

# Huit Jours en Paris

With Mary Robbins, Sharon Schade, Martha Hurst and Amanda Sulock  
March 14–22, 2002

**Friday, March 15, 2002**

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## **Getting off the Ground**

Preparing for Paris was some of the most fun I've had. There are so many places you've heard tell of or seen all your life. It was a pleasure to pore over books and prioritize what we wanted to do. After all this, by the time we left we were truly ready to be en Paris.

The flight over was uneventful except that all the gate and ticket agents were flirty. I and my passport, Mary and her searches. It was too funny. When we finally arrived in Paris it was 11:30 a.m. Friday morning. We'd had the most horrendous airplane food imaginable and attempted to sleep through some really bad movies. But we'd made it and we were happy.

We hopped on the RER — the suburban train — from Charles de Gaulle and headed into town. What an adventure! Buying tickets, reading the maps, using correct Euro change, then trying to navigate over to Le Metro once we were in the city. I actually got stuck (twice!) in the automated doors. Once it was my backpack which was attached, and once it was my suitcase. What a scene. We were truly obtrusive with our big bags and sleepless eyes in the bustling Parisian crowd. By the time we reached the St. Paul stop to get to our hotel, and emerged from the depths to face that final long flight of stairs to the street level, Mary proclaimed, "Lord, take me now!" But somehow we persevered and managed to get our bodies and our bags into our hotel.

Our residence for the week is Hotel Saint Paul Le Marais (pronounced mah-RAY). It's located at 8 rue de Sévigné – 75004 in Paris. It's on the Right Bank and it's one of the trendiest areas around. It's also the gay/Jewish area (an odd combination to be sure), where you see a mixed bag of shopping, food, and personalities.

Martha and I had a huge room with a courtyard view and three beds. I had my own little section with a dresser and everything. This was quite a generous amount of space for any European hotel room. Mom and Mary's room was much more traditional, a small room with two twin beds pushed together (that's a double) and an antechamber with an armoire. The hotel itself used to be a convent so there were still these weird old walls

here and there. And the “kitchen” area on the ground floor even had smoke burns on the walls stemming from where they used to cook. It appeared they had upgraded around the original structure, which added tremendously to the charm. There was even a spa that offered a prolifically advertised hunky masseuse named Marcel or something.

Regardless of its once being inhabited by women devoted to poverty, les salles de bains were exceedingly nice. We had lots of hot water, lovely marble tile, tons of storage space, and good water pressure. The WC was housed in a little, cramped room unto itself, but we had oodles of getting-ready area.

### **The Search for Gastrointestinal Pleasure Begins**

Our 11:30 arrival means it’s now lunchtime. What better excuse to have our first French meal? We walk around the block near our hotel and find a cute little courtyard with four appetizing cafés in it — one on each corner of the square. We opt for Le Marché, a charming little place with glass block built into the wood and old radios decorating the shelves. The waitress doesn’t speak any English. My first chance to practice!

It’s Mary’s first meal in Europe and she isn’t sure what to order. She settles on a shrimp salad with avocado. I opt for the fromage et tomates appetizer and the soup of the day (which we think is bean). Martha also orders the soup but when it arrives it turns out to be seafood. Since I don’t eat seafood, I cancel my soup order and devote my attention to what turns out to be an unusual dish. Instead of (raw) sliced cheese and tomato on a plate, I find myself facing an inch-thick block of cheese wrapped in a light, flaky pastry and layered with small slices of tomatoes and fresh herbs, then quickly fried in what tastes like olive oil. It was amazing.

Mom had her first taste of paté, served upon a salade. She says it’s good, but I’ll take her word on it. I don’t eat liver very often, and this wasn’t going to be one of those times. At the end of our meal, however, we each order our own crème bruleé. They were absolutely fantastic. Warm and simple, and even without any fruit garnish they were divine. Mary had a brownie with warm crème fraîche, but I wouldn’t have traded my crème bruleé for anything at that point.

### **After the First Meal**

We spend the afternoon exploring Le Marais district. There’s a gorgeous cathedral at the end of our block, something you don’t see very often in Florida. The shopping was good;

there were Hasidic Jews and pretty men everywhere. This district doesn't kid around when it bills itself as gay *and* Jewish. "Live together in perfect harmony ..."

For dinner we opted to have a picnic in our room. Mom, Mary, Martha and I all bought stuff to share. We ended up with: a rosé wine, some goat cheese, some cow-based cheese, a baguette with poppy seeds and a baguette with sesame seeds, potato soup, and this incredible little salad lined with homemade buffalo mozzarella. Its make-up was simple: lettuce, tomato, and oil with herbs. I'll call it the Wonderful Salade since you will hear of it again.

We passed out by 10 p.m. since we hadn't had much sleep on the overnight flight. We wanted to get an early start anyway, lots of things to see and not enough time. Nighty, night ...

### **Saturday, March 16, 2002**

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We were all up early on Saturday. We met in the hotel's basement for breakfast, a breakfast that included the best croissants I've ever had. All in all, breakfast was rather continental and included: cheese, pastry, cereal, yogurt, fruit, a sort of chocolate cake breakfast bread, hard-boiled eggs (brown), and of course delicious un café for those of you who partake. My most memorable breakfast treats, aside from the previously mentioned croissants, are the pomme granny yogurt (a granny smith apple yogurt) and chocolate rice krispies. Everything they put out was yummy and I had an egg every morning to ensure I got my protein while restraining myself from having more than 1.5 croissants on any given day. Trust me, this wasn't easy.

