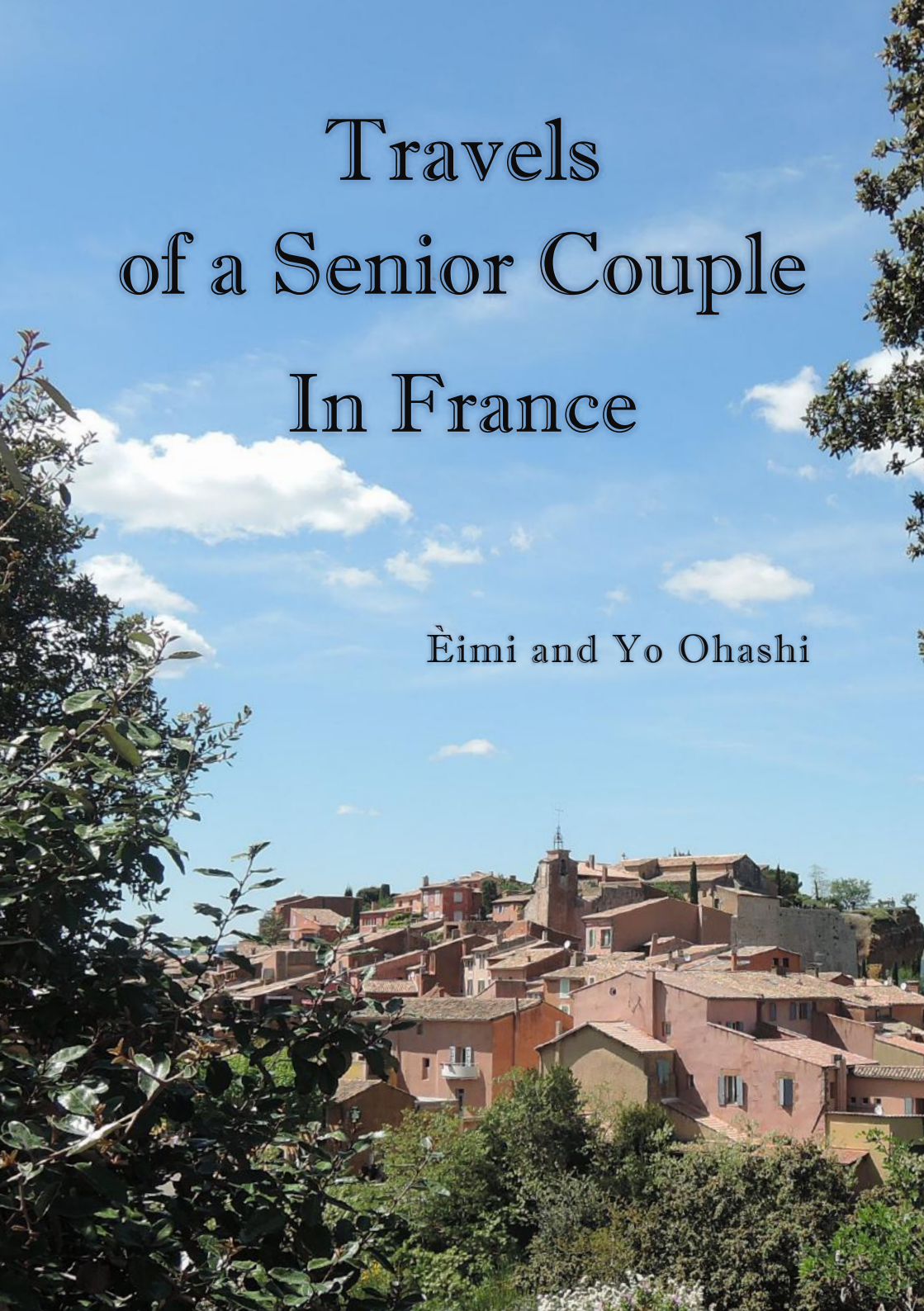


Travels of a Senior Couple In France

Èimi and Yo Ohashi



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Foreword

Yo and I traveled to France in May of 2019. Yo, a 64-year-old venture capitalist, and I, an otorhinolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) with a private clinic, had both seen our 60th birthdays come and go. We are both planning on retiring in the next few years. These days, we often talk of spending our retirement abroad. Maybe we should try living in another country for a while. But which country? We had been talking about this on and off for a long time — perhaps a short trip to see how it might go — but we had never been able to make it happen. In fact, throughout our careers, we had never been able to take even one week off.

*Yo and I traveled to France
in May of 2019.*

*The 18-day trip was our first
little step toward planning
for our retirement.*

2019, however, afforded us an interesting opportunity: we took 18 days off for a vacation abroad. Every year in Japan, April 29 to early May brings a string of bank holidays that allows people to take three or four days off from work, sometimes up to a week by including weekends and paid vacation days. In 2019, the Imperial transition was scheduled to coincide with these bank holidays, and the way the celebrations, holidays*, and weekends worked out, a lot of people were able to add a few extra days to an already long series of officially sanctioned vacation days.

What could Yo and I do with these two weeks? Maybe a short trip abroad in preparation for our retirement? How about Paris? And maybe even the countryside of France?

.....
* April 29: Showa Day (the Showa Emperor's Birthday)
May 3: Constitution Memorial Day
May 4: Greenery Day
May 5: Children's Day

So we took our first baby steps toward our retirement. Our philosophy that there are countless ways to enjoy France led us to a trip that was suitable for active seniors like us. The chronicle that follows is a detailed account of our first endeavor, filled as much with dreams as with tribulations, some of which might be unique to the senior population. All of the future trips abroad that we hope to take will have their roots right here in this narrative, in our very first trip abroad to Paris and beyond.

The Day of Departure

On April 24, we set off for Paris! — That is what we would have liked to begin with, but as luck would have it, we were faced with an emergency situation.

On the night before departure, Yo came in a great panic to my clinic, shouting, “Come with me! Something is terribly wrong with Po.” Po is our black cat. Three years ago, he had a bypass pyeloplasty done for kidney stones. “Po peed all over the place, and he can’t move,” Yo said.

We were faced with an emergency situation: my cat and I both landed in the hospital.

My guess was that Po was probably suffering from another episode of stones causing bloody urine and painful urination. I quickly called the vet and took him there. There were early signs of renal failure but he was diagnosed early enough to require just a few days of hospitalization. Yo sat there staring into Po’s eyes, who, in turn, stared back in fear. “We had better cancel the trip. We can’t leave Po like this!”

Thanks to the emergency catheterization procedure, he survived.

“Yes, let’s cancel the trip if he isn’t going to be okay,” I said.

The next day, his condition had improved slightly thanks to the emergency catheterization procedure, but he was still not well.

Then it was my turn. I finally succumbed to back pain that had been bothering me for a while. We were scheduled to leave that evening, but the level of pain was just too much to bear. I had no choice but to turn to Dr. M.

Someone else was in bad health, and that was me.

Dr. M. is a physician and one of my friends.

I phoned him. "Hello, Dr. M. Are you busy all day today? I have a debilitating pain in my back that's been bothering me for some time. Would you be able to take a look? And, um, since I'm going to leave for Paris later today, do you have time this morning... perhaps?"

"Huh? Pardon? What did you just say? You are going to Paris? This afternoon?" Dr. M. was almost yelling.

"Well, we're first flying to Taiwan where we're transferring for a flight to Paris, so... um... I would appreciate it if... um... you could take a look... as soon as possible..."

Dr. M. did not press the matter and agreed to let me come in for an echo and an endoscopy that morning at 8:30. There was no way I would be able to spend 18 days in Paris with no treatment. I needed to know the cause of the back pain and to do something about it.

The echo confirmed that I had many kidney stones. Not just in one, but in both kidneys. My condition turned out to be far worse than Po's.

"Oh, I see. The pain in your back is clearly coming from these stones," said Dr. M., looking at the test results.

"What can we do about it?"

"Well, we can give you a high dose of diuretic so that your body will naturally get rid of the stones. How's that?"

To rule out the possibility of ulcers, I needed to do an endoscopy as well. The general anesthesia that I was given before the endoscopy was so effective that I did not wake up as quickly as I should have. It was not until the early afternoon that I finally came to. Dr. M. said that if I had been allowed to, I would probably have slept all the way until the evening.

I had many kidney stones. Not just in one, but in both kidneys.

As soon as I was awakened, I had to hurry home since we had to leave for the airport no later than 2:00 p.m. Time was definitely not on our side. We frantically rushed to the airport.

Even though I had "woken up" from the anesthesia, I was still very drowsy. With unsteady feet and slurred speech, I somehow pushed my

big suitcase to the baggage drop-off area, finished check-in procedures, and responded to basic questions at the immigration counter.

As soon as I sat down on the plane, I fell into such a deep sleep that I very nearly lost consciousness. On that first leg to Taiwan, I never once awoke. I even slept through the beverage and meal services and did not wake up when Yo gently shook me. I spent the second leg of the trip from Taipei to Paris in a similar manner.

Exhausted, we finally arrived in Paris.

Paris Day 1

Citadines Didot Montparnasse Paris · 14th arrondissement

We arrived before 7:00 a.m. at a time when Charles de Gaulle Airport was still relatively quiet. We got on a taxi to get us into the city. The hour-long ride cost €55. We were dropped off in front of our hotel, Citadines Didot Montparnasse Paris. Even though we had requested early check-in, we were told that our room would not be available until 3:00 p.m. Although it was already 9:00 a.m., we still had to find a way to while away our time for the next six hours. In hindsight, we could have done anything, but with no specific plan in mind, we decided to go for a stroll around the neighborhood.

In the 14th arrondissement, where our hotel was, there were many old buildings and many old people. They were pulling carts (or using them as support) and walking slowly toward a nearby Monoprix. They all had the weekly ad in their hands, ready to select whatever was on

The view from Montparnasse Tower



sale. It looked like a daily ritual for these elderly people, walking slowly to the shop, nodding to acquaintances, and heading directly to the grocery store. Looking at this urban scenery, I was convinced that France is a country of old people, just like Japan.

What I saw on that first day in Paris — the throngs of elderly Parisians making their way to supermarkets in the neighborhood — seemed to be an ordinary sight in the mid-morning hours around 10:00 a.m. Watching them ponder over a single tomato, I wondered if they, too, had the kind of financially strained life of retirees we so often see these days in Japan.

*A country where retirees
can lead secure lives
must have a stable
government and relatively
well-to-do economy.*

*Once in Paris, we saw
throngs of elderly
Parisians making their
way to supermarkets.*

Coming from a notoriously aging society, it was a revelation to discover that Paris was hardly any different.

In a country where retirees can live secure albeit simple lives, the government must be stable and the economy relatively well-to-do.

Years of democracy and prosperity have resulted in a society where old people can live in peace, and that peace has allowed people to live long lives. After a tumultuous period in its history, France was finally basking in its hard-earned era of peace.

Monoprix: Friday evening

Even in a neighborhood that seemed to be filled with predominantly elderly Parisians, the people at the same Monoprix on Friday evening were markedly different: there were many men who were in the prime of their lives shopping for groceries. It was almost 7:30 p.m. when we went, right before the weekend. Of course, there were many women, too. But



the men were the ones filling their baskets to the brink with carefully chosen cheese, smoked salmon, fresh cream, fresh seafood, large chunks of meat, bread, and seasonal vegetables.



After 8:00 p.m., it was not only at Monoprix, but at other stores like Franprix, Bio, or Naturalia as well that we saw many men quickly snatching ready-to-eat meals. We also saw them at florists here and there grabbing bouquets that had been placed outside. It seemed like there were many more flowers on display outside on this Friday evening than on any

other weekday. We, too, had a bouquet made with 20 stems of pink roses for €25.

Bakeries, Butchers, and Small Grocery Stores

The major supermarket chains around the city were Monoprix, Franprix, Carrefour, Picard, and Bio, but in addition to these, there were local mom and pop stores selling organic produce and dairy. I had been under the impression that elderly people frequent big supermarkets that offer coupons and weekly sale items, but there were quite a few doing their shopping at the butcher's around the corner or at small grocery stores selling everything from baguettes and cheese to a small selection of vegetables and cold cuts as well as other items people might need for



their daily survival. Even if elderly people can only walk slowly, there are stores where they can get their daily shopping done within a 3–4 minute walk of their homes. At Picard, the frozen food section seemed to be especially popular among the elderly. Frozen vegetables, TV dinners, and frozen cakes were less expensive than at Monoprix or Franprix, and they came in smaller portions too.

During our stay in Paris, we went to four or five supermarkets around the hotel. At all of them, between the hours of 10:00 and 11:00 a.m., the clientele was predominantly elderly. After 8:00 p.m., women and single men came rushing in to grab something before the cashiers closed.

These were our observations about the shopping habits of Parisians. Now, to go back to our first few hours in France, we were getting a little tired from walking around and wanted to take a break somewhere. Yo suddenly said he had to go to the bathroom. Really badly. Looking for a place with a bathroom, Yo started running around the neighborhood, but there was not a single McDonald's, Starbucks, or a simple bistro in sight. He finally made his way to Montparnasse station where he rushed into the bathroom for €0.80. I was shocked that bathrooms in stations are not free. In Japan, public bathrooms, wherever they are, are all free.

Right outside the Montparnasse station is a skyscraper. "What is that huge building?" I exclaimed. "It's the Montparnasse Tower. You can get a good aerial view of Paris from the observation deck," Yo replied. Without giving it much thought, we paid the €18 admission for a chance to climb up there. Little did we realize that an admission of €18 per person was outrageous even for Paris. That is what happens when you do not know how much things cost.

*An €18 Aerial View
of Paris from the
Montparnasse Tower?!*

We whiled away the time looking at Paris from up above and in no time, it was almost 3:00 p.m., time for check-in. We walked across the Montparnasse Cemetery for a direct route back to the hotel. On the map on our iPad, it looked like a fairly simple route back but we ended up getting lost and going around quite a bit. We stopped by the Saint-Pierre de Montrouge church right above the Alesia subway station where there

was a wedding going on. There were only a dozen or so people in attendance and it seemed to be a very simple affair. It was nothing like the lavish Hollywood-style Western weddings in movies.

Cimetière du Montparnasse: Breezy, Serene, Divine Verdure



Cemeteries do not usually make the top of a must-see list, but the Montparnasse Cemetery is definitely an exception. It was quiet, the breeze pleasant, and the shades of green all around just divine. The brightly colored flowers were all well-tended and each of the headstones had its own little story, adorned with statuettes and poems. They were little objects of art in their own right. If I lived nearby, I would most definitely spend hours sitting on a favorite bench in the shade of a big tree, listening to the breeze. I would read, write a poem, or lose myself in my thoughts.

A Little Shopping Spree

The contents of our shopping cart that day looked like this: baguette, butter, two cartons of milk, orange juice (delicious), three kinds of cheese, ham, prosciutto, a chunk of smoked salmon, three cans of beer, wine, tomato, zucchini, lettuce, herbs, blackberries, strawberries, couscous, two boxes of tea (there were so many kinds, it was hard to settle on two), ground coffee, jam, two packages of yogurt, pre-packaged pasta salad, two kinds of tart, and a sandwich. Our shopping bags were like dumbbells but thankfully, our hotel was right next to the supermarket. We paid €50 at this Franprix, which turned out to be the most we ever paid for our groceries while in France. We bought almost the same things in Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, and Lyon, but we paid only €30 to

€38. Our calculations show that grocery for one day for two was €10–13. Maybe downtown Paris is more expensive than the countryside.

In Japan, most things are sold pre-packaged and in predetermined quantities — 6 potatoes or 4 tomatoes, for example — rather than by weight. Paying by weight

was completely new to me, so I obviously had no idea that I was supposed to weigh the vegetables and put barcode stickers on the bags. I just took them all to the checkout counter where the cashier told me to go back and put stickers on them. I stared blankly at her. Pointing to the fresh produce area, she said, “There, you can do that over there.”



*Paying for fresh produce
by weight was
completely new to me.*

“What do you mean? How do you put stickers on these?” I asked, puzzled.

There were several people lined up behind me, but without another thought, the cashier shut down the lane, saying, “OK, follow me. I’ll show you.” As we headed to the back of the store, I noticed that she was in a wheelchair. How nice of her to go through the trouble of doing this for me. Thanks to her efforts, I mastered the art of weighing vegetables and fruits and putting stickers on the bags in a matter of minutes.

A Fully Stocked Kitchenette

After getting into our room at our hotel (Citadines Didot Montparnasse Paris), we checked out the kitchen. There were all kinds of cooking and eating utensils. Though the kitchen was certainly small, I felt that we should not have any trouble cooking for ourselves for a few days.

