

HARRIET REPORT #7 – I CAN TRAVEL WITHOUT GRIEF: PARIS WITH CYNTHIA

What a lucky dog! I got to go to Paris, France, with my friend Cynthia for four days in October and it was WONDERFUL! Since this is a Harriet Report, it is food and people centric, as Harriet is. Read as much or as little as you want. love, Harriet – November 6, 2000

Topics include: strategy; the setting; new experiences I'd never done before; the loot – stuff I bought; the action; how it felt; extra attractions; getting there and back; and summary.

STRATEGY:

I was thinking about “maximizing”. Like not just choosing a square of great chocolate, but wanting chocolate with a blob of whipped cream and some light cake soaked in coffee and alcohol so it's all there, maximized. Paris is a kind of maximum place. But maximizing is tiring and kind of manic, absorbing is more laid back. Absorbing and maximizing can alternate. That's what we did in Paris.

I was also thinking about expectations. Often it seems if you have expectations, then things can be disappointing, but having no expectations at all can mean missing out on the pleasure of looking forward and dreaming. The museums I had expectations for were disappointing, but I didn't even plan to go to the Louvre and it was such a blast. Likewise, the cathedrals were not something I cared about ahead of time. But they were spectacular and moving. I admit I also like cathedrals because I can sit down in a pew to absorb the sights and have a quiet, feet break.

THE SETTING:

Our hotel room was on the sixth and top floor with a really very scary little elevator. I wish it didn't drop four inches every time you got in, even for fly weight Cynthia. Our room had a barely two person wide balcony which you entered by climbing through a low window. Yeah, I was scared of the height, but I held onto the window frame behind me to enjoy the view over the Hotel de Ville to Notre Dame! Wow! Even if the bed pillows were attached to the bed and the sky light maybe leaked, it was a good setting. The reception ladies were highly entertaining. The spandex leopard jump suit one with bouffant helmet hair was really my favorite, but the pretend swiss milk maid complete with blond pippy longstocking pigtails was a close second.

Food is a worthy goal for any comfortable trip. The food was very nice, it had it's brilliant moments, it was Paris for god's sake! I especially remember the last long lunch when I ordered cassoulet because our table mates said it was fabulous but forgot that cassoulet has white beans in it, yuck! I'm sure it was very good, but there were a lot of white beans. But as proof that life always balances, I also ordered green beans for a side dish and they were incredible

with little squares of foie gras in them, those really ultra skinny and perfectly cooked green beans that I've only ever seen in France and the foie gras sublimely rich but not overpowering. Yes!

People watching is crucial too: the cute young (gay) waiter at our first long lunch who forgot our order more than once! Of course, immediately upon arriving in Paris we went to a long lunch, priorities after all. It was clearly a really long lunch because he kept forgetting about us and honestly the food was not all that memorable, iceberg lettuce, need I say more! But he made for good people watching. We were in our neighborhood near the hotel since we had sensibly checked in and left our bags before seeking food. Our neighborhood was the Marais, a trendy, gay neighborhood that was perfect: safe, cute, boutiquey, thick in the city center, near the museums, and had lots of good places to eat.

NEW EXPERIENCES I'D NEVER DONE BEFORE:

I'd never sat at someone else's table in a restaurant before. We did that at every meal in Paris, elbow to elbow with strangers at the same table. Mostly they never seemed to speak any english so it felt very private still and they always returned my smiles. More proof that a sense of humor goes a long way toward world peace.

I'd never walked clear across the map AWAY from the train station when I thought my train was about to come, but that's exactly what we did in Chartres and it was worth it. I calculated it to be a moderate risk because the guide book said last train at 8pm and the train schedule said last train at 6. Turned out last train was around 10, but we caught the 7:15. And the mosaic house we hiked across the suburbs to see was really wonderful folk art that I plan to always remember. And it wasn't raining on us.

I shopped more than I went to museums. I never did that before. Even my Italy trip with Linda when we decided to skip museums altogether, we ate and sat in nature more than shop. Also, in Paris I took photographs of the inside of shops, after asking permission. There were so many amazing shops, the felted wool gallery, the african store, the street of paper stores.

I've done this one before, but not often: I ate a rich dessert first and then decided to order a salad and soup with bread. Heh, that was in Chartres just before we thought to go away from the known train to see the mosaic house. Maybe the meal reversal set a tone for risk taking? Or maybe finally seeing the sun went to our heads.

THE LOOT - STUFF I BOUGHT:

Not bathroom cleaner. I bought a gorgeous soft glowing blue chenille muffler. It cost ten dollars. For under ten dollars each I bought some cuban CDs for Alex and a TinTin children's book. I bought tee shirts for the boys. For under two dollars each I bought a snow globe of the eiffel tower (which we didn't go see, but

I could see it from the top floors of the Louvre poking through the foggy rain). I bought a plastic camera that shows the sights of Paris when you click the shutter. I bought a collection of animal stamps from various countries. And one of art paintings. Cynthia wasn't kidding, she likes to shop. She bought a leather jacket (used and fitting perfectly) and beautiful lace sheer fabric to make living room curtains. She bought stamps and postcards and special paper too.

THE ACTION:

Well, there was this pretty attractive guy, kind of round and mid fortyish, traveling alone and sitting at the table next to us that engaged us in conversation one dinner. He was from Washington DC. Oops! Not that kind of action? Oh right, as if! Actually that was the night we had the amazing pot de creme. There were three different ones, coffee, chocolate, and vanilla. They each had different textures and the coffee one, which was a little loose, was absolutely incredibly fabulous! Yumm! The chocolate one was dense and nice. The vanilla one was a perfect texture and very comforting.