### **Getting Oriented**

To get our bearings we'd decided to take a bus tour in the morning. We hopped on L'Open Bus Tour since it was right next to our hotel. This allowed us two days' worth of on-and-off access anywhere the bus tour went. We took the main city tour in its entirety; this lasted about two hours. We got to see a good bit of everything, plus we had headphone narration to tell us about it. There was also an elderly British woman who made it a point to talk over the narration, since she was wearing her headphones, and drone on and on to her friend about her garden, her niece, her breakfast. I couldn't take it. That and the chilly day encouraged Martha and I to go inside the bus, where I promptly fell asleep in the well-heated space. That's OK, I didn't miss much. It's just Paris, right?

As soon as we got off the bus we were ready for lunch. We enter this gamey little restaurant called Le Bistrot. I say gamey because it had stuffed ... er, mounted ... animals everywhere. Moose on the wall, deer under the coat racks. Very strange. However, it had a prix fixe menu that looked delicious, and Martha and I opted for that.

Our waiter was funny as hell, and cute too. Mary was flirting with him by telling him he looked like a Backstreet Boy. It was hilarious. Here he is with Martha. Doesn't she look pleased? Of course, this was after our savory lunch, which I'll get to in a minute.



Alright, now on to the menu. I had escalope de veau a la Normande, which is veal in a cream sauce, along with salade au roquefort. The latter turned out to be a goaty bleu cheese. But it was good. I also finally had profiteroles, and I said it so well when I ordered it that Jean-Nick here complimented me. Profiteroles are cream puffs, usually made with ice cream and served with chocolat chaud, or warmed chocolate sauce. These and crème bruleé are two of the most common desserts you'll find. It's good to be in Paris!

Martha too had profiteroles, but she had it with roasted lamb and the salad nicoise. Mary had French onion soup — though they only called it onion soup, of course — and she also had my favorite fromage et tomates salade with the sliced homemade mozzarella. (This was what I expected at Le Marché, even though I was happy with what I tried.) Yum! I helped her out quite a bit. Mom had a plain salad and that was it. You may not know this, but my mother is actually part camel and can go days without eating, drinking, or using any sort of facilities. It's downright miraculous I must say.

To drink, the girls all had wine and I had un Coca. I quickly learned that it costs the same to order a bottle of Coke as it does to order a glass of wine. I was not saving money by not drinking like I would at home. Although, I cannot adjust to drinking wine every day, much less every meal. So I continued to cough up about \$3.50 per Coke.

### **The First of Three Walks**

In the afternoon, we took Le Metro to the Latin Quarter for a walking tour. The tour also included La Sorbonne. The Latin Quarter is named such because Latin was the common language used among the students and professors who traveled there to study. These elite academics included such figures as Thomas Aquinas, Voltaire, and Petrarch. Those who lived outside the academic community, the common folk who spoke a bastardized form of peasant Latin, were often looked down upon. But did you know that this “peasant” Latin eventually became what is today the French language? Hmm ...

Early on, we visited the Church of St. Julien the Poor. Located across from Notre Dame, this sanctuary was popular with the student body. It contained modest wicker seats and a minimalist décor. Next stop is the inside of the nearby Church of Sevigny (slightly more elaborate). Housed inside is a hand-carved, wooden pipe organ:



Also of note about our walking tour was the young, attractive, American guy Mary pointed out. I was amused because he looked like a kid and he was on vacation with his parents. Then I realized, oh wait, so am I! So that was the end of that judgment.

There was also a Georgia Bulldog on our tour. He was an older guy from somewhere in south Georgia, I can't even remember where now. Though he wasn't very big, but we did decide he was one of the heaviest people we saw in France. What Europeans think about

Americans is true as far as obesity goes. I think one of the reasons why is the fact that you can't buy a potato chip or a cracker here unless you look really hard. Cookies are ubiquitous, however.

During the tour we also got our first glimpse of the Musée du Moyen Age, the medieval museum. Martha and I have plans to return to later this week. But today we all get a taste of the medieval gardens. Some students from La Sorbonne posed for photos in the gardens as if they were statues. I suppose college students are silly everywhere.

A near-miss on the cultural front happened when I realized that as we were walking through the gardens, Carmina Burana by Carl Orff was being performed just inside. Drat! I wish I had known about that as it's one of my favorite operas. All in Latin too. How apropos.

Jennifer, our tour guide for the day, left us off at La Sorbonne. The girls and I grabbed a table at an outdoor café called L'Ecritoire Café and took in the university atmosphere for a while. The café had study tables and a library feel. Mom became enchanted with an elderly French gentleman at the next table. He looked like something out of a movie.

### **Into the Evening**

Inevitably, a meal is coming next. But in order to prepare for that meal, we stopped on the way home and once again purchased cheese, wine, and bread. I tried not to eat too much because I knew we were going out for pizza later ... I was waiting.

