Travel and Adventure: An American teenager in Paris

by Patricia Woeber

PARIS - The Eiffel Tower. Yes, on arrival in Paris, Ariel, my 15-year-old Southern California granddaughter on her first foreign trip, chose the city's most famous icon as our first destination.

TOWERING OVER PARIS - The Eiffel Tower, built in 1889, is one of the most recognizable structures in the world. It was the tallest building in the world until the Empire State Building was completed in 1931. CNS Photo by Patricia Woeber. PYRAMID ENTRANCE - The Louvre Museum once was a palace for royalty such as Louis XIV. The museum's collection of priceless paintings and sculptures is considered the world's greatest. CNS Photo by Patricia Woeber. WORTH A PICTURE - Ariel navigates the miles of corridors and the enormous galleries of the Louvre Museum. CNS Photo by Patricia Woeber. TOP OF THE TOWER - A panoramic view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower. One of the most-recognized landmarks in the world, the spire reaches over 1,000 feet high. CNS Photo by Patricia Woeber. I told Ariel that to erect such a tall construction at the time, 1889, Gustave Eiffel, its French designer, had used the most advanced industrial and technical engineering with cast iron, steel and glass. And that Parisians had disparagingly called it a "metal asparagus."

"This tower was the world's tallest building until the New York Empire State Building in 1931. Eiffel also designed America's greatest, most meaningful sculpture - the Statue of Liberty," I shared.

"Cool!" Ariel led the way into an elevator.

At the top level we gazed over the roofs of Paris. On the way back to our hotel we peeked in the window of an inviting brasserie (a cafe or restaurant serving a limited menu, open all day and late into the night). Our appetites kicked in for entrecote (steak) and frites (french fries) for dinner.

Parisians regard each meal as a worthwhile and social event. In consideration of my budget, I'd fleetingly thought of feeding Ariel on the cheap for lunches - on street food like crepes and ice cream - but this girl has a healthy appetite, and hungry teenagers get grumpy.

I also wanted Ariel to experience a great Parisian hotel for her first two nights in Paris, before moving into family style budget hotels in Paris and B&Bs and private chateaux in the countryside.

I'd chosen the deluxe Hotel Le Bristol Paris, which cosseted us in pure luxury with a spacious, elegant room overlooking the hotel's courtyard garden, actually Paris' largest private garden. For breakfast, we ate croissants - Ariel was astounded at the taste and texture of this typical French flaky pastry - here baked to perfection.

Early in the morning, we set off in casual clothes and sneakers, most comfy for the Louvre's miles of marble floors. The museum's extensive exterior showcased rows of statues and countless pedestals and ornate windows. Inside, we aimed to see as much as possible, including Leonardo da Vinci's famous "Mona Lisa" and the "Nike of Samothrace."

We gawked at the ornate ceilings in several galleries, as this palace once housed royalty, even Louis XIV, the Sun King, who built Versailles. I told her that through the centuries, kings had built several fabulous palaces in the Loire Valley and added to the glorification of France by patronizing the arts.

The Louvre's collections of priceless paintings, sculpture, furniture and much, much more impressed and overwhelmed. This museum requires many visits over a lifetime, preferably starting as a child. We agreed that as the world's greatest museum, it should stay open 24/7, particularly for the jet lagged and insomniacs.

The following day, we walked to the Ile de la Cite, one of two small picturesque islands in the Seine River in the center of Paris. At Notre Dame, the magnificent Gothic cathedral commissioned in 1159, we stood outside photographing the facade's ancient bell towers, portals with sculptures of saints and kings, and menacing gargoyles frowning down.

"Oh Grandma, I know this well."

"How so?"

"From the movie 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame.'"

"Of course."

I'd forgotten that Disney has familiarized American kids with this site.

"And French author Victor Hugo wrote this story and also 'Les Miserables.'"

Next, we toured Sainte-Chapelle, built by Louis IX (Saint Louis) in 1248 to house the sacred Crown of Thorns and fragments of the True Cross. In medieval days, the chapel was called "the gateway to heaven." The 15 ethereal stained-glass windows reach 50 feet high. Ariel whispered that it was "way cool."

She wanted to see the nearby Conciergerie, the infamous prison that held more than 4,000 people during the Revolution, including Marie Antoinette before she was guillotined in 1793. We studied her cell, noting how she'd suffered from a total lack of privacy, with the male guards constantly watching her.

Afterward, we stopped by a corner street stall and ordered crepes. Ariel chose one with butter and strawberry jam; mine was banana and sugar. We strolled down the street nibbling and disagreeing on Marie Antoinette.

Ariel believed she was beheaded for her spendthrift ways. I told Ariel that the queen was naive and innocent, a pawn caught up in events she had no control over.

The Revolution's tragic history had earlier roots, from Louis XIV's extravagant spending on Versailles and unnecessary wars, compounded by Louis XVI's stupidity, all aggravated by two years of failed crops. Also, the Revolution led to many tragic stories, including the heartbreaking, inhumane treatment and death of Marie Antoinette's innocent little son by the revolutionaries, which I'd read in "The Lost King of France" by Deborah Cadbury.

Perhaps influenced by Marie Antoinette, we decided to devote time to France's high fashion. From the Bristol Hotel, we continued on the same street, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore, and popped in and out of boutiques: Hermes, Sonia Rykiel and Balmain. In Christian Lacroix's, we admired his textured, multihued, Provencal-inspired designs.

On Avenue Montaigne, we studied Nina Ricci, Christian Dior and Chanel. A typical American teenager, Ariel delighted in the fashionable outfits and stylish belts and bags. Not everything we did or saw was ancient or high art or fashion. On rue de Rivoli, we bought knickknack souvenirs and T-shirts with "Paris" emblazoned with glitter. We frequently treated ourselves to street food, and once to elegant chocolate pastries in Angelina's Tearoom. We purchased books in Galignani, my favorite Paris bookstore.

On our final day, I was excited about visiting the Musee d'Orsay on the Left Bank. I've always adored the museum's Impressionist collection, and I just knew she'd find these masterpieces "way cool," and that the images would stay with her.

Afterward, we strolled back across the Seine and into Place Vendome to admire the square's sumptuous 18th century mansions - even Chopin lived here. Everywhere, we admired the decor and wrought-iron balconies of Paris' graceful architecture.

It's said that Americans are nonchalant about their city buildings but Parisians are passionate. Well, we Americans were passionate about Paris too.

IF YOU GO

In the Louvre's underground carousel, a mall offers a food court, boutiques and the museum shop with art books and reproductions. The museum is closed on Tuesdays, www.louvre.fr.

Air Tahiti Nui flies from Los Angeles and New York to Paris. It offered great service and the best rates, www.airtahitinui.com.

Le Bristol Hotel on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore, www.lebristolparis.com.

Intimate, deluxe Lancaster Hotel off Champs Elysees - 75008 Paris, www.hotel-lancaster.fr.

For reasonably priced family hotels and tours in France and Italy, contact Essential France, 866-285-8758, www.essentialfrance.com.

For information contact the French Government Tourist Office, www.franceguide.com.

Â© Copley News Service

Travel and Adventure: An American teenager in Paris by Patricia Woeber