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Living the French Life: An American Student in Paris

Danielle Billmaier

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Introduction: *Le Commencement* (The Beginning)

Living abroad is a challenge, whether you're there for 6 weeks, 6 months, or 6 years. My experience in Paris falls into the 6 month category. It began as a childhood dream- an obsession with all things French accompanied by a strong desire to live in France. I spoke about it long before I began learning French and after my first visit to Paris, I knew I wanted to spend more than just a few days there. After four years of French in high school and then a few more classes in college, I felt like it was the right time to look into studying abroad. I knew if I didn't go then, the opportunity may not present itself again. So I found a program that suited me, turned in my application, and anxiously awaited the decision.

Finding out I was accepted into the program was more than just a dream come true. It was the realization of a goal I had subconsciously given myself as a child. I was beyond ecstatic and proceeded full speed ahead with all of the forms and documents needed to go on my journey. By the end of the semester preceding my trip, I thought I knew everything. I had attended every meeting held by the Education Abroad Office, I had read tons of books on living in France, and I studied my French books religiously. I even found a job before leaving the States. I would be working as an au pair for a French family. I thought I was set.

I had no way of knowing the rollercoaster that lay before me- the intense highs and lows of emotions that could turn on a dime. Nothing could have prepared me for the challenges that came upon my arrival in France, nor could anyone have told me of the incredible experiences with which I would come home. Because of this, I decided to help others like me when I returned home. I wanted to give potential study abroad students a glimpse into my experience living in Paris. Because no matter how many people told me before I left that this would "define" me and that I would have the experiences of a lifetime, you can't really know how it feels until you've

experienced it for yourself. And those words do not always comfort you in the times of loneliness or isolation when you first arrive in country.

Day 1: *Toute Seule* (All Alone)

The whole flight across the Atlantic, I kept thinking how excited I was and how little nervousness I felt. I felt calm, prepared, and thrilled at the prospect of living in a foreign country and getting to practice French on a daily basis. Then the plane landed. And I was surrounded by what I assumed was French but I couldn't really tell because everyone was speaking so fast. I was rushed off the plane and followed my fellow passengers through customs and to our baggage claim. Then I had to locate an atm, find a way to set down all my stuff so as not to have someone snatch it, and proceed to get Euros so I could pay the taxi driver (assuming I could find where to take a taxi). Luckily, I saw a sign that indicated where I should go, so I set off with my entire luggage to wait in line for a taxi. I had practiced what I would say to the cab driver on the plane but sure enough, once it was my turn I completely froze and just showed him the paper with my address on it, rather than actually speaking to him. Telling myself it was only nerves, I switched my focus to Neuilly¹, the town I would soon be living in.

I assumed that since my French family was having a foreign student coming to live with them, that they would be anxiously awaiting my arrival. This was my first of many misconceptions. I arrived at the apartment only to find a note stating that they were out for the afternoon, I could get my keys from the *gardien* and that they would come to my room when they got home. So I found the super's office, explained who I was, and he took me to my room. I opened the door to a tiny little rectangle space. Once alone, I sat down to survey my new home

¹ "**Neuilly-sur-Seine.**" *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed November 10, 2010, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/410487/Neuilly-sur-Seine>>. "**Neuilly-sur-Seine**, exclusive residential northwestern suburb of Paris, France. It lies in Hauts-de-Seine *département*, Île-de-France *région*, west of the capital and north of the Bois de Boulogne."

for the next 6 months. A shower, futon, mini fridge, and a one burner hotplate was what I was given to work with. I called my mom to let her know I was safely at the house, and then I was once again alone. I tried unsuccessfully to find an internet connection and wound up just sitting on my futon waiting for the family to come get me. It was then that it really hit me how alone I was here. I suppose I thought that in arranging this job and living situation ahead of time, I would at least know the people I was to be living with. However, I was their employee, not a guest in their home. The French are more reserved than the Americans² and this was my first solid example of that.