We opted for pizza because when Mom and Martha had gone to purchase our Paris Visites (passes for the subway, RER, buses, etc.), and on their way home they'd peeked into the Pizza Momo near our hotel. A local woman had given them an enthusiastic thumbs-up about the cuisine when she saw their inquisitive observation of the place, so we thought we'd check it out. You never have to twist my arm when it comes to eating good pizza.

Upon our arrival we realized that this place truly was a local joint, and they wanted to keep it that way. We had a lousy table in a smokey area; the bottled water was actually tap water (you've heard of this happening); and the proprietors were Middle Eastern, not Italian. Not that that's a bad thing, it just showed in what came next — the pizza.

I had pizza margherita, my favorite, which is simply cheese, tomato, and fresh basil. How hard is it to screw that up? It's easier than you think, I promise you. The other girls split a

large pie with artichokes, ham, and olives. They said theirs was good but in my case the cheese was rubbery and the crust only mediocre. Not to be picky but the basil was almost nonexistent. I was off pizza for the rest of the trip. The only good thing about that place was they had Kronenberg on draft. That's my favorite beer in the world. Mom and Martha had one, but I don't drink while I eat so I never did get one. I had a Coke and the annoying waiter kept trying to be funny by asking me, "Another whiskey?" I guess it's his favorite tourist joke.

After dinner Mary headed back to the room while Mom, Martha, and I went to get a beer. There was a 24-hour karaoke place near our hotel, along with lots of noise, and many local bars. We stopped at the tabac so I could buy a phone card to call home. The line for the LOTO was very long and the gentleman at the counter was annoyed with me, especially once I tried to order my telephoner carte but wasn't sure which one I wanted. I ended up with a 15-Euro deal for 100 minutes. That was awesome; it lasted me nearly all week.

After browsing the back streets a little longer, we wandered back toward a Scottish pub we'd seen earlier. As we passed him by for the second time, a drunken homeless man on the street began waving a knife at us. He was yelling something in French we didn't understand. Weird.

When we got to the pub I sat and watched the boys throw darts while Mom and Martha had their beer outside to get out of the smoke. We'd ordered the "Local Lager" which was all the handwritten label on one of the taps said. I'm not sure what was in there, but I only had one and I could feel it. So I only had one. It tasted good though, especially after our somewhat disappointing meal, the only mediocre meal I was to have.

We went back to the hotel and observed the firefighters at a game of cards. Did I mention that our hotel was right next to a fire station? Seems safe enough but it did tend to get loud at times.

Martha and I turned on the TV to see "The Sopranos" on en Francais. Cool! "Law & Order: SVU" was also on. We flipped around a little bit, then went to sleep.

**Sunday, March 17, 2002**

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**St. Patrick's Day the Uneventful**

We had breakfast in the hotel again. Yum! But the conversation was odd. Traveling with two ER nurses and a doctor can sometimes make meal conversations a little unappetizing. But of course, I can never be totally deterred.

Mary “picked up” a traveling salesman who was on his way to Switzerland. I think he was making her a good deal, but on what I’m not sure. ☺

We left the hotel and headed to Montmartre. We were scheduled for our second of three walking tours at 10:30 a.m. We took Le Metro to the Montmartre station and discovered that we had to hike about 15 flights of circular stairs to reach street level. Sweet lord, were we ever winded! Even the high school kids came out panting. The walls were painted all the way up; a different motif at every level. This gave it nearly an art show feel that we could have enjoyed except that we had to be topside very soon to make the scheduled tour time.

When we reached sunlight Mary announced “The walking tour is now over!” But oh did we have a way to go. Montmartre is a very hilly area so we earned some great glutes throughout the rest of the morning. It was raining so we also had to maneuver with umbrellas, but it was OK. It seems Montmartre, no matter who you talk to, is always raining. It also has a famed, but phantom, flea market that no one could confirm nor deny the existence of. We plan to go, even in the rain, if we can find it. Perhaps it’ll stop raining tomorrow.

Our tour guide was another Briton, Malcolm this time, and he was funny as hell. He was by far the most entertaining tour guide we had. Although I really liked Jennifer, Malcolm had been living in Paris for about 30 years and knew everything.

During the tour we get to see two sites from the film “Amelie.” If you haven’t seen it, it was one of the best films to come out this year. In fact, I saw it two times in one week. Excellent! We saw the Café of the Two Windmills (named such — I learned on the tour — because Montmartre has two windmills. We also saw La Basilique due Sacré-Coeur (or the Basilica of the Sacred Heart), one of the city’s most beautiful sites both up close and from afar. After the walking tour, we moseyed on down to the bottom of the hill to have lunch and seen below is our view of the basilica from our table.



On our way down the hill we got a free-of-charge view of a guy peeing on the OUTSIDE of the public toilettes (the paying kind). To avoid a misstep, Martha and I opted to wait until we reached the café to eat. Ew!

Another thing that happened once we were off the walking route was we discovered that the rest of Montmartre was very touristy with people trying to draw your portrait and sell you stuff. I didn't like that part at all, even though I'm not the least bit ashamed of being a tourist.

On the tour we got to see some excellent stuff though. We saw a garret called Le Bateau Lavoir where many famed artists lived and worked and played. Picasso was just one artist you've heard of who spent time there, though there were many more.

