Excursion en Normandie

The week-long orientation of the Skidmore in Paris program was by far the best introduction to France that I could have asked for. We visited the northwest provinces of Normandy and Brittany. I found this to be an excellent choice because, since we were going to be living in Paris for the semester anyways, we would automatically have time during the semester get acquainted with the City of Light. So, exploring this beautiful region of France whilst getting to know the other students in the Skidmore in Paris program was a truly amazing experience.

Our tour guide (aka Vincent Awesomeguide – no joke) has not only memorized the entire history of France but is also fluent in approximately seven languages and has the ability to recall the most minute details about monuments, kings, and cities. In only three days we managed to visit Giverny (and Claude Monet’s house), Honfleur, Le Mont St Michel, St Malo, Omaha beach, and Rouen. And those are just some of the main stopping points. Because we were travelling in our own bus, we could view the beautiful French countryside from the comfort of our own seats!

Although it may seem that this sort of trip would be overwhelming, it was not. The orientation not only introduced us to the best French food (raw milk Camembert and the famous crepes and cider of Brittany!!), but also helped get us through jetlag, and helped us grow as a group.

It was an amazing, amazing excursion; one that I will never forget!

Melina McCormack
Franglish: the new language event in Paris.

Franglish is a social event which enables you to improve your French or English and explore other cultures. The aim is to practice a foreign language while making friends. This new concept of one-on-one conversation is very simple. Each session lasts about 15 minutes which includes first a 7-minute talk in French followed by another 7-minute talk in English. Then you switch tables and meet a new partner.

Many of the Skidmore students attended Franglish and were very pleased. One of them, Leah agreed to tell us a little bit more about this new kind of social event.

- How often do you go to Franglish?

Leah: “I’ve been to Franglish twice, but hope to attend events regularly next semester.”

- What do you like the most about it?

Leah: “Franglish is specially designed for non-native speakers of English/French; all attendees are in the same boat: eager to improve their foreign language skills and to meet new people. Hence, you never feel like you’re burdening anyone. It’s an educational experience minus the stress associated with sitting in a classroom worrying about grades. In addition, it’s a great opportunity to make new friends, discover the hidden gems of Paris from the natives, and to ask questions about French culture.”

- Do you find it challenging? How is that helping you improve your French skills?

Leah: “As amazing as the program is, it can be a bit difficult and challenging at times. Firstly, you’re forced to think in French and to respond spontaneously. During the first few minutes of each event, I feel like my French is extremely mechanical, and even find it a bit frustrating to rewire my thought-process into French. However, it’s important to understand that training yourself to think in a foreign language is the key to speaking it comfortably. After a while, you fall into the rhythm of the conversation, and you don’t want to switch back into English!

Another somewhat frustrating aspect of this activity is the fact that people tend to ask the same questions. But instead of worrying about redundancy, you can use it as an opportunity to get creative with your language abilities.

- What do you think of the place and the people you have met?

Leah: “Franglish holds events at different cafés in the 4th and 11th arrondissement. From what I’ve heard, all the cafés are in nice areas. Both events I attended were held at L’Autre Café, which has a nice casual and relaxing ambience. So far, everyone seems really nice. There seems to be a lot of IT people who attend Franglish, which puzzles me. Each time I’ve gone, there have been more men than women. It’s a bit intimidating, because I’m not sure if their intentions extend beyond learning English (although it is clear that the events are meant for English/French immersion, not dating.) In any case, it’s an excuse to go with a friend. The second session, I met a nice young lady, who works as a graphic designer. She does illustration on the side. We had a lovely conversation about art (my major) and have been in contact since fall break.”
Thinking back, it is hard to believe how nervous I was to meet my host family at the beginning of the semester. They are completely opposite of what I imagined, but in a good way. They love to talk politics; they correct my accent and my grammatical errors, but only sometimes, they always make sure I have enough to eat, they do my laundry, and, best of all, four times a week at dinner, they force me to speak French. When there is a lull in conversation, my host mom asks me to tell her something about my day, which improves my French little by little, and sparks a conversation, often about differences between our cultures.

At the beginning of the semester, my host mom told me that the reason she hosts exchange students is because she likes to learn about different cultures without even leaving her house, and because she likes to have young people around. I appreciate these reasons, and try to give back to my host family as much as I am getting out of this wonderful experience.