A Haunt of the Locals

There was a bar right next to the hotel where locals seemed to gather on a regular basis. The signs by the entrance said *tabac* (tobacco), *lotto* (lottery), *press* (newspapers and magazines), and there were indeed shelves of cigarettes behind the owner, but the space to the back was a standing-only bar. We decided to go in for a pint of beer.



There were a handful of people drinking and enjoying themselves. They must have already drunk quite a lot but they did not show it at all. A group of regulars invited Yo and me to the counter and started talking to us. What was supposed to be just a pint turned into three, then four...

*Even at 12:30 a.m.,
they were still carousing
at the local bar.*

When the clock ticked past 10:00 p.m., the shutters were lowered, effectively trapping us inside. There were only regulars left by this time, and they were all in high spirits. We had before us glasses of beer that the regulars had ordered for us, then there was one that was on the owner. We stayed for quite a while, enjoying the cordial atmosphere. When I looked at the clock, it was already 12:30 a.m.

Since I do not speak any French, I had no idea what anyone was saying all through those hours at the pub, but Yo could understand from his years working in France. According to him, they suddenly started telling us with great urgency:

“Don’t take out your wallet in front of people!”

“Don’t let anyone see the money inside your wallet!”

“You’ll be an easy target for pickpockets!”

“They’ll snatch your bag!”

“Your whole wallet will be gone in no time and you won’t even know it!”

Turning to me, they said sternly, “If you carry your backpack on your back, a pickpocket will surely steal your wallet, or worse, a thief might even cut your bag open with a knife. Carry it in front of you. Always! And don’t let anyone see you taking your wallet out of your bag!” They warned us very seriously.

“You’ll be an easy target for pickpockets!”

This unexpected lecture was disheartening but they all meant well. It dawned on me that they knew what they were talking about: they must have seen Yo take a 5 euro bill out of his wallet for our first round of beer and then the 10 euro bill after that to treat the regulars to a round.

Yo and I enjoyed our time at the neighborhood bar. The people there were all so big-hearted and talking to them was so much fun. And since these places are no-frills bars, beer is really cheap too. *If we were to live in Paris even for a little bit, we would want to find a bar that we can call our favorite.* And maybe not just one but a few we can go to all the time.



Paris Day 2

The Parisian Subway

On Friday, April 26, we went to the Louvre Museum. We bought a 10-ride booklet of public transport tickets and took the subway. Once you validate your ticket at the start of the journey, you can transfer as many times as you want.

The subway started to move while I was stuck between two sets of doors. A few big guys helped drag me inside.

As we were transferring subway lines, Yo rushed into a train whose doors were already starting to close. Expecting the doors to reopen easily, I ran close on his heels but was too

late: I got stuck between two sets of doors: the subway doors and the platform doors. I should have known better than to run after a subway train that was getting ready to close its doors and depart. We just thought the subway in Paris would be like the subways in Japan — but we were wrong. Really wrong. I also completely misjudged the force of Parisian subway doors. I suppose I was expecting them to be as sensitive as they are in Japan. You know, to open again when it detects a person stuck in between.



The métro at Clignancourt

On the Parisian subway, the doors close with such a force, obviously not made to open again for stuck people and belongings. While my body was still half inside and half outside, the subway started to move. I was desperate to somehow get the doors to open, afraid that I would be dragged through the tunnels most definitely to my end. Looking at Yo staring at me in horror, rooted to the spot out of shock, I thought my life

was all over. Just then, three or four big guys came rushing to me. Each putting a hand on the door and the other on me, they dragged me inside with incredible strength. Pop! And I was inside. I was saved. I was alive!

That night, as I was getting into the shower, I noticed the countless black and blue bruises all over my body. The skin on my shoulder, arms, and back had been scraped raw. But I was alive. It was a close call, but I was still very much in Paris.



The Louvre Museum

Like every other popular tourist attraction these days, the Louvre is infamous for its long line of visitors waiting to get inside. But also like most other places, you can buy your tickets in advance, even specifying a time, and bypass that line. We had gotten our tickets online and had already paid for them, so after getting our mobile tickets scanned and going through a quick security check, we were inside in no time.

The most famous and most popular work there is, of course, the *Mona Lisa*. Considering your physical and mental stamina, it is best to start with the Italian Renaissance on this floor. In France, it is the first floor, which in Japan would be the second. It is generally accepted that these works make up the most sublime group of artwork. The throngs there are just as impressive. But the floor space inside the museum is so immense, it does not really feel crowded.

Start with the Renaissance.

The floor above (3rd floor in Japan) is the Northern Renaissance. As a continuation of the Renaissance movement, I think it makes sense to

go from the Italian Renaissance straight to the Northern Renaissance rooms. But the crowds are all in the Italian Renaissance rooms so the floor above is a wonderful place to quietly enjoy paintings.



We spent four or five hours going through the Italian Renaissance, Rococo, and Northern Renaissance rooms, gazing at works by Bruegel and Van Dyck. Since we were intent on enjoying as much as we

could of the artworks, we were completely exhausted by the time we finished walking through these rooms. Our legs could hardly carry us any more.

“I’m starving. I can’t take another step...” moaned Yo. It was just past 3:00 p.m. We had gotten to the museum a little after 10:00 a.m. We had been walking around for some four or five hours. No wonder we were so spent.

“I’m starving. I can’t take another step...”

There were supposed to be cafés everywhere for you to grab a baguette sandwich or some other light meal and sit on a terrace with a nice view

— but where were they? Walking around, glancing at the floor plan, stopping to look at paintings along the way, we wandered around in search of a place to eat. We wanted to eat, but we also wanted to see things. It took us until 4:00 p.m.

Café Richelieu is a place to stay away from at all costs.

to get to a place that looked inviting: the Café Richelieu. That was to be our biggest mistake of the day. It is a place to

stay away from at all costs. The food is mediocre and the prices are astronomical for what they offer. We ordered a caesar salad (€23), a salmon salad (€26), onion soup (€12), two glasses of wine (€16), totaling €77 for a lunch for two. It was nearly 10,000 yen. For that kind of food? Just bowls of shriveled vegetable pieces, luke-warm soup, and a little wine. Yo sat there sullenly with the worse-than-mediocre food staring back at him. It was a painful lesson but a lesson well learned: you must not eat inside the Louvre. If you must eat inside, go for a sandwich and cake and maybe some tea at a café.



Even with the food already in front of us, I could not help poring over the floor plan again to see if there were any other choices nearby. “Oh, there’s a restaurant on the underground levels. There’s even a café along a corridor here where you’re supposed to be able to get a baguette sandwich. It looks like you can even eat it right there standing in the corridor.”

“Too late,” was all that Yo said.

If we had taken our time to look closely at the floor plan, we could have found any number of cafés. The problem was, we could not really figure out how to get there in the vast maze that was the Louvre. After our unpleasant lunch, throughout the rest of our trip, and for many

years to come, I was to hear Yo say again and again that the biggest mistake of his life was to eat at that restaurant in the Louvre.

*The biggest mistake of his life:
eating at that restaurant
in the Louvre*

sance. There were sculptures everywhere, along the corridors, in little nooks, and even stair landings. It was four or five hours of standing and walking without a chance to take a break. By the time we got to Café Richelieu, it no longer mattered whether we were in for a mediocre or delectable meal, or whether it would cost us an arm and a leg. We were simply too tired to look for another place. We were actually not even looking for the place. We got lost and somehow ended up in front of Café Richelieu. At that point, any place looked better than none. Perhaps other people sitting in Café Richelieu felt the same way.

But realistically speaking, what could we have done? It took us well over two hours to get through the Renaissance rooms. And another two or three hours for the Northern Renaissance.



After lunch, we embarked on Part Two of our Louvre day. Looking carefully at the map, wandering from room to room, we could not get to the rooms and paintings we were interested in. Were we walking the



other way? Did we turn into the wrong room? I had always considered myself good at reading maps and finding my way around, but the Louvre was a challenge of a caliber I had never encountered before.

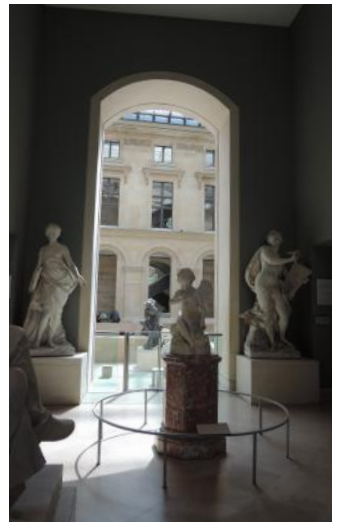
In the end, I decided to ask those people in uni-

forms sitting at the entrance to every significantly sized room for directions. Little by little, it started to dawn on me that it was faster to ask these people than to get lost with the map in our hands. They always had the answers if you asked where the bathroom was or how to get to some place. I should have figured it out much sooner. If you asked anything about the paintings, they usually had no answer because they were neither curators nor guides. A stark difference from museums in Japan where people sitting quietly in the corner of the room are certified curators who can tell you about the paintings and artifacts on display.

During our afternoon stroll through the museum, I found out that there is yet another way of satisfying food cravings in this huge place. Why had I not noticed it before? I saw it once here and again there and

*I saw other ways of
munching on something.*

yet again: someone standing in the shadow of a column quickly stuffing his mouth with a piece of bread he had snuck out of his bag; another man standing by a window, pretending to take in the view while munching on a baguette; or that woman I saw in the ladies' room slipping a piece of chocolate into her mouth. Whether it is really okay to eat like that is a big question, but what they were doing was completely understandable.



There was a visitor who took even more liberty by stealing a few puffs of his e-cigarette standing next to a painting by Van Dyck. It is probably not allowed but I can understand how a smoker might be tempted to smoke in a relatively deserted room. Once you get inside, there are just so many paintings and sculptures in an incredibly vast area divided seemingly haphazardly into rooms like one gigantic maze. You get lost. You get hungry. You want to rest. And you might even want to smoke.

What is wrong with taking a few puffs next to a Van Dyck?

We entered the museum at 10:00 a.m. and by the time we felt like we had seen enough, it was already 5:00 p.m. We browsed in the museum shop and finally made it outside around 7:00 p.m.

Île de la Cité and Pont Neuf

We took the subway to Île de la Cité and walked over to Pont Neuf, the famous bridge across the Seine River. We saw boatloads of tourists on sightseeing vessels going up and down the river.

We walked back to the other side of the island to where the Cathedral of Notre-Dame stood, or rather, the remnants of the cathedral that had been engulfed by flames on April 15, just a few weeks before our trip. It was still cordoned off and guarded by fully armed security. The area had been cleared away nicely after the fire but we

From Île de la Cité over Pont Neuf to the Notre-Dame





need — daily essentials, basic electronics, etc. — at student prices. I almost fell for a marked-down Pyrex casserole dish in the shop window. It was so much less expensive than in Japan. As I made my way to the entrance of the store, Yo grabbed my arm saying, “What are you going to do with a Pyrex dish or an IH pot? Are you going to bring them back to Japan in our suitcases?” I did not have an answer for him. Yes, he was right. It would not make sense to lug them back with me. But if I lived here, I would definitely get my kitchen gadgets, pots, pans, and everything else here. I would even come back every day just to browse.

We walked through the Luxembourg Gardens, Luxembourg Palace, and the Musée de Luxembourg, taking the subway back to our hotel.

Once back in our neighborhood, we headed to the bar downstairs for a drink. There were always nice guys there even if I could not understand a word of French. That day, there was one woman who could speak English.

I discussed my first impression of France with a woman I met at the neighborhood bar.

still could not enter the premises.

From there, we walked to the Sorbonne University and strolled around the nearby Latin Quarter. The shops around the Sorbonne were for students. There were many bookstores and small shops selling everything a student might

I almost fell for a deeply discounted Pyrex casserole dish.

I offered her my first impression of France: “Going shopping and just walking around yesterday, I saw so many elderly people. France seems to be a country of retirees, very much

comparable to Japan that way. How is this country planning on supporting everyone, especially as it looks like the number of retirees will only increase from here on?"

"We don't plan on fully supporting them at all. I think Japan is taking a more friendly approach to retirees." To my surprise, she offered this blunt observation matter-of-factly.

I went further with my first impressions. "I have a feeling France is the breadbasket of Europe, a major exporter of all kinds of food. Is agriculture the main industry here?"

"Agriculture? No. The major industry here is fashion. Starting with Chanel, Christian Dior, or Yves Saint-Laurent, there is a plethora of haute couture designers as well as fragrance and jewelry brands. They support our economy."

Is agriculture the main industry of France?

— No, it's fashion.

"Wait, it's fashion? I'd never thought about that. Then what about tourism? Doesn't tourism contribute a lot more to the economy here?" I asked in astonishment.

"No. Other countries are just as serious about tourism, not just France."

"Really? But you have the Louvre or the Palace of Versailles that everyone knows about. Isn't Paris the Number One tourist destination?"

I offered.

*France is about fashion,
not tourism.*

"I don't think so. For France, the biggest contributor to the economy is not tourism but fashion. It's haute couture."

A little taken aback, I continued. "But if you think about the ever-growing world population, it should be more of an advantage to be dedicated to agriculture."

"That's not true. Our agriculture has problems too. Compared to Japan, our laws on GMO foods, pesticides, and other food safety rules are not very strict."

I wondered if France seen from the inside is vastly different from the image an outsider like me might glean. Turning the thought over in my mind, I took a glance at Yo. He was engaged in a lively conversation with some tipsy locals who were all pointing their fingers at me. Are they talking about me? What are they saying about me?

As soon as we were back in our hotel, I asked him later what they had been talking about. "They were talking about you, and how you have a certain sparkle in your eyes that make you look like an actress."

"Really?"

I had never heard such compliments before. It was a jarring moment. So that is how Frenchmen sitting in bars flatter women! I was impressed at how men in the West treat the women around them. Really, a world of difference from my own culture where men hardly ever pay compliments to women. "Why don't you learn a thing or two from those guys and try to say something that might make me happy?" I asked. His terse reply: "Tough luck. Too bad I'm Japanese."

There was a regular at the pub who must have been an octogenarian nearing 90. He usually headed home rather early, around 9:00 p.m. Even if he had to use a cane to get around, he still wanted to enjoy a drink or two and a lively conversation at a neighborhood bar. And if there were women around, he would shower her with compliments. Even at that age. *If we lived in Paris, how nice it would be to live near one of these casual, unpretentious bars.*

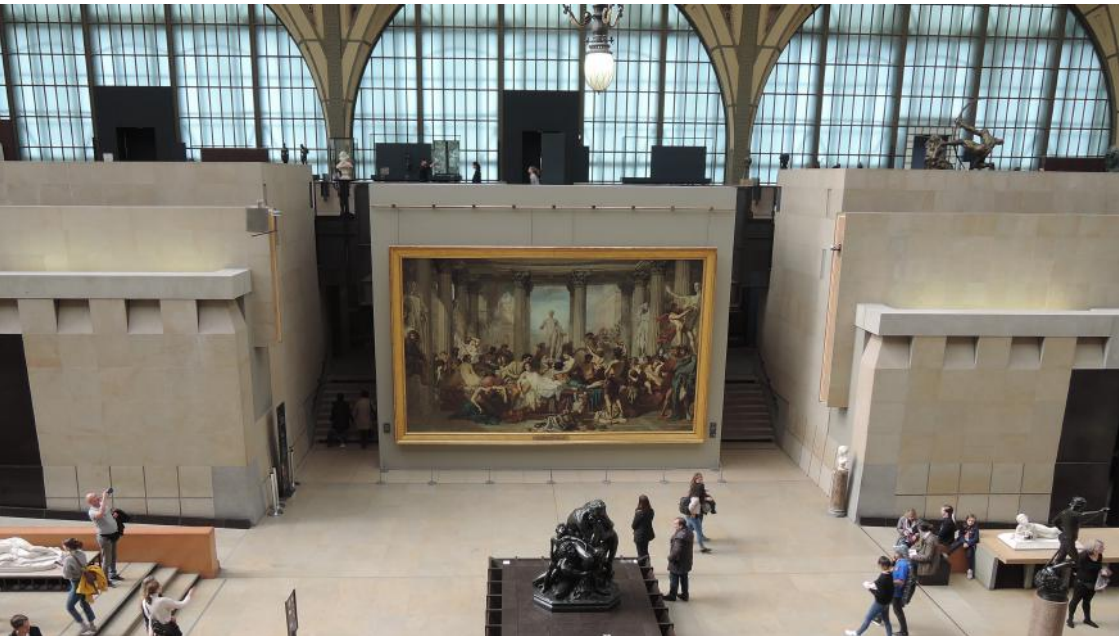
Paris Day 3

Musée d'Orsay

Like the Louvre, we were able to book tickets online three months in advance, but what was different was that we could not pick a time. Since we did not want to spend a lot of time waiting in line, we decided to get there early, aiming for 9:30 a.m. We took the subway there, got in line shortly after 9:00., and were let inside after a mere ten minutes.

