

Paris, France
October 13-20, 2003
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Exchange rate: \$1.10US to 1 Euro

Thursday, October 16, 2003

Right in the city

We stayed the first two nights in the Latin Quarter at Hotel Eugenie, 31 Rue Saint-Andres-des-Art 75006 Paris. Rooms were 112 Euro (\$1.18US = 1Euro) and very comfortable. We stayed on the inner-court room, so it was very quiet.

The first day was spent at Saint-Chappel, a huge cathedral with stained glass windows. This is also the place where Marie Antoinette spent her final days in a cell. The Palace de Justice, next door, is a working court with French lawyers running hither and yon.

To get into the court, you had to run your bags through an x-ray machine. I blew it and let my high speed 3200 ASA film go through, so it's likely toast. You really can take anything through without issue except a backpack, so just put things in a tray, pass it along and the guards don't give it a mind.

Funny thing was the guards asked to see Patty's flashlight. There wasn't any problem, but maybe it looked like something more menacing. The best part about this place was they had toilets. That seems to be a little tough to find in the city.

Where to stay?

After touring around Isle Cite, we went over to the Latin Quarter to find a place to stay. All of the places recommended in the guide books were booked. Funny that. So, we wandered down the street and found a place to stay. It had double beds, showers in room as well as a toilet. Excellent, considering we were warned about European-style accommodations.

From there, we went over to the Notre Dame. Wow! The place is massive, but don't show up too late. Everything closes up very early. Going up all 488 tower stairs is well worth the paid trudge. We purchased the carte-musee, a museum pass that's good for everything in the city for nearly a week. It's well worth it.

The towers on Notre Dame provide a great vantage point for taking in the city. The bell inside the towers is massive, something you wouldn't want to be close to when it tolls.

We wandered down and found some good, cheap eats in the Latin Quarter. I ate the salad and haven't died yet.

Make sure you pick up a copy of the Metro map that has an overlay of the city, available at most metro stations. Without overland references, you won't be able to figure out what lines and stations you need to use. With the Metro pass, we were able to move about the city efficiently. But, we were warned to watch out for pickpocket crews. Being fresh off the boat on your first self-guided international jaunt, it makes you a little paranoid.

Wednesday, October 15, 2003

I didn't sleep well, waking several times at night due to the time change. Then, when I did finally fall asleep, we both slept all the way to noon. Egads! We ran down, checked out and checked in, had to change rooms for another 112 Euro.

The best museum ever?

The Latin Quarter is actually quite nice to stay in, though it's more expensive than the Eiffel Tower district. Weird! Once we moved from one room to another, we walked over to the Louvre. Make sure to check out the medieval moat. It seems that most people either skip or miss it. It was one hidden below the building and only "recently" discovered. It was originally built during the reign of King Charles V. That was an awesome find.

When entering the Louvre, the only thing you have to do is have your bags x-rayed. Also, having the museum pass made it very quick to get in, rather than waiting in line to get tickets. Also, there are no backpacks allowed in the museum. Eats in the museum are pretty expensive, too.

Some parts of the Louvre are closed during the week, with the closed areas cycling around. So, it's literally impossible to see the whole place in one day. Today, the Napoleon Apartments were closed. We did get over to check out the Mona Lisa behind glass. There was only a small crowd around it, so there was no wait. But, I could see that the roped off halls leading up to the famous painting. We finally were kicked out of the museum and snagged a couple postcards on the way out.

The park between the Louvre and obelisk from Egypt closes at sunset, so you'll have to walk around it to catch the sunset behind the Eiffel Tower. One bonus is the Eiffel Tower sparkles from flash strobes at sunset. An added visual bonus.

We walked back to the Louvre, hoping to catch the Arc d'Triumph at night, but it wasn't lit up that evening. Wandering around the Louvre at night is quite fun because there are very few people around there, so you get a better sense of the place. We caught the Metro back to the Latin Quarter.

Thursday, October 16, 2003

Art and more art

We had to leave our nice hotel and strike out across the city to find some different accommodations near the Eiffel Tower. We used the metro up to the Arc d'Triumph to check that area out in the daylight. It was a mistake not to find a hotel first and drop our packs. We had to haul them up 250+ stairs to the top of the Arc. Aside from that, the views from the top are spectacular.