An hour later, the mother of the family, Laurence, came to greet me. She was kind but very businesslike and immediately set about explaining my daily duties. It was a whirlwind first day and by the end my head felt ready to explode. I had no idea how I would remember where the grocery store was or what days I had to be where. I also felt uncomfortable around the family. While nice, they were still complete strangers to me and I didn't know what was acceptable and what was not. For example, when the mother finished explaining my responsibilities, she told me she would come downstairs to my room to get me when dinner was ready. There was no internet signal in my room, and earlier in the day they had offered me the use of theirs in the apartment but what she'd said sounded like a dismissal. So rather than asking if I could stay to use the internet, I just went back downstairs to wait until dinner. It felt very formal between us and I didn't feel like I was in a position to ask for favors at this point. I went to bed that night feeling alone and unsure about my decision to live there for so long.

Week 1: *La Période D'isolement* (The Isolation Period)

² Gilles Asselin and Ruth Mastron, *Au Contraire ! Figuring out the French* (Yarmouth (Me): Intercultural, 2001), 20.

My first week consisted of a lot more loneliness than I ever anticipated. I felt isolated from my family and friends, almost as if I was placed on an island away from everyone and everything I knew. Which in a sense, I was. From the language to food to customs, nothing was familiar to me and everything felt strange. After my first night, I gave myself a pep talk and decided I needed to appreciate the opportunity that was in front of me and learn to make the best of it.

So I ventured to the grocery store which made for some laughs. I tried to buy butter but I didn't know what any of the packages said. I knew *beurre* meant butter, but after that I was lost. At home I knew which ones were margarine or which were salted or not. Here I just saw ten kinds of *beurre* that all looked the same so I gave up and decided I could live without it. I bought milk, but it wound up being a strange kind of milk that tasted terrible because I took it from the refrigerated section. Apparently in France, the regular milk is stored on shelves and only the specialty milk is actually placed in one of the coolers.

I also had my fair share of getting lost, even in my own neighborhood. My third day in Paris, I came home from a planned excursion with my school program, only to walk around for 2 hours before finally arriving at my apartment. Unbeknownst to me, I got off the metro at the correct stop but I took the wrong *sortie* or exit and wound up on the wrong side of the street. So naturally when I walked in what I thought was the direction of my apartment I was actually walking away from it. Here's a very important tip: When in a new environment, pay attention to your surroundings!

After the first few days, I thought I was beginning to accept my situation and learn to live what was feeling like a very solitary life. Then I spoke with my family for the first time via webcam. It was much more difficult to see my family in person than it had been to talk to them

on the phone. I started crying immediately and just couldn't seem to stop. This, of course, upset my mother who was ready to book me a plane ticket home. After a little bit of a meltdown, I was able to calm down and my dad reassured me that I should stick with my commitment, which looking back now, I am so glad that I did.

The rest of the week consisted of placement tests and choosing a *université* to attend while in Paris. Having tasks to complete seemed to help fill the hours and I slowly found myself working into a routine- this held true especially with my job as a *jeune fille au pair*³. I worked weekdays from 3pm to 8pm speaking English and spending time with two girls ages 12 and 16. This was new for me and somewhat difficult to adjust to. I felt the youngest, Juliette, trying to test me and see how far she could get with the new nanny.

Month 2: *La Routine* (The Routine)

By February, things were beginning to look up. I had made some friends within my program and we spent weekends together exploring the city. This was great for me, because I realized that I wasn't nearly as brave as I thought I was. I was nervous and timid and tried to find people to go with me to visit places rather than go alone. On one such excursion we visited the *Musée Carnavalet*⁴. This particular museum focuses on the history of Paris with certain rooms and floors illustrating different time periods. The area that struck me the most was the floor covering the Revolution. Amongst the many pieces illustrating the reign of Louis XVI and Marie

³ Webster's Online Dictionary, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/Au%20Pair%20Girl?cx=partner-pub-0939450753529744%3Av0qd01-tldq&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8&q=Au%20Pair%20Girl&sa=Search#938>. "a foreign girl serving as an au pair"

⁴ "Musée Carnavalet - Musée de l'histoire de Paris", Paris Office du Tourisme et des Congrès, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://en.parisinfo.com/museum-monuments/232/musee-carnavalet-musee-de-l-histoire-de-paris>. "Nestled within the Marais, the Musée Carnavalet chronicles the history of the capital from its origins to our day. It is housed in two mansions built in the 11th and 17th centuries, with a gallery now leading from one to the other."