On Saturday, April 27, we headed to the Musée d'Orsay.

We were there from 9:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. That was enough time for us to go around the upper floors of the museum twice. There were far fewer works on display than at the Louvre and the whole space was much smaller, so we were able to see everything not just once, but twice.



The World of the Paris Métro

We took the Métro Line 12 from d'Orsay, transferred to Line 4 at Montparnasse – Bienvenüe, and got back to our hotel. I was thoroughly amused by the subterranean world of the Paris Métro. There were so many things that I had never seen before. Take the musicians for example. There were often people performing, from amateurish bands to fairly good singers accompanying themselves. Once, there was even a string ensemble of a dozen players performing classical music. These were the pleasant performers.

There were a dozen musicians performing classical music.

Then there were people who would suddenly get up from their seats on the subway to begin reciting something. The first time I saw them, I was honestly a little startled. They usually wore rather shabby clothing, but their recitation was so full of confidence and pathos, they might very well have come out of Julius Caesar. As if reciting a monologue from a Shakespeare play, they would stand in the middle of the aisle and recite something for a while, and then, almost as suddenly as they had risen, would pass through the aisle and move onto the next car. Along the way, passengers would hand them some change.

Are they actors reciting something from a play?

“What is he saying?” I asked Yo.
“He’s a panhandler,” he explained.

“All he’s saying is that he wants to eat a sandwich but doesn’t have any money and is going hungry. If people with spare change would help him out, he’d be able to get some bread.”

The Paris Métro is rife with sly pickpockets, but these panhandlers were a different sort altogether. Even while begging for change for some bread and walking away in a hurry, they had enough pride in themselves to ask. That made them seem almost charming.

In the late afternoon, we were supposed to meet up with Dr. M., the doctor who hatched up the rash plan to help me get rid of my kidney stones right before our departure on this trip. Just by chance, he and his wife were spending time in Paris at the same time as us.

We were going to the five-star Hotel Banke, in a historical building that formerly housed bank headquarters, located near the upscale Galeries Lafayette Haussmann department store. Both Métro Lines 7 and 9 stop at Chaussée d'Antin — La Fayette, right by the department store, so we took Line 4 from Alésia and transferred to Line 7. After exchanging hellos, the doctor and his wife reported that they had arrived that morning and had already been to the Eiffel Tower. They had already made reservations at a renowned bistro nearby for dinner. I ordered some beer while everyone else enjoyed champagne, gin, and wine. We had some appetizers, veal steak, and spare ribs, and called it a night. It was well after 11:00 p.m. when we made our way down to the Métro, but it was still bustling with people. Maybe that was typical for a weekend in Paris.

*Meeting Dr. and Mrs. M.
near Galeries Lafayette
Haussmann, then
dinner with champagne,
gin, and wine.*

The cafeteria at Orsay



Paris Day 4

Palace of Versailles

Sunday, April 28 was the day of our Versailles Palace tour. We had reserved a package tour through the Japanese travel company, Miki Tourist, which has a popular site for individual travelers called “Myu Travel”. They offer day trips in and around popular European cities, which work well for people like us that generally like to travel alone but might find such arrangements convenient for out-of-town excursions.

A “Myu Travel” package tour of the Versailles



This particular Palace of Versailles tour required us to be at the Galeries Lafayette Haussmann by 7:50 a.m. Punctuality was a must. The tour included bus transportation to and from Versailles and admission to the Palace for about ¥5600 per person.

At Versailles, people start lining up at around 8:00 a.m. to be one of the first ones to get inside when the palace gates open at 9:00 a.m. There is no official time for when you can start lining up, so the earlier the better.

There is a way to get around this incredibly long line, which is to buy a time-specific ticket on the official Versailles website. Booking itself is easy, but they sell only a limited number of tickets per time slot, so you need to make reservations early. If you know your schedule ahead of time and you manage to get these tickets online, your waiting time will be much shorter since you will be allowed to enter through a dif-

ferent gate. If you are more than 30 minutes late for your entry time, however, getting in might be a little more complicated.

*Get online tickets
to skip the long lines*

We got to the main gates at 8:30, and by 8:40, we had already taken our places behind the 200 or 300 tourists who had arrived even earlier. When the gates open at 9:00, the first ones to gain entry to the palace are the time-specific ticket holders, so it was 9:30 when we finally made our way inside.

While we were waiting to get through security screening, we saw many people sneaking their way past the long line. By the time the gates open at 9:00, there are some 500 people waiting in line. If you are at the end of that line, you can easily expect to wait an hour for entry. I suppose that is what prompts a lot of sneaky tourists to slip through the gates, squeezing past the line. They use a variety of ways to get inside without waiting in line. One of them goes like this: they say something like, "I want to see if my ticket is valid" and bypass the line all the way to secu-

*An excellent place
to observe a beautiful show
of deception. Otherwise, just
a wall of people.*



rity, and at the entrance they make up another lie. “I need to check something about my ticket”, they say, showing their ticket, walking in with an air of confidence, and when they get a chance, they slip inside. What a beautiful show of deception right before your eyes!

The Palace of Versailles can be seen on countless videos online. The best of them by far is the series by Canal+ aired between 2015 and 2018. But whichever online video you choose, it is a much better way of enjoying Versailles than actually going there. When you are there yourself, all you can see is a massive wall of people. It is, however, an excellent place to observe sneaky people.

As we begin the self-guided audio tour of the Palace, we go in wanting and expecting to be impressed. But all we can see are group after group of Chinese tourists. Throngs of people wherever you look. So what do you do in a situation like this? You look up at the ceiling. The furnishings and paintings on the walls are certainly spectacular but the ceilings that hardly anyone



bothers to look at are works of art in themselves. If you cannot get a good glimpse of all the items on display that the audio guide tries to put in context for you, there really is very little point in even listening to it. It is best to just enjoy the place — as much as you can get of the atmosphere with all of those people around — look at the ceiling, and keep moving with the crowd. Then go home and spend all the time you want looking at videos of the Palace. There are countless videos online and the best of them by far is the series by Canal+ aired between 2015 and 2018. But whichever online video you choose, it is a much better way of enjoying Versailles than actually going there because there is no one to block your view and you can be there for as long as you like. In reality, you have no choice but to move along with the crowd and when you get to the end of the tour, the mad rush for the bathrooms begins. That is the

modus operandi here: keep moving and beat everyone else to the bathroom.

We had quite a lot of time left before we had to head back to the bus, so we went out to the gardens. There were relatively fewer people taking the time to wander around the gardens, making for a very relaxing walk. Even though we had time, it still was not enough to allow us to go to The Queen's Hamlet and back, and that would

The gardens were a must-see.

have involved separate admission as well. In hindsight, the best way to enjoy the famed Versailles is to walk around the vast expanse of sculpted gardens, fountains, pavilions, and everything else that adorns the palace grounds. Versailles is not about the palace but about the gardens. The next time we come back to France, I would definitely want to explore more of the gardens.

The Métro, Again

There is something of vital importance that everyone traveling in Paris should keep in mind: scheduled and unscheduled service disruptions can happen at any time. To make it on time for the bus to Versailles Palace we had to get to Galeries Lafayette by 7:50 a.m. No exceptions



allowed. We had been planning on taking Métro Line 4 to get there. But the night before, just by chance, while riding Line 7, we saw a written announcement alerting passengers to changes in the schedule the following morning, namely, that service on Line 4 would not begin until 10:00 a.m. We figured that out only because Yo was able to understand French. Of course, the next question was how to get to Galeries Lafayette another way. We ended up taking Line 13 from Plaisance and transferring to Line 8, but the other Japanese passengers on the same tour to Versailles apparently were not aware of the change and were almost late for the bus. They had not even thought of the possibility that the subways would not be running as scheduled. They must have figured it out when they tried to get on a Line 4 subway, then scrambled to find an alternate route to make their way to Galeries Lafayette. They made it, but they were very close to being left behind.

*Scheduled and
unscheduled service
disruptions can happen
at any time*

It is important to always check for service announcements. But the problem is that on board and online, the announcements are in French.

*You need to know
at least some basic French.*

While English is usually enough for traveling, you might find yourself in a lot of trouble if you do not have even basic knowledge of French (or any language for that

matter). Whether it is asking for directions, telling the taxi driver your destination, or transferring from a bus to a subway line, you need to be able to pronounce the names of places correctly. Honestly, as long as you can pronounce the names of places, the rest of your sentence could very well be in Japanese and people would still understand you.

And the other important thing is to know the numbers. Especially when it concerns money. If you cannot say the numbers, you

Numbers are important too.

will run into a lot of trouble. Thankfully, Yo was very good with numbers in French. But even he slipped up while we were out shopping: he wanted to get shampoo but mistakenly got conditioner instead, or so he said. But I think it was shower gel. But then it might have been body

milk. The lesson learned is that it is important to know some basic words so that you do not get wrong things at the supermarket.

The Flea Market at Clignancourt

Spurred on by Dr. M., we decided to check out the flea market near the last stop on the Métro Line 4 at Port de Clignancourt. At the famous flea

*Mostly junk, occasionally
real antique. You need
to be able to tell them apart.*

market, there is a whole array of objects from real antiques to junk. It is like a treasure hunt but the offerings are truly mixed, so you need to have very discerning eyes. I was mesmerized by the chandeliers, Limoges porcelain,

antique linen that looked to be from the 18th century, antique beads, and various objects from Africa, but the whole time, I could feel Yo's searing stare as if trying to tell me by telepathy, "Don't buy it! You have all those things at home! You don't need to buy anything here!" I have to admit that he was right. I already have a large collection of antique items. Still, if I see something attractive, I cannot help but buy it. An exasperating habit indeed.

The area around Clignancourt seemed seedy and not at all the kind of place where you could let your guard down even during the day. Wanting to get back as quickly as possible, we headed straight to the subway without dilly-dallying anywhere. But even inside the subway, we did not feel very safe. We kept a low profile, trying our best not to attract attention. It was only after we crossed the Seine River that we



finally started to feel more at ease with the passengers around us. By the time we got to the stop near our hotel, there were no longer any hints of shadiness.

A dinner at the Moulin Rouge with Dr. and Mrs. M.

That evening, we were going to have dinner with Dr. M. and his wife at the Moulin Rouge. After getting back to our hotel, I changed into a dress and Yo into a suit, and we headed to the famous cabaret, located in the heart of the entertainment and red-light district in the Montmartre area. Getting off the Métro Line 2 at Blanche, we came up right in front of the house of entertainment.



We already had tickets so we did not have to get into the long line outside for last-minute tickets like so many other tourists. But since seating is not prepared in advance, it is important to know how this works. You present your electronic ticket at the entrance and while the maître d' is looking at the seating chart, you need to slip him a couple of bills to get good seats. Even for the same class of tickets, there are good and not-so-good seats. Once you get your general seat assignment, you will be shown inside by an usher who seems to be able to decide where exactly to seat you in the area you have been assigned. A little more cash secures you the best seats available.

The dinner show was a combination of a Las Vegas show and something out of the Takarazuka Revue (a musical theater troupe in Japan). After getting to our

seats at 6:50 p.m., we were promptly served our dinner. The pre-show band performance was already on, with the show proper beginning at

*The real value of our
€420 tickets was not only
in the performance itself but also
in the professionalism of the staff.*

8:00 p.m. and running until 11:00 p.m. It is easy to imagine being sufficiently entertained for a good four hours from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. there.

Our class of combined dinner and show tickets for prime seats cost a whopping €420 each, which seemed rather extravagant, but we were not disappointed. Entertaining was clearly their business and they knew it inside out. We were kept engaged the whole time and the dinner was unexpectedly delectable. I was honestly quite surprised that it was a real full-course dinner. Why? Because dinners included with shows are usually mediocre at best. On top of that, the service was very professional and did not leave us feeling annoyed as is so often the case in restaurants. The hawk-eyed manager kept close watch over his staff, leaving absolutely no room for blunders. The waiters were attentive even to the most trifling problems and were always on hand to immediately respond to guests' requests. I must not forget to note that all of this was done in the most discreet manner. If the performers and producers of the show are at the height of professionalism in entertainment, the staff are no less admirable for their expertise.

It was past midnight when we got back to our room. We had to cross the Seine somewhere since the Moulin Rouge was on the right bank and our hotel on the left bank.

The Seine River



Paris Day 5

The Musée de l'Orangerie is one of a handful of museums open on Mondays. Bordering Place de la Concorde, the museum is accessible by both subway and bus.

But before we could head to the museum, we had to exchange money as we were running low on euros. Thinking that we would be able to exchange money at any bank in Paris, we first headed to a branch of the BNP Paribas bank. Walking up to a window, I asked in English if we could exchange Japanese yen for euros. Without a word, the teller handed me a form to fill out. Thinking that this is how people exchange money in France, I was about to take that form when a middle-aged woman next to me suddenly said, "Non!" and started to say something in a stern tone to the teller. Turning to me, she said, "You cannot exchange money at the bank. You have to go to a currency exchange office."

We decided to go to the Musée de l'Orangerie on our fifth day in Paris

I could not exchange my money at BNP Paribas.

I was completely taken aback by her words, spoken so matter-of-factly. "You really cannot exchange money at the bank in France? That 'currency exchange office' — is there one nearby? Where should we go?" I asked, already half-panicked.

"Unfortunately, there is no currency exchange office nearby," the woman replied.

"Even if it is not nearby, we need to get to one because we are running out of euros. Can you please tell me where we should go?" I asked.

"Near the entrance to Métro Line 4 here, there is a bus stop. Take a bus to Montparnasse, about a 20-minute ride."

“Pardon? I don’t understand. Did you say Montparnasse? Oh, Montparnasse. Huh? Montparnasse? Is it near the bus stop?” I fumbled, my panic level audibly rising.

“Yes, there are many exchange offices near the bus stop so you should be able to find one easily,” she reassured me.

“It’s 20 minutes, correct? By car?” I tried to confirm, getting instructions mixed up.

“No, by bus,” she explained patiently.

Thanks to the help offered by this thoughtful woman, we were able to get to Montparnasse and exchange our yen for some badly needed euros. There were two key takeaways from this experience. One is that currency exchange is not done in banks but rather in special booths or tiny offices that do only currency exchange. The other, very important lesson we learned is that the English spoken even in semi-official places like banks with strict security and educated employees can be dubious. When I saw the form that had been extended to me, I quickly assumed that all I had to do was to fill out the form and that I would be able to easily exchange money at the bank. I do not know what we would have done had the kind woman nearby not cut in to come to my rescue, first by scolding the bank teller (“That’s not what she is asking for. She wants to know if she can exchange Japanese yen here.”) and then patiently explaining to me where I can get euros and how to get to this place.

There are lots of people in Paris who speak English well, and often-times, how well someone speaks English has very little to do with the job that he or she might have. A prime example: the bank teller did not understand me. But there are random passengers on the subway or taxi drivers who speak English not just well, but really very fluently. You need to be careful when you hear someone say “oui” back to you. It does not always mean that the person has understood what you were saying. There are people who say “oui” even if the answer is actually “non”. Come to think of it, you might come across this latter scenario quite often.

With the exchange complete, we were ready to head to the Musée de l’Orangerie. We wanted to take the subway from Montparnasse to Place de la Concorde, but we were not sure which route was best. Yo and I

were debating our options with a map spread out between us when a very elegantly dressed elderly lady, probably near or in her 80s, came up to us with a warm smile asking, "Where would you like to go? Do you need any help?"

"We want to go to the Orangerie Museum," I said. But to my surprise, the lady looked at me, very puzzled, and said, "Sorry? Pardon?" My pronunciation of "orangerie" must have been completely wrong. I tried my best to imitate the French pronunciation, saying things like "oranje," "aranje," and "aranjeeh," but it made her only more puzzled. I could not make myself understood and there was a look of serious confusion on her face. Getting increasingly more distressed, I tried to say, "Picture, museum, drawing, famous art, Monet... um... Concorde, Tuileries," but none of these words made any sense to her. My pronunciation was obviously totally off.

It was at this point that Yo came to us. He talked to her in French, then I heard her ask, "Concorde?" to which Yo excitedly said, "Ah, yes!" Finally, we were able to make ourselves understood.

She suggested that we take Bus No. 94 which goes straight to the Place de la Concorde. She showed us to the bus stop at Montparnasse, and pointing to a map, showed us where to get off. She did not forget to remind us to press the red button for our stop. She had suggested the bus so that we could look out the window

A bus lets you enjoy a nice view of the city scenery.

and enjoy a nice view of the bustling city scenery. And she was right.



