

## Harriet Report #3 – Last Sort Of Happy Family of Four Trip

Dear Family and Friends:

Thank you for listening. Read as much as you like. At first I was trying to be brief but it was boring to me, so I went back and added my self. love, Harriet (begun Thursday Sept. 21, 2000)

### M Y F R A N C E R E P O R T - 2000

Thursday September 14 to Wednesday September 20:

#### OVERVIEW:

France was great! We all got along well enough and enjoyed what we each enjoy. Many of the sights were spectacularly memorable. There were almost no other kids anywhere, weather pleasant, the food sometimes disappointing, trying to speak french was fun but tiresome and feeling isolated with nobody to talk to wore me out. I was ready to come home to (much english speaking) Delft and extremely happy to be living in such a comfortable home (the shower, the sheets, the kitchen!) We are so lucky!

Just being out of the city and in the country and seeing the fabulous sights, the feeling of awe and amazement, helped to sooth any getting along discomforts. Even though expected and we understood, when the boys didn't have enough imagination or experience to appreciate the incredible stuff, both Alex and I felt annoyed. Sometimes internal politics of the family, or hotel goof ups, or traffic, or finding decent food, caused trouble. Boring stuff really. But I was happily surprised that we all got along so well.

My dreams of the splendors of France were all realized with the color filled in of modern France around the edges of the old history stuff. No french people were rude to us and almost none spoke any english. It was very different from Holland. On the train home, I started to wonder if the Dutch ever feel isolated in their little country with its distinct language and culture.

#### HIGHLIGHTS:

There were some fantastically memorable elements. In no particular order, there was:

- + scrunching into the cave of Grande Roc with stalactites/stalagmites galore
- + our 800 year old castle tovertop hotel room, really!
- + the 14,000 year old prehistoric paintings in the cave of Font de Gaume
- + a nice afternoon at the sandy Atlantic beach of Maubisson
- + and one unexpectedly great lunch on the road to Perigord

#### T H E F I R S T H A L F

THE MEDOC AND MARATHON:

The first three days were in the sandy, pine tree, vines, and flat, rural and vacation area of very little towns near the Atlantic in the region called Medoc. The west part along the Atlantic was wild, the east part was tamed long ago with vineyards from way back, way famous, like Lafite Rothschild (\$2,000 a bottle). And there weren't any guard towers around the grapes! Just roses planted at the ends of every few rows to act as canaries in the coal mine and pick up disease or pests before they got to the precious grapes.

Did I mention that Peter had a cold? I got it hard Wednesday night before we left, and Alex picked it up the worst just after his marathon run. Also, the first day of the trip (Thursday), relatively grim but not horrible, was all day on the train to Bordeaux with the only interruption being the metro trip underground (no sights of the city) across Paris to get from one bullet train to the next. The bullet train apparently can go 160 miles per hour (300 kph), but is so smooth, I barely believe it was that fast. I enjoyed the boys being mesmerized by GameBoy while I read.

Renting the car went fine at the Bordeaux train station but once we were out in the country almost to our hotel we realized no restaurants were still open, so we stopped at the first bar with lights on and had a nice salad and hamburgers for the boys sitting on the patio (our first experience of really needing to speak french).

At 10pm when we finally arrived at our hotel they didn't have our reservation, but they had room (you bet they did). It was a resort of many buildings with little, very little, apartments instead of rooms. It was a study in space management. There was a beautifully tiled outdoor pool, ping pong tables, outdoor cafe/restaurant, playgrounds, giant checkerboard game, and all surrounded by sand dunes covered in pine trees. It seemed very restful, but wasn't particularly. There were a couple of bus loads of marathon guests all partying in the courtyard and then awake early. The cardboard style apartment didn't come with noise blocking capabilities. Oh Well.

So that explains all day Thursday spent getting there. Friday, we started sightseeing by checking out Pauillac, the town hosting the beginning and end of the marathon, getting signed in and gathering marathon freebies, etc. not particularly interesting. As an afterthought on our way home to the hotel at 3pm we went to the beach and it was perfect. Not too hot like it'd been in Pauillac, great soft sand, crashing waves (too crashing, with posted warnings not to swim). Alex and the boys played in the waves and then Peter and Arthur buried each other in the sand (over and over). It was great!

That night there was a "marathon pasta buffet" at the hotel which was a semi disaster except the boys could play outside on the playground unsupervised while Alex and I dealt with the discomforts. Our assigned table ended up being encircled on three sides by pressed in bodies waiting for the buffet, while we

already had our food. The people in line had nothing else to do but watch us humbly eating, or talk to their friends across our heads. UGH! We silently ate our food and pretended we weren't there and they weren't there, which was hardest when one especially friendly older woman from a US elder hostel group kept grabbing my shoulder to accentuate her quizzing of me while leaning down my throat. I guess I wished I had some personal space.

