Paris badges

* La tour Eiffel (lifescouts)

When I was little, I used to think that all the radio towers dotting my Cincinnati landscape were Eiffel Towers. Every time we drove past the one on Winton Rd right next to Galbraith, I would tell my parents “Eiffel Tower!” just like Radhika. I always knew that there was only one Eiffel Tower in the world, but for some reason, I really wanted there to be one in Cincinnati, so I just kept seeing it when I saw radio towers that look nothing at all like the real Eiffel Tower in Paris, aside from the fact that they are tall and pointy.

I finally got to see the real thing for myself when I went to Paris for our honors seminar study tour. I actually got to go twice! I think I’ve seen every possible view of the Eiffel Tower: In the sunshine, in the rain, during the day, during the night, all lit up, twinkling, lit up and twinkling while on the tower itself, and in front of a rainbow.

The Eiffel Tower has an almost magical quality about it for me. It has become a universal icon for travel, novelty, and culture. I’m convinced that everyone on this planet Earth has heard of it before. Everywhere that we saw it, it was beautiful. And there was a rainbow with it one day! How much more magical does it get?

When I went back for the second time to see it at night with Molly, Sam, Radhika, and Mykia, we made sure to see it while it was twinkling. We arrived just as the show started, so we could see the whole tower twinkling from the outside, and then we bought our tickets and headed up. It was amazing to see the city at night, all lit up. Paris truly is a city of light. There were so many things glittering, just like the tower. And finally, when the clock struck 9 PM, Radhika and I ran down the steps to be inside the twinkling tower. That was a pretty spectacular sight. We ran back up the steps to watch the whole thing twinkle from the outside while we were on it.

In the end, it was a beautiful evening, and one of my favorite memories from the entire week.

* Speak French (lifescouts)

It’s been a long journey, but I think I have finally earned this badge. I began taking French classes in the 7th grade, when we had to choose between French, Spanish, and Latin. Of course I didn’t want to take Latin, because it’s a dead language, and I love *speaking* other languages (I can’t bring myself to say a “foreign” language, even though it’s completely correct. To me, “foreign” sounds harsh, like “alien”, with a connotation of being different, but almost in a negative way. Perhaps that perception speaks to our culture here in Cincinnati and the United States, but that’s a whole other discussion). So that just left the choice between French and Spanish. I knew Spanish would be very useful, but as a 7th grader, I was annoyed that the vast majority of the grade had signed up for it and I wanted to be different, so I took French. Honestly, I think I would have been happy with either language, and I really do want to learn Spanish now, but I absolutely do not regret decision, all these years later.

I have had some amazing teachers throughout the years. On my first day of French class, ever (I still remember it so clearly!), Madame Gallaspie didn’t introduce herself to the class or say anything at all, really, in terms of an introduction. She started walking around the room, pointing at things and saying things not in English. Eventually, we all caught on and understood that she was trying to teach us French vocabulary. She did this several times, always going back to the same things so we would learn the words. *Ordinateur. Cahier. Crayon. Stilo*. It was the strangest beginning to a course I’ve ever encountered, but it worked. For the next few months, she made us learn to speak phonetically. We were not allowed to read or write anything until almost halfway through the year. To this day, I still consider her one of the best teachers I’ve ever had the privilege to work with. She taught us for two years, and then we had another teacher, who was not that great. After that, I would have had her for another year, but due to some class size problems, I ended up skipping French 3 and going straight to French 4, where I was lucky to have Madame Gallaspie again for one last year before she retired. She taught us about poetry, literature, songs, and culture. It was a great class. We spent an entire quarter of the year reading the Little Prince, which has since then become one of my favorite books of all time. She really dug deep into the book to teach us about all the levels of symbolism in the story, and I was so impressed by how such a simple children’s story could hold that much meaning.