On both the subway and bus networks, a regular single ride ticket allows us to travel for 90 minutes with unlimited transfers even from a subway to a bus and vice versa. We decided to use the bus more from here



on so that we could enjoy the view out the window as we traveled. It seemed to be a more popular option among the locals as well.

The Musée de l'Orangerie is at one corner of the Tuileries Garden, facing the Place de la Concorde. Located in a prime spot, we could see both the Arc de Triomphe down the Champs-Élysées and the Eiffel

*Musée de l'Orangerie,
in the Tuileries Garden,
by the Place de la Concorde,
with views of Arc de Triomphe
and the Eiffel Tower*

Tower on the other side of the Seine River. The Musée de l'Orangerie is best known for Monet's Water Lilies cycle, but they have a trove of other Impressionist and Expressionist masterworks including those by Franz Marc.

The Centre Pompidou is just a ten-minute subway ride from the Musée de l'Orangerie, and both museums are right near their respective subway stops. Though not as well known as the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay, the Centre Pompidou has its fair share of paintings and other artworks. The six floors above ground comprise the museum portion of Centre Pompidou and the underground floors house a library and a media center, used by students and other locals dressed in everyday clothes as well as business suits. You can eat at the restaurant on the top floor or in the café and food stalls here and there throughout the

building. Unlike the other museums we visited, the café here seemed to be filled mostly with locals on their way home from work. At 8:00 p.m., it was still as bright as day, and with its reasonable prices and tasty offerings, it made sense that it was not just tourists enjoying a bite there.



By 6:30 p.m., the Centre Pompidou was quite deserted. For people looking for a little respite from the hustle and bustle of the city, it is an excellent place for a break. From the corridors

Centre Pompidou: an excellent place for a breather

on the top floor, we could enjoy spectacular views of the city including what remained of the Notre Dame Cathedral after the fire in mid-April.

At this time of the year, daylight hours are already quite long in Paris, a city located at a higher latitude in the northern hemisphere than where we come from. 8:00 p.m. is still long before sunset. It begins to get a little dark around 9:00 and that is when we finally feel like cooking dinner.

The next day, the 30th, we were scheduled to travel on the TGV to the south. We had been planning on packing our things and getting to sleep early but after a long day enjoying the Musée de l'Orangerie and the Centre Pompidou, it was already midnight when we finally hit the hay.

On this particular evening, our main goal was to clear out the refrigerator. I

A grocery mixup: yogurt vs. cream

sautéed some mushrooms with butter, added a little cream, and seasoned everything with a dash of soy sauce. Why cream? Well... Because of my

inability to read French, I made a little mistake getting groceries at the supermarket. Completely convinced that I had grabbed a container of plain yogurt, I bought a container of cream instead. Even after opening the package and trying a spoonful, I still thought that it was a super-rich, thick yogurt. Looking at the package for the first time, Yo told me that it was cream, not yogurt. Oh, really... So that is how we came to have a container of cream in the refrigerator. But with a little improvisation, we could enjoy a tasty fusion dinner.

The Tuileries Garden



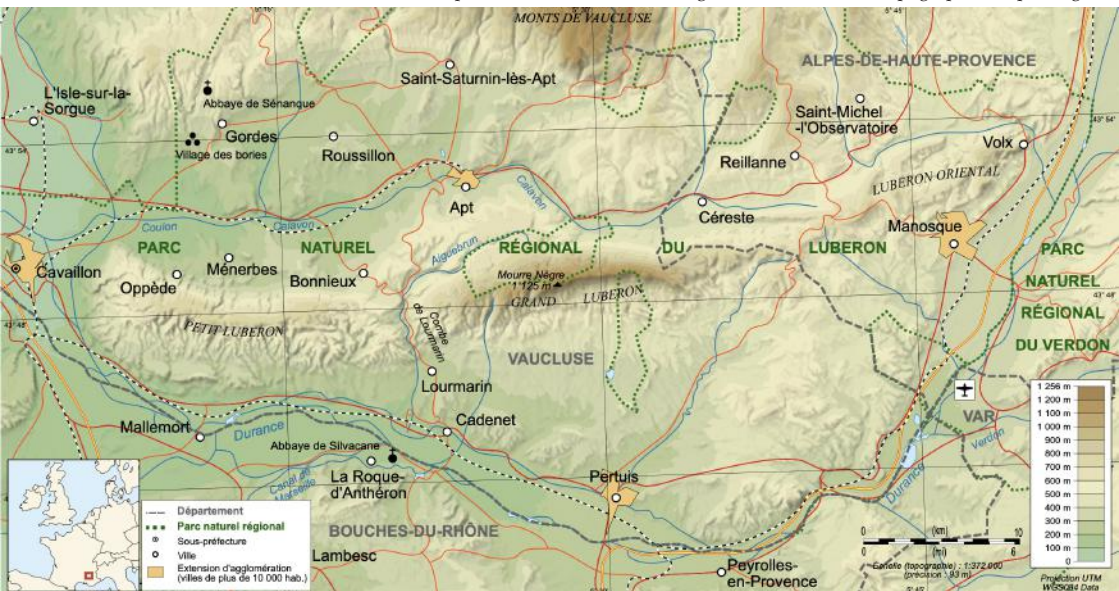
Roussillon

The particular train station you need to go to within Paris depends on your destination, so we checked our departure point and went to Gare de Lyon, Hall 2. Living up to its reputation for being one of the most reliable rail services in Europe, our TGV departed exactly on time.

On April 30, we headed to Gare de Lyon for a TGV to Avignon.

At the entrance to the platform, we had to scan the barcode on our e-tickets, either printed or on our mobile phones. There were lots of nice cafés and even a Monoprix at the station and there were also meals available on board. We saw many passengers, popping into these places to grab a coffee and a sandwich. As for ourselves, we had packed lunch for the trip using what we had left of the baguette, butter, cheese, ham, smoked salmon, lettuce, and tomatoes.

The Luberon Valley: Roussillon and Gordes in the northwest
 Topographic and administrative map in French of Luberon (Wikimedia Commons)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luberon_topographic_map-fr.svg



We left Paris at 8:30 a.m. and arrived in Avignon three hours later. Our plan was to get a rent-a-car there and drive to Roussillon. Since we had eaten sandwiches on the train, I thought that we were good to go when we arrived in Avignon, but Yo, upon seeing freshly baked bread being carried out of the oven at a station café, exclaimed, “Ooh, there’s our lunch!” The café had glass windows where you could see the bread being made in the kitchen. People with long transfer times seemed to be lounging in the café, getting some work done on their laptops.

*Everything is fresher and tastier
the farther you go from Paris.*

I can say with confidence that the bread served in Parisian restaurants popular with tourists was never very good. If you want scrumptious

bread, you need to get out of cities. And it is not just bread. Butter, cheese, ham, vegetables, fruit — everything is fresher and tastier the farther away you travel from Paris.

A Novel Challenge: Driving in France

We got our car at the Hertz in front of the Avignon station. We had reserved a car for €293 for five days, but after being persuaded to add GPS (€50) and emergency road assistance (€31), the total came out to €374. It was an amazingly straight route from Avignon to Roussillon, with just one left turn right before Roussillon where we turned into a



winding road that led to the mountains. It was manageable even for the two of us who were new to driving in Europe.

I say, “manageable” because we were not used to driving on the right-hand side in a car with the steering wheel on the left-hand side. In Japan, we have left-hand traffic and the steering wheel is on the right-hand side. The exact opposite of what they have in France and most other Western countries. What struck us most was that *you cannot turn left or right wherever you wish*. In Japan, you can turn at any point on the road as long as you turn on your blinkers. But in France, you need to use designated lanes for turning, which are located mostly at intersections. If, while driving along the road on the right-hand side, your destination — a parking lot or a store — is on the left-hand side of the road, you need to go to the next rotary or traffic light, turn around there, and drive back to where you wanted to go. We were flustered for at least a half hour, trying to get used to this rule.

Another challenge was maneuvering the rotary, something we had never seen before. In Japan, there are no rotaries. Wherever roads meet, there is a traffic light and a formal intersection. What shocked us even more was the idea of a two-lane rotary. Figuring out where and how to get off the rotary was a major source of vexation for us.

On the kinds of provincial roads we used, everyone drives near 100 kph. When they want to overtake a car in front, they go even faster, probably around 120 kph. All of that on a road that has a speed limit of 90 kph. Our GPS kept on warning us every time we went above 90 kph, but looking around, no one was really following the rules. Unless driving around a rotary, everyone keeps on driving straight at close to 120 kph. No one so much as imagines that the driver in front might suddenly step on the brakes and turn left or right. That is simply unthinkable in France because you *must* use the rotaries, but in Japan, people slow down and turn everywhere and it is perfectly legal. In France, you go straight and only straight. I came to feel that the rule of slowing down and changing directions only at a rotary is logical and reasonable in places with very few traffic signals, like areas outside city limits.

With the help of our portable WiFi and Google Maps, we managed to arrive at our destination without much ado. Since we were using Google Maps in Japanese, the spoken directions were in Japanese. But

the street names are naturally in French, and because all the signage on the actual roads is in French, you need to be able to read simple words and know how they are pronounced. Looking back, we did not need to rent a GPS with our car since it was only in French. It was completely useless to us.

It was some time after noon when we arrived in Roussillon. It was just a one-hour drive from Avignon. There were pastures, wheat fields, vineyards, and fields of flowers as far as the eye could see. Lavender fields dotted the landscape everywhere. We had started to get weary of the hustle and bustle of Paris so we were genuinely moved by the countryside that surrounded us all around. "Wow. This is Provence! Amazing! It's so good that we came!"

Provence: Pasture, Vineyards, Lavender

Roussillon is a medieval village situated atop a hill famous for its red-dish ochre deposits. Despite it still being lunchtime when we arrived at our hotel, there were tourists wherever we looked. It was the same at 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening with tourists enjoying their relaxing dinner, but once they had all left, the village became very quiet and peaceful under the stars. We were to spend two days here.



Le Clos de la Glycine

We found our hotel, Le Clos de la Glycine, on the Internet. The fact that it came up early in the search results points to its popularity among Japanese travelers. It is located in the middle of the village, near a bus stop, ATM, and a post office, next to a butcher shop and within a stone's throw of a *tabac* shop and the only supermarket. This is all there is of the village.



The terrace of the restaurant at our hotel had the best view in town. The hotel itself is built on the side of a hill, as if sculpted into a steep valley, and the terra cotta terrace of the restaurant juts out even further, affording us a spectacular view of the illuminated cliffs. A magnificent view indeed.

The Restaurant David at the hotel is featured in the 2019 Michelin Guide. The chef's "Menu Back from the Market", a full-course dinner with the freshest ingredients, was €38. Michelin recognition aside, we were captivated even more by the breakfast offered every morning on the same terrace. The bread, butter, and cheese were simple yet delectable. The milk was silky and sweet. We were glad we had made plans to stay here for two nights. In the midst of inns and souvenir shops on cobblestone streets dating back to medieval times are ordinary homes. Elderly people can be seen walking up and down the hill, sitting and





Restaurant David, listed in the Michelin Guide

chatting all day in the square in front of the church. There are cats and dogs peacefully napping here and there. If you look carefully, you might see a small, weathered wooden door hidden along a narrow stone stair alley. Beyond that little gate and other little doors in little crevices and landings are ordinary homes where people lead their quiet lives.

If you walk around the village in the early morning hours or at dusk after all the tourists have left, you can see the real, everyday lives of the people. The misty rooftops in the faint light of dawn, or the stone steps slippery with the morning dew, or the stone walls wrapped in purplish haze at sundown were all sights we could savor only by staying in Roussillon. Around 6:00 a.m., the village would slowly start to come to life.

The majority of the inhabitants are elderly. In the morning hours, they walk to the bakery next to the tabac store, or slowly make their way down the slopes, carefully carrying a baguette home for breakfast. Even the butcher's is open early, and we spotted a number of people stepping under the awning to place their orders. While walking past several elderly people walking their dogs, I

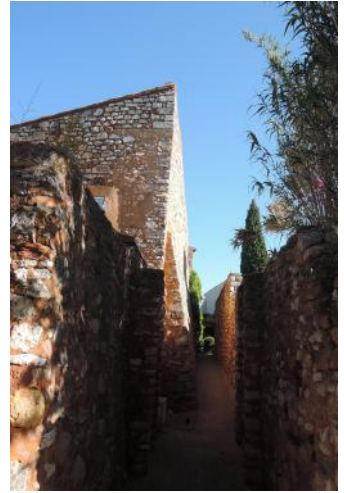
The wee hours of the morning: a quiet time for villagers to walk their dogs and cats.

said simple hellos to them.



It was here that I saw an old lady walking a cat for the first time. Even cats go on walks. Just like the people here, the cats are also elderly. The cat walked alongside the elderly lady, sometimes sidling up to her, sometimes wandering off, rubbing its stomach against the wall here and there, and just

generally keeping company until it had walked far enough and had decided to make its own way home. The elderly lady, for her part, kept on walking with her dog to the bakery. After getting a baguette, she stopped to chat with a friend for a while, and then started making her way back. The cat had gone home another way, and was waiting for her in front of the house, lazily reaching out to its food bowl by the entrance a few times, as if to say, "Nothing yet..." As soon as the lady gets home with her dog, she probably puts something in that bowl for the cat. I called to the cat, trying to get its attention, but all I got was a perfunctory look, after which the creature lay down on a shady spot to continue its wait for the lady and some breakfast.



Nîmes

On the morning of May 1, after saying good-bye to the cats we had spotted the day before, we made our way to Nîmes. There are still monuments dating back to its period as a regional capital of the Roman Empire. The Arena of Nîmes, an amphitheater, is one such monument. From there to the church is just a few minutes on foot. There is public parking under the amphitheater and the exit leads directly to the tourist office.

A taste of the Roman Empire



The Gardon River

A 30-minute drive away from Nîmes is the Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct bridge crossing the Gardon River.

We wanted to climb to the top of the famed aqueduct, so we walked along a dirt road for some 10 minutes. When we got near the top, we realized that the entrance was locked. It is open year-around, seven days a week, but the hours are adjusted according to the season, and if you want to walk along the top tier, you need to join a guided tour for which you need to make an advance reservation. Individual tourists are not allowed up on the top tier on their own.

The hiking course from the top of the aqueduct leading into the nearby hills were dotted with teenage boys wearing scout uniforms, carrying camping gear and tents. Along the hillside, flowers were beginning to bloom. Soon the whole hillside would be covered with gorgeous flowers.

In Nîmes, there were French people, of course, but a fair number of people from neighboring countries like Italy or Spain, all speaking fluent French. They had come to vacation on the Gardon River with their families.

On the Gardon River, people were riding on canoes and diving 10 meters down into the river from the river bank. Just as soon as you thought they had jumped down, you could see them clambering up the bank to leap into the river once more, and over and over again. On the banks of the river, there were camping cars and next to them, parasols and tables where people were enjoying family picnics.

This is how people spend their days off. In the EU, it is so easy to go across country borders now that movement of people and goods is free.

Pont du Gard: a popular weekend outing spot

Still, we were amazed at the number of families on vacation in their camping cars. There were also a lot of regular cars and motorcycles as well as families with their canine friends.

It was so much more fun and refreshing than Paris. What a wonderful feeling of freedom!

Dogs came often to me, sniffing around my feet. When I talked to them in Japanese, they seemed to enjoy the attention and kept on fol-





lowing me. Seeing their dogs so attracted, their owners would start talking to me in English. Somehow, with a mishmash of Japanese, French, and canine tongue, all of us, including the dogs, were able to communicate.

Upon getting back to Roussillon after 5:00 p.m., we wanted to park in the hotel parking lot. We saw that the village was filled with tourists everywhere. Of course, it was May Day in Europe. The combination of narrow streets, the location of the parking lot — right on a corner of the only intersection in the village with a traffic light — and the throngs of tourists made the task an extremely daunting one. The streets were narrow cobblestone streets. It would have been easy to slip on the stones while trying to park and run someone over. We had been so careful about driving up until here. We did not want to be careless and have an accident with a tourist. But it was so possible. Probable, even. *Careful, careful, was all that was going through our minds.* That was how popular this village was. There must have easily been three or four times more tourists than inhabitants. Parking was one major ordeal, essentially maneuvering the car just inches away from the bulging line of tourists. It

was only after 9:00 p.m. that the usual stillness and peace returned to the village.

Now, about the driving. At first, both Yo and I were sticklers for the rules. But there were times when, driving according to the car GPS, we were a second too late making turns. It was a series of those all-too-common “We should have turned there!” or “Oh, we missed it!” moments. The GPS navigation — being a mere GPS and not a human mind — would tell us to drive to the next exit or to the next rotary, turn around, and come back to try again. In the countryside, that often meant big detours.

