

# A lesson in Paris

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Some people are born knowing who they are. Others have to grow into it. I fall into the second category.

It took more than 30 years, a baby, and one giant, jet-assisted leap across the Atlantic for me to figure it out.

In less than two weeks, my life expanded to include a boy with black eyes and relatives from three different countries who speak four different languages — much faster than I could ever translate.

It began with a card from someone I barely knew. It arrived in the mail shortly after the anniversary of Sept. 11. Inside, I found the photo of a baby with a shock of jet black hair. His name is Thomas and his father is my cousin several times removed.

The announcement demanded that I do more than send a check and a few kind words.

It required an answer.

Would I, the announcement asked, be the godmother to a child that I wouldn't know unless I traveled eight hours by airplane to attend his christening? If so, Laurent and his wife, Christina, would put off the christening until I could make the flight from the States to Paris, where they live.

It would seem a tough decision for a control freak who doesn't like to fly. After I realized alcohol was available on the plane, the trip didn't seem like such a bad idea. Plus, I'd get to see Paris. Who could pass up all that?

By the time all the arrangements were made, more than a year had passed, war had been declared and Air France had discounted its fares to encourage Americans to travel there.

Still, a few of my friends wondered why I wanted to go to a country that wasn't even backing our effort. I explained it simply.

"I have family there," I said.

## Paris, France

I arrived at Charles de Gaulle Airport on Sept. 20, a sunny Saturday morning a day before the christening. A \$40, 20-minute cab ride brought me to Montmartre and a rented apartment in the city's historic art district. Using the Internet to make arrangements with the people at [perfectlyparis.com](http://perfectlyparis.com) allowed me to get the apartment for less than \$700 for more than a week, a good price despite the exchange rate of about \$1.20 in U.S. currency for every Euro.



Joan of Arc, France's patron saint, guards the Basilique du Sacre-Coeur in Paris. *Photos by MARISA PORTO/news-press.com*

Manager Gail Bosclair explained how to use the phone, the TV and the heated towel rack, which seemed to be easy enough, even for someone as technologically challenged as I am. A transplanted Canadian, Gail also provided her cell phone number for emergencies. As it turns out many Parisians — including the woman at the boulangerie near my temporary home — understood my poor combination of French and English. This was handy as it allowed me to buy whatever pastries I wanted without a problem.



This trip to Paris came on the heels of the hottest summer on record in a city where air conditioning is not common.

A pyramid marks the entrance to the Musee du Louvre, which houses the Mona Lisa.

Fortunately, a fairly constant breeze allowed almost perfect conditions for walking. That was great because seeing Paris requires lots of walking, which is a good thing considering the fondness I developed for the custard-filled French pastries that cost less than \$3 at bakeries around the city.

Sacre Coeur was my first stop after I settled in and made dinner arrangements with Christina and Laurent. This giant white cathedral attracts visitors from around the world because it sits at the peak of Montmartre, which is the highest geographic point in the city.

Hiking up hundreds of steps and along twisty streets to the famous church, I passed the last vineyard in Montmartre, its vines heavy with grapes ready for the year's harvest. The small plot of land seemed out of place, squished between buildings that sit one atop one other with little space to breathe.

The church rises above it all, a statue of Saint Joan of Arc, the patron saint of France, dressed in armor and sitting atop her steed guards its front door. I spent a roll of film trying to capture this view of the city, but I never did it justice.

Afterward, I returned to the apartment to gather the presents that I had lugged from Fort Myers to Paris for my newfound family. At the metro near the apartment, \$3 purchased a ticket to the Boulevard de L'Hopital des Invalides, which is as it sounds — home to a major teaching hospital in the city. My cousins live across the street. They'd told me to arrive at 8 p.m because Parisians like to eat late.

### Meeting the family

Christina stood waiting on the broad sidewalk outside the apartment, holding a well-dressed little man in her arms. She is tiny with black hair and big eyes, just like her son. After a round of hugs, she led me through the lobby of her building and up a slick wooden stairway that ended — after a spiral of five floors — at her front door.