Antoinette, I was struck by the sympathy I felt for what they went through at that time. Growing up as an American, I was taught that they were frivolous and subpar rulers, but looking at the paintings of their final goodbyes to each other, I saw that they were human- afraid just like the rest of the French people. This museum really showed me the lengths to which the French will go to preserve their history and culture. How, rather than having one or two museums to house their history, they have many smaller, more in depth ones to focus on certain periods. It's difficult for me to understand that passion as my own history is new in comparison.

Another great example of the preservation of history can be found in the *Louvre*⁵. The last time I was in Paris, I saw the outside and took pictures in front, but we didn't have enough time to go in and explore which made it a must this time around. Words cannot describe the magnitude of the collections this museum holds. I spent four hours there and barely saw a quarter of the pieces. The first two things I had to see were the *Mona Lisa*⁶ and *Venus de Milo*⁷. It was an indescribable feeling standing in front of pieces of art you'd only heard about in history class. That feeling pretty much lasted the whole day as I looked at piece after piece of history.

⁵ "About the Louvre", Louvre Website, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.louvre.fr/llv/musee/institution.jsp?bmLocale=en> . "Founded in 1793 as a museum for all, it celebrates humanity's long journey with the remarkable scope of a collection that spans thousands of years, reaches from America to the borders of India and China, and is highlighted by such iconic, universally admired works as the Mona Lisa, the Venus de Milo and the Victory of Samothrace."

⁶ "Mona Lisa", Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/388735/Mona-Lisa>. "Mona Lisa, oil painting on a poplar wood panel by the Italian painter, draftsman, sculptor, architect, and engineer Leonardo da Vinci, probably the world's most famous painting. It was painted sometime between 1503 and 1506, when da Vinci was living in Florence, and it now hangs in the Louvre, in Paris, where it remains an object of pilgrimage in the 21st century."

⁷ "Venus de Milo", Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/625740/Venus-de-Milo>. "Venus de Milo, ancient statue of Aphrodite, now in Paris at the Louvre. Carved by Alexandros, a sculptor of Antioch on the Maeander River in about 150 bc, it was found on the Aegean island of Melos on April 8, 1820."



Venus de Milo
Musée du Louvre

It was also around this time that I began to notice my confidence level increasing with every conversation I held in French. By no means was my French perfect, but I was beginning to reach a point where I was strong enough to say what I needed to say and not feel so self-conscious about the mistakes I may have made. This was new because for the first month I was there, I would wait for someone else to speak first or even let a more advanced speaker speak for me. It made me smile every time I ordered food or answered for myself. However there were times when I reverted to English which left me feeling defeated. An interesting thing that I noticed in Paris was the large number of people who spoke at least some English. This was nice if I stumbled or couldn't find the right French words, but it was also a detriment at times. You see, the French wanted to practice their English just as badly as I wanted to practice my French. This is found especially in areas with large numbers of visitors. So if I even slightly hesitated in my speech, they were only too quick to jump in with their English, and let's face it, I was relieved to be able to go back to my native tongue.

In the middle of all the history and language I was learning, I was also trying desperately to register for school. I had decided on a university (*Paris X- Nanterre*⁸) and I had taken the placement test required for students entering the French as a Foreign Language program. I chose this program based on my level of French and the intensity of traditional French university curriculum. Upon arriving in France, I was terrified that I would be placed in *La Sorbonne* attempting to give thirty minute presentations in French. However, after speaking with my program staff, I learned there were programs out there for international students learning French. To my dismay, I never heard anything back from the advisor after I emailed asking for an appointment time to register for classes. Having had enough, I just went to the campus and asked to be registered. They were very nice and welcoming and all in all, it maybe took 10 minutes to make my class schedule (the week before classes started). Their school system, well systems in general can be very slow and I rarely experienced anything done ahead of time. In the US, I'm registered months before the semester begins, but in France it was about 4 days before classes started. *C'est normal.*

Once classes began, it felt like I was going nonstop five days a week. It was difficult adjusting to the schedule but to be honest, I think it helped me immensely. Not only had I found friends, but I had also established a routine which left very little time for feeling lonely. I took five classes, all taught in French, Monday through Thursday. Classes felt similar to the US in that most classes met two days a week and I had regular homework assignments. However, this may be because I was in the international program as opposed to the traditional university

