

Simon Mundie experiences top-class American hospitality on his first visit to Roland Garros

French polish

It’s May 2005, and I’m wilting under the hot sun on an outside court at Roland Garros. My American host pipes up: “You mark my words. Mariano Puerta is going to do very well this year – I’m tipping him to get to the semi-finals at least.”

Suggestions like these are to be scoffed at – after all, the Argentine had not long returned to the ATP Tour after his first drugs ban. Andrew obviously isn’t as ‘in the know’ as he would like to think. I decided against correcting him, after all I was his guest at Roland Garros and didn’t want to appear ungrateful. Instead I would just wait until Puerta lost. This would be long before the semi-finals; time enough at any rate to gently remind Andrew of his outlandish claim. In the meantime this was my chance to sit back and enjoy his hospitality.

Grand Slam Tennis Tours is the baby of Andrew Chmura, a former satellite player and top American junior, and Dave Kenny. The American-based company specialises in taking people around the globe to watch top-class tennis action, and since its founding in 1991, has escorted more than 6,000 tennis fans to tennis tournaments everywhere from Melbourne to the Bahamas. Its founders, Andrew in particular, are complete tennis nuts who like nothing better than to share their passion for the game with anyone who is willing to join them as they jet around the globe.

This was my first time at Roland Garros. Although travelling to the French Open isn’t hard, like many people I had never got around to going. Maybe it was mental block of crossing the Channel, but whatever the reason, I had finally made it and the event was living up to all my expectations. Unfortunately, time constraints meant I was only here for one full day, but Grand Slam had promised me a jam-packed schedule. Generally trips last a full week, with tickets



Parisian pleasures: When you can tear yourself away from the tennis, there are plenty of sights to take in, from the Louvre with its Pyramid, to the Eiffel Tower and one of Henry Moore's reclining figures (opposite)

provides academy lessons at the Stade Jean Bouin – the old site of Roland Garros and the current practice courts for pros competing for the French Open title. But on this occasion, watching the tennis was my priority. I politely declined, figuring that those extra few hours in bed could prove to be crucial. In hindsight it was probably a good idea, as the guests who did take him on returned to the hotel looking like they could barely stand.

The company’s mantra is sightseeing, shopping and museums in the morning and Grand Slam tennis in the afternoon. As many of the guests are first-time visitors to Paris, this is a formula that goes down well. A guided tour of all the famous sights is first on the itinerary, but if you know Paris well, this is also an ideal opportunity to cut loose and do your own thing for a few hours before the tennis starts.

Up close you really appreciate the blood, sweat and tears put into every single point

By late morning, the crowds around Roland Garros are swelling, so the troops are rallied and you head off. Andrew’s connections pay dividends, and everyone gets to bypass the assembled mass of Gauloises-smoking French tennis fans jostling for position outside. Inside, thoughts turn to tennis. Anyone who has been raised on the rarefied diet of British summer grass-court tennis is in for a treat, as the clay-court version undeniably makes for the more colourful sight; far less boom-boom and loads more spin, slide and guile.

Another marked difference from SW19 is the crowd; there are no cries of “come on Tim” here. Not that this lot are afraid to holler their pleasure, or displeasure, at the fare on show, as many a great

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What does Grand Slam Tennis Tours offer?

The company provides guided tours to all four Grand Slam tournaments plus other major tennis tournaments. During the events, good-quality tickets are provided to the tournament for every day of your stay. The Grand Slam Tennis Tours staff aim to share their intimate knowledge of the local area, organising excursions, games of tennis and eating out at no extra charge.



How do you book your trip?

Visit www.grandslamtennistours.com and enter details into ‘Request information’. Alternatively e-mail grand@grandslamtennistours.com, or call 001 802 244 6611.

Prices vary for different venues. Tours generally last seven days, although they can

be individually tailored, with days added or subtracted as you see fit. You have the option to combine tours for more days of tennis – ask your Grand Slam Tennis Tours agent for details.

Which different destinations are offered?

Trips are organised to all the following venues: the Australian Open, the French Open,

Wimbledon and the US Open. Further tours are organised for the Pacific Life Open, Indian Wells; the NASDAQ-100 Open, Miami;

the Monte Carlo Open; the Italian Open; and the Masters Cup, Shanghai.

French Open packages

Packages for the early rounds start at \$3,175 for a week, going up to \$5,395 for the week-long men’s semis and finals package. Stay at either The Lutetia or the Hotel Cayré – both first-class hotels which are 20 minutes from Roland Garros by metro. Highlights of the package include an exclusive on-site tennis academy, held at Stade Jean Bouin. Seating at Roland Garros is in the 1st category Lower Level Court Philippe-Chatrier seats approximately 20 rows from the court.

champion can testify. Another point worth noting is that the spectators are far less bothered about adhering to crazy notions such as sitting in your allotted seat. It was at this point I chose to dispense with a few choice words from my phrasebook and this approach could work for you too.

A few hours sitting under a blazing sun on Court Philippe-Chartier is enough to make anyone burn – as my red forehead could have testified – so a wander round the outside courts with Andrew to find some shade is a welcome relief. Up close you really start to appreciate the blood, sweat and tears that the gladiators of the clay-court game put into winning every single point on the slow red clay. You can start to understand why, given that the grass-court season starts so soon after the clay-court season finishes, some of these guys have been

known to give Wimbledon a wide berth over the years.

Before long, the shadows have lengthened and thoughts turn to dinner. Once a week guests are treated to dinner on board a boat sailing down the Seine – taking in the Eiffel Tower and other Paris sights, and thankfully this was the day I was there. It’s a magnificent way to cap a day spent watching some great tennis, and all the

guests were wide-eyed and in good spirits at the end of their trip. Night rapidly draws in and a few people’s sunburn starts to glow in the dark-serving as a reminder that a hat and sunblock would have been a good idea.

We disembarked from the boat, bid adieu to our French crew, before hopping in a minibus to be escorted back to our hotels. At this point I took Andrew to one side and, with the help of a bit of Dutch courage, told him that I thought his Puerta prediction had been well wide of the mark. To my dismay, I watched with amazement over the ensuing two weeks as the Argentine proceeded to carve up the field, before getting stopped in his tracks in the final by Nadal. To his credit, Andrew wasn’t too smug about putting me in my place. And I have to admit, he obviously knows exactly what he’s talking about.