An abundance of “Oh, we missed it!” moments leading to U-turns anywhere and anytime

Reconsidering the situation, it was quite obvious that where we were — in the middle of nowhere, not in the downtown area of some bustling tourist destination — there was hardly any traffic. Not a car in sight to the left or the right. Not a single pair of eyes looking our way. When there is no danger and no one is looking, would it be wrong to



make a U-turn and go back to the rotary that we just got off of? If we could do that, we would be saving ourselves a lot of trouble. There were quite a few of these instances. We eventually mustered the boldness to take that liberty and make a U-turn. One U-turn turned into another, and before long, we were making U-turns anywhere and anytime it was safe to get us back onto the right road.

All around us as we drove was the countryside, with fields and pastures stretching as far as the eyes could see. Those were maybe wheat, grapes, olives, and sometimes grazing land. There were very few houses, but every now and then, we would see a tiny hamlet in the distance. Provence seemed to be a very well-maintained region. My belief that agriculture is the most important industry in France was confirmed again and again. If you drive through the countryside, you would think so, too.

The further we drove, the more sparsely populated the area became and the more delicious bread, cheese, and butter tasted to us.

The fruit was fresh and delightful. After spending five days in the capital, we were constantly impressed by the flavors and freshness of everything in the countryside. Near a large orchard, there was a farm stand by the side of the road where locals would get out of their cars to fill a basket full of fruits. You could see that everything had just been picked, not to mention truly tree-ripened, in beautiful shades of red, pink, and yellow. We were so happy to have escaped Paris. We could feel laughter and pure joy resonating in our stomachs. Onward we go!

10

Gordes

We left Roussillon to head to the nearby village of Gordes, only a 15-minute (12 km) drive away on the D2 road. We were going to stay overnight in this picturesque village often included among the “most beautiful villages” in France. Since we wanted to enjoy the quiet of Gordes before the throngs of tourists made their way there, we left Roussillon soon after breakfast, arriving shortly past 9:00 a.m.

*On May 2, we visited
Gordes, a medieval village
recreated by the Morands*

The village church and other old buildings were all destroyed during World War II and the village had been more or less abandoned. It was the Morands who began work on restoring the village in the 1950s, completing their revival of medieval atmosphere in the 1980s. It must have taken considerable investment of both time and personal money, but the fruits of their efforts are now available for all to enjoy.

That said, we had seen all there was to see by 11:00 a.m. I prefer to look into everything in detail, inspecting every historical fact, observing



everything not just once but a few times, so it was in this fashion that I toured the village two and a half times. By the middle of my third round though, I had become tired of the artificially recreated medieval village.

“Let’s go somewhere else! I think we’ve had enough of Gordes. We’ve seen everything there is to see.” I suggested, and that was how we began our adventure to Aix-en-Provence. Since the city was a mere hour away on the A7 and A8 highways, we still had more than enough time to do the trip.



*The charm of Gordes
quickly wore off.
Time to go somewhere else.*

Driving on the highways is very easy. As long as you do not make mistakes getting on or off, it is the fastest and easiest way to get to your destination. Regardless of where you stay in Provence, you can easily get to Nice or Cannes or Marseilles. The only drawback to using the highway is that you miss the chance of driving through charming medieval villages that are almost too small to even appear on the map. It is a tradeoff between time efficiency and serendipitous discovery.

The Joy of Stopping at Rest Areas

We stopped at a rest area en route and found the experience unexpectedly interesting. The shops and café carried regional specialities and products and just looking at people taking a break, each family in its own way, was intriguing. Of course, the main purpose of stopping at such a rest area is to get gas. Who knows where the next gasoline stand will be on our side of the highway. Filling up the car is just as important as taking a bathroom break.

Aix-en-Provence

Aix-en-Provence is an hour from Gordes if you take the highway. Here, Roman remains and somewhat newer historical buildings abound. We passed a fashionable middle-aged Asian couple who looked to be seasoned travelers from Taiwan or Korea — the first Asian people we came across since leaving Paris. Our eyes naturally met. When you see someone from your own part of the world, you notice.

*A vital city, both politically
and economically*

The city, in spite of its modest size, fulfills its role as a local hub of various industries while serving as the strategic political heart of southern France. The modern part of the city, with its ubiquitous business and residential towers, encircles the medieval old town, and in the center of the old town is a parking tower that extends five levels below ground. That was where we parked.

We took the elevator up to the ground level to be met by an ultra-modern shopping mall, called Les Allées, smack in the middle of the old



city. The majority of the retail stores catered to the younger generation with brands like Zara or H&M in addition to a plethora of boutiques featuring high-end designers. From the air of brisk business that we could feel and see, it seemed like the economy here was in good health. Everyone looked polished and fashionable, almost to the point of eclipsing the Parisians. There was a tourist center in the same square as the mall. We went inside, took a map of the city, and walked around on foot for some two hours. It appeared to us that the economy here was more grand in scale and bustling than in Nîmes. There were locals lounging in cafés or sitting on park benches, enjoying the warm spring sunshine.

The Hôtel de Caumont, formerly a private residence that was used for various other purposes over the years, now serves as a cultural center for Aix-en-Provence. The day we went, we were extremely lucky as the special exhibit entitled *Masterpieces from the Guggenheim Foundation*, featuring Impressionist works from the Guggenheim Museum in New York, had just opened. We saw paintings by Cézanne (he had a studio in Aix-en-Provence that is now a museum), van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Monet, Manet, Matisse, Seurat, and others as well as bronze sculptures by Degas, not to mention

*The Guggenheim in France:
a homecoming of sorts*

that the building itself is a historical gem surrounded by a most charming garden. That even a small museum as this, where we just happened to stop by while walking around the city, can house such a spectacular collection of Impressionist paintings signifies the cultural prowess and influence that is embodied by French Impressionism.



It was 2:30 p.m., then soon 6:00 as we enjoyed ourselves at the museum and walked around the city. We decided to head back to Gordes along mountainous local roads, which turned out to be a perfect

decision. We drove through quaint little villages and old castles nestled in small valleys among the mountains.

If we had taken the highway or some other major road, we would not have known about these medieval villages and brick castles. Feeling inspired, we decided to visit these off-the-map villages on our next trip as we continued to drive in awe through these hamlets.



Practically speaking, however, to enjoy these chance encounters with medieval villages, you need to avoid the highways and major roadways, and be bold enough to zip through roads so minor — narrow roads that zigzag up and down through the mountains — that they barely make it into the GPS system. The whole time we were crossing the mountains,

*The urge to visit places
not even on the map*

we had to drive along numerous sharp turns — genuine hairpin curves — closely followed from behind by local drivers who knew the terrain inside out. Whether maneuvering a sharp curve or driving through an especially narrow section, they never bothered to slow down. If we drove at 70 kph, they would be driving right behind us, unintentionally putting pressure on us to go faster. Whether it was legal to drive so fast along those roads is questionable. We felt so hurried by the local drivers behind us that we were easily going at 100 kph, maybe even faster.

Contrary to the ease of the highway that we enjoyed getting to Aix-en-Provence, it was an exhausting drive back to Gordes. This was a major test of our alertness and skills, even for Yo, who had once dreamed of becoming a professional car racer, and me, a doctor by profession who is used to making crucial decisions in a split second. When we got out of the car in the hotel parking lot, our heads were swimming, our knees were wobbly, and it was all we could do to just stand up. *No wonder this is the land of 24 Hours of Le Mans. There are fearless potential racecar drivers everywhere.*

A Village Nestled in the Luberon Valley of Provence

The narrow roads that meander through the Luberon Valley are all paved and maintained well. It would certainly make for a delightful ride through the valleys on a bicycle or motorcycle on a sunny spring day.

There are fields of flowers growing along the slopes as well as little patches of vegetation clinging to the face of the cliffs. Hamlets dot the scene here and there and walking into a tabac store — a cottage with floors and walls made of stone, topped with impressive timber framing — would be like stepping back in time to the Middle Ages.

*A cycling trip might be
the way to go next time.*

We saw a group of cyclists settling down for the day at an inn in one of these villages. Having bought some milk, vegetables, and fruit at a tabac store or maybe a small grocery store, and ham and dried sausage at a butcher, they were now sitting on the stone steps along the side of the street eating sandwiches. Cyclists were everywhere all along the valley, often parking their bicycles along the wall of a castle. While driving along the meandering mountainous roads, we also saw a few camping cars with bicycles attached to the rear. Looking at them, we became convinced that we should cycle through villages like these on our next trip.

We saw a group of cyclists settling down for the day at an inn in one of these villages. Having bought some milk, vegetables, and fruit at a tabac store or maybe a small grocery store, and ham and dried sausage at a but-

Cyclists in Roussillon



Driving here and there, stopping wherever we feel like to ride around on our bicycles.

In addition, there seemed to be a cohort of motorcyclists riding through these villages on a frequent basis. In every one of the hamlets we visited, we saw motorcycles parked somewhere while their owners explored the village. All at once, Yo became enthusiastic about the idea of traveling around Europe on a motorcycle. Perhaps the idea was not completely new to Yo. After all, his father had taken him on rides around the countryside on his BMW motorcycle some half a century ago.

Gordes



Avignon

The following day, May 3, we headed to Marseille. Our plan was to return our car at Avignon station and to take the TGV to Marseille. When we got to Avignon, it was still 9:30 a.m. We had plenty of time to spare until the TGV departure time of 11:30. We decided on the spur to visit the fortress and castle of Palais des Papes before returning the car.

*On May 3, we went from
Gordes to Avignon to Marseille*

In most cases, there are parking lots directly below tourist attractions, but the entrances are rather difficult to find, making you wholly dependent on your car GPS. But if your GPS is a split second too late pointing out the entrance, you will miss it and end up circling around the crowded old town in search of another entrance or trying to find your way back to the entrance you missed. That is exactly what happened to us as we

*When driving in the old town
of any place in France, the most
challenging part is finding parking.*

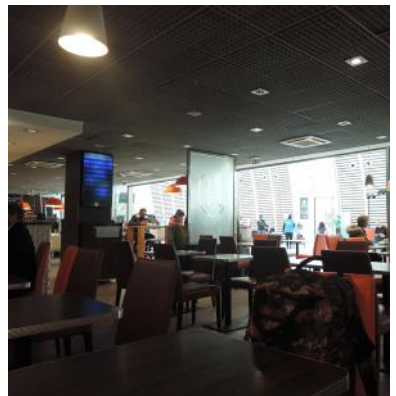
approached Palais des Papes. The pedestrian exit from the enormous parking garage leads you directly to the entrance to what was once a papal residence in the 14th century. The parking costs €1.20 for an hour, or €5.00 for 3 hours.

After walking around the Palais des Papes for a while, we headed back to the station to return the car at Hertz. In the time we had until the train departed for Marseille, we



sat down at a café for some brunch. For two café au laits, a baguette sandwich, a smoked salmon sandwich, and a chocolate chip cookie, we paid a whopping €22.70. The cookie alone cost €3.60. Isn't that outrageously overpriced?

We had our e-tickets for the TGV fare and seat reservations ready to present to the conductor during the entire 30-minute ride to Marseille, but no one came to check. Unlike Paris, we were able to get onto the TGV platform without scanning our e-ticket anywhere. It struck us as a little odd, but that was the way it was.



Marseille



The Staycity Apartment Hotel

In Marseille, we stayed at the Staycity apartment hotel directly above the Colbert subway station. The kitchen was fully equipped, allowing us to indulge in our penchant for preparing dinner in our hotel room. During the two days that we stayed in Marseille, we came across a group of Chinese tourists. They came on tour buses, got off to take pictures of each other in front of a famous site, and promptly got back on their busses to immediately go to another destination. What we did not see were Japanese tourists. Perhaps because of its reputation for being rather unsafe among tourists from Japan, Marseille might be eschewed more often than not. We had heard those rumors too, but we decided to come anyway and were not disappointed.



There was a most singular, almost exotic atmosphere in Marseille that was worlds away from the other parts of France that we had seen. It was a perfect melting pot of North African, Arabian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian cultures. I immediately fell in love with the chaos and excitement of the Mediterranean city. For some reason, I had a feeling that the Argentine tango would be perfect for a place like this. But if we had not taken plenty of safety precautions sightseeing in

this exotic city, we might have very well become a statistic like so many other tourists before us.

There are Asian fruit stands, markets, and restaurants everywhere, apparently owned by Southeast Asian immigrants. We heard Indo-Chinese languages and of course French and Arabic, but English was not a language we heard being spoken on the streets. Nonetheless, when occasion called for it, people could

An exotic and chaotic atmosphere

speaking English well enough to accomplish what needed to be done. In Marseille, it seemed as if most people could speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue. If I seemed flustered by the fast-paced French coming at me, they would immediately switch to English and we would be able to communicate just fine. English was the lingua franca

between locals and tourists from beyond the Mediterranean.



What struck us first and foremost about Marseille was that every dish we tried was delicious, perhaps because of the multicultural culinary blend here. There were few posh, tradi-

tional French items on menus. Instead, we had a wide range of cooking styles to choose from, including the classic bouillabaisse as well as Moroccan, Tunisian, and even Spanish.

*An excellent place
for gourmands: a truly
Mediterranean cuisine*

We tried the pizza that the men working in the port were eating for lunch. It was a flavorful whole pie of pizza with a chewy, thick crust and hot, melted cheese on top. Especially appealing to us was the seasoning. We ate the €10 pie in one go. In Marseille, there is no need to get fancy to enjoy a good meal.

The next remarkable thing about Marseille was the vitality of the city, bustling with people from all over. Up above was the sun, shining brightly upon the city, tempered only by the breeze from the Mediterranean.

*The sun shone brightly upon us,
tempered only by the breeze
from the Mediterranean.*

It was here in Marseille that we hired a personal tour guide for the first time. Until now, in Paris or Aix-en-Provence, we had not felt the slightest need for a tour guide to help us navigate our way. Most French people we encountered spoke English, and when necessary, Yo's French was enough to help us get by. But since we had heard some not-so-nice rumors about this southern port city, I — being the worrywart that I am — had gone online to book a personal tour guide who could speak English.

We were greeted by Axelle, a sassy 38-year-old Marseille native, who, at €380 for a 3-hour tour, was one of the more expensive guides.

*Our guide, Axelle, a Marseille
native, was going to retire at 40
and travel the world.*

She usually leads groups of 8 or so tourists around the city in Italian or Spanish, but on that day, just the two of us had booked her so we were able to decide on a time slot that

worked best for us. She claimed that at 40, she would stop working and travel the world.

Thanks to her expert knowledge of her hometown, we were able to explore all we wanted of the city on foot in the span of three hours. We



saw the old town and other historical sites, of course, but there were plenty of other places to visit, such as obscure, narrow alleyways that saw their heyday as black market locales and have been decrepit since shortly after the Second World War, or the red-light district — semi-lawless places — that are now turning into artists' villages and something of a tourist attraction in themselves that would really have been a little dangerous for us to visit without a guide who knew her way around.

We had enjoyed traditional French fare for the past two days, savoring full-course dinners prepared by chefs featured in the Michelin Guide (€38 in Roussillon and €49.90 in Gordes). Our stomachs were starting to feel a tad heavy and Yo was wanting a simple dinner of just rice porridge. I agreed that a lighter, Japanese-style dinner was in order for the day, and we went out to get what we needed.

There were small grocery stores everywhere. And right near the hotel was a small outdoor market consisting of a butcher's, a boulangerie, and some greengrocers. Many of them were owned by people from the Middle East or Southeast Asia. Seeing that most things could be procured right there in the vicinity, we decided to do our shopping at the market instead of heading to the local Carrefour.

A long baguette could be gotten for around €0.90, a small block of salted butter for a little over €1, milk for about €2, good quality wine for €4 or €5, and a 500mL bottle of beer for €1.80 to €2.60. We felt that strawberries and other berries were tastier in Provence, but what took our breath away were the oranges of Marseille. They were so juicy and plump and perhaps the best oranges we had ever tasted. Bell peppers were also very sweet. We got water, tea, and rice at the same store and paid a total of about €35. Not a bad deal.

*The most splendid
oranges are in Marseille.*

Causing us a lot of misery was not the price but the weight of it all. What with three bottles of water and three bottles of wine and beer, another big bottle of milk, vegetables, strawberries, oranges, cheese, ham, sausages, butter, and the baguette sticking out of our grocery bags, it was the best we could do to hobble back to our hotel.