Within minutes, Laurent had returned with a loaf of French bread from the neighborhood bakery. We uncorked the first bottle of wine and began a conversation that lasted for hours. During the meal and then long after, we moved from one language to another when we couldn't think of the right word in the right language at the right time. From the chorizo to the espresso, the meal mixed cultures with a carelessness that was, at once, comfortable and comforting.

Through it all, until he finally fell asleep, Thomas toddled around the table clutching a tiny, red firetruck, making tiny, red firetruck noises.

The night ended with more hugs and a promise to return the next morning by 11 a.m. Like many Parisians, Christina and Laurent don't own a car but had rented a van for the christening. It was parked in typical Parisian fashion, with less than half an inch to spare between the cars on either side.

After several trips up and down the stairs for forgotten items, we drove



Custard-filled Napoleon pastries can be found at any boulangerie.

to Sainte Rosalie's Catholic Church, an old stone building several blocks away. A crowd of relatives who had arrived earlier in the week from Spain, Italy and other parts of France were already gathered there, waiting for us.

Meeting them face to face — these men and women whose names I'd heard but never expected to meet — was almost overwhelming. They greeted me as if I had come home from a long trip.

Minutes later, the priest called us inside the darkened sanctuary to begin the ceremony, which lasted less than an hour — a minor miracle considering it was a Catholic service in a country that reveres the traditional pomp surrounding an event such as a christening.

The priest was kind enough to overlook my poor language skills during the ceremony and later helped me sign the church book that officially records me as the godmother.

After firing off another roll of film, we climbed back into the van and drove to the other end of the city for the party. The invitation for the christening read, "Un dejeuner est prevu apres le ceremonie," which translated means that a meal would follow. Arriving at Le Chalet de le Porte Jaune (the Big House with the Yellow Door), I realized that the meal was going to be a little more than I expected. After checking our invitations, the wait staff served champagne and appetizers by the lake, where couples in boats rowed by, turning the afternoon into a live Impressionist painting.

Several glasses of champagne later, we were escorted into the restaurant where we spent the rest of the day wading through seven courses that began with shrimp in a white wine sauce and ended with a cake made of cream puffs and topped with sparklers. When we returned to the lake, Christina and Laurent thanked everyone for coming, especially their American cousin who'd journeyed from so far away.

At the end of the party, Louis, a white-haired, old gentleman who wore a black beret, gave me a tight hug and asked me to take his love across the world and give it to my mother, the cousin he only remembered as a little girl.

Then, he kissed me twice on either cheek for luck.

"You will return," he said.

### **Renewed Connection**

My mother grew up in this part of the world, but her memories are tainted by war. She didn't understand why bombs fell from the sky and why hard-eyed men with rifles shot at one another. What she did understand is that, as she moved from country to country, people were dying. Some were shot in the head to make a statement about what happens when you fight against power and corruption. Others were just taken from their beds in the middle of the night and never returned.

It was a time when there was never, ever enough to eat; a time when boiling water and an onion was a thin soup that you were grateful to have.

Once she left Europe, my mother never returned. At first she couldn't afford the trip. She can now, but I often think she doesn't go back because she's not sure some government bureaucrat will let her leave again.

Even now, when her hair is almost white, an official postcard arrives in the mail. If she'd just return and vote, it says, the government would pay her way and her citizenship privileges would be restored. Just as she has every year, she laughs and sends the card to me and tells me to go and visit.

This year, I did just that.



Montmartre offers a variety of restaurants — and great wine.

All told, the trip cost several thousand dollars. But the rewards went beyond a visit to almost every tourist attraction in the city. I established my connection to a place that haunts my mother's memory, as well as my own.

And I, at long last, connected with relatives whose names I'd only heard in stories around the kitchen table.

On my last night in Paris, the cousins who live in the city gathered at Laurent and Christina's flat to eat, talk and say good-bye.