Beyond that we came to an incredible statue that was representative of a short novel



written by a man named Marcel Aymé (1902-1967). Apparently it was a post-war story about a schlubby public servant who wakes up one day and discovers he can walk through walls. He eventually goes to a physician who says he can cure him, but it will take six months for the treatments to work. During that time, the character takes a married lover and sees her by sneaking into her room through the walls. Of course, he forgets about the cure and one night as her husband returns home this is what happens:

Sucks, don't it? But it was a neat story and the statue grabs your attention right away. I'm so glad Malcolm was there to explain it.

We also saw the Inn of the Agile Rabbit and made a roundabout the Moulin Rouge, both very famous nightclubs. The rabbit still has performances that include the husband of Jennifer, our tour guide yesterday. Apparently she and Malcolm know each other quite well. I'll bet Malcolm's quite the hoot to party with.

The only annoying things about the walking tours were the Americans who actually answered their cell phones, then sat there and talked! I couldn't believe it. It happened on two out of our three tours. Geez!

Oh yes, I never finished telling you about lunch. Back to the good stuff. At the café at the bottom of the hill, Martha ordered a crepe with fromage (cheese) and Mary had a ham sandwich. Mom ordered carpaccio which is raw, thinly sliced beef with olive oil and capers. It was excellent. I had a crepe with noix au coco-chocolate. This means with chocolate and coconut. I also had pomme frites which were the best I'd ever tasted. We finally figured out that not only were they fried, but also they had been doused in butter somehow. Delectable!

### **The Move to Le Marais — Or Not**

We planned to make a walking tour of Le Marais, the district where our hotel is, at 2:30 p.m. It was already 2 p.m. so suddenly we were push to make the train to get back. At the last moment Mary decides to stay back and do a bus tour of the rest of Montmartre — the heck with the San Francisco-like hill walking. I don't blame her! But we remaining three had to take the RER to Le Metro to make our tour time so we hustled out of there.

At the RER station, Mom struck up a conversation with a bum who spoke no English. This friendliness is common practice for mom, so says anyone who knows her. This time, before I knew it, I was translating between them so he began to focus both his attention

and his hands on me. He actually started poking me in the breastal region. Next thing you know, Mom and Martha are forming a human block around me so he'll go away. He was drunk and talking about his job or something. The only words I could make out were "I work," but then somehow it morphed into "sleep with."

Unwilling to give up, he got on the RER, so Mom and I backed ourselves into a crowded corner. We think this is where she got blue paint on her coat. Drag!

We arrive at Le Marais and make the tour with a moment to spare. This time it's an American giving the tour and he's hard to hear and the district is busy. We get to see the Jewish stores and areas, and a few more gay men, plus lots of police for some reason. We learned that 75% of the Jews that were there during WWII survived, but the 2% that were rounded up were all sent to death camps. This explains why France has the third largest Jewish population in the world behind Israel and the United States. I had no idea.

About halfway through the tour I tire of walking and straining to hear so I head back to the hotel with a short stop in a local grocery. Mary arrives shortly after me ... good for her! Her first solo European adventure and she returns herself unharmed and unharried.

When Martha and Mom get back, Mom and Mary go off to take photos. They visit the Eiffel Tower and go up in it. It was a nice sunny afternoon. Le Marais was packed with people since it's the cool spot to be in right now. Martha and I decide to sit for a while due to all the walking, then finally get some Chinois (Chinese food). We had stir-fried legumes (veggies), chicken egg rolls, and poulet au amande (chicken with almonds). It was excellent and there were lots of locals and Asians eating in this place. It's so close to our hotel we inform Mom and Mary about it later.

As the sun begins to set, Martha and I head to the Bastille district to see a movie. This was a memorable experience. We saw "Mulholland Drive," which I'd never been able to see in Jacksonville because it never came. Fortunately, Martha also likes David Lynch. We saw it in English with French subtitles. Très cool!

The seating in this tiny theater was odd and it had a little screen to match the intimate atmosphere. They sold us our tickets at half price but we didn't understand what the ticket agent was trying to tell us. As it turned out, after she fetched a coworker who spoke English, the reason was that we had only two seats to choose from, one of which was a fold-down seat on the end of an aisle. I opted for the last front-row chair and Martha sat toward the back on one of the fold-downs. It was weird.

The English speaker also asked us if we had cell phones. No way. Plus, I'm always vigilant about turning mine off in the theater. But this was only a shadow of the courtesy to come. I loved the moviegoing experience. The French take their cinema as seriously as I do. Not only did no one have a cell phone, but they didn't even sell or allow food to be brought in. Can you imagine? That film's audience was dead silent the entire time. I'm not even sure people were breathing! No one even got up to pee, so neither did I. It was blissful.

After it was over, not wanting the night to end, Martha and I stroll through the Bastille area. We do a little shopping and enjoy the younger crowd that seems to hang out there. We take a look at the opera house that we're still debating on attending later that week. It's 105 Euros to attend, which gives us some pause, but we're still taking it under advisement.

We also found a painting that had a blue/frost Siamese cat in it. Cool print but it didn't look quite like any of our babies so we didn't buy.

