

## IMMERSION 2005: FROM PARIS TO THE PYRENEES

On June 26, 2005, my husband and I left the U.S. with fourteen students, mainly high school juniors and seniors, who had studied from three to five years of French. We left our English with the parents on their side of the security checkpoint at Cleveland Hopkins Airport as we began a two-week total immersion experience that would provide opportunities to experience life in a French host family, make significant progress in French, and explore sights in several regions of France.

The dream of one day organizing a total immersion experience for students had begun when I last co-chaperoned a trip in 1992. The trip was phenomenal, and our students visited major cultural sights from Normandy to Nice, but I came home disappointed that the students had not had more opportunities to speak French as they traveled together around the country. I also believed that I could give students the chance to gain a greater understanding of the people and of family life. I wanted them to experience linguistic, cultural and personal challenges and triumphs.

Planning for the trip began two years prior to departure. We worked for a full year to develop a custom itinerary, set up travel plans with Educational Travel Alliance, host a meeting for students and parents to explain the trip, and establish our list of travelers. Our expectations for speaking French were clearly stated, and it was critical that each participant agree to espouse this philosophy. During the twelve months preceding our departure we held three meetings with parents and three mandatory meetings with students to bolster their skills for navigating around Paris, handling transactions at the post office and stores, making phone calls, and benefiting to the utmost from the family stay. Each student also chose a sight that we would be visiting and carried out serious research so that she could provide background information (*en français, bien sûr*) to the rest of the group just prior to our visit.

We arrived in Paris on a Sunday morning, and the next several hours were devoted to getting the students to their host families, two students per household. By lunchtime we were regrouping, ready to find a meal and see the sights. We walked from the Champs-Élysées to the foot of the Eiffel Tower, took one of the cruises along the Seine (some jetlagged students napped during the ride!) and enjoyed the view from the highest level of the Eiffel Tower.

From Monday through Friday morning, the students had classes at the École France Langue, arriving there by *métro* using their *carte orange*. They found themselves in different classes depending upon

their level of proficiency, but all enjoyed working with adolescents from a variety of countries who were also in Paris to improve their French. After class each day, they had another hour and a half to get their lunch in the neighborhood, do some shopping, visit the post office, or take care of other needs. The next six hours were devoted to seeing the sights with my husband and me: Versailles, the monuments of the *Île de la Cité*, the district around the *Place de la Concorde* and the *Jardin des Tuileries*, Montmartre, the picturesque scenery from the *Passage des Panoramas* to the Louvre (with stops to find the Arago Medallions featured in *The DaVinci Code*), and the Louvre itself for art and more *DaVinci Code* connections. From the moment they woke up until their heads hit their pillows at night, the students spoke ONLY French, handling transportation, lunches, shopping and all other errands with a new-found independence. They spoke French with their families, with shopkeepers and other employees, with teachers and students at the school, with us, with our extended French family, and with each other. They quickly realized how much they knew and could do, and both their confidence and their language acquisition soared!

For the second week of our two-week tour we were joined by a Journey Director selected by eTrav, a young, knowledgeable French native, Nicolas Canfin. Nicolas understood our goals and helped us keep the French flowing! We traveled to Vaux-le-Vicomte (candlelight tour), Chartres, Chambord, Chaumont, Chenonceau, Amboise, Tours, Bordeaux (Tours-Bordeaux by TGV), and then began our exploration of the Pyrenees from the Atlantic Coast to Carcassonne: Biarritz, St. Jean Pied-de-Port, St. Jean de Luz, Gavarnie (for some very major hiking!), Lourdes, Niaux, and Carcassonne. Our flights back to the U.S. originated in Toulouse.

We had planned numerous fun activities for the trip, and Nicolas helped us carry them out. Instead of dinner in a restaurant one evening, we organized a scavenger hunt picnic supper. We headed for a hypermarket where we tore our picnic list into 7 pieces, distributing one piece to each pair of students. They loved hunting for items from paper goods to cookies and successfully requesting slices of cheeses and *pâtés* at the appropriate counters! On July 4 in Biarritz we organized a French Trip Trivia contest before heading back to the beach for the glorious 10:15 p.m. sunset on the ocean. We prepared map reading contests, proverb contests, a department store questionnaire, mini French song books for our rides in the bus, a little-known-

facts-about-each-other mix and mingle game, and a check-it-out *DaVinci Code* booklet. Nicolas taught everyone how to play "Jungle Speed" (a Belgian card game demanding sharp reflexes... my students are *still* regularly getting together to play!). A surprise ceremony capped our final evening in France. We distributed two certificates to each participant, one for her *rôle enthousiaste et amical d'ambassadrice américaine* and the other for her successful *randonnée de 15 kilomètres jusqu'à la Grande Cascade, Cirque de Gavarnie*. Throughout the trip, the students filled in the pages of the «Journal» that we had designed for their observations and reactions as their experiences and visits multiplied.

During our post-trip debriefing students stated that they had made progress in speaking and comprehending, gained great confidence in their ability to manage in a French-speaking country, and stated that they had returned to the U.S. with proof that a number of widely-held stereotypes were just that, stereotypes. Several of the students began dreaming in French during the trip, and some indicated that after they got home they tended to continue to react in French with utterances like: "May I have this, *s'il vous plaît?*"

We've been back for three months, and student enthusiasm remains amazingly high. They have dedicated a lot of time and effort to sharing their experiences and memories. They decorated a bulletin board and a large display case in the main hallway at the high school; they prepared two bulletin boards at the middle school, one in a high traffic area next to the cafeteria. A few of these students manned a booth near the bake sale table at Solon Middle School Curriculum Night, fielding many parent questions about the study of French and travel abroad. Two students are currently developing a PowerPoint presentation that will be shared with middle school and high school students during *la Semaine du Français*. Several other students are currently writing the rules to "Jungle Speed" in French so that they can teach other students this game as a classroom activity. Others would like to give a presentation about the trip at our municipal Senior Center.

My husband and I are so proud of the students and thrilled with the success of the undertaking and the enthusiasm that it has continued to generate that we have just designed a *new* total immersion itinerary for 2007: from Paris to Provence.

Davara Potel  
Solon High School (OH)  
E-mail: [letop123@en.com]