We marched back down, caught the metro back to the Eiffel tower and went to hunt for lodging. Surprise – the hotels listed in the guide books were completely booked. Across the street, we stayed at Hotel Serre, less impressive than our previous hotel. The shower was broken and the neighbors were loud...for 70 Euro (\$80US) per night. This was a much older styled Parisian hotel, with the classic dorm room style showers.

We cleaned up, dropped our bags and headed out for Musee d'Orsay, a fine art museum located in an old train depot. It wasn't as large as the Louvre, but it would do for the day. We almost missed the premier paintings on the top floor, sections 29-35. This most important section is hidden behind the upstairs café. Don't miss this area! Sadly, Whistler's Mother was in Edinburgh, Scotland, at the time. But we did get to enjoy quite a few Van Gogh pieces. Patty ended up following the lead of a couple other French girls and used the men's restroom, as the line out the women's was a good 10 minutes.

Smoked out

We left the Orsay and caught the metro back to the Eiffel tower. Wow, up close, that thing is huge. It's 5 Euros (\$6US) to ride to the top and must be done. The Restaurant Jacques Cousteau serves dinner for about 70 Euro (\$80US) per person. Wow! It's supposedly difficult to get a seat at the restaurant. We walked back to the hotel and sadly discovered that Rue Clare, a famous tourist byway, closed at 8pm.

We changed, went to dinner and promptly were literally smoked out of our chairs. It was so bad, we skipped dessert. Blech. We did meet these two nice Irish girls on holiday. Apparently smoking was banned in January 2004 in Ireland. There's already been mass protests. Smoking has to be dying if a European country has banned it. After a smoked out dinner, we went off to the hotel room for sleep. The bed was rough and uncomfortable, the neighbors were terribly loud and Patty couldn't sleep. I slept just fine.

Friday, October 17, 2003

Awake at 830am – we're a couple of slugs! The dorm room shower was small, with the toilet right next to it. A little bit different. We finally make the assault on the Eiffel Tower. At the bottom, if the line is to the end of the snaking rail, it will be a 20 minute wait. At the second deck, when the line wraps around the whole floor, you've got an hour to get to the upper elevator. Also pay attention, as the other line might be significantly shorter. We chose the lee side of the elevator, as we were out of the wind. The views up top are to die for.

The total tour time for the tower is about 3 hours, and that's without taking the time to check out the museum. We then took off to see Napoleon's tomb. This is across from the Hotel d'Invalides and the Musee d'Arme. The place is huge! You could burn a day at the Musee d'Arme alone. Napoleon's tomb is duly impressive as well. The last guy to put France on the conquer map received a respectable send off. After Napoleon's tomb, we tried to hit the Rodin museum, but it was closed at 5pm. The gardens looked pretty impressive through the gates. Then, from there, we went back to our dump of a hotel on Rue Cler. Watch out, the whole street closes at 8pm sharp.

We bought a baguette at the boulangerie, hit the boutique for meat, a fromagerie for cheese and a bottle of wine from the vin store. Perfect, though we almost didn't have the bottle uncorked for us. And each shop vendor knew exactly what we were planning to do – have dinner under the Eiffel Tower. Guess my idea wasn't too original.

Noisy neighbors

The walk through Le Parc du Champ du Mars was pleasant, other than trying to prevent spilling the bottle of wine. In the middle of eating our meat, stinky cheese, baguette and drinking the wine, the flashes on the Eiffel Tower went off, making the tower sparkle. Funny thing, it made Patty cry. It's one of those beautiful sights that raised emotions. Being decently buzzed might have helped with that, too.

After we were done, we strolled back to our dump of a hotel, Le Grand Hotel Leveque. The place was stinking of smoke, me enjoying a runny nose from it and plenty of noisy neighbors. The only thing going for it was our inner courtyard room, making it easy to toss out peach pits and other miscellaneous things targeting the trash below. Quite medieval.

Hardly slept that night. Not surprisingly, the center courtyard reeked of trash, but it overcame the smoke sneaking in under the door. Each odor was equally as bad, it was a choice you don't want to have to make. We chose to alternate poisons.

Saturday, October 18, 2003

In the middle of the night, Patty caught her hair on the bed and started screaming, thinking someone was holding her by the neck. The whole time, I was saying "Patty, wake up. It's me!" I started speaking much louder until I finally got through. After that, I made sure there was a little light in the room to avoid incidents.

