

Brownian Motion Blog  
not-so-random thoughts  
Paris, September 2012

by Dolores Cellier

... edited on 26 September 2012

At last, here we are in Paris again!

Greetings from Paris!

I am using my Sharxx keyboard with the iPad for the first time and it's smaller than a regular one, so slower going. (We've been here a week tomorrow, turned our forks over continental-style and our sleep-wake schedule is improving. Forced into our French selves very quickly by the reality of our apt. A very old building, just across the street from the oldest stone building in Paris (1407) called Auberge Nicolas Flamel, where we had a very nice lunch. Suffice to say that this apt. has the least amenities or charm of any others we've been in before, altho it has all the basics for function. In realtor-speak, it would be described as rustic, charming, and in need of loving care. Spent the first week re-acquainting ourselves with the Metro, neighborhood, and the rhythm of the city.

Visited old favorites first, Blvd Montparnasse (felt like I was home). In the 6 months I was here in '88, I spent a lot of time in the 6th as it was close to the Universite in the 14th. Visited La Cupole for dinner, an Art Deco restaurant famous since the 2020s for having been a haunt of the literary bad boys of Paris. I noticed the dark green marble and the dark wood paneling in several places here and in Florence, (previously) and wonder if subliminally that influenced my kitchen choice. What a nice discovery. Had dinner at an old favorite steak house called Le Entrecote, still wonderful for steak frites and Profiteroles, also in the 6th. Window shopping in the St. Germain-de-Pres area amazes me with the creativity of their window and flower displays, but that's true in most of the nicer shopping areas of the city.

Have spent two days at the Louvre Antiquaire, the D'Orsay, and attended the opera at Bastille opera house. Tales of Hoffman was the production, with a very bizarre first act. Rained lightly Mon. evening, then harder on Tues. (good day for museum) after having a weekend of 80 degree weather!

Today, so far, back to the high 60s and very pleasant for walking. Have been averaging about 5 hrs walking daily, including the 200 stair steps (then lost count) in the metro.

Week 2: The past two days were in two museums; the Cernuschi, of Asian art and the Cognacq-Jay, a small townhouse of early Paris furnishings, particularly wood marquetry tables and cabinets. Had a nice unusual lunch of squid at the Rose bakery, all found in the 4th. Impressions, similarities and differences from prior trips: Seems all the young people, and some old as well, are still smoking. The difference is that smoking is no longer allowed indoors, so restaurants, Metro, and shops are all smoke free, but outside of every building door and on the street, everyone is smoking!

Paris is a walking city, so the streets are crowded with pedestrians, only now they have their earbuds in, are looking at their cellphones in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The walking hazard in Paris used to be the dog poop on the street, now it's the WWD (walking while distracted). The fines for not picking up poop are up to 400 E, so the streets are cleaner than they used to be and 5 to 7 pm is still the prime dog-walking time. First disappointment was at Galeries Lafayette, the huge dept store with the glass rotunda over all. It is being refurbished, so the dome not always visible and parts of was closed off. The grand restaurant has been reduced to USA type food court counter service, ugh.

BUT, next door, the dept store Printemps outdid itself in over the top everything. The first floor was a series of upscale designer boutiques: Lanvin, Dior, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, the usuals. Each doorway had a velvet rope and people were admitted by a doorman like at a club! And there WAS a line at some. As usual, such haute couture gave me the giggles as it is so extreme and bizzare, especially the platform booties with stiletto heels. (We did see a few fashion victims on a rainy day at the museum in platform stiletto

sandals& ) ( Seems the street uniform for Parisians is jeans with ballerina flats or Converse sneakers or boots if raining, jackets and le sac the ever present tote bag on the shoulder to keep hands free for you-know-what. Late afternoon and evening some dollies add stiletto heels to their jeans and leather jackets. An easy dress code seemingly acceptable everywhere we've been.

Continuing with the fashion scene, skinny jeans are in and the girls here who wear them look great. It really is amazing the difference between the tourists and the natives weight-wise. I'd forgotten what normal sized people looked like, but Al is appreciating every outing. I look in the windows, window shopping (leche vitrine) and Al appreciates the street scene, also probably leching a little. The season colors seem to be Royal blue for men and women, and burgundy and russet orange. Also sparkles on shoes, bags and skirts, everywhere! Even Louis Vuitton had a sparkly huge travel tote like something Barbie or her friends would carry.

