

France? Oui, Oui!

By Jessica McMillan

It was Sept. 1999 and Stuart and I had just come back from our first trip to Western Europe...a 14-day fabulous trip to Italy! It only whetted my enormous appetite for travel and exploration of that continent, and upon our return, I immediately announced we were going to France the next year. I didn't quite get the reaction I had hoped. Stuart's reluctance was based primarily on what most of us believe about the French people...that they are arrogant, rude, and have quite the "nose-in-the-air" attitude when it comes to any foreigner attempting to speak their lovely language. Ah, I thought, it will be different for us. I speak a little French, having struggled through five years in school, with a mother who spoke it fluently. And, so it was....

The most delightful 16 days in Northern France we could ever have imagined!

Our first five nights were spent in Paris. For first timers, I am happy to report that the "City of Light" is very easy to navigate, and the local folk more friendly and overly helpful than we had hoped. We stayed in the family owned Tourville Hotel, in the 7th arrondissement. Our hotel was within two blocks of Les Invalides, where Napoleon's Tomb is located, and within a 15-minute walk of the Eiffel Tower. Around the corner was a very convenient metro station, so all of Paris laid waiting for our discovery.

Our first full day, we decided to make the trip OUT of Paris altogether to the Palace of Versailles. The 45-minute train trip to Versailles was well worth the entire day there. It is helpful to understand a little of the history of this massive residence of the French Kings. Kings Louis XIV, XV, XVI, spent enormous sums of the French taxpayers' money living a totally decadent lifestyle. But it is not only the opulence of the Palace's interior that impresses, but the extensive gardens, fountains, and the nearby *Petite Trianon*-"the little mansion" (King Louis XVI's gift to his teenage wife, Marie Antoinette) that invite you to explore and spend time. The weather in September is ideal for the country, warm and sunny, and the gardens are still lush with the last vestiges of summer and early fall color. It was truly heavenly, and very relaxing to imagine the royalty walking gaily along the many paths. As we picked ourselves off the grass and back onto the tram to escort us to the palace's main terrace, we were sorry we had to leave. I think I was born 300 years too late. Palace life definitely agrees with me...

The remaining days of our stay in Paris were filled with walking-lots of walking-which is why we now understand how the French women don't put on any weight. They can't possibly get fat on all that wonderful cheese, chocolate, and wine, when they walk literally everywhere. We did all of Paris-the Orsay Museum, Montmartre, the Louvre, the Champs-Elysees. If you walk, make the trip to St. Germain de Pres, because not only is that where all the delightful and ritzy boutiques are located, you will find some of the most interesting and historical cafes to park yourself and watch the locals go by in all their finery. This is the Latin Quarter, renowned for the student life at the Sorbonne, but also for the magnificent Luxembourg Palace and gardens, one of THE destination spots on a weekend afternoon...or any afternoon, for that matter. The French certainly don't seem to be overworked and stressed out like we Americans are. In fact, given that lunchtime is usually two hours long, and that beginning at 4 p.m. everyone seems to congregate at the nearest cafe for a cigarette (yes, there are way too many smokers in France), an espresso, or a glass of local French red, I would say the French working life is something I need to strive towards. Ah, Paris! I loved it, and hated to say "*au revoir*".

One of the true highlights of our trip to Northern France was the pristine and historic 75-mile Normandy coastline and Omaha Beach. The battle remains left in tribute to the courage of the British, American and Canadian troops who laid down their lives to successfully carry out the largest military operation in history will forever be etched in my heart and memory. We arrived at Omaha Beach at 11 in the morning, at lowest tide. It was a spectacular view from the cliff as we made our way down to the beach for a stroll. I could not help myself. I had to stand in the water that had turned crimson red with the blood of our soldiers. My dad fought in this war, and I had to take back a piece of the land that claimed so many lives as my gift back to him. I confess, I scooped up some sand and one of the large, smooth "pebbles" that lined the upper edge of the beach and wrapped them in aluminum foil to take back with me. The significance of this sand makes all the difference to me. We saw a small sandbar not far out, which we could have waded to in thigh high water, but chose instead to walk along the lovely, smooth crescent sandy beach. As we turned around, we discovered the sandbar had disappeared under several inches of water, and it was not until later that we learned how quickly the tide turns on this northern coastline. It was the rising tide, rough seas and the unfortunate delayed allied communication that forced what should have been a 6:30 a.m. landing at Omaha, to approximately 7:15 a.m., and caused so many of the troops, overloaded with machine artillery, to drown in the rising waters. The rest is sad history. But they were successful in their attempts, and we left Omaha to explore the cliff of Pont du Hoc. Here the Germans had laid waiting for our men to climb the limestone cliffs with picks and ropes, only to discover the "cannon" they had hoped to capture was nothing more than a huge tree trunk disguised as a piece of artillery. This two-acre ground is littered with the 35-foot wide gaping holes left by Allied bombs. The remnants of partially destroyed bunkers, pieces of rebar, and hollowed out ground is all that remains of a day fought so bravely by our men. They are remembered and immortalized at

the 173-acre memorial American Cemetery. The memorial is a semi-circular colonnade with a loggia housing battle maps at each end, and a large bronze sculpture in the open area-the "Spirit of American Youth, Rising from the Waves".

One cannot help but weep, when, at the top of each hour, the chimes play out the patriotic songs of that era, in a slow, sad remembrance of the sacrifice made. Never before have I been so proud to be an American, and now at 55 years old, I understand the depth of the commitment and courage my father and countless other fathers gave so that my life would be free. It is amazing to see the thousands of grave markers lined up ramrod straight, one to the other. I sat down next to a soldier who died on D Day, June 6, 1944, and wished him peace. Next to him was the marker of "A comrade in Arms, known but to God", in honored glory. Wherever he is now, a "thank you" is not enough.

Normandy offers a host of history, a bushel of mussels, and delectable local cheese, not to mention a rolling countryside that is lush with green vines, stone cottages, and small local farms. It was so wonderful to have spent the day in this most memorable place, and sad to leave it behind for the shores of Brittany, but Mont St. Michel was calling, as was the "maison sur la mer", a delicious meal, and hot shower. The weather had turned drizzly late in the day-a fitting end to our historic trek. We were physically and emotionally tired. As we sank our heads onto the softness of the pillows, I believed I could live out my days in this region of France, living a more simple life, with good food, wine and friends...dream on, zzzzzzz...