“I remember meeting my host family the day we returned from our excursion. Upon meeting them, all my anxiety and nervousness went away. Now I know that M. & Mme St Yves are the kind of people they are: calm and nurturing. They’re also sweet and very funny, which helps on the rough days. I’ve had a very positive experience with my host family. They really embraced me and made the transition from home into a new culture and territory very easy. At dinnertime, we have conversations about our days and the contrasts between French and American culture, which I always appreciate. A quality that I love about them most is their patience. Whenever we have conversations, they always correct my incorrect grammar. I can’t count how many times they’ve corrected my pronunciation of the word ‘culture’ and I still can’t get it right. Overall, it’s been a very positive experience and I feel very blessed to have had a family like that to ease my worries of the semester.

“I’ve had a very positive experience with my host family”
Taking courses outside of the Skidmore Center

The first day of class at the Catholic Institute was extremely daunting — Nicole, another Skidmore student — and I came more than a half hour early to class and sat nervously in the courtyard of the university. Once class began, we quietly took our seats and looked around. The walls in the room were painted a bright yellow and the desks were linoleum and grey. All the students were loudly chatting with one another as the professor took her seat. She started lecturing straight away, and like clockwork, the students began taking notes. I couldn’t believe it—the students were furiously copying down every single word that came out of the professor’s mouth. Being from completely different education cultures, Nicole and I struggled to keep up with the rest of the class. We are definitely used to writing down some things, but certainly not everything. The fundamental difference between the American classroom and the French one is that in America, student input is highly encouraged. The professor has never asked us a question—she only lectures and the students take her word as law. That said, Nicole and I gave an oral exposé in class and received excellent feedback on our work (and a good grade!)

Since my business class takes place at the American Business School, the classroom rules were similar to what I’m used to. Never have I ever been in a class more multicultural than my International Marketing class. Thanks to this class, I now know people from Zambia, Senegal, and Mexico! The final project in this class is a group marketing presentation to be given in front of the entire class about a new product or service. The groups were freely formed by the students, but with one rule: each member of the team had to be from a different country. Everything was going smoothly in the class until our first quiz. Test taking culture is very different from country to country. In America, it’s never ok to cheat on an exam, but during my exam at the business school, I noticed that some of the other students were asking each other for help during the exam. The person sitting next to me even leaned over to ask me for help on a question. This was a real shock to me, but when I talked to one of my group members after class, he told me that in a lot of European countries there is a sense of solidarity among students and that even during exams they’ll help each other out. During the midterm exam, though, we had a proctor that walked around the classroom making sure that no one was cheating. Although the proctor was comforting for me, I noticed that many of the other students weren’t too happy with it....

My third course outside of the Skidmore center is my black and white photography class. The Studio Vermès is located right off of Boulevard Henry IV right near the Bastille. After opening the front door of the studio, you are greeted by a brick-lined outdoor passageway containing half-broken mirrors covered in ivy and a discarded bicycle. This green little piece of paradise is magical, hidden away from your typical Parisian hustle and bustle. The studio even has a resident cat named “Pas Touche,” which means “Don’t touch!” in French. Inside the studio, there is a main living room area where a portion of the class is held. There, we discuss the photos we’ve taken and learn techniques for the portion of the class held outside. The outside half of the course is where some of the picture taking happens. While the students take pictures of the environment, our professor secretly (or sometimes blatantly) takes pictures of us, which he then sends to us by weekly emails. After taking the pictures, we have darkroom hours with a teacher’s assistant. We develop our own film and do our own prints! At the end of the semester, we will have an exhibition to show the rest of the students our art. The darkroom is definitely one of my favorite places in Paris. It is nice and cozy and has a great ambiance.

My three classes outside of the center are amazing! They have really given me new perspectives on my life in Paris and I’ve been learning so much.

William Zhang
Paris, Je T’aime. But Not for All the Same Reasons.

A boat floats by, briefly filling the Seine with warm orange light. We’re sitting on the bank, wine bottles in hand, cheeks warm and red from the alcohol, stomachs full from a picnic of sausage, baguette and cheese. Paris glitters in the night around us, the Eiffel Tower sparkling in the distance. This is why I came to Paris.