I continued studying through my AP French year, when our actual teacher was on maternity leave and had to be replaced for the first quarter of the year. So for that short bit of time, we had Madame Mise as our instructor. Except that she had only just graduated from Ohio State and could barely speak French. Even though we had only been studying French for four years at that point, we could recognize and correct her mistakes in speaking. It didn’t turn out to be too much of a problem in the end because we didn’t actually speak much French or learn anything of any kind while she was teaching. We mostly played classroom games and hung out during her class, which was pretty unfortunate since we were going to have to take the AP French Language exam that May, which has been notorious for being one of the hardest AP exams of all, along with Spanish. When our real teacher returned in January, she kicked our butts to whip us back into shape. She was a great teacher. Madame Laine was a native Parisian herself and could therefore speak perfect French and gave us an opportunity to learn to understand native accents. She made us take old AP exams in class regularly so that we could become familiar with the format of the exam and learn where we struggled. And they definitely were not easy, but somehow, they seemed like a piece of cake compared to the actual AP exam that year. Maybe it was the nerves or the pressure, but it was tough. Fortunately, I came through with a 5 and that really helped set me up well at UC. I am now able to complete a minor in French taking only five classes, and giving me 18 credit hours towards BoKs, and on a biomedical engineering curriculum, the fact that I’m able to pursue a minor in something completely unrelated to STEM fields is really great.

* Meet Mona (lifescouts)

Everyone has seen the Mona Lisa, maybe not in person, but they have seen her image replicated through thousands of textbooks, movies, websites, etc. Her face is famous all over the world for her enigmatic smile. Before we went to the Louvre, I thought that going to see the Mona Lisa would be nothing special. I felt like I had already seen it a million times before. So when we got to the gallery with her painting, I wasn’t expecting much. It was full of people all crowded around the small portrait taking pictures. I made my way through to crowd to look at her up close, and I was very surprised to find that it seemed like a completely different painting in real life. I finally understood why so many people are entranced by her image. I can’t really explain it much beyond that. All I knew is that I wanted to just sit down in that room and look at her for a while, which of course is impossible when there’s a massive crowd of people all trying to get as close as possible so they can take selfies with her in the background.

* Best pain au chocolat

I had pain au chocolat in many different places throughout Paris and I have to say that the best one I have ever had was in this small café in Montmartre whose name I don’t even remember. This place brings new meaning to the expression “hole in the wall.” It was literally a kitchen with a display counter on the outside where you ordered and then a small seating area “indoors” that couldn’t have been more than five feet by five feet. It didn’t have a front window or door to this indoor seating area. It was literally some space carved out of the building. I was having lunch with Erin and Lisa before climbing up the hill to see Sacré Coeur. I ordered a goat cheese and tomato quiche (delicious) and a pain au chocolat for dessert. It was wonderful. The outside was buttery and flaky and soft, and the inside had melted, dark chocolate. I was not expecting the chocolate to be melted so I was very happily surprised. I know a lot of people though Ladurée had the best pains au chocolat, and truthfully, I never had one, but I did try a piece of Erin’s at the airport as we were leaving and it was very good, but melted chocolate just belongs in pain au chocolat and I never knew it until I tried it. This probably was not the best pain au chocolat in Paris by a long shot, and I suppose I will have to go back one day and go on a hunt for the best, but in the meantime, I’ll keep the memory of that delicious dessert from the hole in the wall café in Montmartre.

* Visit at least 5 churches

I don’t think it’s possible to visit any western European city without touring its churches. Even the smallest villages can have the most stunning buildings. I have seen countless churches, cathedrals, basilicas (etcetera) in my life, but I never get tired of seeing more. Paris was no exception, and I think I can safely say that I saw some of the most beautiful churches of my life here. We first visited Sainte Chappelle on the Île de la Cité. The entrance took us to the lower level, and when we walked in, we were expecting to immediately see the giant stained glass windows. We were a little disappointed and mostly confused when instead we found a dark, beautifully painted room with small windows. It was almost like a basement chapel. Then we remembered that Sainte Chappelle is composed of an upper and lower chapel, with the lower one having previously been reserved for the people and the upper only available to nobility and the king. It was beautiful, but we wanted to see the main attraction. We couldn’t find the stairs at first, and when we finally found them, they were a very small and narrowly winding stairs that didn’t reveal anything until you had arrived. And when I looked up, it literally took my breath away. The tall stained glass windows surrounding the upper chapel were magnificent. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Unfortunately, one of the walls was completely covered by a giant structure informing us that those windows were currently being renovated. On the bright side, it provided a nice canvas for the light to shine on. When the sun came out and poured through the stained glass windows, the scaffolding was covered in splashes of color.