Continuing with Week 2 &

Paris has become very green since our last visit; special organic vegetable shops and community bike racks all over the city. There are 1800 stations with more than 20,000 bikes located about 2 blocks apart. A swipe of the credit card releases it and starts a charge after the first free one half hour. When you return it into a terminal anywhere in the city, the charges stop. People really use them, we took a picture of a rack with only one bike in it. Yesterday we saw woman in heels zipping along on a fold-up scooter on the Champs Elysees, and men in suits on bikes are common. Talk about encouraging a healthy, fit population. They would laugh at our trying to get people to do 30 min a day of exercise. We in the U.S. have a long way to go. The rhythm of the city that I perceived on previous visits still seems to hold; Fri nights for lovers and mistresses, Sat for nuclear family outings (the metro full of little kids and strollers) and Sun with the extended family at home. On Sun, everything out of the tourist sections are closed up tight. (We've been averaging 5 hours of walking per day, except for last Sun, when we went to the Garnier, the Paris opera house to see Strauss' Capriccio, then to dinner again to our favorite steak frites place. (only 2-1/2 hrs walking that day, due to all the sitting).

On Sat, Al planned our outing to Montmartre, to the Basilica of Sacre Coeur and wanted to visit the Champs after. Not my favorite places anytime, but we did, and the crowds were as predicted. It was a beautiful low 70s sunny day and EVERYBODY, locals and tourists alike, was out. We spent about 20 minutes on the Champs, just long enough to find a Metro and get out of there. Dinner at home, baked fish, etc, simple stuff since our kitchen has only a 2 electric burner stove and a toaster oven, plus a fridge 17 x 29 inches. I don't know how Parisians produce such exceptional meals in such tiny spaces. I guess I'm not there yet and probably won't ever be.

Yesterday we visited the Jacquemart-Andre museum, which is in an old mansion in the posh 8th. It has the actual furnishings of the couple who lived there and donated their collection, all the wooden marquetry and marble of the 19th century. The special exhibit is of Canaletto and Guardi's works of old Venice; we saw more Canaletto's today than we saw in Venice.

Then, I had wanted to visit the George V hotel for a drink, since it was after 5 and we were close by. The hotel is famous for everything expensive, but especially for me it is their reputation for their flower arrangements. It was an incredible extravaganza of purple orchids, hydrangeas, and gladiolus in clear glass vessels. Very easy to do, but incredible when massed like that. Took some pics with the iPad, but they do not do the scene justice. I loved my drink on the terrace with orchids strung on wires overhead, attached to the waterfall wall. It seems that only the grand hotels carry my Tanqueray gin, so it was a necessary stop. Each week the designer and 7 assistants work with about 15,000 flowers to get their dazzling effects.

Starting week 3 ...

Al is enjoying his Paris rituals: a morning stroll to the bakery for his favorite pain du chocolat and croissant d' amande or 'chassure du pomme' for me, which is like a croissant-apple turnover, and his daily indulgence of Camembert. (at home, it seems not to travel well, so not so good to him). Paris and Italy are the only places we eat bread anymore, so we are enjoying our daily demi baguette, here and in the restaurants. (We ARE averaging 5 plus hours walking each day.)

Regarding the 'French Paradox', it is not such a one when one lives the life of the average working

Parisian. Few have cars, most use busses and the Metro which involves walking up and down countless steps in the stations and a block or two at each end of the trip. Our apt is on the first floor which means 20 steps up and down for each outing to start with; others live here on the 6th level, no elevators in these old buildings.

Life here just involves more routine activity. Also I think a big part is the regular hours for eating and activities, e.g., the restaurants are open for lunch 12 to 2:30, then closed until open for dinner at 7 or 7:30. That encourages the long times between meals for fat-burning; most people are not snacking or sipping something all day long. The sidewalk cafe system is to eat or drink something and rest, also built into an active day at regular intervals so that the body can adjust and self regulate. I have become more convinced that regular hours for eating, sleeping and activity help our bodies to adjust and auto-regulate and reduces the stress of always having to work to achieve the homeostasis it requires.

We are crossing things off our lists and have a few more to go in the days we have left. Al had never taken the tour of the Paris Garnier opera house, looking at the library and rooms one never sees when attending the opera, so he did that one afternoon. He got to hear how some of what we see is "trompe l'oeil", while I elected to do laundry downstairs. Nice to have fresh clothes on a trip.