On our way home we actually stop off for more Chinese food. It was so good! We took away some steamed dumplings to add to the bread and cheese we're harboring in our room.

Mom and Mary came home soon after and joined us with some wine. They shared about their trip to the top of the tower and their trek down the Champs-Élysée. They said it was very busy. They also visited the Arc d'Triomphe. These are a few of the touristy things...

Mary told us about saying "gracias" to the concierge downstairs. She's mixing her European countries, and it shan't be the last time either. We have a few glasses of wine and a couple of laughs, then call it a night. We're pooped! Bon nuit!

### **Monday, March 18, 2002**

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Looks like we're in for crappy weather. There's a front coming in and it's going to sit right on top of us all day. Over breakfast in the hotel we decide: What better place to visit than the cemetery on this rainy Monday?

About three weeks before we left for our trip Jim Morrison came to visit me in a dream. Although I've always been a big fan, it hadn't really *occurred* to me that he was buried in Paris even though I knew. After many hours of dreaming of the romance and death that surrounded his life — and mine since in the dream I was the lover cursed with the

knowledge of his impending demise — I awakened and realized that I would have the chance to see him if I wished.

Mom was not psyched about going to a cemetery. Apparently, she's never been to a really cool one. As it turned out, the four of us spent half the day in the drizzly rain sitting with the likes of Alfred de Musset (French poet), Chopin, Gertrude Stein, and far too many others to mention. We never did locate Maria Callas (the opera singer) or Maurice Merleau-Ponty (a French existentialist I always liked).

Aside from the people, the memorials were incredible. There was one for each death camp and even the tomb of the unknown transportation victim. Spend some time at Le Pere Lachaise on the Internet at <http://www.findagrave.com/>. You can type in the name of any of the folks I've mentioned or just use the cemetery name. It lists all the people buried there and includes photographs of many of the headstones.

You'll also get an idea how large this cemetery is; it's the size of a small town. If you've never visited a place like that, you should take some time to do so, especially if you're in a city with some history. Atlanta has Oaklawn (see Margaret Mitchell, Bobby Jones, and hundreds of Civil War soldiers to name a few), New Orleans has Lafayette, and Savannah has Bonaventure. The East Coast is a fantastic place to visit cemeteries if you don't have the urge to go abroad and see the really old stuff.

When we finally get to Jim there's a young man swigging Jack Daniels and having his photo taken. There were cigarettes all over and a dozen bright blue roses on the grave. It was quite nice. There were lots of people around, many Americans. In fact, Mom had even asked directions from some young Americans and then replied, "Merci." Funny how you become immersed.

Mom snapped some awful photographs of me trying to catch me being "natural" with Jim. Ugh. I finally handed over my camera to Martha and she got the shot I wanted. Here



it is, me and the “other” Jim:

On the way into the cemetery I’d stopped off at La Saint Amore to use les toilettes. It looked quite charming so we decided to lunch there. It was still raining and chilly — imagine — and they sat us at an intimate table upstairs near the window. It was like dining in someone’s house except for the menu. This last was to die for, no pun intended.

I had a steak with bernaise sauce et pomme frites. The bernaise was a little different than how we make it here, but very good. The frites were not quite as good as the buttery ones I’d had in Montmartre. Martha had roast chicken with escaloped potatoes and Mary had a shrimp salad with an incredible dressing. She said it was one of the best things she ate in France. Mom had the salade nicoise with tuna and anchovies. For dessert we split a torte des pommes (apple tart) and a pear tart with almonds. The latter was the more delicious of the two. I would like to find one of those here at home, so if anyone has any ideas where to look ...

### **On Death and Art**

After dining outside the Le Pere Lachaise, the girls and I board le Metro to visit the Louvre. We spend the afternoon visiting the Venus de Milo, the Mona Lisa, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and many other famous works. I got a few notable snapshots, one in particular of Venus.

I also visited the belly of the building, which used to be a palace in case you didn’t know. I didn’t know. The “medieval” Louvre, as it’s referred to, consists of what used to be a moat and a dungeon. I was surprised that no one else in our group went down there; it was quite exciting. I took a handful of photos just in case. Everyone seems to be impressed with that mystery of what’s underneath.

I didn’t like the Louvre as much as I’d hoped. The architecture was more interesting than anything. I didn’t really like the layout of the exhibits. I kept finding myself going in circles through the Islamic art section. Not fun. I also thought the audio tour was a rip off, and the guided tour in English was full so none of us could go.

Martha made a great discovery in the café though. She ordered these three pots of cream that turned out to be different flavored custards. Unfortunately, I was down in the dungeon and missed them. We looked for those pots of cream the rest of our trip, but never found them. Eh bien, I will just have to dream what they tasted like.

On the way out I did a bit of shopping in Sephora and the bookshop. Mom, Mary, and I then headed back to the hotel since Martha wanted to spend some additional time in the Louvre's halls. We stopped on the way and bought another one of those Wonderful Salades at the take-away place, a bottle of rosé wine made in the Luberon Valley, some broccoli cheese soup, a tomate paninette avec trois fromages (one of which was too goaty for me), and on a whim I purchased a sort of banana pudding for dessert. The idea was Martha would help me eat this stuff upon her return ... all but the banana thing which I managed to devour within seconds after I took my first bite.