We walk through the metro, hurrying along with the masses, the 4 line towards Porte d’Orléans. We turn into a corridor where a woman kneels in a praying position, head down, hand out, still like a statue. And the bustling crowd treats her as such. On the platform a man sleeps in a sleeping bag, bottle of vodka next to his head. On the train a woman sings a haunting melody as people avoid eye contact and hold their bags closer. This is why I came to Paris.

The problem with Paris is that people expect too much from it. It’s not fair, really, to demand so much from a place. Sagging under the weight of its numerous clichés, it is held to a gold standard, sugarcoated and unrealistic. People come here expecting what they’ve seen in movies, postcards, novels, and guidebooks. And maybe they do get that if they’re here for a week or so. Wearing the chicest clothes they can find in their closets, Louvre pamphlets in their Louis Vuitton bags, itineraries that only cover the 6th, 7th, and 8th districts of the city. But it’s only after longer exposure that the city starts to reveal its darker side. This unsettles a lot of people.

Choosing to come to Paris is largely based on the idea of the city fulfilling the fairy-tale the world imagines it to be. And when this falters, disenchantment follows. But I’ve come to realize that I’ve fallen in love with this city precisely because of this disenchantment. I realize that the reason why I love to travel is that I love being immersed so deeply into a place that I can dig through its postcard surface and settle into its grittier layer of reality. Paris is not what I thought it would be, and I’m all the more pleased because of it. I’m relieved that it doesn’t live up to its laundry list of platitudes. It has proven to me that it’s not one big cliché, but a city of depth. “French” means more to me now than it ever did before. “French” is the Champs Élysée with all its luxury, and “French” is Belleville with its plethora of Chinese medicine shops, groceries, and discount stores. “French” is the woman dressed in Chanel walking her poodle in the 16th, and “French” is the Moroccan boy selling fruit for a euro on the street in the 20th. For a city that the world expects to be one-dimensional, it is a city of a thousand dimensions.

“[How is] anyone ever going to come up with a book, or a painting, or a symphony, or a sculpture that can compete with a great city,” Owen Wilson says in Woody Allen’s Midnight in Paris (probably the pinnacle of the Parisian cliché, but, I digress). “You can’t. Because you look around and every street, every boulevard, is its own special art form.” Cities truly are works of art, but you can’t know that until you’ve looked past the shining eyes of their proponents, and also into the sneers of their critics. What makes Paris a work of art is all of its dualities. Its pretty and its ugly, its sunny summers and grey, grey winters, its musicality and its cacophony, its clean and its dirty, its European sensibility and its multi-cultural variety. I don’t see Paris through rose-colored glasses anymore, and I love it all the more because of that.

Miya Tsudome
I came to Paris never having taken a French class in my life. Since arriving here two and a half months ago, I’ve learned to order food, ask store employees questions, and carry on basic conversations. Overall, I’m extremely pleased with my progress; however, when I heard we were going to the Opera and it was going to be in Italian with French translations projected above the stage, I was, needless to say, a little nervous. I had a feeling this would be a cultural excursion I was not ready for.

But, as with all cultural challenges abroad, I just had to take a deep breath and stop taking things so seriously. You’re going to the Opera in Paris! This is going to be fun! I reminded myself, Now go put on the best dress you brought in that limited wardrobe of yours. So I did; we all got dolled up and headed to Opéra Bastille where we found our seats and waited for the orchestra to begin. The building was beautiful and I felt so classy mingling with the chic Parisians and tourists alike on our way into the show. We saw Les Noces de Figaro, a comedy with music by Mozart. I had never been to an Opera before and was blown away by the performers’ voices and loved the over-the-top theatricality of the performance.

While, yes, I did have a hard time following what was going on at times, the Opera was performed in three parts and my friends and I discussed and clarified plot points for each other during the intermissions. And, when you think about it, the plot is only one part of the Opera; even when I was confused about what was going on, the music was incredible, the costumes were beautiful, and the sets were stunning. At the end of the night, we had worked out most of what had gone on in the story and I left feeling that by going to the Opera, I had experienced an important part of French culture and had enjoyed a lovely evening with the whole Skidmore in Paris crew.

Elizabeth McCrorey