Yesterday we spent the day back in the 6th arrondissement at the Au Bon Marche, the oldest and first elegant department store in Paris. Their basement is a huge foodies delight, with amazing displays of fresh and imported goods artfully arranged. (Beautifully arranged food and flowers, my favorite things.). Had lunch in their Le Cafe de la Grande Epicerie and finally bought a pair of black ballerinas to replace the old ones I brought. I have enjoyed looking at all the shoes in the shops, but haven't seen the unique something I don't already have (blush).

Count down of activities continuing. Yesterday we spent ALL day in the Louvre revisiting old acquaintances and marveling at the changes and improvements, e.g., escalators in some places instead of the countless marble stair steps which are also still present. Had lunch in the Angelina cafe, founded in the Louvre in 1903. Saturday at the Carnavalet Musee, depicting the history of Paris and details of the Revolution, left there and stumbled upon one of my favorite things; a marche aux puces and brocante (pop up flea market in the 3rd with antiques, collectibles, and junk). Everything I liked either cost a fortune or was too heavy / delicate to carry on our travels or both. I'm not too good with numbers in French, something I was ready to buy for 90.00 euros was actually 900.00; Al is better with numbers than I am, so he saved me, again. He did that some years ago at the Louvre Antiquaire where I was wanting to buy a fireplace screen for what I thought was in the hundreds and actually was thousands. Oh those decimal points and the nuances of the language.

We did return today to the flea market, and bought an Art Nouveau pitcher which is fragile and which I will try to protect as we travel. A couple days later I realized that I have bought pitchers on other trips & I collect them??

Monday, last day in Paris. The Islamic Art exhibit opened this weekend at the Louvre, part of its new permanent collection. We were so lucky that our dates coincided. It is a huge collection, two floors of ceramics, carpets, metal work, calligraphy, illumination of manuscripts and jewelry. I realized why I like Islamic ceramics so much, and it's because the depictions were of wave-like flowers, leaves and fruit. Our last dinner was special too. Al found Le Cordonniere, a little restaurant, 20 places, one sitting, that happened to have its first reservation available a week in advance on that Mon. The chef prepares his specialties, and they were. Coquilles St. Jacques and Poulet avec figues et grain de raisin. The appetizers and the side dishes were so different and unusual.

The weather has gradually gotten cooler and a few days of variable light rains has brought out the opaque black tights, with the short skirts and the ever-present foulard, (neck scarf). Tuesday, travel day, luckily no rain. Taxi to Gare de Lyon, then onto TGV, the high-speed train to Lyon which covers the 295 miles in two hours, averaging 150 mph. I love the TGV, so luxe and quiet. Al wisely went against our usual plan of staying in the oldest locally owned hotel, instead booking us into the ultra-modern Mercure which looks like a photo layout for Rochebobois and was a welcome jolt of angular, shiny, slick efficiency. I was beginning to feel like Camille without the cough. Adhering to the first rule of travel keep moving we walked a couple of miles into the oldest part of town, (we are in the most modern area)

crossing two rivers, the Rhone and the Saone. Lyon is the second largest business center of France. It is also famous for its "trompe l'oeil" walls and its Lyonnaise cuisine which means lots of cream and gratinee. Think potatoes Dauphinoise and traditional onion soup with cheese, or don't.

Had a wonderful traditional dinner in the old town, and a stimulating, fun dinner conversation with a young prof from University of Paris at the adjoining table. Our fractured French and his a little better English enabled us to discuss politics, theirs and ours, social conditions and answer each other's questions. Caught a bus directly back to our hotel. Next day it rained hard all day, so we were confined to the modern shopping mall nearby to see the similarities and differences of everyday living in France. (La vie quotidien) Missed visiting the famous silk weaving workshops because of the rain; an industry protected by law in this Rhone alps region since 1901.

Greetings now from Switzerland!

Thursday 9/27. Arrived by train in Geneva, sunny day. Checked into hotel and decided to explore city before dinner. Took a turn that started to look suspiciously seedy & then sex shops and girls out front. Rushed by there SO fast. Started to rain, by dinner time a downpour. Found a lively restaurant near the hotel serving French and Swiss meals. Next day, walk into old town passing all the high-end shops. Spent afternoon in the Patek-Phillipe museum of watches from the 16th century to currently. Amazing, especially the highly jeweled and automated clocks and watches made for the Chinese market in the 19th century. Since we rushed thru the part of town that I usually don't encounter, before we left I made sure that we went that way again, slower this time, but in the car on our way out of town.