I'm not usually much of a dessert eater but let me just say that this was one of the most sublime things I ate while I was there. It had fresh, sliced bananas, banana pudding, some whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and just a touch of coconut cream mixed in. It was divine! I just went nuts.

When Martha returned she wasn't upset about the banana thing at all (she didn't know what she was missing). There was great soup and wine and salad to be had. We caught up on our day and watched "The Weakest Link" on TV. I also watched "The Real World" (English with French subtitles). They don't try to make those people sound more intelligent in the translation, by the way. Martha and I also watched "Futurama" in French for a while before bedtime.

During the day I'd seen many strange turns on American culture throughout the city: Pizza Hut ads, Cheetos in green bags, KFC promotions, subway panhandlers who play "real" French music (e.g. on accordions) for money, people who ride the subway (lots of them) read books, and we'd seen a group of McDonald's workers on strike near Notre Dame. The entire restaurant was shut down and though we couldn't understand what they were complaining about, they did think it funny that we took their pictures out of curiosity. "Wave to the tourists!" I was beet red. I also learned from Mary that day what it meant to set the towels on fire. A new colloquialism if I have anything to do with it. ☺

We call it a night and prepare for our Tuesday. We only have a few days left and we intend to make the most of them. Besides, it's supposed to stop raining ... tomorrow!

## **Tuesday, March 19, 2002**

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We breakfasted in the hotel as usual. By now the place is filling up with Brits and one of them seems to have pilfered the beaded milk cover. It's a mystery that would haunt us the rest of our trip.

No tours today, but we do a good bit of walking regardless. We finally visited Berthillon, the famous ice cream place that only has locations on the Ile de la Cité. I had caramel/ginger ice cream and something called chocolat nougat. Mary had the chocolat nougat plus a scoop of praline. Martha had the caramel/ginger as well. Mom was so impressed with the ginger she nearly regretted her choice, but they were all too incredible, believe me.

This was the day we took the RER to Versailles, and even though it was the rainiest of all the days we were there, it couldn't take the shine off the palace.

That's OK, we were just this morning — once again — told that it's supposed to stop raining ... tomorrow!

Versailles was beautiful, if wet. We took two separate audio tours and saw a good bit of the place, including the famous Hall of Mirrors. At the end of the second tour, when we decided to grab a sandwich in the café, we ran into Jennifer, our walking tour guide from Sunday. What a small town! I talked to her for a while, then we set out to explore the gardens. This we did by tram, an unexpectedly dicey endeavor since the ride was excessively rough and we had to wait a long time because one of the prior trams was held up due to a flat tire. Some operation.

The windstorm that had knocked down so many of the Versailles trees was still apparent a year later. Most of the gardens were filled with small saplings tied up with string and reinforcements. Not the loveliest time to see it I'm sure, but there was some green beginning to bud. The next few weeks of spring would be spectacular, tu vois.

Filled to the brim with the wonder of what palace life must've been like, we begin the trek back to town for dinner. Our hotel concierge, Hamid, recommended a local Chinois et Thai place that we went to in the Republique area. The restaurant was OK but nothing special. My meal was interesting though: I had frogs' legs. It was my first time. I had them with black bean sauce. It was good, but they definitely looked like leggy wegs to me. I also had crab and asparagus soup but I didn't like it; it was way too fishy. The dim sum was excellent though. Martha added duck curry and Mom a Thai chicken skewer to our mix. Mary had shrimp and scallops. The noodles were probably the best thing we had, and the dim sum I already mentioned. They were like lo mein with bean sprouts.

During dinner we met an Asian girl from New York who was sitting at the next table. She was a trip. She was extremely proud of the fact that she was from New York. It was almost comic how she said the two words with such intensity. Her date was a Frenchman

she'd met during the course of learning the tango. He didn't seem too happy to be with her. I could see why. She was funny but a bit too much, if you know what I mean. She kept trying to explain to him why Americans couldn't drink wine at lunch. She also kept trying to run interference between us and our waitress (who didn't speak English). It was all very amusing, but only to us.

When we returned to the hotel, Mom and I sat in the lobby bar and talked with Hamid while we drank Kronenbergs. It turns out he was studying architecture and his wife was an engineer. They had a young son. Hamid seemed nice and he and my mother exchanged email addresses by the end of the evening.

Full of leggy wegs and once again experiencing the discomfort of ubiquitously tired feet, I'm ready to call it a night. So's mom. We meander up before midnight and hit the proverbial French hay.

### **Wednesday, March 20, 2002**

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Only two days left, we marvel over breakfast. The Britons keep coming and they're particularly annoying this morning. I had to share the elevator with a very strange one who absolutely refused to even look in my direction, though we were only inches apart. Yet these people can babble on to one another at length over the most inane stuff you ever heard. Sheesh!

It's raining — again! — so we postpone our bike tour for one more day. Since it's supposed to stop raining tomorrow, for real this time, we're hoping to get lucky. Instead, Martha and I head to Montparnasse to see the artists' district. It was mostly shopping; good shopping though. We did see a few working studios along the walk at least.