Once back at our hotel, I prepared a simple dinner: rice cooked in a pot miso soup with wakame, warm noodles, salted seaweed, and some bonito flakes to sprinkle over the rice. It had really been a good decision to bring powdered soy sauce. Rice was often sold in small pouches so it was easy to prepare even in a pot on an IH cooking stove. Jasmine rice in a small bag was a mere €1.50. I wonder if French people use rice to make desserts. I felt that produce and groceries in general were considerably less expensive than in Paris.

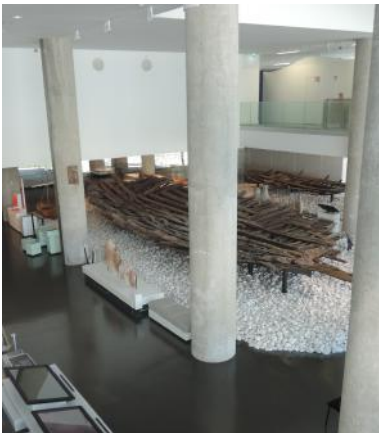
Because of Marseille's location along the southern coast of France, it is 22°C (72°F) here when it is only 5–10°C (40–50°F) in Paris. The sun shines beautifully making it even hotter if you go out into the sun. If you go from the north to the south of France as we did, there can easily be a 10–15 degree difference in temperature (20–25 degrees in Fahrenheit) so the clothes that you wear are also quite different. It was only May but felt very hot already.

*Every so often,
you can ski in Marseille.*

It is another story altogether in the wintertime when gusts of wind can blow snow down from the mountains. Axelle, our guide, told us that every 20 years or so, there are snow storms even in Marseille. It is a very hilly city, so if it snows for two days, roads need to be closed to traffic. And on days like that, people, both young and old, can be seen skiing down the city streets.

Cassis and the Cruise

May 5 was a Saturday, and with the coming of the weekend came a deluge of tourists. They were everywhere around Marseille, coming in droves on double-decker buses that competed with trolleys for space on the narrow cobblestoned streets. They came to sit on a sunny terrace, drinking and eating seafood freshly caught that morning, talking their time away. We decided to head to the Marseille History Museum and the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, built next to a 17th century fortress along the harbor.



The Marseille History Museum is at once a museum and a shopping center. Archaeological finds that surfaced at the time of commercial development of the area are displayed in the underground levels. The permanent exhibit is still a work in progress, currently covering the history of the city up to the 18th century.

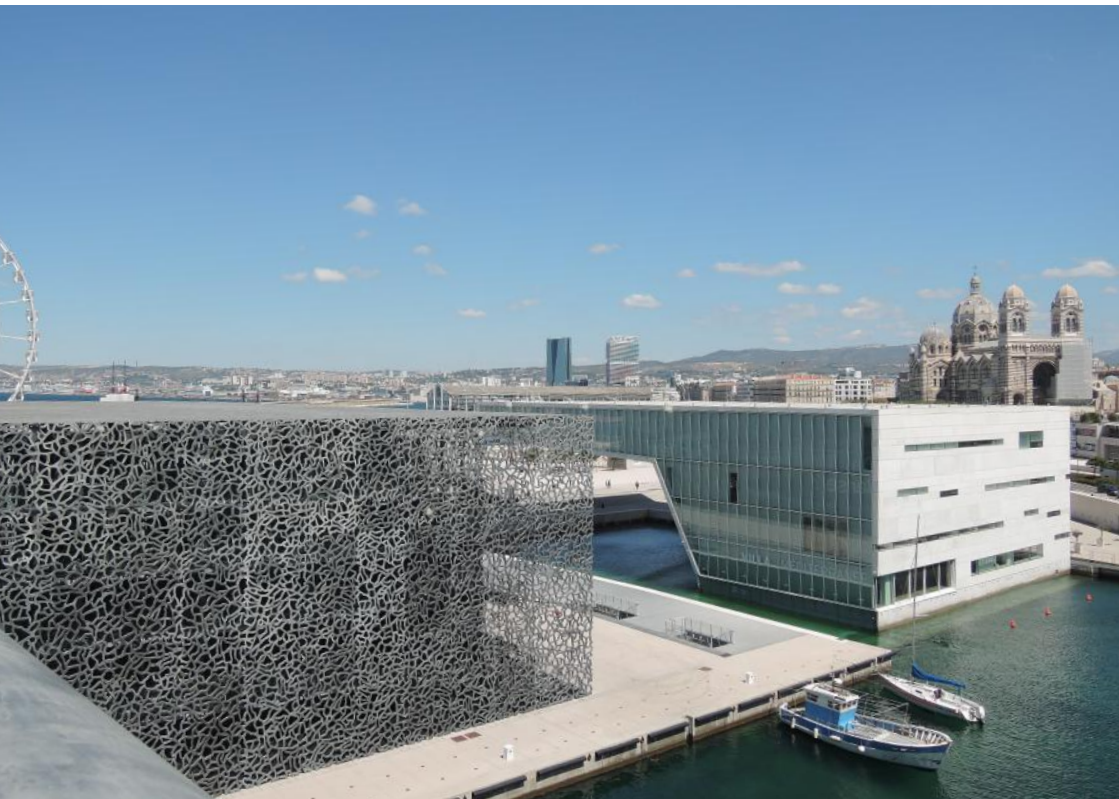
*Part of a shopping center,
the Marseille History Museum
is still a work in progress*

Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations

The site of the museum, known as Mucem (from the French name, *Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée*), is a former fort at the very end of the harbor. Reminiscent of the time in which Marseille was the port of entry to the French Empire, the museum preserves the original appearance of the fortress with a modern addition connected by a high footbridge.

If you stop to look around from the footbridge, you can catch glimpses of the ultramarine sea rippling beneath, and off in the distance, the Marseille Cathedral on one side and the Notre-Dame de la Garde basilica on another, atop a hill. Once inside the museum, if you look out to the sea, you can see Château d'If, the island on which Dantès of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Carlo* was imprisoned. The deep blue hue of the windows further highlight the cobalt sheen of the sea.

*Château d'If: where
Dantès was imprisoned*





From 2:00 to 5:00 p.m., we toured the fishing port of Cassis. Our fellow passengers on the minivan that took us to the port were an American couple from South Carolina and a Canadian couple from Vancouver. We set off on our cruise around the bay, hosted by Rémy, a Marseille native who had grown up in Aix-en-Provence. He never stopped talking even for a moment, keeping us entertained the whole time. The tour was €80 per person, including the roundtrip minivan ride from Marseille.

*The deep blue sea and
white sand beach of Cassis*



We even got a little culinary tip from the talkative Rémy. According to him, the *bouillabaisse* offered in restaurants can easily cost upwards of €80 to €100, but if you say you want to eat *fish soup*, you can get a bowl of an identical soup for €20. Apparently, the two are really one and the same, meaning, *the €100 bouillabaisse is just a tourist scam.*



The port town of Cassis itself is very small, requiring just 30 minutes to explore every nook and cranny. It is called a port town, but its central attraction is the deep blue sea and white sand beach where flocks of French, Italian, and Spanish vacationers come to enjoy swimming and diving. We were a little surprised to see a small Japanese restaurant called Maki Concept in this small town.



What struck us about Marseille was what people were wearing. Near the beach, we saw young women in strapless summer dresses speeding along on skateboards. But away from the water, even in 25°C (77°F) weather, the majority of the people around us were wrapped in down, wool, leather, and even sherpa fleece. As unbelievable and unlikely as it might sound, it was true. At 25°C and baking in the sun. They must be hot, but they clearly have their reasons for it.

There are times when powerful gusts of wind cause temperatures to dip suddenly. It is the kind of wind you might experience during a typhoon, but for Marseille, it is life as usual. It is not only in Marseille, but everywhere in France, that temperatures can easily fluctuate more than 10 degrees (20 degrees in Fahrenheit) during the course of one day. And early mornings are always chilly. Perhaps bundling up is a way for these people to protect themselves from extreme temperature changes. There must also be other reasons as well.

That morning, we saw a number of people carrying large mattresses on top of their heads and rushing to work. There were others who were carrying rolled up sleeping mats on their shoulders. Marseille is one of the largest trading ports in France. Every time a large cargo ship arrives, throngs of men gather to unload the goods. We wondered if they might be migrant workers who worked on the docks by day and made impromptu sleeping arrangements somewhere by night by sleeping on the mats and mattresses they carried around with them. There might be times when they would have to sleep outside or in unheated premises. With morning temperatures dropping to below 10°C (50°F), sometimes as low as 5°C (41°F), having enough clothes to keep warm might be just as important as having a mattress to sleep on. If they are dressed only for the warm and sunny daytime climate, they would never make it through the night in this city.

Lyon

The evening before, it had been warm — on the order of 20°C (68°F) — but when we went outside in the morning, it was a brisk 10°C (50°F). We headed to Lyon on the TGV, leaving Marseille at 8:43 and arriving in Lyon at 10:30.

A two-hour ride to Lyon where we were welcomed by light flurries

When we got off the train in Lyon, I thought that I saw some little white flecks floating around. Could it be snowing? Looking around and up at the sky, I saw that it was indeed flurrying. It had not even gotten cloudy and yet, there

were little flecks of snow dancing around in the air. Sunny skies and flurries. What a strange combination. The miniscule snowflakes notwithstanding, it was fair weather alright. We were very close to the Alps here.



Lyon Museum of Fine Arts

We checked into Mercure Lyon Centre Beaux-Arts, located on the main street of the Old Town. Seeing that the Museum of Fine Arts was open until 6:00 p.m., we headed straight to the museum, one of the largest in France.

A Hamburger at Ninkasi

The Old Town of Lyon runs along the River Saône, bordered on the west by hills and plains to the east. For lunch, we ventured into a hamburger joint in the Old Town. It was actually not a hamburger establishment in the traditional sense but rather one of 18 restaurants that form a chain of brasserie/club establishments called Ninkasi. On the streets along the river, there were numerous bars that served beer, whisky, bourbon, and such starting at lunch hour. Many appeared to feature German beer and wine. We chose one that appeared to be strictly a bar. When we peeked inside, it was already full with locals rowdily drinking beer, but upon seeing us, the bartender heartily motioned for us to come inside and go to the back. We did not think there was any room left, but we walked past the counter overflowing with people and finally made our way to the back, which was dimly lit but very spacious. On Saturday evenings, the tables are all moved to the side, turning the room into a boisterous disco



space where the party goes on all night. We were surprised to see that what we had thought was a bar was actually a nightclub. We had been clueless. The menu was basically just hamburgers from beginning to end. For beverages, there were very few choices besides alcohol. Their salespoint was clearly hamburgers, but their hamburgers were not just ordinary hamburgers. They were thick and juicy, and when paired with a dollop of absolutely divine mustard, a Lyon specialty, it was enough to revitalize even the most tired of souls.

Thanks to the extremely filling hamburger lunch, we were able to scale the Fourvière hill, on top of which sits the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière. To be honest, had we known just how steep and demanding the climb would be, we would most certainly have taken a



bus from the foot of the hill. In fact, Yo hardly made it to the top. With moans of “My heart is about to burst!”, he slowly inched his way up. I gave him a light scolding. “Here, think about it for a moment. On such a steep hill as this, you can’t expect an ambulance to come to your rescue if you suffer a heart attack. Let’s just keep going!” Joking aside, anyone who suffers a medical emergency along those steps probably has very little chance of getting any help.

Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière

From the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, we had a spectacular view of the city below all the way to the hills beyond. Not to mention that the weather was picture perfect. Nearby were the Ancient Theatre of Fourvière, a circular Roman theater, the Lugdunum (formerly known as the Gallo-Roman Museum of Lyon-Fourvière), and a little lower down the hill, the Museum of Textiles (*Musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs*), home to one of the world’s largest textile collections. Lyon has been long famed for its silk-weaving industry.





Gastronomy of Lyon

Lyon, famed also for its gastronomy, lived up to its reputation. We tried a deli popular with office workers not only during lunch hours but in the late afternoons as well. Everything was selling like hot pancakes. We decided to get several kinds of dishes to take back to our hotel for another simple in-room dinner.



Back to Paris

May 6. We were finally going to head back to Paris. Knowing that Paris is always colder than Lyon, I was worried that Yo would freeze in his T-shirt, sweatshirt, and simple waterproof jacket. The low was supposed to be 5–7°C (41–45°F), and here was Yo, still in warmer Lyon, shivering and nearly dying of cold. I was wearing a Uniqlo Blocktech coat and a down jacket on top of a Heattech undershirt and a knit sweater but, what with the frosty strong winds, I still felt quite cold. We had time before the train, so we headed to Zara in the late morning hours to get him something warmer. But try as we might, there was only summer attire to be had. It was flurrying and cold outside, but summer reigned inside. Hoping that a wool sweater or thick coat might be tucked away somewhere, we wandered around but could not find a single piece of wool clothing. No down either. No coats for that matter. And it was not just at Zara. Every men's clothing store (even boutiques) that we tried had only summer clothes on display. If there were a mall or a fast-fashion clothing store nearby, we might be able to find some warmer things in the clearance sections, but there were none within a reasonable distance.

Yo had nothing warm to wear in chilly Paris.

“Why didn't you bring a sweater or a warm coat? Didn't I say again and again that sweaters are a must?” I went on and on. Yo had not imagined that northern France could be cold in May.

“You say, ‘sweaters, sweaters’, but a Uniqlo fleece top is enough for me. Just one. Any style.”

(In the end, we bought a light cotton jacket at Zara. Better than nothing.)

Another, more immediate concern to me was how we would get the keys to the apartment we had booked for our second stay in Paris. The apartment that we had found along the Champs-Élysées was a whole

apartment offered as vacation rental, so we had to get the key from the owner and let ourselves in. I had no idea how we were supposed to get the keys or how to even open the main gate to the building. I had to get in touch with the owner somehow. Even after sending a series of emails, I was still waiting for a word back.

From Lyon Back to Paris

When we got into Lyon from Marseille, we had gotten into Gare de la Part-Dieu, but to get on the TGV to Paris, we had to make our way to Gare de Lyon-Perrache, a little ways from the Part-Dieu station. The TGV from Lyon to Paris was nearly full. Outside, it was pastures and fields as far as the eye could see. There were sheep and cows grazing here and there, wheat fields, and stunningly beautiful ever-extending expanse of yellow. (Were they rapeseed?) We got into Paris-Gare-de-Lyon at exactly 5:00 p.m.



Champs-Élysées

Our taxi took us along the Seine River directly to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. The apartment that we had booked for the next three days was located in an old building facing the famed avenue. We finally succeeded in getting in touch with the owner of the apartment who was not in town. He had left the keys with a clerk of a shop on the first floor who did not know which key was for which lock. We got the keys but could not figure out how the gate worked. Luckily, a resident happened to come home just as we were discussing what to do and let us in.

Blowing the fuse in the apartment along the Champs-Élysées



Old European apartments — those that are easily over a hundred years old — have very high ceilings. They have usually been modernized with electrical wiring and many of these can be found on accommodation booking sites. Ours was one such unit. While cooking on the IH stove and boiling water with an electric kettle, we started the microwave. The next thing we knew, there was

a snap and everything went dark. Uh, oh. We had blown the fuse. Lighting our way around the unfamiliar apartment with a flashlight, we found the circuit breaker box in the back of a closet and flipped the switch back on.

Shopping at Monoprix

We walked to a Monoprix store 3 minutes away to get fish (herring), rice, miso, milk, oranges, pears, lettuce, leek, wine, two bottles of beer, and some water and orange juice. The total came out to about €35. Things were more expensive here back in the city. The Monoprix on Champs-Élysées is like Aeon or Ito-Yokado general merchandise stores in Japan, selling everything from household goods and



clothes to groceries. After two weeks in France eating bread, ham, cheese, and butter, we were starting to crave rice and miso soup. Even after a long day of sightseeing, around 7:00 p.m., we felt more like heading back to our apartment and cooking rather than sitting down at a restaurant somewhere. By this time, we had gotten tired of overpriced touristy restaurants, so getting our own groceries at the supermarket and cooking Japanese-style meals for ourselves was a much more attractive thought.

When we got to the cashier at Monoprix, we were astonished to be greeted in Japanese. It was near-perfect Japanese too. When we asked

***You can learn Japanese
by watching Gundam and
the Fullmetal Alchemist!***

the young lad where he had learned the language, he said, “I taught myself through Japanese manga. I’ve never taken any classes.” He was especially into the *Gundam* series, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *Dororo*. To learn the language

purely out of love for manga... Manga fans can be almost scary in their total devotion to the genre.

