

France 2007

Paris

On the day we arrived, we settled into the hotel then went out walking to get the lay of the land. We had dinner at an outdoor brasserie. They served fish surrounded by pork even though Keeb had explained, in French, that he was a pesco-vegetarian.

The next day we took a bus tour of Paris and we came out at the Louvre. I had been primed to expect long lines so I told Keeb we'll just get the tickets that day and the next day we would do the visit. Well, there were no lines at all and we walked straight to the automatic ticket machines, got the tickets and a few minutes later were gazing at the Mona Lisa. I was so thrilled to be touring this famous place and must say that the painting I will never forget was done by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy called "Entombment of Atala" – it was full of angst. Getting back to the hotel was a bit of an adventure as we missed the last tour bus. We were told that a shuttle would be arranged but unsurprisingly, none showed up. Keeb was sure we were walking distance from the hotel, so we walked back, stopping for dinner on the way. I must say I was enjoying the French food.

On the third day in Paris, we took the tour bus to the Rodin museum. The garden was beautiful and "The Thinker" was surrounded by roses. There were other iconic pieces in the garden including "The Gates of Hell" but "The Kiss" was in the museum itself. The museum also housed paintings from Rodin's collection including a Van Gogh and a Monet.

Benon

We took the train to Bordeaux on our way to attend my cousin Julian's wedding. Julian's brothers, Francis and Russel, met us at the station and took us to our Bed and Breakfast in the quiet village of Benon. The B&B was beautiful with trees in a big yard and a rope corral in which cars were parked (which seemed a little odd to me). Since we were just planning to leave our luggage and get back into the car to go to the beach with the boys, they pulled up right outside the front door. The owner of the B&B then asked if we were leaving the car unattended. She then explained "My 'orse – he bite the car". So that explained the roped off area... She then asked if Keeb and I liked animals, we assured her we did and she then listed the pets of the house. In addition to the horse they had three cats, two dogs and one donkey. I am just surprised she did not end with a partridge in a pear tree.

The day was very sunny and the beach was beautiful. We have now seen the Atlantic Ocean from the French coast. Previously, our view from Trinidad was from our Mayaro and Manzanilla beaches.

The night we got in, Julian and Karine treated all of us to dinner. It was good to catch up with Jason and Simone, my other cousins and their partners/family. The evening was relaxed and we were really happy we came.

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The next morning, we attended the civil ceremony at the town-hall which was walking distance from the B&B. We all then had lunch together and set out for the wedding that was held in 12th century church that I understood had been used by the Knights Templar when they were wounded and need to hide and recuperate. The walls of the building were three feet thick.

The ceremony was beautiful, held in both French and English. After the ceremony, the photos were taken outside the church in the bitter cold. I could not believe how different the weather was compared to the day before. The reception was excellent – we had a seven-course meal with wine with every course (with special fish dishes for Keeb) and they split the speeches up between courses – very practical should anyone wax eloquent. Karine's father, who only speaks French put together a DVD of photos of both Julian and Karine from childhood to grown-ups and he even had the music change at different parts – he had tropical music for photos of Karine as a child living in Reunion Island. It was a very thoughtful contribution.

The wedding cake was made of shue pastry puffs, filled with cream and glued together with caramel to form a tall inverted cone on top of which was perched a miniature bridal couple that Karine and Julian knocked off as part of the sticking of the cake. They then served these pastries as the second dessert course. The first dessert course was a selection of cheeses.

Both Keeb and I were struck by how well organized everything was and by how genuinely happy both Julian and Karine were together.

Adventures in Transport

Basically, if it could go wrong it did: whether we were going on a plane, a train or car.

The Plane

Caribbean Airlines helpfully changed our route after I bought our tickets that meant (1) we were going through Gatwick not Heathrow (2) we ended up stuck in Barbados on our way home in a strange limbo situation where our names were on the passenger list with ghost boarding passes from London but we were not allowed on the plane. We should have known things were not going to work smoothly when we were at Gatwick that morning, after getting into the check-in line we were sent to the customer service line since we could not be checked in. The customer service man told us come back after 9:00 AM since the Caribbean Airlines office did not open before then and he had to call them to sort it out. We lurked around and a few minutes before nine I decided to buy a dress. I experienced a scene similar to Roal Atkinson wrapping the Christmas gift in "Love Actually". They put tissue in the dress to fold it and then wrapped it in more layers of tissue followed by stickers to hold the tissue packet's shape and then placed it in a great big colourful bag. Keeb told me he expected them to bring out potpourri as well. We did eventually get on a subsequent flight.

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The Train to Paris

The good news is we decided to pick up our Paris train tickets the day before our trip. The bad news was it turned out that having ordered them on-line, I assumed that when they said "pick up at station" that they could be picked at the station we were leaving from i.e. Waterloo in London. Enter a piece of logic that is beyond my comprehension – we could only pick up the tickets in France. After Keeb helpfully suggested we go to Paris and get the tickets and then return to London so we could use them (grrrr.....) he then suggested buying one-way tickets to Paris and sort it out over there. When we got there, the French shuttled me from one person to another, none of whom was interested in actually helping me. We decided to just consider it a learning experience.

The Train to Bordeaux

I maintain if the train workers in Paris were even a little helpful, we would not have ended up on one train with our luggage on another. Having come from London where that carriage numbers are painted on the platform next to the train, we looked but we just could not find our carriage. As the whistle was blowing, we jumped on the train and then discovered as we walked through that we were on one of two trains that were attached but there was no way through one to the other. We left the luggage on the original train and jumped off in order to be in the correct seats on the second train when they come around to check. When we arrived at Bordeaux, Keeb ran all the way to the other train, hauled our luggage off and was back on the platform seconds before the doors closed. I had to sit on a bench to collect myself.

The Car to the Reception

We had a map and I was navigating, which may have been the problem. Francis was extremely patient when he had to recover from me making us go in the opposite direction. We got off track a second time when we came to a particularly tricky roundabout that was not consistent with the signs that went before. There were three policemen standing near the roundabout prompting Francis to tell us about the movie "Hot Fuzz". We passed the policemen and continue to try to figure out where to go. Now my uncle was in the car behind us. We then saw them stop and talk to the cops and then wave at us to follow them as the policemen got into their car and escorted both our cars to the wedding reception.