⁸ "University of Paris X- Nanterre", MICEFA Website, accessed November 10, 2010, http://www.micefa.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9&Itemid=60. "The University Paris X, now named Université de Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense, is located near the business sector called la Défense, ten minutes away from the center of Paris. Studies are pluridisciplinary and include economics, management, law, humanities and social science; arts, languages and physical education."

setting. I had class in the mornings and then I picked up Juliette at 3 and worked for the rest of the evening. Then I would either do homework or go visit friends and enjoy the Parisian night life. Not only was I adapting to my situation, I was beginning to fall in love with Paris at night. No matter how much walking I did during the day, I was always up for night time walks that ended in front of the sparkling Eiffel Tower or on the banks of the Seine.



La Tour Eiffel

During these walks, I would feel unbelievable awe at the fact that I was living there and that I was literally walking through history. I still had moments of missing my family and friends, but they were so small in comparison. I mean, when you're walking in *Père Lachaise Cemetery*⁹ passing by the graves of Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf, and Moliere, it's difficult to wish you were somewhere else.

⁹ Rick Steves, Steve Smith, and Gene Openshaw, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, (Berkeley: Avalon Travel, 2009), 322. This cemetery was named after Father La Chaise who listened to Louis XIV's confessions. It opened in 1804 and now has a population of 70,000.

Spring: *Les temps du soleil* (The time of sunshine)

Just in time for my newfound appreciation of Paris, was my boyfriend's weeklong visit. After a little over two months apart from each other, let alone away from any truly familiar face, it was amazing to see him walk out of the doors at the airport. We had a fantastic time together and it really showed me how much I was learning to like it there. I planned out activities for everyday and made sure to take him to every possible "touristy" place. We even ventured to the top of the *La Tour Eiffel* which was definitely colder than we anticipated. I had an amazing time showing him "my" city.

Probably the most entrancing thing we did was our program trip to Normandy. We went to Omaha Beach¹⁰, which was so serene and peaceful; it was difficult to imagine a huge battle being fought and so many lives being lost there. After the beach, we went to the American Cemetery where we learned the stories of some of the soldiers who died there which made the battles, and the war for that matter, that much more personal and real. I was really touched by the tribute given to those soldiers. The people of Normandy are so thankful to the American soldiers. It is clearly visible that their sacrifice is not something that will ever be forgotten.

After Dan left, it was back to business as usual for me. That meant going to the medical appointment needed to receive my *carte de séjour* (the documentation in my passport that worked with my visa which allowed me to live in France for six months). The appointment was fairly efficient, beginning with an eye exam and ending with a chest x-ray. After three months of living in Paris, I was finally officially allowed to be there. Just another testament to the French systems I guess....

¹⁰ Joseph Balkoski, *Omaha Beach: D-Day, June 6, 1944* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), x. The US used Omaha Beach during World War II to invade France and help defeat the Germans. "Omaha Beach would become one of those exceptional moments in history when Americans defined themselves by their actions as a people worthy of the principles upon which the nation was founded."

A significant change that began occurring midway through March had to do with the weather. The temperature began to climb into the sixties and the sun decided to make more than just an appearance every few days. This lifted my mood drastically. Coming from Florida, I'd never understood the idea of "seasonal depression"¹¹ but after spending my first three months in Paris stuck inside because it was cold, gray, and wet, I have a deeper understanding. It was remarkable what the warmth and sunshine did for all of us. We explored more and wanted to spend our days outside soaking up the sun. The city itself also changed. Overnight, it seemed, there were flowers blooming in every garden, joggers on every street, and just a general lift in the spirit of Paris. This beautiful weather prompted a visit to *Le Jardin du Luxembourg*¹² with my History of Paris class. It was wonderful to see all the people out enjoying the weather. We had a great time walking around and exploring all the different areas the garden has to offer. It was definitely a place I went back to again and again.

