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Traveling Abroad in Southern France

by Tristan Murray

I sat back in my airplane chair and waited for the familiar feeling of one’s body being pushed back into their chair with the sudden increase of speed. The fans that hover above every passenger began their chorus of changing tunes as power from the main on board batteries were diverted to the jet engines. The lights flickered on and dimmed, and every passenger prepared for the plane’s immediate departure. This particular jet was the largest jet I had ever boarded; a double-decker airbus with a few hundred passengers. My eyes were dry and swollen. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the cold I was beginning to catch, or because of the tearful farewells to my friends, family, and girlfriend moments before. The drive to the airport was a long, stop and go journey that every citizen of Southern California is familiar with. The day was bright, sunny, and warming up quickly. Again, another familiar June day in Los Angeles.

I had begun my long journey in Riverside, California, a growing metropolis and Inland junction cradled south of the Historic Route 66 in San Bernadino, North of San Diego, and east of Los Angeles. My destination was Aix-en Provence (pronounced Ex-on Provance),1 France, a small city north of Marseilles in the south of France. As the plane took off and began its long ascent into the sky, I could feel my head cold being pushed from my throat and into my ears. This was going to be a long flight, with a stop in Chicago, Frankfurt, Germany, and finally Marseilles, before busing it from Marseilles to Aix. I had 14 hours to think about the friends and family I had left behind, and I had 14 hours

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1 Make sure to use that Nasal French sound when pronouncing this. It just doesn't seem right unless it's pronounced as if you have a major head cold.
to ponder the next ten months of living abroad in France. What adventures would I find myself in? Who would I meet? While the first embers of my future life began to trickle into my mind, I could feel, and hear, the congestion from my horrid cold simultaneously trickle into my inner ear. Little did I realize that my first few weeks in Aix were going to be in relative silence. I could hear very little, as the elevation incline in combination with a cold, would bring me into France with a double ear infection. Yes, this was going to be a long flight, and a long start to my new life as an American in France.

I arrived in Marseilles around 4 pm (GMT+1) along with about fifty other American students enrolled in the same study abroad program. I was exhausted. The other students were, on average, about eight years younger than my twenty-eight years. The difference was stark. These young explorers had a lot more energy after a long and arduous journey than I did. But, then again, I was also half deaf, hungry, and sick. But this did not detract from my first impressions of France.

Southern France is green. Not forest green like Oregon. Not jungle green like Panama. But a yellow red green, reminiscent of folk legends. Fields of knee high flowers of white and yellow blew in wavelike patterns in the wind. Staring down at us and sprinkled across small red hills were old ruins, farms, and forts from ages long ago. These building dated back some four, five, or even six hundred years ago. Some were even older than that. But this had not done anything to satiate my curiosity about Europe. Europe was still an unknown entity to me. While I had done much in regards to research about Europe, I had yet to experience its beauty for myself. Before being able to digest anything else, we were shuffled out of the airport and onto a bus. We were surrounded by France. A new country, a new place, and a whole new culture to explore for myself. I selfishly thought about how this experience was going to be mine, and mine alone. None of my friends or family back home would have this to share with me. I was going to have France all to myself.

The bus ride to Aix was another experience worth
describing. How these bus drivers managed to get these large buses around on those tiny two lane roads is something best experienced firsthand. One cannot explain the amount of finesse these drivers must have. Sharp turns overhanging steep drops were handled at a frightening speed. Motorcycles passed the bus as it wove through hills and turns. We drove through hills of red, green, and yellow. Grass waved knee high length in all directions and we passed many more ruins and farms. It was a sight and experience to behold.

We arrived in Central Aix about an hour after first arrival. Central Aix is old. It was originally established by the Roman Empire some 100 B.C.E. as a central hub for Roman troops in the region. It grew from a troop center to a small town and later, a hub for transport, food, and trade. It is approximately 40 kilometers north of Marseilles, France’s major southern port into the Mediterranean. One of the most prominent and well-known features of Aix is its central enormous fountain. Beyond description, I provided a picture of it here.
During Christmas time, the inhabitants of Aix would empty this enormous fountain and place lights all around it. They would also dangle lights up and down their equivalent to “main street,” Cours Mirabeau. All along Cours Mirabeau were fancy and expensive cafes, restaurants, small bars, and various outdoor vendors of the normal tourist things. While walking from our large bus to the hotel where we would reside for the next two weeks, I could hear a stereotypical sound of the accordion wheezing sweetly down the tiny corridors and alleys of this new unfamiliar city.

As the first day blended into the second day, the other students and I began to prepare for our new life in Aix. There would be hardly any time for a break, and my double ear infection was getting worse. Luckily, France has one of the highest rated health care systems in the world. My first French experience would be visiting the doctor. This doctor knew a little English, and I barely knew a few phrases in French. Through our mutual attempt at sign language and Franglish, we were able to figure out my problem and I was soon placed on antibiotics to remedy the infection. With the sudden anxiety over my health situation deteriorating, I found I was able to enjoy the sights, smells, and the muffled sounds of Aix much better. On our fourth day in France, we were given a quick tour of Aix and its history.

