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Four Months in France: An Illustrated Journal

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I graduated UK in May, 2007, with degrees in History and French. Although my initial plan was to pursue a history major and a French minor, this quickly changed when I became aware of the high caliber instruction in the French department. As I continued through my undergraduate career, I began thinking about study abroad opportunities. Such a chance became available in the second semester of my junior year in Caen, France, by way of the Lexington-Deauville Sister Cities Exchange Program. My experiences there were not only culturally enriching, but also life-changing. I have a newfound affinity for other cultures as a result of my time in Europe. I just completed my first semester of law school, and I even find my French helping me here and there in my legal studies, as I encounter archaic French terms in the texts. I plan to graduate law school in 2010.

In a most successful and invaluable attempt to bring together the complex and challenging understanding of the relationship between language and culture, David Hicks spent a semester in Normandy, France, documenting his very own linguistic and cultural quest. As he delved into centuries of French history, politics, architecture, and art, he documented his day-to-day discoveries while negotiating the sometimes difficult presence of an American in post 9/11 France. In this photo-journal, he develops and captures the subtleties and intricacies of a foreign culture and society in the wake of social issues of world dimension, and reflects upon his own appreciation and perception of a culture that slowly unlocked itself as his linguistic competence grew to allow him a native-like interaction with French people of all walks of life. Prior to this experience, David’s view of France — as he discovered it in the classroom — was that of an inalterable, “exotic,” yet manageable reality, which did not prepare him for this life-changing experience. Braving the February, 2005, riots amid the inevitable pre-elections social unrest, debunking stereotypes while learning about the many facets of a diverse mosaic of immigrant amid parallel cultures, he remarkably served as an ambassador of his own country and culture at a difficult political and historic juncture, while gaining a new perspective of 21st Century France and its forever-changing European future.

Introduction

My name is David Hicks and I am a student at the University of Kentucky. I have lived in the United States my entire life, but on January 26, 2006, I left to study in northern France for four months. This European experience was completely new for me because I had not previously visited any foreign countries save for Canada. I had, consequently, not been exposed to other cultures and people; this made for a variety of new and interesting experiences in my new home, many of which will be detailed here in a combination of words and pictures.

Much like my own perception of a culture different from my own, this journal has been a work in progress. The style of each page, the rules of writing and the overall goal of this project have all significantly changed since January. I realize that this journal is alive as long as it continues to inspire the discovery of other cultures. This, for the most part, is my motivation for this project. I know that it will never die completely. It is my sincere hope that you, the reader, will garner some sense of another culture — and perhaps yourself — as a result of my own experiences recorded here.

This project was conceived to immerse the audience in the French culture, and to record my experiences in text and photographs. The end of this endeavor is triple: I want to understand my new environment, succeed in it, and obtain a larger respect and understanding for the views of other people. To facilitate the process, the journal is divided into two parts: a written journal and a photograph section. To enrich my comprehension of the French language and to immerse myself more completely in the French culture, the [original] journal was kept entirely in French. I will retain not only the advantages of a multicultural understanding, but also the possibility to share them with others. The final product will be bound, displaying the entries, photographs, and legends chronologically.
“In Thought, Paris:” Everything in this shot was captured completely by chance, from my listless stare to the bird haphazardly flying overhead. Compare the immediacy of my face with the distance of the Seine river and the Parisian flats overhead.

Journal

Thursday, January 26
4:31 PM CST (Wednesday, January 27, 12:31 AM in France)

Today I leave for France. I have always understood the imminence of this moment, but I suppose that I didn’t completely grasp it, like some distant reality. But now I am sitting in Chicago’s O’Hare Airport waiting for my flight to Paris. I already see an enormous diversity of people here. I hear the symphony of different languages while I walk, and my thoughts drift across the Atlantic. A new and strange land awaits me, and honestly, I don’t quite know if I am ready for it.

When I arrive in Paris, I plan on going to Republic Hotel to rest. I am excited that I will be staying close to the Notre Dame Cathedral, the Moulin Rouge, and other famous sights. I hope that the hotel is in a safe part of town and that the room is clean; I have heard many a horror story detailing unsavory living conditions abroad, and I don’t want to fall victim to such a fright. In fact, I cancelled my previous reservation for a youth hostel because I heard the rooms there are disgusting. Time will tell how things go.
“Beach, Lion-Sur-Mer:” The majestic beauty of Normandy’s beaches is simply breathtaking. This particular stretch of beach was complemented with a stone wall topped with a weathered white fence that seemed to stretch on endlessly. The rustic nature of the shot is accentuated by the sepia tone.