The change in weather also provided the slight push I needed to explore even more of the city. I was beginning to realize what a luxury it was to be living somewhere for a period of six months as opposed to only visiting there for just a few days. Not only had I been to all the places you're "supposed" to go to multiple times, but now I had the opportunity to really get to know Paris and see what all the different *arrondissements* or neighborhoods had to offer. This included finding an offbeat record store with a really interesting album collection and a revolutionary bookshop selling books with topics ranging from history to the legalization of marijuana. I was

¹¹ "Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) - Topic Overview", WebMD, accessed November 19, 2010, <http://www.webmd.com/depression/tc/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad-topic-overview>. Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that occurs during a specific time of year. "Experts are not sure what causes SAD, but they think it may be caused by a lack of sunlight. Lack of light may upset your sleep-wake cycle and other circadian rhythms. And it may cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood."

¹² Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 259. Luxembourg Garden is a 60-acre recreational area located on the Left Bank. It is the property of the French Senate who uses the Palace as a meeting place.

infatuated with Paris and the many layers I was beginning to peel back. Paris has such a vivacious personality and each neighborhood brings something new and exciting to the mix. Whether I was sipping coffee in a bookshop in the *Quartier Latin* or dancing in a club near *Republique*, my days were never boring.

My heightened desire to explore occurred just in time for spring break. Previously, I had planned for my mom to visit during my two week spring break. I was off of school and work since the girls were out of school as well and the family travels during holidays. The first week I had planned to show my mom Paris and the second we would travel to Nice in the south of France. However, that all changed when a volcano in Iceland decided to erupt and completely halt air traffic over half of Europe for close to a week. Her flight was cancelled and so was our time together. Since the plans I'd had and some of those of my friends had fallen through, we decided to make the most of our break to see everything we could possibly see within Paris. We visited the museum of Auguste Rodin¹³, learned the story of Heloise and Abelard¹⁴ while seeing their house, and visited the Orangerie Museum¹⁵. In between these amazing visits, we spent our days walking along the banks of the *Seine*, soaking up the sun and people watching. We perused the book stalls set up along the river for hours, combing through the paintings and trinkets, and occasionally stumbling upon the unique stand or two selling things like old John Wayne movies.

Le Quartier Latin and *L'île de la cité* became my favorite places to walk. My friends and I even dubbed the area "St. Michel" in honor of the metro stop we used every time we went

¹³ Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 58-59. Auguste Rodin is a famous French sculptor and the museum is housed in the mansion where he lived and worked.

¹⁴ Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 330-331. Abelard and Heloise had a forbidden relationship and were forced to separate when discovered. Abelard went to a monastery and Heloise to a convent. Their love survived through letters they wrote to each other until they died. They are buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery.

¹⁵ Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 53. The Orangerie Museum is an impressionist museum located in the Tuileries Garden by the Louvre. It's most famous work is Monet's *Water Lilies*.

there. In one sweep, I could see the towers of *Notre Dame* rising up over the water and watch the people as they walked by all the many shops and restaurants. It became “our” place and we could be found there at least twice a week.



Notre Dame
L'île de la Cité

One of my favorite past times became getting a crêpe from my number one *crêperie*, taking it down to the river, and eating it while watching the boats go by. During the day, there were so many tourists coming and going, seeing *Notre Dame* for the first time or trying to navigate their way on to the next museum. And at night, the lights from the *cafés* danced off the water, illuminating the lovers as they strolled hand in hand. If that sounds romanticized, I meant for it to. Paris at night has a certain air of romance about it that cannot be denied. I was quick to write off Paris as the “city of romance” when I first arrived because, naturally, I was separated from the people I loved so I thought I couldn’t feel love there. My night walks along the Seine shattered that notion. It’s not so much that the French have more love than other cultures; it’s more the idea that they’re not afraid to express it or show it. Never have I witnessed so many couples holding hands, or people warmly embracing each other. And the way they expressed their feelings was simple and classy. It shattered the stigma that I’d always heard about the French being cold or distant.

May: *Le Dernier Mois* (The Last Month)

As spring break was drawing to a close, I thought I had pretty much everything figured out by now. I was surprised to find out that even after 5 months, things could still get “lost in translation.” It began one night when some friends and I decided to find a new Chinese restaurant to go to for dinner. Usually, when eating Chinese food, I tend to stick with something involving noodles and vegetables because it’s a safe bet. Chances are, I’ll like it. However, this time, I thought, “Hey, I’m eating Chinese food in France, why not live a little and choose something outside of my comfort zone?” So, I ordered something resembling chicken and broccoli in a red sauce that I had seen the picture of in the menu. What came to our table looked nothing like the picture. It was called *poulet noir* (black chicken) and even now, I’m not fully convinced it was the same thing I had seen in the menu. Nevertheless, the server was adamant that it was and convinced me to try it because it was supposedly very good. I tried, I honestly did, but it was not good at all. I wound up eating the broth and vegetables around the “chicken” and vowing to never think outside the box again!