We had gone grocery shopping wanting to make miso soup, cook rice, and grill some fresh fish. But at Monoprix, we could only find salted herring or smoked salmon, which would not go well with Japanese cuisine. It would have been ideal if we could have gotten fresh

salmon or halibut at a seafood market nearby or a fishmonger at an outdoor market, but neither were to be found in the vicinity of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. Of course, even if we had been able to get fresh fish at an outdoor market, there was a fair likelihood that we would have to scale and gut the fish ourselves. And since we no longer had a young person's appetite, just one filet each would have been enough. So our best bet was to get whatever we could at Monoprix, soaking it in water to remove the salt, and cooking it Japanese-style from there on. That had been our hope, but in reality, the brine was so concentrated that debrining by soaking in water simply did not work.

Picard

Picard is a supermarket that specializes in frozen foods. There is one along the way going from the Arc de Triomphe to the Eiffel Tower. The entrance is usually small and often inconspicuous, but elderly people often buy frozen meals at Picard and simply microwave them at home, so you can be sure to find one in any downtown area. Actually, it would not surprise me in the least bit to find one next to a Chanel boutique.

At Picard, we bought some whitefish and a block of tuna. We also got a pack of frozen rice, but it was a mistake. It was not the sticky rice we are accustomed to eating in Japan but the fluffy and dry, long grain variety. It would have been perfect for fried rice or paella, or in casseroles, but if you are going to eat it as is, it would be better to forgo the frozen kind and just cook rice the traditional way.

There is virtually nothing that is not available in frozen form at Picard. There is even sushi, not to mention more standard staples like vegetables, fruits, meat, complete TV dinners, and fried foods. My favorite were the dessert selections. Their chocolate cake, slightly defrosted and thrown in the microwave for a few seconds, tasted like cake just out of the oven. For the home cook in a rush or with limited cookware, the precut and parboiled beans, eggplant, and potatoes would be a big help. You need only to microwave them for a short time and they are ready to cook.

Arc de Triomphe

On May 7, we took advantage of our location — a mere three-minute walk to the Arc de Triomphe — to climb to the top. Since the Arc de Triomphe is surrounded by a huge rotary, access to the monument is via an underground passageway. You can get tickets in this passageway, and when you come back up to ground level, you will find yourself in the middle of the central island. With your ticket, you can

A man, hand on chest, was sweating profusely, doubled over on the spiral staircase.

take the elevators that will take you to the top or take the stairs. A quick warning here: the stairs are narrow and steep! While climbing up the stairs to the top, we encountered an alarming scene. There was a man in his forties, clearly overweight, with one hand on his chest, doubled up in pain with beads of sweat streaking down his pale face. The possibility of a heart attack or angina immediately crossed my mind. Right at that moment, he looked straight up at the ceiling and started to yawn. The

situation was obviously very serious. I looked at him and made motions with my hand to ask if he needed an ambulance, but his wife threw me a look that said, “No, he’ll be fine.” Why had they opted for the stairs when they could easily have taken the elevator up to the top? (In a situation like that, you should also not refuse an offer of medical attention!)



Our apartment was located within a stone’s throw of the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, as well as the Musée Yves Saint Laurent.



Musée Yves Saint Laurent

Our apartment was located within a stone's throw of not only the Arc de Triomphe, but also the Eiffel Tower as well as the Musée Yves Saint Laurent. The admission to the museum was a whopping €10. Should we go in? Should we not? We hesitated at the entrance trying to ascertain whether the exhibit was really going to be worth the €10 admission. In the end, we went in, and boy, were we glad we did.

Never in my life had I seen so many good-looking young men, from the security guard to the attendants at the ticket counter. Even the young Jude Law would have a hard time competing against a stunning young man — a fashion student? — we saw. The chance to glimpse so many handsome young men was an experience that cannot always be gotten for €10.

Never in my life had I seen so many serious-looking French people. From the very start, as we entered the premises in which countless clients had come to see and have fittings for Yves Saint Laurent's designs, we were pleasantly taken aback by the grandeur of the exhibit and zeal of the visitors all around. Young people who were clearly from design schools were carefully scrutinizing everything and jotting down notes.



They all seemed to be fervent devotees of the late designer.

There was a woman, who appeared to be an instructor from a fashion school, giving a detailed analysis of a dress, speaking about drapes and stitches. In addition to pieces Saint Laurent designed, visitors have access to his studio, sketches and drawings, bundles of fabric samples, his extensive library, a video archive of past Paris Fashion Weeks, as well as rare footages of the designer at work and at home. Those

who clearly looked like students were transfixed by what they saw, endlessly taking notes.

I had been worried that the museum would not be worth the admission, but the experience was well worth every penny.

Picasso at Les Invalides

From the Arc de Triomphe via the Eiffel Tower, we headed to Les Invalides, some 10 minutes on foot from the tower. At Musée de l'Armée of Les Invalides, we saw a powerful exhibit entitled *Picasso and the War*. The whole complex of Les Invalides is huge, comprising museums as well as a hospital and retirement home for war veterans. Memorial services for politicians, fallen soldiers, as well as police officers who have perished in the line of duty routinely take place in the church.



Eating Well at a Neighborhood Italian Restaurant

On our way to the Rodin Museum, we dropped by a small Italian restaurant for lunch. This was our first good choice in Paris. What we learned from eating at mediocre places all through our first stay in the city was that settling for a nice terrace of a restaurant in a touristy area is basically a guarantee of sub-par food. We certainly paid dearly for this



knowledge. The best way to look for a good restaurant is to find an unassuming place that is a popular haunt of the locals. One place where it is easy to find such a spot is near an educational institution. Somewhere near the back of a school building, there will always be a diner that students and faculty go to on a daily basis. The meals are usually reasonably priced and still very good. Another

place to look would be a quiet street, away from the main thoroughfare, where modest hair salons, rather lackluster clothing stores, a low-key tailor or sewing machine shops and tiny stores selling notion can be found. Tucked among them somewhere will be a slightly spartan and old-fashioned diner with a narrow entrance and menus that are not shiny and new. These kinds of places are almost guaranteed to be a hit. The more crowded the better.

The restaurant we found near Les Invalides was across the street from the rear entrance of an elementary school. There were no tourists inside. Just local men, some university students, and a handful of couples occupying every available seat. Still, when we ventured to peak inside and ask with hand gestures whether there was still room for two more, they pulled out a small table from somewhere and made space for us. Diners left and right adjusted their chairs this way and that to allow us to pass through.

There were only three people working at this restaurant. All three of them were immigrants from South Asia frantically running around, keeping the place under control while also taking delivery orders. One left the premises every now and then for a delivery run. Another cooked in the small kitchen in the back. And another took orders. Hectic hardly does justice to the pace of things in this restaurant, but in spite of the

rush, the food was top rate. It was a true neighborhood diner. We had pizza, risotto, and two glasses of wine for about €30. The creamy home-made dessert was a scrumptious treat.

Rodin Museum

The Rodin Museum was just a stone's throw from our lunch locale. The harmony of the garden and sculptures was just as magnificent as we had expected.



In the footsteps of Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, and Sylvia Beach

From the Rodin Museum to Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, the bookstore that Hemingway mentions frequently in *A Moveable Feast*, we needed to get on the bus or the subway. We took the subway Lines 13 and 10, arriving at the bookstore in under 20 minutes. It is located close to the Sorbonne University and near one of the bridges spanning the Seine.



Latin Quarter: A Pint at the Sorbonne

In an effort to avoid the crowded areas of the Latin Quarter, we decided to walk along streets frequented by students going to their classes at the

Sorbonne University. When we came to the area during our first stint in Paris the week before, we had found a quiet, small take-out delicatessen with tables in the back. Yo suggested that we go back there. I was more than willing, so, charmed by the delicious-looking baguettes and other offerings, we went to the unassuming deli just steps away from one of the university buildings. In the



dining area, there was someone who looked like a professor, a heavy briefcase by his feet, working on his laptop with some beer. At other tables, there were students working on their iPads. It looked like students and professors alike spent hours at this deli with just a coke or water.

We took the subway back to our apartment on the Champs-Élysées.

Monoprix Yet Again

We stopped by Monoprix again to get some water, beer, wine, and a baguette. Dinner was the frozen tuna and cod we had gotten at Picard, just grilled and eaten with a Japanese-style sauce of soy sauce and wasabi. Miso soup and jasmine rice were also quite tasty. We had some simmered seaweed (*tsukudani*) and *ochazuke* (which, in its simplest form, is rice with tea but is usually a little more elaborate than that).

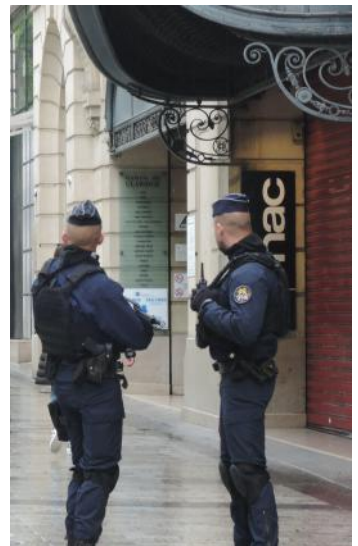
The following day, on May 8, we were planning on going to Pontoise by train. We cooked white rice and ate it with wakame miso soup as a light breakfast before heading out for the day.

Every time we stepped out of our rented apartment on the Champs-Élysées, we were met by the imposing Arc de Triomphe as the apartment was located directly in front of the monument. Coincidentally,

May 8 was Victory in Europe Day (VE Day), celebrating the end of World War II in Europe. To be expected, there was a ceremony scheduled to take place at the Arc de Triomphe. Everywhere, there were French flags neatly affixed to the trees lining the streets of the city.

*Unbeknownst to us,
it was VE Day.*

Unlike all the other times that we stepped out of the apartment, on this particular morning, the world around us was eerily quiet. Something in the air was very different. Looking in front of us, we were surprised to see a line of police officers on full alert in bullet proof vests carrying machine guns. As surprised as we were at the sight, we made light of it and proceeded to the subway station as if it were a perfectly normal day. That was where we were wrong. The shutters to the entrance were closed. "No subway service during the ceremony observing Victory in Europe Day" read a notice taped onto the shutters. If that was what was happening, there was nothing we could do. We walked to Gare Saint-Lazare.



Pontoise

The station in Pontoise is rustic and quiet in a suburban way. As such, there were not very many people who got off the train with us, but since the train network branches off at this station, one line leading to Auvers-sur-Oise, the last place van Gogh lived, there were tourists here and there waiting for their connections. Before leaving the station, we made sure to check the timetable for our train back to Paris. We confirmed that there are indeed one or two direct trains per hour heading to the capital city.



A town with a significant but now almost forgotten connection to French Impressionism

Climbing a cobblestone street up a hill where you can get a good view of the whole town, you are supposed to arrive at the Museum Camille Pissarro. For some reason, Pontoise was a popular place of residence for many impressionist artists and on the Internet, site after site referred to the town as one of the capitals of the Impressionist movement. However, we could not find the museum and when we turned to townsfolk for directions, most did not even seem to know of the existence of the museum.



“We just moved here so we don’t know a lot about old things,” one from a group of three people said, a little apologetically. Shortly after parting ways, one of them came back, waving his arms and saying,

“Yoo-hoo! This way! The museum is just a little ahead up this road.”
What a nice person!

Prix-fixe lunch at L’arbre Blanc

We had lunch at a small restaurant in town called L’arbre Blanc. When we arrived just a few minutes after noon, we were their first customers of the day, but within 30 minutes, every seat was occupied. It was clearly a favorite haunt of the townspeople who all came with their families in ordinary clothes. It seemed to be a weekly routine for a lot of people.

At every table, the order was the same: the day’s prix-fixe lunch special that had been advertised on the easel outside. That day, there were two selections each for appetizer, main course, and dessert. Glancing at the other tables, we saw people enjoying lively conversations over various permutations of the lunch menu. Warm steam from the kitchen filled the air. A real course menu was just €15 per person. Even with the two glasses of wine that Yo ordered, the total came out to just €44. The couple sitting at the table next to ours explained the French menu to us in English and helped us order. Their son arrived a few minutes later. We found out that he was a fan of the Japanese animation series *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no kyōjin*).

After our very satisfactory lunch, we rode the train for about an hour back to Paris. Once back in the city, we visited the Arab World Institute, Institut Curie and the Curie Museum, walked around the Sorbonne, and headed at last to the Cluny Museum.

Cluny Museum – National Museum of the Middle Ages



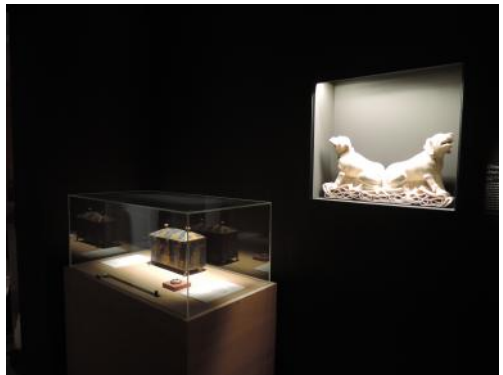
The Cluny Museum is located so close to the Sorbonne that it is almost part of the university campus. It houses a vast collection of artifacts dating up to the 16th century. You can see inside from the park located right outside the subway stop. There were elderly Parisians spending yet another lazy after-

noon in the park. When I greeted them and asked if I could take pictures of them, they agreed with polite nods. How lucky they were to be able to spend as much time as they wanted, sitting on a quiet park bench, gazing at precious specimens of French history. Even for the casual passer-by, there was a sense of grandness about the place that we, too, could partake in.



The museum is famed for *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries. The building itself is what remains of the Gallo-Roman baths built in the third century. The remains are protected by a glass wall, and the basement level of the museum leads directly to the outdoor portion of the baths.

This visit to the Cluny Museum marked our fifth time in the area around the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter on this trip. Just one side street away from the main thoroughfare offers a welcome quietude that you can enjoy during otherwise busy lunchtime hours.



Arab World Institute

The museum at the Arab World Institute begins on the seventh floor and makes its way down to the fourth floor. Along the way, you can see the glass-enclosed library. Located near the banks of the Seine River by the bridge Pont du Sully, the Cathedral of Notre Dame is a stone's throw away.



The museum offers a formidable display of Islamic influence that is in stark contrast to the more delicate culture in which the institute resides. Having accustomed ourselves to the sometimes anemic quality of the French disposition, there was something very captivating about the sun-bathed inner strength of the Islamic culture.



For dinner, we made fried rice from the rice that we had cooked in the morning. We minced some spring onions and fried them with the rice in a little butter and some soy sauce. Rounding out the meal were some miso soup and potato salad from Picard. Yo was especially fond of the fried rice with soy sauce.

At around 8:00 p.m., we heard something pounding against the window. Stepping out to the balcony, we were surprised to see hailstones flying about. A stray hail here and there came into the apartment, sitting on the floor without melting for a while. It was considerably colder as well but we could not get the heater to work.

A sudden hail in Paris

Our apartment did not have air conditioning. With summer temperatures easily in the upper 30s and even in the 40s these days (low 90s to

100s °F), it must get brutally hot. Perhaps May is the best month to spend in this otherwise prime apartment upon the Champs-Élysées. Once squarely in the summer months, it would be unbearable without air conditioning.

The building itself probably dates from the 1800s. The inside had been recently renovated, but the electrical wiring was old and not very stable. Perhaps fitting the apartment with an air conditioner was rather out of the question. Despite its age, the building had an elevator, but that, too, was quite old (albeit newer than the building itself) with manually operated doors, making the marble stairs winding around the elevator appear far sturdier.

Since May 8 was Victory in Europe Day, historical footage of French Resistance fighters in various parts of the country during the Nazi occupation of France dominated the evening TV programming.

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame after the fire



Montmartre

May 9 was our last day in Paris. We decided to head to Montmartre. From the Champs-Élysées, we took the subway Line 1 to Concorde, transferred to Line 12, and got off at Abbesses. Unlike most other

*On our last day in Paris,
we had the pleasure of walking
up the stairs from the deepest
subway station in Paris.*

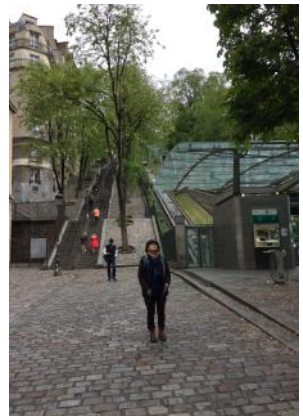
subway stations, there are elevators at Abbesses, the deepest station in the whole Paris Métro network. We wondered why people were lining up to get into these elevators when the stairs were right there. We

started walking up. After going up a considerable number of steps, it finally dawned on us why people take the elevator. It was easily a climb of 5 or 6 storeys. No wonder. By the time we got to the exit at ground level, our knees were shaking and our hearts were almost pounding out of our chests. After that climb, we were in no mood to climb any more, so we took the funicular up to the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur at the top of the hill.