"When will you return?" they asked.

"Will you bring your sister?" they wondered.

"Will your mother ever come?"

I explained that I did not know when I would return, that I would try to bring my sister, but that my mother wasn't likely to come.

And all the while, I watched as my godson toddled around the room with the little red firetruck clutched in his hand. He stopped just long enough to listen to his mother, who spoke softly to him, moving quietly from one language to another without hesitation.

He's lucky, I thought. He will grow up knowing who he is. Some of us have to figure it out along the way. When he's old enough to understand, I plan to tell him how he helped me.

### **Things to do in Paris before you leave**

I'm a Type A personality — even on vacation. Translated: I tried to visit everything in Paris at least once.

If you're going to go, don't miss these highlights:

- Notre Dame is a Gothic Catholic Church named for the Virgin Mary. Located on an island in the Seine, it has been the focus of books, movies and a Disney cartoon about a hunchback who lived in its towers. The day I visited, artists lined the sidewalks around its massive flying buttresses, trying to capture its beauty with their brushes. Though I tried to capture those images with film, I eventually gave up, realizing that I was lucky just to have the memory.
- Stop into Shakespeare and Company, a bookstore where famous writers from around the world stop in to pay homage to this very venerable little shop. The original owner published Ernest Hemingway's first book of short stories when no one else would. If you're a book lover, this is a must-see.
- Don't forget to wander the Latin Quarter, which is only a few blocks away. Hawkers stand in the doorways of their restaurants and try to persuade tourists to come inside and eat for a fixed price.

At one restaurant that had a courtyard garden, the \$40 menu included appetizers of moule, or mussels, as well as escargot. The bill also included the sangria, though customers had to tip in cash because the waiter seemed stumped by the process of billing Visa for something other than the cost of the meal.

- The Arc de Triomphe is a highlight for tourists. After a ride on the metro, you climb the stairs and land on the sidewalk near the traffic circle that surrounds this war memorial.

It costs nothing to walk underneath, so you can see just how big it really is. It might seem that the noise would be overwhelming, but somehow, the strength of this structure makes you feel completely alone.

- Museums and Paris are synonymous. The best options: Go to the Louvre, which costs \$7.50 Euros. For about \$10, you can see for yourself what's so impressive about Mona Lisa's smile. It requires a little

time, as there is usually a line of visitors waiting to view it. The statue of the Venus di Milo, also at the Louvre, requires a wait as well. If you don't mind dropping \$50 at lunch, stop in the cafe, which offers a better than average menu. It's a tourist thing, but you can say you ate there.

- A fan of 19th century artists should not miss the Musée d'Orsay, which costs \$7 Euros to visit. From Rodin's sculptures of ballerinas to Toulouse-Lautrec's Moulin Rouge dancers, this museum gives the Louvre a run for its money. Buy a cafe au lait and brioche at the cafeteria and take it out on the roof, where you get the best view of Sacre Coeur from across the city.

- Finally, don't forget to wander around at night before leaving the city.

For no cost except your walking time, head to the steps of the Trocadero, another famous French museum, and view the Eiffel Tower at night. Even if you don't want to walk or ride up into its great arms, you can head down to the Seine, cross under its belly and sit on the grass at the Champs de Mars. Bring a picnic basket with dinner and a Frisbee for fun.

You'll be joined by thousands of other Parisians and tourists, who will wait until 11 p.m. when the structure is illuminated by thousands of strobe lights, turning it into a giant sparkler. If you get this far and you have a cell phone on you, forget the cost. Call someone you love and describe the scene. You won't regret it.

- Walk along the Champs-Elysees at midnight and watch the people and their puppies, which are often allowed to dine right alongside their masters in this European country.

Buy at least one overly expensive souvenir on that famous boulevard so you can say that's where you bought it. Don't forget to stop at the world-renowned L'Alsace restaurant, and make certain to order the creme brulée.