We stopped for lunch outside the Musée d'Orsay at a little café. We weren't sure about it at first, but a lot of locals were going in so we took a chance. It was good. I had a cheese omelette unlike any I'd had before, kind of closed all around and somewhat crispy. It was excellent. Martha had a flat, toasted sandwich. I stopped in les toilettes before we ate. Martha waited until after much to her regret, because she ended up having to use a Turkish toilet. The only one we came across on the entire trip. If you've never used one, basically it's a hole in the floor with two foot pedals ... so you have to squat carefully. I'd used them on previous trips to Europe, but got lucky this time. Oh to be a man for just one minute!

Next, we headed for the Musée d'Orsay to be blown away. It was way better than the Louvre. The building itself is a converted train station right on the water and it's gorgeous. Inside, we saw paintings by:

- Van Gogh                      Monet
- Degas                            Gauguin
- Rodin                            Toulouse-Lautrec
- Munch                            Cezanne
- Pissarro                        Whistler (including his mother)
- Seurat                            and many, many more

It was incredible. I also saw a special exposition on architecture and decorative arts. This section included Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan, and MacKintosh. Doors, chairs, bedrooms, windows, a whole section on the evolution of wicker furniture. In other words, everything.

Soon after, I went downstairs and came upon one of the traveling expositions, something called "Le Dernier Portrait." It turns out, having your death portrait done was quite en vogue for a time. There were painted ones by Rodin and Munch and Monet, as well as photographs of some of these artists on their deathbeds. There was also a large section on children and babies. This last was rather creepy, but interesting. I spent a lot of time in this expo. Who knew?

I also looked at the architecture models and the small-scale sets of l'opera rooms designed by a handful of famous artists. The museum had a lot to offer someone like me who has a tendency to appreciate the more pragmatic arts. But seeing many of the "great" painters' works in person also had an effect on me. Still none as profound as Magritte, but that hasn't changed since I was in ninth grade. There was also an amazing view that felt like something out of a movie. Through the clock tower you could even see the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur on top of Montmartre. I spent a long time standing here ...



We left the museum after a quick stop in the gift shop to purchase some books. On the way home, Martha and I stopped by Berthillion again. More chocolat nougat!

Meanwhile, Mom was near the Eiffel Tower. She also walked all the bridges and took photographs. She visited Rue Cler but didn't like it as much as she'd thought she would. Mary shopped for her family back home and somehow stumbled onto a Harley shop, a lucky break she probably couldn't have pulled off if she'd been looking very hard. (Her son and nephew collect Harley shirts from places they travel. How cool to get a French one!)

### **Cruising the City of Lights**

At dusk, we all meet back at the hotel to prepare for our gourmet dinner cruise. The cruise is a nighttime excursion down the Seine. To get there, we have to walk near the Eiffel Tower at night. We actually get a few good shots in the dry, night air.

During preboarding, we're in this room that looks like it's out of a 1930's gangster movie. Everything is red and black and sumptuous, with winding leather couches and flowing champagne. Wow!

The real treat, however, was when we got on the boat and were given the very front table. Surrounded by glass — and no people at all — we felt like total VIPs. They brought us bottle after bottle of wine and champagne. Even my nonalcoholic sparkling grape juice had up to 3% alcohol. It'd be tough road to hoe to be a recovering alcoholic in France!

The menu was exquisite as it should have been for 125 Euros. I'm still thinking about what I had. The choices made were:

Amanda: Beef Wellington with a vegetable and fruit salad to start, plus potatoes and a carrot flan. The sauce was a tad salty, but the beef crust was impeccable. I had a fruit tarte for dessert.

Martha: Foie gras salad with the Beef Wellington and a grand marnier soufflé.

Mary: The filet of sole and baked Alaska. She tried to share her sole with us, and then offered to show the boat's photographer some leg. How generous. ☺

Mom: Lobster salad with caviar and a baked lobster dinner. She too had the soufflé. And a lot of lobster.

We saw so much from the boat, the lights, the small statue of liberty, the museums at night, the Eiffel Tower. It was truly beautiful. We also saw a near-sex show on one of the benches along the Seine, flooded with light. These people are definitely not shy. We saw Rodin's "The Thinker" in a park as well. I didn't know he lived outside.

The service and the cruise — even the weather — was perfect. It still wasn't raining! Maybe we'll be able to do that bike tour tomorrow after all. Our final cruise treat was a feast of chocolate truffles in cocoa powder. They were quite good, even after I got so excited I accidentally dropped one down the front of my shirt. Surely the ship's captain and crew had a laugh as I sat under the bridge and fished for chocolat. Ugh.

We topped off our evening by heading back to the hotel for a few drinks in the lobby bar. That's when we met Medhe (pronounced med-EE). He was a fashion design student. Like Hamid, he was very friendly and also happened to be Algerian.

But tomorrow was our last full day in Paris and it was already past midnight so we didn't hang out long. Bon nuit!

### **Thursday, March 21, 2002**

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After breakfast Martha and I have finally given up on the bike tour. It's raining again! So we head to the Musée National du Moyen Age et Thermes de Cluny. This is the medieval museum I mentioned earlier. It turns out to be one of the coolest things we do. We'd already visited the medieval gardens, so this time we stayed inside.