Saturday, left Geneva in a rent car in the pouring rain on the visiting-the-villages- where Al's ancestors lived and distant cousins-still-do-phase of the trip. 3-1/2 hrs later, thru country roads, arrived at our hotel on edge of Lake Neuchatel at a fishing village called Petit Cortailod. Dinner at the hotel with 3 friends and historians of the area, two of whom professors who wrote books about the Cellier family, and who have helped Al in his research. On Sunday, a distant cousin, Nick ( who is a near-identical DNA match to Al) took us for a drive exploring the countryside and then home for dinner with his family. We met Nick 2 yrs ago when we visited Neuchatel where he works and the chemistry was instant and positive. They have a lovely contemporary home in Bevaix with a view of the lake.

Left there, drove short distance away to the ancestral villages of La Ferriere, and Neuchatel, then on to La Neuveville to stay for two days. Met with Theo, a distant cousin of a branch of the tree, and wife Marriette for lunch. They are an elderly couple who are also historians and have written articles about the region. Stayed at Villa Carmen, a hotel that used to be a residential school for girls, built in 1873.

Had a day of rest, which was welcome. We've kept a steady pace. Al usually plans two nights in each place so that we don't feel rushed and can explore at leisure. Good thing too, because he packs a lot into these trips.

We read that Switzerland is approx 20 percent more expensive than France, and I think we've seen some evidence of that. Even the old, historic hotels in these areas have had the luxury touches of down bedding, Frette linens and Villeroy-Boch china in the rooms, and modern, slick European plumbing.

English seems the default language; everyone we have encountered here speaks it, along with French, and German, and some Italian and Spanish. We really have to improve our conversational French! We can function at a basic level with certain useful phrases, but not for sustained conversation.

On to Lausanne to another beautiful hotel on Lake Geneva, the Angleterre. Weather has been mild and sunny/cloudy, but no rain or need for jackets. Celebrated Al's birthday at a lakeside restaurant having venison, since this is the season of "la chasse" or the hunt. It is also the harvest season in this wine country, and the hillside vineyards are full of workers and bins of grapes. We have lots of pictures, but they will need to be transferred into computer at home and into the blog at a later time.

Met with younger cousins, brother and sister from the closely-related Chilean branch of the family who returned to Geneva to live and work, Fernando and Isabel. He is a Renaissance man, electronics engineer, MD, and economics professor, and currently is working for Seimens developing their new generation

tomograph for which he has patents. He prepared the appetizers. Isabel is an orthopaedic nurse, sort of new-agey, interested in Eastern spirituality, and had just moved into her spacious new apartment near Fribourg. We were her first guests; she prepared a typical Swiss meal, a Raclette avec garnitures. We had had a nice visit with them 2 years ago as well, and hit it off with them immediately.

On Friday, moved a short distance along the coast of Lake Geneva to an old hotel on the edge of the vineyards called Auberge Le Raisin to visit with the musical parts of the Cellier family. Raisin here means grape, and the hotel had this wonderful iron work of vines, leaves, birds, and grape clusters that I need for my staircase at home.

Toured the area of mountainous narrow roads thru the vineyards, high walls, no center dividers, hairpin turns and drizzly rain. Saturday evening attended a Jazz concert at a mountain top dinner house given by Alexander Cellier and his sextet; sat with friends and family of the band. Picture this. We re in a Swiss mountain top restaurant, everyone is speaking combinations of French, English and Spanish to each other, and the band is doing Trinidad type steel drums, percussion instrument jazz. Mind boggling.

Next day, family lunch with the elder musical Celliers, Marcel and Catherine and one of their other sons Claude, and grandchildren. Marcel won a Grammy in the 90's for his work as an ethnomusicologist; introducing Eastern European folk music to Western Europe. Two large tables in the old stone cellar serving as a large dining room for the three generations and some friends. Later that day, we left the French part of Switzerland to arrive in Bern and then Zurich, which are in the German speaking part.

... remainder of text lost! But, see:

<http://cellier.org/2012CH/2012CH.html>

for continuation with photos.