hand-

crafted furniture, stained glass windows and luxurious finishes, I was struck by the solidity of the bourgeois environment decorated with turn-of-the-century whimsy, as if a conservatively designed bank building had been converted into a living space for fairies and elves.

Nancy is a shape shifting town. You can walk down medieval streets, glance into Renaissance churches, have coffee in 18th century hotels, or dine in Art Nouveau

restaurants. At night, Place Stanislas glows with subtle illumination and, during the summer, the façade of its City Hall becomes a gigantic screen for displaying the most popular art form of the 20th century, moving light.

After dark, an elaborate light show is projected onto the City Hall façade, recreating the history and folklore of the town. Part Monty Python and part artistic wonder, a whimsical recreation of the story of Nancy unfolds. I



WEEKEND OFFERINGS: Sunday flea market along the Grande-Rue. SUSAN JAMES



FINE LOCAL ART: Daum glass in the Musée des Beaux Arts. SUSAN JAMES

watched children chasing the images of enormous multicoloured fish as they moved across the walls of the building or tried to hitch a ride on a rising rainbow. Among Nancy's many faces, there seems to have always been a place for make believe.

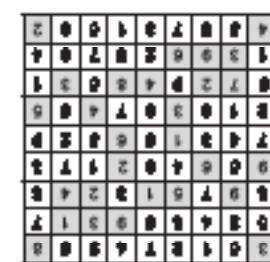
Susan James is a California-based writer who has lived in India and the U.K. She specializes in art and history and has written about China's Silk Road, Henry VIII's Eng-

Sudoku

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Fill in the boxes using numbers between 1 and 9 so that each column, each row, and each 3x3 square contain all nine numbers only once.

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This week's solution

White Dew Oolong

A 100% natural high mountain spring oolong (gao shan chu), from the Bei Shan Mountain in Taiwan. This tea is hand-picked, and hand-crafted. A lightly oxidized oolong with a fragrant fresh scent. Produces a clear golden brew with an awakening quality and smooth refreshing taste.

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Aged Oolong Tea

This award winning rare aged oolong (lao chu), from Taiwan is carefully aged in bamboo baskets for 8 years. The tea is then re-fired, naturally making it low in caffeine. A traditional tea regarded for medicinal properties for living light on the stomach. Produces a clear amber brew with a crisp clean taste.

To learn more visit: www.fiveelementstea.com

The Epoch Times
Geography Guru™
"Growing your geography knowledge" Quiz #274

GAS GIANTS IN CELESTIAL GEOGRAPHY: The four largest planets are composed of mostly gases, and are thus called "gas giants." In the solar system, they are 5th through 8th in their distance from the Sun. Name the four planets. HINT: Their names come from Roman mythology: the ruler of the Gods, the ruler of the Titans, the father of the Titans, and the God of the sea.?

Read The Epoch Times next week for the answer!

Answer for Quiz #273

WHAT NATION AM I? My western border is on the Atlantic Ocean. Most of my territory abutting the Atlantic is one of the oldest and driest deserts in the world, with tall sand dunes. The easternmost part of my area is the Caprivi Strip, a panhandle that extends to near Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River. English is the official language of my 2.1 million people, although Afrikaans, German, and various indigenous languages are widely spoken. Windhoek is my capital. What nation am I? **NAMIBIA**