The only hitch we ran into was in trying to get a tour. This museum was quite small and there wasn't one apparently. While Martha was trying to ask one of the hosts for an audio tour, in lieu of a guided one, he didn't understand what she was saying. He guessed she

wanted a telephone card. No, no, no. I motioned to him and tried to explain. I didn't know the exact words, so instead I pointed to one corner of the room and proclaimed, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Then I pointed to the other corner of the room and said, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

By this time Martha was in stitches. So was the guy. He shook his head and told us the word for what we wanted, and that they didn't have one. Eh bien, no tours. But a moment later he began to point about the room and say, in his cute little French accent, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." That amused us for the rest of the day. Charade master!

The coolest part of this museum was the Lady and the Unicorn. This is a tapestry I've seen many, many times in books. So have you. But seeing it in person was a memorable experience. In fact, I'd love to go back and see it again. I spent more than half an hour in that room reading and studying the details of the piece.

There were lots of beautiful tapestries, stained glass, the Roman baths, clothing, books, shoes, jewelry, hand-carved church pews, and much more. You can visit their Web site to see some of the pieces at <http://www.musee-moyenage.fr/RMN/mnma/>. I highly recommend spending some time here if you ever make it to Paris.

After the museum, Martha and I visited the crypts under Notre Dame. This is a working archaeological site under the building that includes pieces from Roman structures and other early Paris streets and sewers, etc. It was very cool. We tried to visit Saint-Chappelle but the line was too long.

We also tried to have our photos made in a photo booth a la "Amelie" but the booths weren't working. I lost a few Euros on that. We then peered into what we thought was a costume shop full of king's robes and such, but they turned out to be the uniforms that the government workers wear, much like the English parliament. Bizarre!

Meanwhile, Mom and Mary were exploring La Madeleine, a lovely little district full of flowers and fabulous shopping and buildings. Then they returned to Montmartre to go inside the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur. If you see a nun in a phone booth, snap a photo. (It was one I'd missed earlier.) Those nuns are quick!

For lunch, Martha and I had an exciting culinary adventure. We stopped in a small restaurant and enjoyed one of the best soups we'd ever tasted. It was cream and spinach topped with thin slices of parmesan cheese and cubed, soft pumpkin bread. Topped with allspice it was a taste treat like nothing I'd had before. We actually took pictures of the soup! OK, here it is:



Don't I look happy?

For our entrée I had homemade fettucine with tomates and Martha had osso bucco made with veal.

The place was called Hélices & Délices and it's located at 8 Rue Thenard, 75005 en Paris. I urge you to go. The service was lovely and the food ... well you already get the idea.

### **Back to Home Base**

In the afternoon, Martha and I visited the Place des Vosges. We took the walk all the way around the park and peered into the different galleries and haute couture stores. We walked around Le Marias for the rest of the afternoon and shopped a bit. We saw a cute little doggie in a café window who turned out to be real; he was sitting right on the food counter. This was much more appealing than the dead cow's head in one of the take-away displays we'd seen earlier that week. Ugh.

At one point, we even went into a comic book store. They had some cool stuff, including some Nightmare Before Christmas, but I didn't buy anything.

That night the girls went to dinner near the Eiffel Tower and the Latin Quarter. They had crepes with cheese and crepes with mushrooms. I was kind of pooped so I went and got that Wonderful Salade from the take-away place again. Trouble was, yes they had no bananas! I was sooooo sad.

About 9 p.m. I came down and had a few gold beers with Medhe and waited for them to return. I learned that one of the designers for Jean-Paul Gautier stays in this hotel when he's in town. He and I also talked about pop culture quite a bit. He was interesting and very nice. He recommended we (meaning the girls and I) vacation in Tunisia sometime. It's apparently quite popular with the French.

The girls came in soon after and once we caught up and formulated our leaving plan for the morning, we called it a night and went to bed.

### **Friday, March 22, 2002**

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Our last breakfast in the hotel and we finally solve the mystery of the missing beaded milk cover. Sam says it wasn't stolen.

We arrive at the airport to find throngs of people waiting to check in. We then go through countless security checks, a nice reassurance, and finally get stuck on the tarmac for nearly an hour before we take off.

Fortunately, I had run down to a take-away place and purchased sandwiches, chips, and a drink. Mom had complained at first about my getting out of line — camel, see? — but she was happy for that crappy, pre-fab sandwich now. Mary had an apple and Martha had some truffles so we passed food back and forth to get us through the three hours till we were finally served the most awful food we'd had in a week.

My seatmate was a recent college graduate returning from her first trip to Europe. She was very nice. We talked quite a bit and didn't sleep much. We were both ecstatic at having our first Pepsi-Colas since we got to Europe! I also saw the sun for the first time since Sunday.

I used the duty free on the plane to spend the last of my cash. I spent down to my last five Euro pennies. That was a good coincidence.

### **Denouement**

Though every trip has its ups and downs and all the particular flavors that give it its own personality, I hope that everyone found Paris to be as exciting and full of surprises as I did. For Mary, it being her first time, I know she'll remember it forever. For Mom and I, being first only in Paris, I know we've talked since. My only sentiment is, "I miss Paris." And I do.

I would like to go back someday. Perhaps even with Martha on her third time around. Back to the Lady and the Unicorn again, m'lady? I'd put five bucks on it.

THE END