Next morning, Saturday, by 7:30 am we were off to Pauillac for the marathon, parking with the crowd only 1 or 2 kilometers from the race start. Then the long wait began for the boys and me. Before the start we enjoyed sitting on a bench and watching about half the eight thousand runners go past us in costume. That's part of the kitsch of this particular race; costumes, water stations at each chateau they pass and some serving wine and oysters (on the half shell). And Alex says runners were partaking and then running along. It IS only 26.5 miles to run, I guess maybe some oysters and bordeaux could help you make it? Alex asked one runner how he could do it and he replied "But I'm french!"

I guess if I were a strapping man wearing a pink tutu and fake breasts I'd have oysters and wine instead of water as I ran the marathon too! The best costumes were about 12 people dressed as traditional french sailors and carrying a huge boat, a lot of men in drag, a lot of men in giant diapers with bonnets and pacifiers, and lots of men dressed as cows with hilarious udders. Come to think of it, there were a lot of men.

The start was incredible with the eight thousand runners all crammed into the boulevard together. It took Alex 10 minutes on his race watch to even get to the starting line and he says the first 10 kilometers (of the 42 kilometer race) were so badly crowded that the runners kept being forced to walk, the bodies so packed together that he almost quit the race. Good thing it wasn't hotter or the smell might have killed him.

For the ten thousand or more spectators packed on the edges, the start had flying entertainment. There were four monster construction cranes and each one had a human doing circus tricks hanging in the air over the lined up runners. One was a guy on a bicycle and he rode circles over the crowd, one was a dancer doing graceful flips and stuff, one was a saxophone guy I couldn't see and the fourth we couldn't see either. All this accompanied with blasting technofunk music from ten foot high speakers lining the streets.

So I had four hours to distract the boys in Pauillac in the crowd. We did breakfast in the cafe for the first hour, then one hour fighting about what to do next and going potty, the third hour at the skateboard ramp park, which was right by the helicopter landing pad so we could enjoy the sand and dirt being flung into our faces every 20 minutes or so, then the fourth hour standing along the finish line watching for Alex, and counting the number of ambulances coming and going from the red cross zone just behind us.

Just as my watch turned four hours, Alex came sprinting down the red carpeted finish alley. Number 1159 out of 7288 finishers (top 16%)! He looked great! He did it! But he really hurt a muscle in his ankle. And he had to make three pit stops. We are so proud of him!

But mostly we were just relieved to see him after our wait and ready to get out of Pauillac. He was expectably wiped out after the race and we, of course, were totally exhausted from sitting around all day, it's so tiring to do nothing you know, so we went back to the hotel and the boys swam in the pool. It was a great break to sit out at the pool in the open space and green pine trees.

After everyone rested and took pain killers, we drove to the nearby lake village to have dinner on the edge of the beach playground in an outdoor creole restaurant that was convenient. The boys ran loose on the playground while we ate questionable curry. It wasn't the France I expected, but very entertaining nonetheless.

## T H E S E C O N D H A L F

### PERIGORD NOIR, MEDIEVAL CASTLES AND PREHISTORIC CAVES:

The next day, Sunday, we drove over to Perigord Noir, an area of steep wooded hills, limestone cliffs, big rivers (the Dordogne and Verzere) and nut trees, sudden valleys, and little towns with old castles and fortresses built into the cliffs, and lots of caves! Really beautiful scenery. But to get there we had to pass Bordeaux again and lots of flat grape and corn farmland, very blah, with American style corrugated metal strip malls and such.

Worrying that everything would close for the afternoon before we got some lunch, we were turning the car around when we noticed a restaurant right where we were turning around. We descended to the shaded patio and proceeded to have the most fabulous and memorable, scrumptious five course meal (while the boys drew pictures on the paper tablecloth). The first course was an hor d'oeuvre buffet. Alex ate sea snails and crayfish but didn't take any oysters. He made sure to tell us the snail was mucousy. I had mussels and lots of other divine stuff. Second course was wonderful country beef vegetable soup, third was huge shrimp in whiskey sauce, fourth course was meat with great scalloped potatoes and garlic red and white pole beans, fifth was dessert, quite forgettable. What a great meal!

Back in the car and three hours later we arrived in Sarlat, a well kept medieval town set on the edge of a wooded hill deep in the valley of the Vezere river.

Our hotel room was incredible! It was the 800 year old top of a round guard tower in the old city walls. Circling our room was the crenellated battle wall (that's the up and down looking thing castles have) just outside our old style

windows. Inside our room the huge exposed wooden beams, cut and joined together with wooden pegs, and the raw stone walls gave some hint of their 800 year history. Luckily I was able to forget what might have happened there (like murder, rape, and torture) and go to sleep with no disturbing dreams.

To get to this room, you went up a scary little elevator in the only 300 year old castle turned hotel and then outside onto the top of the old city wall which had a few pots of geraniums and a funky ancient sculpture of a monk holding a miniature human among the crenellations, and then up some steps to our door into the tower top. It was wonderful!! It felt like a tree house but in a medieval fortress. And it was great to be able to walk out on the old wall and look around at the town, like our own private deck. The old city center was like San Gimignano but way better, less crowded.