On a different night a few days later, my friend took me to a new favorite spot of hers called *Pont des Arts*¹⁶. It’s a bridge where people put padlocks on the links in the bridge, writing their names and the names of their lovers with the dates they got together. It was very romantic to see how long some of the locks had been there. Just the idea that couples come to this place year after year to mark their love was truly inspiring. It was yet another testament to the “City of Love”.

¹⁶ Steves et al, *Rick Steves’ Paris 2010*, 250. Pont des Arts is a pedestrian bridge located on the Left Bank and a popular meeting place for lovers.



Pont des Arts

The end of spring break also brought a return to school. I must admit that those two weeks really threw off my sleeping schedule and I was finding it harder and harder to wake up for my 8am classes. We also began talking about our final exams and projects. I had finals in almost all of my classes and the ones that didn't have final exams had papers to be turned in. Honestly, it felt a lot like a typical semester here, filled with stress and a countdown until the end. It seemed surreal to me that school and subsequently my time in Paris was winding down. I wrote in my journal, "seems strange that all this is coming to an end when it's just beginning to feel like home."

Another important event that occurred in May was my 21st birthday. I was nervous about celebrating my birthday over there because in my family, birthdays are a big deal. We always have a huge family celebration complete with gifts, cards, dinner, and cake. I knew I wouldn't have that here and I was afraid it would make me sad. I was in for a total surprise! Juliette made my birthday so special! She told all of her friends at school so they said happy birthday to me when I came to pick her up. She also saved all the cards and presents I had received in the mail the days prior so I could open them all together. We spent the afternoon talking and watching a

movie. I felt loved in a way I hadn't expected. After work, my friends wanted to take me out to celebrate my birthday "American" style since turning 21 is not a milestone birthday in France like it is in the US (in Europe you can legally drink when you are 18). We went to an Irish pub complete with a live band that did a surprising mix of covers. The band even dedicated a song to me ("I'm Just a Girl" by No Doubt) when they found out it was my birthday! It was an amazing night!

As if that wasn't enough of a celebration, I planned a train trip with a few of my friends for the following day. We went to Epernay in the Champagne region of France. The train ride was beautiful. I fell in love with the countryside and wanted to stay in Epernay. I discovered that while big European cities are fun and interesting, it's the small towns that I really enjoy. They feel more personal and unique. Once there, we had lunch at a beautiful restaurant then headed to our first cave tour of the day at Moet and Chandon¹⁷. It was really interesting learning how champagne was made and stored and how long the process really is. We even got to taste the champagne at the end of the tour. I was really beginning to feel 21! After Moet and Chandon, we trekked through town passing by beautiful little houses to another tour at Champagne Mercier.

All of the extraordinary experiences I was having were making it hard to deal with the fact that I would soon be returning to the US. Midway through May I started to undergo really conflicting emotions. Once I booked my return ticket and had a final date, it seemed that all I could do was think about going home. Part of me had learned to love it there and I knew there were pieces of my daily life I would miss once I was home. But I was also excited at the prospect of seeing my family and friends again.

¹⁷ Moet and Chandon Website accessed November 19, 2010, www.moet.com. Moet and Chandon is a popular brand of champagne company located in Epernay, France.

I found myself wanting time to slow down, a concept that seemed foreign to me since all I had wanted for the first two months was for it to be June. These feelings occurred a lot when I found myself really enjoying my time there. One night, I met some new French friends at a party and basically spent the whole night speaking French and actually did some interpreting at one point for a girl who didn't speak French very well. This really showed me how much my French had improved and it made me want to stay and continue speaking French.

The day after my amazing French filled night was Juliette's Bat Mitzvah. By this point we were becoming the best of friends and she had invited me to attend. It was a learning experience for me but also a touching one. I felt truly honored that she invited to share this day with her. I also couldn't help but feel proud of her as she sang all the songs I'd helped her practice over the last few months. It was tough for my brain to handle though as the ceremony was spoken in French and Hebrew, only one of which I understand!