“Parisian Skyline:” Taken from the Pompidou Museum, this photo displays the city in all its glory. To the left, slightly off-center, stands the silhouette of the Eiffel Tower. To its left stands Notre Dame Cathedral and Montmartre.

Journal

Saturday, January 28
10:50 PM

I have no friends, familiar faces, or comforts of home here. I am in a foreign country, and for the most part, I actually love it. Yesterday I arrived in France, and the first difficulty was getting to the hotel. After a half hour of wandering aimlessly through the massive Charles de Gaulle airport, I found the metro, and later my hotel. The people here are somewhat reserved and silent in public, unlike many Americans. However, I can still sense the warmth and hospitality that I had always perceived as cultural trademarks of this country. In every restaurant and convenience store, I hear « bonjour » and « au revoir ». I am thrilled to be able to use my French, but I now realize that I may have overestimated my own speaking ability. I hope, however, to be fluent by the time I leave. Still, I understand that it will take diligence on my part to become so. I am ready for the challenges that await me here.

The real catharsis of all this is that I am finally free - free because I have neither friends nor family here, and I have a genuine opportunity to present myself as I truly am; people here have no preconceived notions of me as a person because no one knows me. I can be me — an American trying to survive in a strange country. Will he survive? Of course — he is determined to understand the culture of this place, and to leave with a newfound understanding that no classroom can duplicate. Welcome to France.
Sunday, January 29
10:24 PM

I’m not a pro at the Parisian metro system. I can find the street where my hotel is located — Oberkamph Street. I love it. I love the little boulangeries (butcher shops) and pâtisseries (pastry shops) and their aromas mixing in the cold, crisp air. I love the cold wind that greets me each morning. This is the life of a Parisian, isn’t it? I find that I am able to blend in with the locals if I don’t talk much and if I am polite.

However, another facet of life here has attracted my attention: I noted that few Parisians speak English. This was contrary to my preconceived notion that pretty much everyone in Paris is bilingual. This is not the case, and thus there are limitless opportunities for me to practice my French. I have done well for the most part, but from time to time I find it hard to comprehend their rapid speech and slang terms. I hope that I’ll see some real improvements in my French soon.
Tuesday, January 31
11:25 PM

Tomorrow I leave for Caen. Astonishingly, I can honestly say that I am finished with Paris — for now, at least. I love this charming city, but I am not accustomed to city life. Caen, and the normality it should bring to life, will be a welcome change. In six days, I have visited a lion’s share of the popular tourist destinations in Paris. Now, I want to see a new side of France, and with it, a new type of people.

This is not to say, however, that Parisians are hostile; quite the contrary, they are warm, but reserved nonetheless. It’s natural in a larger city like this. I feel something new awaits me at Caen though. I am excited for tomorrow. I can only hope I don’t have any problems finding the campus and my dorm.

I lose my identity in this ocean of people
Different voices mixing in the metro
Château d’Eau ... République ...
Oberkampf ...
The metro stops create a lucid symphony in my mind
It’s dusk, and I can see the lights through the window
Blinding me with an assault of color
Gold, blue, red, they are all indistinguishable
And nothing exists save for this mass of people
Pulsating, living, breathing
Searching for their own destinies
In a city without mercy
I have chosen to become one of these
This is Paris
Hemingway ... Picasso ... Stein ... This is their city, not mine
But as I stare at these blinding lights
I know there is some method
In this madness.

Le statue d’un ange, Paris
(Statue of an angel, Paris)
I was pleased with this photo because, to me, it evoked a mental image of an inhabitant of this new world in which I was so suddenly dropped. One can discern in this photo the mystery of Paris in the expression of the cherub, and also another characteristic — the faded background adds a dramatic effect.
“I.M. Pei’s Pyramid, The Louvre, Paris:” Commissioned by president Francois Mitterand, this pyramid, composed of 666 pieces of glass, is regarded by many Parisians as an eyesore in the midst of the classical architecture of the Louvre Museum.

I was lucky to get such a perfect scene; the sun had just descended below the gently sloping hills surrounding the city, and continued to cast a faint hazy glow. In the foreground, one of Paris’s numerous pleasure boats made its rounds on the Seine. The Eiffel Tower, dark and imposing in the background, completes the shot.
The celebrated River Seine is traversed by countless Parisian bridges, all of which are decorated with beautiful statues, most of the classical Greco-Roman style. The one seen here is no exception.

A café-restaurant, Paris

Here one can see a typical scene of Parisian life: old buildings living once again with their flamboyant signs. The café-restaurant is a trademark of French culture. Though I did not visit this particular one, I had the good fortune of visiting many a brasserie throughout Paris.

“A café-restaurant, Paris”

“Une brasserie, Paris”

“A café-restaurant, Paris”