Aix was a small military outpost. Its history replicates the turmoil of Europe. The whole of Aix is small in comparison to modern American cities, being built prior to the Industrial Revolution, when things were generally smaller. The cobblestone roads are tiny, apartments are small, and the many cafes and restaurants house half of their clients outside under umbrellas as protection from the warm Southern French sun. The colors of Aix were much like the colors of its surrounding countryside. Most buildings are earth tones: browns, tans, reds, yellows, and greys. The buildings were tall and narrow. My first few weeks were slightly claustrophobic as I had to adjust to not being able to see the horizon in any direction while in Centre-ville. This feeling quickly subsided as I adjusted to the cozy French lifestyle.
particular to citizens of La Provence.

Another interesting feature of Aix, and to most European cities, is that as you travel from the center of town, the town literally gets younger. The oldest parts of the city, those built somewhere around the fall of the Roman Empire are closest to the center. One can walk from the beautiful fountain in the center of town and watch the architecture change and get younger the farther you walk. The buildings in the center of town are smaller, clumsier, and most have a lean much like an elderly man who has walked too far and seen too much. The tiny windows gaze out like a statue with a withered, tired looked. A few streets out, the windows begin to get larger, the buildings less burdened by the weight of age.

The decorations become more elaborate once you reach the buildings constructed in the seventeenth century, where windows become excessively large, to the extent that many windows are simply walls shaped liked windows. Windows were a symbol of status, and those who could not afford large windows simply made alcoves the shape and size of windows and placed shutters over them. Large statues often decorate the exterior of the seventeenth century apartments, and the doors are extremely elaborate, heavy, and large.
On just about every other street corner is a statue of one of the many Catholic Saints. Through a historical tour on our fourth day, we were informed that these small statues were placed on the streets during the Black Death of the thirteenth century. The churches were so overrun with the sick and dying that priests began placing these statues across the town so that believers had a place to pray outside of the church. Again, Aix replicates the turbulent past of Europe very well.

While Aix was certainly a historical experience, it was another trip that left a larger imprint on my mind. I had the opportunity to visit a place I had longed to visit since I was a high school student. The beginning of November hosts the Christian holiday of “All Saints Day,” and with it, most of the populace of France gets a weeklong holiday to spend how they please. I utilized that time to take a trip with another California student to Normandy, which is located in the North-Western coast of France. While there, I explored many different places that involved the American invasion of France during World War II. The Americans would participate in the largest ocean-to-land invasion on the coast of Normandy on June 6th, 1944. With it, thousands of Americans would perish alongside French, Canadian, Australian, and other
troops representing many nations around the world. My experience in Normandy was very powerful, and much of the imagery has been imprinted on my mind forever. I also made many small museum visits through the area, but the most mesmerizing and harrowing spectacle of Normandy was the American cemetery at Omaha Beach.

With its thousands of wounded and killed, seeing the American Cemetery puts the casualty figures into sharp perspective. My later visit to Auschwitz near Krakow would further imprint the total pain, sorrow, and loss experienced through the largest war to date.

The Normandy beach itself is walking distance from the cemetery. Bunkers, barriers, and many other relics of the fighting on D-Day are still present. The history of this beautiful beach mixed with the casual French citizenry lazing about and enjoying the sun was surreal. Knowing so many died in one spot is hard to wrap my brain around while watching windsurfers along the horizon. Also worth noting is how large the beachhead was. The total width of Omaha was close to four and half miles. This was a considerable amount of space in one single beachhead. Books and films such as Saving Private Ryan do little to illustrate the length
that the invasion had to utilize.

We were considerably lucky that day. Normandy has a reputation for its large amount of rain. A sunny day at the beach in late October is a rare occurrence. We weren’t so fortunate the following day.

The next stop would be Pegasus Bridge, the first bridge taken during the D-Day invasion. The beach landings were preceded by
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airdrops the night prior. Pegasus Bridge was a strategically important bridge that linked Sword beach to the city of Caen. It was doubly important because there was a German armory located in the city. Capturing the bridge meant protecting the flank of Sword beach from German counterattacks. The mission was led by a British airborne glider infantry. Unlike the majority of the airborne landings, this mission went spectacularly well.

The gliders landed near their intended drop zone and they managed to surprise the small company of German troops holding the bridge. This was also the spot of the first death from enemy fire on the allied side during the D-Day invasion. Fred Greenhalgh would die attempting to capture the bridge from a German Infantry round. With little casualties, the British Airborne managed to capture the bridge in 10 minutes. The mission was a rousing success, and the rest, as they say, is history.

My experiences in north France were very special to me. I got to connect to my own history in a small way. Being of European descent really created a past reality I could now physically connect with. The real life struggles of those from the past really magnified and placed into perspective my own struggles. My grandfather was a sonar man on a destroyer during the war, and his struggles and survival were just as real as those fighting in the foxholes of Normandy.
I would explore many other places, learning much about myself and others as I experienced Europe’s past. I would come home with a fifth grade level understanding of the French language, a deeper appreciation for others from other cultures, a deep love of France and French culture, and a new French family. My French host mother was just as tender and loving as my real mother. It was clear that just my first impressions of this new place were mesmerizing and grand. I couldn’t wait to sink my teeth deeper into the European experience. My ten months in France continue to mark one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. To learn about another culture, history, and lifestyle breeds a deep level of respect and love for another culture that I cannot begin to describe. If there is one thing I recommend for every human being, it is to live in another place for a long time. Because of this experience, I live every day of my life hoping to once again travel and live abroad. Someday, I will once again experience the smell of fresh bread and baguettes in the morning as I walk through the crisp cold air of Southern France. One day, I will be back to embrace the friends I hold so dearly from across the Atlantic.