I had two major trips left before I flew back home. The first was a program trip to Giverny, a small town outside of Paris where my favorite impressionist painter Claude Monet¹⁸ lived and painted. He lived in a tiny house surrounded by beautiful gardens which were the inspiration for many of his works. I had a few more of those "I can't believe I'm here" moments while I was walking through the gardens I had seen in paintings. It felt as though I was walking through my favorite paintings.

¹⁸ Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 242. "Claude Monet was the leading light of the Impressionist movement that revolutionized painting in the 1870s."



Jardin de Monet
Giverny

The second trip was to Versailles¹⁹. It was just as incredible as I remembered and I soaked up as much history (and sun) as I could. The weather cooperated and we spent the first half of the day touring the palace and the second half sitting barefoot in the grass by the lakes. We spent a lot of that time contemplating our inevitable return home and how privileged we felt to be there. I remember feeling anxious about returning. I had made more of a life/home there than I'd thought I could and it began to feel like the reverse of what I had felt coming to Paris in January. I began to feel like I was going somewhere foreign all over again.

My last days in Paris consisted of studying for and taking my final exams and trying to finish everything on the bucket list I had created for my last few weeks there. Everyday felt like a rollercoaster of emotions, from waking up excited to be going home to going to bed after great day thinking, “why do I have to leave here so soon?” Saying goodbye to the family, especially to Juliette was harder than I anticipated. I had grown so close to them that it felt similar to when I had left my parents just six months earlier. As I took the cab to the airport I tried to breathe in as

¹⁹ Steves et al, *Rick Steves' Paris 2010*, 486. Versailles used to be the king's palace and has three major features: the chateau where Louis XIV lived, the massive gardens, and the domaine de Marie-Antoinette.

much of Paris as I could. It was like I was trying to make one last memory in case I never got to come back again. The thing is, I know I'll go back, because once you let Paris in, it kind of sticks with you.

Summer: *Le Retour* (The Return)

Stepping off the plane into the hot, sticky Florida humidity was the first of many “new” feelings I had to deal with upon my return from France. I was ecstatic to see my family and boyfriend waiting for me at the arrival gate. There was endless chatter during the car ride home where I was filled in on everything new and I talked about my long flights home. When I arrived home, I was knocked over in excitement by my dog and I couldn't wait to run to my room. Everything was just as I'd left it and I couldn't wait to rediscover it.

The first two days home felt like they flew by. I spent them unpacking and getting back on the right sleep schedule. Day three brought my return to work. I hadn't given myself much time off as I'd anticipated being pretty broke when I returned. So I'd asked to start back as soon as possible. I work in a restaurant and it was a little scary coming back. I felt like I had when I'd first started serving. I was afraid I'd forgotten everything, like where certain buttons were on the computer or which side items came with what entrees. There were also a lot of new faces and names to remember and I was afraid I'd fallen down the ranks as far as seniority went. I've worked at the same restaurant for over three years now and I didn't want to lose that level of respect just because I'd left for a few months. I had no reason to worry though. Everyone welcomed me back with open arms and I quickly fell back into the swing of things. I saw regulars that I hadn't seen since I'd left and I caught up with all the new items we had.

I couldn't believe how easily I went back to my “old” life. I worked five days a week and spent the other two seeing friends or spending time with my boyfriend. I went to the movies

and to the same restaurants I had before I left. Some days I would catch myself wondering if it was all a dream- if I'd ever actually lived in Paris. I remember speaking to friends of mine that had been in Paris with me. When they returned home they felt lost and almost like they didn't belong. They experienced culture shock living in their own homes²⁰ I didn't really understand their feelings, but maybe that was because I'd had everything ready to come back to before I'd left Paris. It was really as if I'd stepped out of a dream and slipped smoothly back into my reality. Rather than feeling like I didn't belong here now, it was more like I couldn't believe that I'd ever belonged there.

Of course, there were (and still are) days where I miss going to my beloved *boulangerie* to buy fresh baguettes and pastries. The first month home, I would be so happy to walk out my front door and right to my car to go to work. But then, at night, I would wish I was back in Paris walking through my neighborhood. I experienced a lot of happiness at having all the things I'd missed while in Paris, like my car, but I also began to realize what I'd taken for granted while I'd lived abroad, like my ability to walk everywhere.