Well you probably want to hear about what we did and what we saw, right? Isn't that kind of boring? To hear some list of sights? I could just make it up to impress you. But I wouldn't! Here's what we saw (museums renamed by subject): the Simple Art Museum, the Blurry Art Museum, the Gigantic Museum of Everything Including Napoleon's Toilet, the Underneath the Kitchen Sink Museum, and the fabulous Cathedrals: Notre Dame and Chartres. Oh, and that guy's house covered in cement mosaic of broken everyday plates, yes! That was a special Chartres bonus.

We walked, we looked at the Big Garden, very neat and tidy, called Tuilleries. We ate a nice meal usually twice a day. Cynthia seemed especially partial to fish soup. One night it was late and (blame her, I'm not so tacky, but I liked it too) Cynthia suggested we get french fries at the fast food burger place. At least it was a French chain, not American.

We shopped as we walked and ate as we sat. We did a lot of metro. We looked around, and up, and sometimes down, into the river Seine, way below, big, and really flowing, like the Mississippi in Minneapolis only with banks beautifully constructed into impenetrable stone walls with big sidewalks on top, bigger statues on the corners and lots of curly, fancy detail like some really rich guy's house.

HOW IT FELT:

It felt wonderful to wander and absorb a little piece of Paris with Cynthia and I'm so glad our travel styles merged so well.

It felt a little bit intimidating, so I tried to avoid speaking french because I'm not good at it, even though nobody laughed at my attempts and everyone was VERY nice to us. Being women of sound mind, we asked directions whenever in doubt.

And I had enough french to be able to tell Cynthia about half of every menu at least. My mantra was “no pig trotters”, meaning no totally unknown menu choice which could be tripe, or feet, or something I don’t need to “try just once”. I love being a grown up!

It felt inspiring to notice things in the museums or around us that hit a nerve. Not inspiring like I want to make that, but inspiring like humans can do some really incredible stuff and life is good.

It felt pretty uncomfortable when it was raining and we had to walk outside. My hair was dripping down my face and neck. That’s why the round Washington man looked at us in the first place. When the maitre ‘d seated us and took our coats I think I brushed my hands through my short hair and water flew like a dog shaking, probably hit him in the face even. But what got him to talk to us across the great divide of not knowing someone in Paris, was when our pumpkin soup was steaming towards our table in the polite waiter’s hands and I exclaimed “oh goody!”. He just cracked up. I guess it broke the ice.

It felt sad when I was missing my boys. I called home every day but didn’t always reach anyone. I knew I was having a wonderful trip and fabulous opportunity, but I missed Arthur’s soft little arms around my neck pulling my back down until it hurts as he tries to hug me and hang on me at the same time and Peter’s big boy hug, standing with his hair nestling under my chin and his strong arms all around my middle. I was glad I planned the trip for only four days!

EXTRA ATTRACTIONS:

There was this incredible African store. It had music CDs, and rugs woven from used plastic, and fabulous dyed fabric bedding, and beaded chairs and truck tire furniture, and the best part was one whole room of sculptures made out of “trash” materials and animated with lights and electricity. Each sculpture was an everyday scene like riding the bus, or taking a bath. It was great! I felt like I was seeing famous art before it was famous, there in the African store. A big treat.

I remember some excellent and wonderfully Parisian food (at least I’ve never had it elsewhere), but it’s kind of a blur now. Cynthia got some garlic mashed potatoes unexpectedly with boring cod that were outrageously good. My great green beans and those incredible pot de creme of course. There was this cake in Chartres. The soups were all excellent and of course the bread! Even the morning yogurt at the fast food kind of cafe was wonderful and different then anywhere else. How do they do that?

The cathedrals of Chartres and of Notre Dame were very exciting. The experience of sitting in them could not be replaced by a video or postcard. Walking in the Tuilleries as it started to rain, I hope I remember that feeling years from now. It’s all so “european” with it’s formality and attention to style and controlling the nature. Even in the more recently built suburbs of Chartres it felt

strangely altered and ordered by civilization. But we were mostly in the most civilized parts of Paris where all the grand things are.

I must praise Cynthia's company, definitely an extra attraction. What a great person and I'm so honored to share her time! Thank you Cynthia for listening, keeping company, and sharing experiences with me! It was a hard time for my emotions and Cynthia didn't mind living with my moods. What a good egg! We had many laughs, we stayed up late reading and slept in, we ate when we wanted and didn't worry if they had kid menus, and Cynthia never whined or needed to be disciplined or told to brush her teeth and she was very patient on the metro. What a treat!

GETTING THERE AND BACK:

I have new respect for the bullet train because it was fast and comfortable in both directions and that felt civilized also. So unlike the packed sardine effect of airline travel.

SUMMARY:

I'm a lucky dog!! Many thanks to Grandear for leaving me a nest egg which I think is well spent on such experiences as a trip to Paris. The whole thing including shopping cost about \$670 (US dollars). A bargain for great memories. The end.

[Cynthia's response]

It was fun to read your Paris report. And yes, we were on the same trip! You stinker! you ratted on me about the French fries! I even thought about writing a little report myself but my server cuts me off a lot so I have to write quickly and send, so it doesn't allow me the opportunity for any thoughtful creative writing.