

# City between Two Rivers

Text and photos by Dr Jonathan Tan, Editorial Board Member

“**HAVE PAPER** will travel!” declared an esteemed professor when I informed him that I was starting to collect data for a project. I presumed that it was meant to encourage me to work harder, obtain an opportunity to see the world and expand my horizons at international conferences. Alas, after months spent looking at unintelligible handwriting and old X-rays, I had gone no further than the office block of my institution and had begun to fear that his words were a cruel joke, like the “*Arbeit macht frei*” signs at German World War II camps...

Needless to say, I was overjoyed when I was told to submit an abstract for a conference in Lyon. I must admit I am no Francophile; my knowledge of that city was gleaned mostly from *Asterix* comic books and the Discovery Travel & Living Channel, but there were four words in the description of Lyon that made it a must-see for me – “gastronomic capital of France”.

Built on the convergence of the Rhone and Saone rivers, Lyon is the second largest city in France. It had been the capital of Roman Gaul, then

a centre of the silk trade during the Renaissance and in recent times, a major industrial hub. Its latest reputation as a gastronomic paradise began when working-class women, formerly employed as cooks by the upper classes, began to set up their own establishments to serve a mostly working-class clientele. Much like the Singaporean *towkay* relishing beef *hor fun* on a slightly seedy side street in Geylang, the upper crust in Lyon did not let snobbishness get in the way of a good meal. Poets went into rhapsodies about the art of eating well, Michelin stars were awarded and from these establishments the titans of Gallic gastronomy arose.

From Paul Bocuse, one of the fathers of *nouvelle cuisine* (who looks rather like the deceased chef from *Ratatouille*), to Daniel Boulud, one-time owner of three Michelin stars and of DB (not the place for naughty soldiers) Bistro Moderne at Marina Bay Sands, Lyon has produced a veritable who’s who of French food. While I salivated at the thought of endless supplies of charcuterie and cheese, I whipped up

an abstract (more fast food than haute cuisine) and waited for the results.

Six months later, I was on the plane to Lyon (with a brief stop in Frankfurt for a breakfast of liverwurst). Lyon’s Saint-Exupery Airport was pretty efficient even for someone spoiled by Changi Airport’s three terminals, and the Rhone Express got me to Part Dieu, the city’s business centre and main train station, without any trouble. A quick dinner of steak frites and my adventure commenced.

The first order of business was locating the conference centre. Thankfully, travelling in Lyon was a breeze with efficient subway, tram and bus systems and a public bicycle service thrown in. The conference centre overlooked the Rhone and I spent my first hour there doing my best impression of the stereotypical Singaporean tourist, taking photos to my heart’s content. It was an eye-opener of a conference and by its end, I realised that I’d never be able to put together a case series as large as the Chinese; or find an internal review board as accommodating as



the Japanese; or speak with the wry humour of the British or the flair of the French. However sipping on a lusciously creamy bisque (trust the French to make conference food delectable) while watching the evening light creep across the Rhone, it didn't really matter that I found the concept of spinal balance a tad hard to grasp. What mattered was casually reinserting myself into the queue while avoiding eye contact with the lady dishing it out. Thankfully she, like most of the Lyonnais I met, was warm and friendly and did not blink at my requests for second and third helpings – try pulling that off in Paris...

And so passed the next three days, conference by day and nights spent having leisurely dinners al fresco with the boss in one *bouchon* after another. Lyon in October has the temperature of an operating theatre perfectly air-conditioned; not too cold that the patient freezes and not too warm that you swelter in your lead suit. Just cool enough that you can have a meal in the open air without having to put on your suit jacket. It did strike me that as a boy I had read about Asterix's journeys around Gaul, in Asterix and the Banquet, to put together a banquet of all of France's delicacies, and now here I was in Lugdunum (as Lyon was known then) eating the same Saucisson de Lyon I read about in the comic books. Alas while I was shaped like Asterix in those days, I am now rather more akin to Obelix.

The night ferry ride was an interesting experience. The journey down the Rhone to the confluence and up the Saone allowed me to see why Lyon is known as the City of Lights. It must be no coincidence that the Lumiere brothers, inventors of the cinematograph, were born here.

By the last day, I had presented my paper which I was sure the Europeans found interesting but not very clinically relevant, what with salted fish-eating Cantonese speakers being in short supply in that part of France...

It was finally time to do a spot of

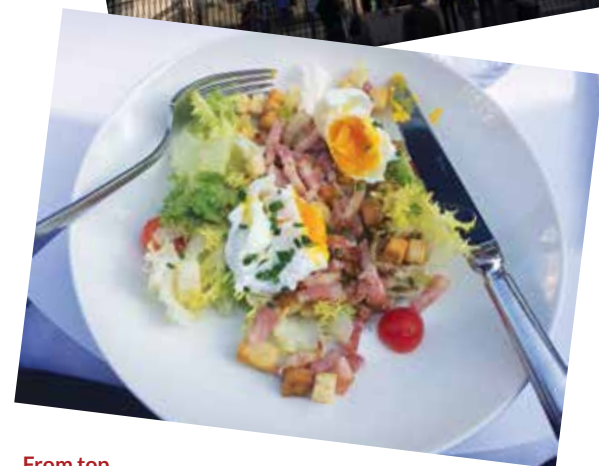


sightseeing and like any orthopaedic round, we were quick and efficient. A trip through the Place Bellcour, a stroll through the Place des Terreaux and a trip up the funicular to see the Fourviere basilica and a panoramic view of the city. The Roman amphitheatre on the Fourviere rather reminded me of the conference hall I had been in. I guess some designs really do stand the test of time. Only all too soon I was enjoying my last Salade Lyonnaise before heading back to my world of family conferences and morning rounds.

Though I cannot profess to have truly explored Lyon or its cuisine (there were times when I seriously contemplated ordering some of the more exotic specialties, but being the first resident to give my consultant food poisoning was not high on my list of priorities), it is certainly a place well worth a second visit – rich history, picturesque scenery, delicious food and friendly hospitable people. Lyon is definitely high on the list of destinations to bring my family to in the future, but first, it is time to head back to the tower block for more X-rays and faded case notes. ■



*Dr Jonathan Tan is currently a resident at the National University Hospital orthopaedics department.*



**From top**  
**Lovely view of the Rhone from the conference centre**  
**Fourviere basilica, an imposing sight**  
**One last hurrah – my final Salade Lyonnaise in the city**