We left Sainte Chappelle and headed to see the famous Notre Dame de Paris. They were celebrating the 800th “birthday” of the cathedral and to commemorate it, they constructed essentially a giant set of bleachers in the square directly in front of the church. I think it had both good and bad points to it. I understand why they built it; it gives you a fantastic view of the cathedral façade that you otherwise wouldn’t get by just being on the ground looking up. Your view is essentially uninterrupted by people because of the differences in elevation. But at the same time, it was a large, ugly, blue monstrosity blocking the historic views from the street level. When we finally got inside, it was everything I had hoped and expected it to be. It was large and grand, but surprisingly less austere than I had imagined. I was expecting it to look just like the Duomo in Milano, but somehow it seemed lighter, in a couple senses of the word. I think there was more light coming in with the large rose windows and tall ceilings. But at the same time, the stone work seemed somehow less intricate, which gave it the appearance of being lighter as it was just less crowded. I’m really not sure how to explain it. It was a beautiful church, but somehow, not my favorite.

I believe we saw Saint Denis after that. I think if I had to choose a favorite church in Paris, it would be that one. Because it was so far away from the city center, I was expecting it to be a small, old chapel. Even when we arrived, it didn’t look all that impressive from the outside. But once we walked inside, there was just something about that place that I fell in love with. Maybe it was the beautiful, dark stained glass windows, or the large, detailed columns and towering arches. There was just something about it that made me love it even more than Notre Dame, which may sound like sacrilege, but I really think it’s true. There was interesting history everywhere, with the buried kings and queens, but was not so overwhelming that it felt like a mausoleum like Westminster Abbey. That church just made me want to keep looking up and exploring all the corners and architectural details. Everything was so beautiful I just kept trying to capture it in photograph. I think Notre Dame might have been a bit too large to do that, or we didn’t get to spend enough time there for me to explore. Either way, Saint Denis was the perfect size and had everything that I love to see in buildings: surprise, beauty, and intrigue.

The fourth church we visited was the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It was different from all the other churches we visited because it was in the Romanic style instead of gothic. While Romanic churches to me tend to seem more modest and simple, this one was still pretty grand. While we were there, someone started playing the organ, which was so cool to listen to. It was a beautiful, large sound that enveloped the entire abbey. I wish we could have stayed longer to just listen. It’s not very often that you get to hear something like that, or at least not in my experience. But maybe I’m just unlucky.

Finally, we saw the legendary Sacré Coeur. Professor Lorenz had told us about the “self-cleaning” white stone with which the basilica was built, so as I walked up the hill, I was expecting to see this pristine white church sparkling in the sunshine, because after all, from down below and far away, it looks pretty darn white. I was very sadly mistaken. We walked up and around the side first, and what we saw was less than ideal. It was covered in black smudges everywhere. It was just *dirty.* Hardly the pure white stone I had imagined. If the stone was self-cleaning, it wasn’t doing a very good job. That initial disappointment kind of spoiled the rest of the visit for me. Sacré Coeur had suddenly lost its magic and charm for me. The inside of the cathedral was spectacular, of course, but so were all the other churches we had visited so I wasn’t surprised. And it bugged me that they were asking for donations so brazenly, saying that the only income the church receives is through charity. Well each little candle costs at least two euros and I guarantee that in such a tourist destination, people light hundreds of candles a day, with many costing five or more euros, meaning they probably make a thousand euros on a good day. Even still, I loved seeing it. I never really get tired of visiting churches and marveling at their beauty, even if it is just as beautiful as the church I just saw the day before, or the day before that. And as we walked down the hill, we saw the basilica in all its glory: white and shining on the top of a green, grassy hill filled with people… and the evil bracelet people.