Second international cold

Woke up with a cold from the smoky dinner on Thursday - crap. I drugged up last night, so hopefully I'll feel better at the end of the day.

Nope, ended up feeling bad the whole day. Oh well. We did the assault of the city anyway with a start of the sewers, Les Egouts. It was a short metro on the C RER train,

get off at Pont L'Alma, wait until the sewers open at 11am, then use the Carte Musee a day past its expiration date to save money and we're in.

The sewer system is quite amazing, as it handles 3 million cubic meters of sewage a day. And you walk right over the grating of the flowing sewage. Interestingly, there isn't any smell at all, no worse than the storm drains I used to play in. And, there were facts and explanations in English, making the experience much more interesting. We spent a good 2 hours down there.

Random streets

We grabbed some lunch and headed over to Denfort-Rochereau, a public-accessible catacomb, off the #4 metro line, about 3km south of the Seine. Make sure to bring your own flashlight with spare bulbs, as you'll be able to see much more. There are tons of bones in cross, heart and other shapes. Even the walls were interesting to look at in the empire of the dead.

Then the strangest thing – you get dumped out of the side of a random building on a random street! After some medieval bone viewing, it was time to visit the post-modern paradise of Musee Picasso over near the Bastille. We transported on the metro and got as close as possible because the narrow streets are very difficult to navigate. By this time, we had secured 2 useful maps – Galleries Lafayette for the streets and a metro overlay map, given to us by a nice guy in the metro station ticket office. Again, without the metro lines overlaid on the city, you'll have a very hard time navigating the city.

Each metro station has the map plastered on the walls, so you mostly end up using those maps on the fly while using the metro. But, watch for pickpockets. I purchased a second wallet of disguise for just this trip plus two turtles of stealth for hiding passports, plane tickets and such. They're much harder to pick pocket.

As a side-side note, Rick Steves is friggin' all over the place in Paris - in people's hands, on hotel doorways and such. He must be the #1 dude for books there. Note to Dad – find the niche for travel and go after it!

Eating backpacker French style

The Musee Picasso was pretty cool, though some things were difficult to figure out. That's the mastery of Picasso for you. Too bad I've felt like crud all day, otherwise the museum might have been more fun. It took a few to find the metro again through the maze of Parisian streets, but we did it. Now it was time for some seriously alternative art at the George Pompidue center. More modernism for the sunset hour.

In the museum, I felt horrible and vaguely trailed behind Patty. She was enjoying the place, checking out Man Ray's works and such. Everything was a fog for me. The fountains outside were wonderfully garish and even the buildings around there were

rather strange as well. After a few hours of post modern, it was time to find our way back to the metro and move on.

Not wishing to suffer through another smoky dinner, we went to a vendor, and purchased a salami with 3 different stinky cheeses Panini. These things are about the best deal for the money. These sandwiches are by far my favorite thing here. We ate in the hotel room, not thinking too smartly about attracting insects and rats. We didn't end up with any trouble, but it was a possibility. I took a bunch of drugs and crashed out.

Off to the castle

Hotel Eugene was very quiet and pleasant, normally costing 120 Euros (\$130US), but we were able to get 4 nights for 112 Euro (\$120US) per night. While messing with the safe, Patty accidentally messed up the code by typing too fast and we weren't able to unlock it. On a Sunday, there was no hope for help. Thank goodness we didn't have anything in there, otherwise it could have been an effort to find a drill. When we checked out, we claimed that the safe was messed up when we arrived. There was a little RJ-45 jack on the bottom of the door, so I'm sure the hotel has the ability to unlock the safes without issue. We're evil.

Sunday, October 19, 2003

We were awake "early" to leave at 10am. Patty's 36th birthday. She said this was her first fun and good birthday in 16 years. Poor thing! We had a choice and I voted to head over to Versailles Castles, 45 minutes out of the Latin Quarter on the train. It was a nice ride on the RER C train to Versailles-Gauch station.

We arrived there and walked the 5 minutes to the castle. It was 55 deg F, breezy and had rained the night before, adding a wet chill to the air. I felt much better today, but Patty was freezing. Not quite ready for a European fall.

What an amazing castle. We, again, used our expired museum passes and toured through the generic entrance; saw the main drawing room, hall of mirrors and room of battles – my favorite! Down around the back, we peeked at the gardens. It was all quite pretty, but as Patty was freezing and shivering, we then took off. I did blow it by not purchasing a postcard.