The Funicular

With a subway ticket (€1.80) or one of the transport passes, you can ride on the funicular that departs once every few minutes. When we got to the base of the funicular line, it was not raining but cloudy. The train car was almost empty. The only other passengers were two employees of the transport system who got off midway up the hill. Most tourists seemed to be happier walking up the steps.

Just moments after our car started its ascent, the sky suddenly darkened, thunder





roared, and torrential rain engulfed the whole landscape. Rainwater ran down the steep hillside like a waterfall and the windows of the funicular were battered by a relentless barrage of rain coming on at a slant. Everyone within sight started running for the funicular.

Upon reaching the top, we got off, and within minutes, the rain eased off and blue skies greeted us once again as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Talk about localized rainfall. This was hardly the only time we were surprised by the fickle Parisian weather.

At the summit of Montmartre, from which you can enjoy a stunning panorama of Paris from high above, is the famous Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur. The stained glass windows were truly stunning.

Musée de Montmartre – Jardins Renoir

If you descend the hill of Montmartre along cobblestoned streets for some five minutes, you will get to the Musée de Montmartre - Jardins Renoir. In stark contrast to the constant deluge of tourists around the Sacré-Cœur, the area around this museum is as serene as a city street could be. The unassuming, old, and rusted entrance probably gives the impression that the place is not worth the €12 admission. Walking along, most tourists probably dismiss it as another old building not worth their time. But





A step back in time.

they could not be more mistaken. Take one step inside and you will enter a whole other world.

Within and around the walls and the three wooden buildings that make up the museum, the Montmartre of old is preserved: concealed and unaffected by the outside world. On the upper floor of one of the buildings is an atelier of an artist who came of age in Montmartre, complete with original furniture and an easel. On the first floor, a historical film rich with precious footage of Montmartre between the two world wars is on show. Each of the buildings that surround the square garden on three sides is filled with paintings and other relics. In addition, there was a special exhibit on Georges Dorignac. The wooden stairs inside these buildings are left as they are, slanted, worn down, and creaking with every step, getting louder as you climb. I could feel my body involuntarily leaning over. "Are these stairs slanted?" I asked Yo. "Yes. In fact, quite remarkably so."

The flowers and trees in the garden were just a few weeks shy of exploding into spring colors. We could see buds everywhere, slowly coming to life. Standing by windows that afford truly picturesque views of the garden below, what did the artists who lived here see as they painted? Did they enjoy the same vista as us, standing in the same spot 100 years later? There was a gazebo in the garden, enclosed by a set of glass walls. Was it always like that, or had it been a greenhouse?



It was time for a short lunch break. We entered the café and sat down to a lunch of café au lait, wine, and quiche (€8). While we were eating, another rainstorm came and went. The rain pelted down against the ceiling of the gazebo and flowed down the glass walls. Just like

before, it was all over in a matter of minutes, and by the time we had finished our lunch, blue skies could be seen overhead.

From there to the Musée national Picasso-Paris is a 30-minute trip via the subway Lines 4 and 13.

Musée National Picasso-Paris

Musée National Picasso-Paris exceeded our expectations on many fronts. First, the museum itself was appealing. In spite of the fact that the whole museum is about Picasso and only Picasso, with room after room of his works, there is still a sense of organization. The curators have created a space that is remarkably well balanced with the works on display, with reverence to Picasso as the sole connecting link from the moment you enter the museum until the moment you exit the premises.

*An unexpected gem
in a cultured neighborhood*



Another aspect of the visit that far surpassed our expectation was the unostentatious atmosphere of the surroundings. It is a sophisticated and artistic neighborhood. Sculptures, works in silver, ceramics, paintings literally line the streets but there is not one gaudy sign to be seen. Only after peeking into the window and seeing works of art do you realize that the place you're standing in front of is yet another gallery. It was not just the museum that left a lasting impact on us, but also the small galleries and art dealers in the vicinity who brought a distinctive air to the neighborhood with their refined taste, discipline, and respect for art.

Galleries Lafayette

On the basement floor of the Galleries Lafayette, there are scores of delectable chocolates, macarons, cakes, and other pastries. In addition, there are handsomely packed lunches and deli items as well as wine and tea that you can enjoy while seated at the huge wooden table in the center of the deli section. It looked so trendy, I was immediately mesmerized by the prospect of sitting there myself and enjoying a light meal. I had decided during our previous visit to the department store that on the last day, we would come here to get some souvenirs to take home. Since we knew exactly where to find things, we wasted no time in getting to the aisles we were interested in.



Within moments, however, that image all came crashing down. A small box of chocolates that you can easily hold in one hand costs anywhere from €80 to €200! When there are only 9 small pieces of chocolate inside? The smallest box of macarons had 6 pieces and that was €25. A medium size had 12 pieces for €50. Everything was out of the question. If I wanted to get something for the employees at my clinic, a half of a macaron and a third of a small chocolate per person would cost upwards of ¥20,000. No way...

Souvenirs at Galleries Lafayette?

A total underestimation.

Off to Monoprix we go!

We quickly abandoned the idea of getting souvenirs at the Galleries Lafayette and headed to the Monoprix next door. A chocolate tablet there was on the order of €1.50–2.70. Even at those manageable prices, we bought €88 worth of chocolates. How heavy they were! The Monoprix shopping bag was on the brink of falling apart from the sheer weight of the chocolates. I do not know how scrumptious the chocolates

at Galeries Lafayette are, but being a pragmatist, Monoprix was definitely the way to go.

Holiday Inn, Just Steps from the Airport

Dragging the heavy bag of chocolates, we got into a taxi and rode for about an hour to the Holiday Inn Express Paris CDG, located right in front of the airport along a row of new hotels that made the area seem something like a hotel quarter. We were scheduled to go back to Japan the next day on a 11:20 a.m. flight. It was not an early morning flight, but for a senior couple that likes to sleep in, this was a perfect location. We could see airplanes coming and going. There was a shuttle tram every four minutes that took us to the departure terminal in a matter of minutes.

The following morning, we got on our flight, and after 14 hours of flying via Taipei, we got home around lunchtime. I had to get back to my clinic the next day, but felt fully energized and ready to begin working again!

Back in Japan

We made it back home shortly after 1:00 p.m. The first thing I did was to check in on Po to see if he was doing alright. Convinced that he was ok, I went to say hello to our other cats. They were all doing fine. Whew.

Our Expenses

While I unpacked and did a load of laundry, Yo was busy going through receipts to figure out how much we had spent on this trip.

Airfare for two (It was Golden Week after all, a high season in Japan.)	¥350,000
Accommodation for 17 nights	¥250,000
Guide in Marseille + Moulin Rouge Dinner Show	¥180,000
Admission for two to over 20 museums	¥57,000
Groceries for 18 days and souvenirs	¥32,000
Dining out (including the first dinner with Dr. M.)	¥92,000
Transportation (TGV, subway, etc.)	¥52,000
Taxi	¥30,000
Rental car	¥47,000
Travel insurance for two	¥10,000
TOTAL	approx. ¥1,000,000

Yo was on the verge of fainting from looking at what he felt were outrageous numbers, but it was more or less what I had expected. “It’s rather normal, I think. It might seem like a fortune, but if you consider what we managed to do, I don’t think it was all that expensive.”

If you have flexibility in your travel dates, you can cut back significantly on the airfare easily fly for much less. Accommodation, too, if you reserve early, can be less expensive. Just by cutting back on these two

big expenses, you could possibly save some ¥300–400,000 for two. There are other areas where we could have saved more. Because we went sightseeing everyday, we paid admission on a daily basis and ate out for lunch. Those little luxuries that only tourists would indulge in cost us probably an extra ¥200,000. If you were to exclude these expenses and travel on less popular dates, stay just in one place like Paris, and dine out only once in a while, a couple with a modest lifestyle could spend a month in France for ¥500,000. Moreover, if you stay in one place, you can cook for yourselves and not waste money on spices and other basic ingredients. If you stay in the countryside, accommodation and miscellaneous other daily expenses would be much less. Maybe even ¥600,000 for two for *two* months would do.

Most important, however, is not how much a trip costs but what you gain from spending time abroad. What do you expect and what are you actually able to accomplish when all is said and done? As long as you have a purpose and you are able to achieve it, the trip is well worth every penny.

We are going to give ourselves a decade to realize our dreams. Before health issues start creeping up on us, we want to figure out where to go, give those ideas a try, and by the end of our 60s, we want to be able to say that we did it, that we made our dreams come true.

Last year, after many years of caring for our parents, we saw the last of them off. Raising our own children and caring for our aging parents seemed a never-ending odyssey, but we have made it through in good health and good spirits. Our kids are all in their 30s and leading independent lives. Our grandchildren are getting bigger and learning more and more about the world every day. We have both reached 60 at last, a significant milestone in anyone's life, having spent the last few decades working nonstop. The age of 60 is a significant milestone. It is high time we started putting some decorating touches on the last chapter of our lives. We still have some time left before we reach our 70s.

What We Decided to Bring Along

It was a good idea to take along some basic pantry items: soy sauce powder, miso powder, freeze-dried rice, freeze-dried miso paste, bonito

flakes, furikake, dried seaweed, wasabi and ginger paste in tubes, and green tea bags. It would have been even nicer had we brought along some boiled seaweed and udon noodles.

What we found even more necessary are umbrellas. In Paris, everyone — and I mean, everyone — has an umbrella on hand. It is just common sense. Whenever I see tourists without umbrellas getting drenched in the rain, I start to question their intellectual capacity.

No Need for Guides

There is no need for a guide. The best way to get to know a place is to explore it on your own feet and to see things with your own eyes. If you get lost, you just ask a passerby for help. The more you familiarize yourself with the public transportation network, the more complete your understanding of the city. Paris is divided into twenty arrondissements, each with its own unique ambience. A package tour might afford you a superficial glance at all of the famous sites with the least amount of trouble, but it is only by walking around and talking with people that you can decipher what every neighborhood has to offer. The Parisians that we met were all very friendly, and patiently and kindly answered our questions. By actively taking charge of your own travel, you can explore Paris, the authentic Paris, as it was meant to be explored.

Stay in the Same Place

Our general advice is to stay in the same accommodation facility. If you do not switch accommodations, you can sleep in or relax in the mornings and give yourself much needed rest. We were always back in our rooms by 7:00 p.m. to cook our own dinner. Staying healthy and energetic through a long vacation requires some amount of discipline. By not staying out late at night, you can avoid seeing your exhaustion level rise day by day.

On this trip, we stayed in apartment-style hotels (or real apartments) with a kitchen, washing machine, dryer, and other appliances that we would normally use in our everyday lives. It was a great relief to be able to cook for ourselves. In a traditional hotel, you would often not have a

microwave, sometimes not even an electric kettle, so fixing your own meals would be out of the question. For extended stays, a kitchen is a must.

A Health Checkup Before Travel

If you have chronic health issues, it is important to regularly keep a tab on them. A hastily performed medical procedure like the one I did on the day of departure is hardly to be recommended. In addition, regular dental checkups are just as important. If your teeth are giving you trouble, you cannot have even half the fun.

Pet Care

If you have pets, arranging for reliable care is a must. Our black cat Po ended up in the pet hospital the day before our departure. We also have four other cats, all of whom we entrusted to a member of the staff at my clinic. She took pains to look after the ailing Po, too.

A Reflection on Our Travel

Our Thoughts Before Heading to Paris

“The primary purpose of our travel is not simply to sightsee but to spend time in France as if we actually lived there. We want to see the lives that French people lead on a normal, uneventful day and spend our days doing what they do. We want to buy the groceries that they buy and cook the food that they cook, go to the boulangeries and corner groceries that they frequent to buy butter, milk, jam, cookies, wines, tea. We want to dress in everyday clothes, too, and also observe how other older travelers travel. And at the end of it all, we want to start a travel blog, written by senior travelers for senior travelers.”

These were the thoughts that we jotted down on the eve of departure, on April 23. After all was said and done, did the actual trip live up to our expectations? Partly yes, partly no.

But the most important achievement was having taken that first long trip abroad. *It was a pivotal first step* that all began with Paris.

Èimi Ohashi

May 16, 2019

Afterword

Sometime in June, a short while after returning to Japan, I reread Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, a collection of short memoirs about his time in Paris in the 1920s. Ten years after Hemingway left, in 1931, Fumiko Hayashi, a Japanese novelist and poet famous for her 1927 work, *Vagabond's Song*, visited Paris. That year in Japanese history is marked by the Liutiaohu Incident that quickly escalated into the Mukden Incident and eventually sparked the Shanghai Incident in early 1932. It was an unsettling time in which minor military skirmishes could explode into full-blown war at any time. By the time Fumiko embarked for Europe from Tokyo Station on November 4, the Second Sino-Japanese War had already begun. She was traveling alone in the middle of this surging tension. She left Japan at the southern port of Shimonoseki, landing in Busan, traveled through Harbin, then via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Moscow, finally arriving in Paris on November 23. During her twenty-day journey, she endured strict inspection by military personnel armed with bayonets at every border, and on November 13, heard gunfire overhead and felt the rumble of explosions all day long. In the huge expanse of land that separated her from her homeland, there were minor skirmishes everywhere and constant tension in the air. Nonetheless, she braved the unknown, an unaccompanied single woman traversing Siberia, making her way safely to Paris and, eventually, London.

She was in Paris from November 23 until May 12 of the following year, except for a month in which she traveled across the English Channel. After her four-month stay, she left Paris to head home to Japan, first by rail through Lyon and Marseille, onto Naples by ship, and from there via the Suez Canal, landing once again on Japanese soil at the Port of Kobe some 30 days after her departure from Paris. Perusing Fumiko's diary and expense journal, we are surprised by how our time in Paris was very similar to her daily life during those four months.

She frequented Uniprix, a budget supermarket (acquired by Monoprix in 1991), to get her groceries, and she often cooked meals for herself

with bowls of rice and salmon roe or spinach and herring. Venturing into a Japanese restaurant, she expresses indignance at the mediocre quality of overpriced sukiyaki and eel. For her, a more affordable Russian or Chinese cuisine was far more welcome. All the while, she struggled to write, quickly becoming depressed at her inability to write anything of significance. Out of exasperation and sheer willpower, she forced herself to work at her desk day after day. In the end, these struggles paid off: she is considered one of the foremost independent female writers of the 20th century.

She enthusiastically mingled with Japanese writers in Paris, registering in her journal her hopes of how she would “love to do good work”. Similar hopes can be seen in Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*: as an American in Paris wishing to explore his identity, he held high hopes of achieving something he could take pride in, and to that end, he devoted himself to writing daily at his desk in his small rented room. (Hemingway also stayed long hours at local cafés.) I think he was able to find his own voice by struggling on his own in Paris, far away from his homeland. Fumiko, too, struggled alone in Paris. An American trying to find his voice in English, a Japanese trying to find her voice in Japanese — both worked relentlessly at their desks to find a style that was uniquely theirs. For them, that special place where this was possible was Paris.

*“If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man,
then wherever you go for the rest of your life,
it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.”*
(Hemingway)

Despite the fact that both were profoundly influenced by their new surroundings, Hemingway felt that in Paris, he could finally write about Michigan, and Fumiko thought frequently of home. Yes, indeed, it must be in Paris that you can look at your own country in a fresh light and come to a deeper understanding of where you grew up. When Hemingway wrote *A Moveable Feast*, it was in the twilight years of his career some 30 years after his sojourn in Paris. The memoirs were published

posthumously in the 1960s. For him, Paris was a place that the farther he went physically, the closer it came to his heart.

Paris is a place that leaves its mark on the hearts of all who visit and with that mark, also a tinge of nostalgia. This must be the appeal of Paris. There seems to be something about Paris that has changed very little from the time Hemingway visited the city in the 1920s. I could not place my hands on exactly what that was, that mysterious *something* that still holds a charm for all of us who visit even 100 years later. Perhaps from regret over not having probed for that *something* deep down in our hearts while we were there, we found ourselves already making plans to go back to Paris in the near future. Yo says on and off, "It would be nice to go back to Paris again." Only a few weeks after coming back from our long vacation in France, we were already feeling the urge to go back. But then maybe we are not alone in feeling this way.

Paris is supposed to be a place where you question your place in this world, where you work with determination and enthusiasm. If that were still true, how wonderful it would be.

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About the Author

Èimi Ohashi, born in 1956, is an otorhinolaryngologist and has been director of her own private clinic since 1998. She received her Bsc in 1981 and MD in 1986, both from Kobe University School of Medicine. Her first travelogue, *Travels of a Senior Couple: In France*, was published by Shinsei Shuppan in November of 2019. The second title in the series, *Travels of a Senior Couple: In Italy*, is due to appear in July 2020.