Starting school was a readjustment as well. Driving on to campus the first day felt strange and for a nanosecond I worried I wouldn't remember where the buildings were. Gradually it got better, just like everything else, but it was interesting how the beginning felt so new, like it had my first day on campus my freshman year. Now that the semester is halfway through, it feels as though I'd never left. I'm working twenty five hours a week, and taking four classes in preparation to graduate at the end of this semester. While it feels as though I've made a pretty effortless transition back home, I still have moments where I "slip up". Some days, especially in

²⁰ Marie-Claire Patron, *Culture and Identity in Study Abroad Contexts: After Australia, French Without France* (Oxford: Lang, 2007), 32. "Reverse Culture Shock is the phenomenon involved in the difficult re-entry process back home."

the first few weeks, I caught myself stumbling for an English word rather than the French one. Or I would wake up thinking I had to get ready to catch the train to get to school. It's difficult turning your life upside down, whether it's moving to another city or coming back home. I hadn't really thought about this prior to coming home, but the first two months I spent in Paris were transitional, just like my summer was back here. I may not have been on the emotional roller coaster that I was in Paris, but my life was still changing, my day to day had shifted yet again and it was something I had to learn to deal with just like before.

Conclusion: *Le Bilan* (The Bottom Line)

Having gone through the narrative of my semester abroad, I figured I would leave you with my final thoughts and advice. First, if you're seriously considering working while studying abroad, make sure you leave enough time for yourself. I went to France with very little money saved and therefore needed to have a job to balance out the costs. I was very lucky to find a job as an au pair which provided me with a room and extra money each month. This enabled me to return from my time overseas debt free. However, there are always disadvantages. In this case, in order to make so much money and not pay rent on my room, I had to work around 25 hours a week, speaking English. If your goal in traveling abroad is to become fluent in your language of study, I would suggest steering clear of really time consuming English speaking jobs. While an easy way to make money, speaking English 5 hours a day, five days a week with native French speakers didn't really help make my French any better. I only started speaking French regularly, outside of class, towards the end of my stay. This leads me to recommend that if you are studying abroad for only a semester and you'd like a job teaching English, be careful not to let it take up too much of your time. While the money is nice, you want to learn as much as you can while you're there.

Another piece of advice I can give: try to have as much set up before you leave as possible. It will save you stress and confusion when you arrive in country. While there are things you can't plan for, make the most of what you can. I'm the type of person that likes to plan ahead so I looked into everything I could beforehand. I was able to find housing and a job prior to leaving the US which saved me from spending my first two weeks in Paris living in temporary housing, searching for an apartment. Don't worry if you don't find something because the people running your program are there to help you when you arrive, but it's always nice to stay a little ahead of the game.

Also, do your homework, talk to people before you go, read books, and find out as much information as you can about where you'll be staying. This will help you in your decisions about which neighborhood to live in or which university to attend. I asked my French teachers that were from Paris about my neighborhood and for any helpful advice they had. The better informed you are, the easier your transition will be.

I would also suggest living with a roommate, if you're able to. I lived alone, which was nice, but there were times I wished I had had more company throughout my stay. If you're anything like me, it helps having someone to experience things with. It makes you bolder; you have someone else with whom to go out and explore a new city. And if you could room with someone who was a native to that city it would be even better. You could speak the language with them and they could recommend great places for you to go. I didn't think about this before I committed to my living situation.

As you can see, my time in Paris was filled with ups and downs- certainly more adventures than I could have ever anticipated. I learned what it truly meant to be alone and I conquered the feeling of sadness that inevitably comes with that particular lesson. I learned how

to make new friends, even with a language barrier. I took a job doing something I'd never done before and even managed to become close with the family. I came into a city knowing no one and left it with lifelong friendships. Nobody's experiences with studying abroad are exactly the same. My story is only meant as that- a story, a little taste of what could come for you. I hope that in reading this you glean some helpful information and realize that while intense and sometimes scary, studying abroad is a meaningful experience that will have a great impact on you. It certainly was for me.

Bon courage!

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