No where to eat

Back on the RER train, we skipped Giverney, given the weather, in favor of making it over to the Madeline district to do some shopping. Funny thing – the entire district is closed on Sunday, save for one café with a pittance of a club sandwich for 10 Euro (\$11US). We discovered that Rue Clere was also closed down for Sunday, save for the restaurant we were smoked out at and an Asian place. We picked up the plate du jour, which was half price for the same amount of food. It was fast and we didn't have to suffer through the smoking. Even the bakery was closed.

We did find a quicky-mart place to enjoy stinky cheese, meat and water. We had to double the very thin plastic bags, as they almost tore open. Finally, after much walking, we found an open shop to purchase some baguettes, though we almost lost them on the metro when the bread broke in half.

Then, the final irony, we made it over to the Latin Quarter and the place was bustling, a regular happening on Sunday. Travel writers say the Latin Quarter isn't authentic Paris, but it looked, sounded and tasted real enough to me. We completed our supply run for dinner, dropped it at the hotel and were off into the city again. This time we stopped by the Bastille monument. Sadly, it was destroyed due to the hard feelings from long ago.

Happy birthday

We found a small pastry shop and bought Patty a small birthday cake, then searched out but didn't find Victor Hugo's home, then saw gas for 1.29/liter (\$6US / gal) at the first and last gas station we ever saw in the city. Then, we caught the metro over to the Pigalle to Moulan Rouge, and the adjoining sex shops up and down the street, Musee d'Eroticism and other adult entertainment. I enjoyed a crepe sucee de rum and Patty had a berry crepe sucee. It was a tasty snack to tide us over until we returned to the hotel via the metro to the Place St. Andres des Arts street. We had our last Parisian-style dinner, drank wine, packed and fell asleep.

Monday, October 20, 2003

Our last day in Paris. We were up at 6am for the last city assault. Granted, it was only a walk to Jardin Luxembourg, but it was all done in the dark with fathers taking their kids to school. The wind cut through and chilled us. The Senate building and gardens are beautiful, with statues of people from the 1400's. We left the garden at 830am, a tad late for making our flight without stress.

Getting caught

We ran back to the hotel, gave away our wine opener since we couldn't take it on the plane, and we caught the metro out. Our metro passes were expired and we made it through the city metro stations without issues. Then, at the train RER station, we stealthily followed people through the shutter-type gates. We had this happen to us several times and used the technique with great success. Right up to the airport.

You can't butt-hug people through a turnstile. Two guards came over when they saw us having trouble getting in. We were having trouble because our tickets were expired, but we pleaded ignorance and that our tickets worked in the city. Since the station gates were stuck open in the Latin Quarter, this was technically true. We acted dumb and pleaded and the guards had mercy and let us pass. They could have made life very hard, considering we were cutting it dangerously close on our flight. Merci! It took 45 minutes from the hotel to the airport.

It took an hour to get to the counter, check in, clear customs, go through x-ray scanning and get to the gate. At terminal A2, there are 2 inspection points between areas 3-4 and 5-6. If one security line is long, it's worth checking the other. We lucked out.

I couldn't explain quickly in French to the x-ray security to hand scan my film. Hopefully it wasn't toasted. I needed much more time and language skill to negotiate such things.

Then, it was a long haul back to the gate, all the way across the airport again. We got on with plane with a whole 10 minutes to spare before the door was closed. If we would have stayed in the longer security line, we would have nearly missed our flight, as there were people stumbling onto the plane at the last minute who we saw in the slow line.

Now, we sit on a plane for 11 hours, flying over Iceland and Greenland to Los Angeles, wait 3 hours for Alfonso who was sacked in traffic, then enjoy a 2 hour ride in Santa Ana conditions in a non-air conditioned vehicle. Door to door, it took 18 hours.

Commentary about Paris

From what we were told and what we found the reality was:

Finding a toilet in Paris can be troublesome. Gauge yourself wisely.

Air Tahiti Nui has awesome service, very island-like. The Airbus A340-300 is very comfortable.

Napoleon is marked all over Paris with capital 'N' letters all over.

Some toilet closets are so narrow that you literally have to back in and out of them.

Forgotten events

I fell down in one slippery shower and lightly clocked myself.
Patty lost her hip harness clasp right as we got to the city by yanking on her backpack in a rush to get out of the train.

END OF JOURNAL