Our first exploring day, Monday, we went over the little curvy road to check out some prehistoric paintings in caves. The best we could do was make reservations for the next day to go in the Cave of Font De Gaume, "discovered" by scientists in 1901 and the only cave with polychrome prehistoric art to still be open to the public. Then we explored the prehistory museum in a fortress built into the middle of the cliff face in another medieval town (Les Eyzies) and met a paleontologist who spoke a little English (I was sick of French by then) and explained some stuff to us. We learned that the cave art is 14,000 to 20,000 years old. They hunted reindeer and bison, not the bigger animals also found by bones and fossils from that period in that area, such as rhinoceros (there was a cast of a scary looking rhinoceros carcass found in an oil pit). Nobody knows why they went deep into caves to make art.

After lunch we went to the cave of Grande Roc, no art, just cool geology. It was half way up the 600 foot cliff and the tour took you into the cave on a constructed flat path that narrowed to less than my body width, with stalactites and stalagmites EVERYWHERE! It was beautiful with the little bit of lighting glowing off the translucent calcite. It was also squirmy and scary to me to walk into the wet slippery guts of the cliff, with water dripping down on you, but worth it.

Then there was quiet time for me back in the tower while the men all went walking. I guess I had to recover from the overexcitement of the squirmy cave. Then a decent dinner discovery with great soup and the strongest, dark chocolate ice cream (for Arthur) that you can imagine. I sampled some of the local specialties; nut aperitif, foie gras, and Alex had duck.

Tuesday morning we slept late in the tower and Alex brought us picnic breakfast of croissants (enough already, every day, I was so sick of them, they aren't always flaky and amazing, they can be quite blah). When we were leaving the hotel, the hotel lady told us she expected us to leave that day. We had reserved three nights but she said only two and we had to leave, there wasn't any room, not even in our tower! Alex was very pissed, but I figured it was a help because

we could move closer to Bordeaux and make the drive to the train the next morning easier.

I asked the hotel lady to find us a room closer to the train and she did, in Bergerac, a kind of business man stopover city only 1 ½ hours from Bordeaux. (When we arrived that afternoon my expectations were confirmed, the hotel was very bland and kind of yucky, like many business man hotels.)

With our room for the night secured, our suitcase in the trunk, we left Sarlat that morning for our last day of sightseeing. We drove off to a castle, called Castelnaud, built into the top of a rock on a cliff in the late 1100's and with quite a history. Abandoned since the French revolution, it was privately purchased in 1966 and patched up and they added a medieval armament museum. It was absolutely fabulous and empty of tourists. You could wander all through it, in these weird twisting stone stairways barely wide enough or high enough for me to fit, and the views off the edge of the cliff were incredible. Some of the rooms had stone dome ceilings that were elegant in their simplicity. There were some castle computer games on display to play, and a catapult video, as well as a real catapult out in the yard, and copious swords, armor, and spear things. The boys loved it!

There was a little ancient village that went alongside with some homes and a cafe or two and a creperie hanging off the cliff among some nut trees and geraniums. That's where we had lunch looking across the valley and river at some rain clouds from the protection of the creperie's porch, eating galettes with goat cheese and nut sauce and salad with smoked duck and nuts. It was a tasty time, but the castle was the best part. The boys didn't want to leave to go to our reservation for the cave of Font de Gaume.

The tour of the cave of Font de Gaume, only 20 people allowed, was almost completely english speaking people, but the tour was in french. They strictly control the moisture, light, etc. It was very strange in there. It was mostly completely dry, no stalactites, and totally dark except the little allowed light. You went way into the cave on a twisting, narrow path before you enter a narrow chamber that was clearly a crack in the earth, shooting slanting up past the light's reach. On these walls were large (4-7 feet) red and black paintings by Magdalen people 14,000 years ago of reindeer and bison and horses. Some paintings had the additional scratchings and graffiti of visitors prior to 1901 when the cave became protected. The boys were a little bit impressed, but not like the castle. oh well.

We ended the day with driving the hours to our blah hotel. Alex went to bed early with his cold, I took the boys to the hotel restaurant which was oddly like a Howard Johnson's with orange polyester table clothes and very quiet rockabilly music. Almost every table had a single diner except us, mostly old women carefully dressed up and middle aged business men. The boys loved their menu

des enfants, which came with three courses. First a plate of melon, cucumber, and tomato. Peter ate both their melon and Arthur ate both their tomato. Then they had homefries (just like Suomi Bakery Arthur announced) and hamburger for the sixth night in a row (steak hache). Finished off with glace (ice cream, strawberry for Peter and chocolate for Arthur) just like every other night of the trip.

And the next day, Wednesday, we were up, croissant filled again, and off on the train. There was some hassle getting there in time with Alex running the last 5 minutes while the boys and I waited on the platform by the paused train hoping he'd make it from returning the rental car. He did make it! Metro beneath Paris again, a short walk, saw a middle eastern man get arrested, then more bullet train home, took the wrong train from Rotterdam, a nonstop, and passed Delft, had to get off and catch another train back the other way to get home to Delft. Oh well, the boys were still in bed by 9 on a school night.

And in the days since the trip, while working on my report, I've been reminded often how wonderful it is to be in Delft and be able to travel europe and return to our comfortable home. So this is the story of our great trip to France.