

PASSPORT TO EUROPE

With Megan Broussard

PHOTOS BY MEGAN BROUSSARD, JUSTIN GREENLEAF, RENEE JUDICE, AND ALEX LANDRY

SEE OTHER COUNTRIES and seize the opportunity of a lifetime. Those were the thoughts that prompted me to study abroad. I wanted to learn about other cultures and acquire a competitive edge before graduating. Little did I know that I would learn more about myself and my country in the process. Although I experienced a few funny cultural misunderstandings, one fact was certainly not lost in translation: Europeans love the Ragin' Cajuns!

The travel bug first bit in my freshman year at UL Lafayette. I was itching to grab a few friends and backpack through Europe. But two questions stood between my dream and me: How would I ever get enough money? And, since I planned to take classes at UL Lafayette in the summers, when would I find time to travel?

Fate answered my questions through a flyer on campus that advertised UL Lafayette's Summer 2008 Study Abroad Program. There it was: a chance to travel to Europe with university faculty for course credit and the possibility of obtaining a scholarship to help pay for the trip. Quicker than anyone could say "bon voyage," I had climbed four flights of stairs in



This photo was taken on our first night in Paris. Shown from left are Hannah Gerard; me, Megan Broussard; Renee Judice; Alex Landry; Katelyn Porubsky; and Elyse Marks.

Griffin Hall, run straight to the Study Abroad Office and filled out an application.

France was my country of choice, not because I'm obsessed with French *crêpes*, (which I am), but because I speak a little French. Paris was also a strategic choice because of its central location in Europe. I could travel to England, Switzerland, Rome, the Netherlands and Belgium on weekends.

The program offered courses I needed to graduate, including an art history elective and an international marketing class.

Three months before our departure in June, 39 classmates and I began taking the state-side portion of our mandatory French culture class. We learned the basic differences between the USA and France, while preparing ourselves for a six-week, PDA-filled adventure – *sans* air conditioning. We were also warned not to draw attention to ourselves while in Europe.

Because of the war in Iraq, America already occupied center stage in the international arena. The upcoming Democratic primary race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was drawing even more attention, since many Europeans favor the Democratic Party.

Anyone who was disbelieving or daydreaming during this lecture was in for a rude awakening.

Finally, the day came to say goodbye to our families and friends, as we boarded a plane for a nine-hour flight to the City of Light. As an only child leaving my parents for the first time, I promised post cards, photos and lots of phone calls, all the while fighting back a few, embarrassing tears.

The thought of arriving in Paris kept me awake during the flight. While everyone around me slept peacefully, I wrote the first entry in my travel journal and prayed jet lag wouldn't be as bad as people had described it.

But it was. When we landed at Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris, I was disoriented. I couldn't read any signs posted in the terminal! I blamed it on delirium caused by sleep deprivation until I realized that the foreign words meant I was nearly 5,000 miles from home and about to walk down the streets of the most romantic city in the world.

On the bus ride to our dorm, I could hardly believe the blur of picturesque clichés coming to life around me. There were smoky cafés on almost every corner, small poodles following their sophisticated-looking owners, and bicyclists carrying freshly baked *baguettes*.

Our class split into pairs and settled quickly into the dorm for the summer. We received meal tickets, which we put to good use immediately. Traditional French cuisine was a bit underwhelming for our Tabasco®-loving taste buds.

But, *c'est la vie!* There was always the safe option of steak and *frites*, and plenty of cafés and boulangeries selling cheap and scrumptious *croque monsieurs* (the French version of the American grilled cheese sandwich) along with popular North African kebabs.

Glacière is the main metro (subway) stop and our gateway to most Parisian attractions. Our *cartes oranges* served as our summer metro passes. We used them on the day we arrived to visit the Eiffel Tower for the first time.

Crammed into the metro car, I realized just how easily Americans could be spotted. I vowed to blend in by exchanging tennis shoes and bright logos for chic European staples, like linen pants and scarves, as soon as I could find time to shop. I also noticed that Parisian women wear little makeup, so I tried to wear less than usual, too.

My classmates and I were also careful not to smile too much, take too many photos or talk too loudly in public places. Despite our efforts, politically charged Parisians called us out.

Our first encounter came just before we arrived at the Eiffel Tower. A scruffy metro passenger picked up on our accents and interrupted our conversations. He began by bashing American



Above: I'm standing by the Seine River just before boarding a boat for a tour of the City of Light. Left: In the garden of famous French artist Auguste Rodin, Hannah Gerard and I mimic the famous pose of *The Thinker*.

foreign policies and ended by spitting in our direction.

Though it wasn't the warmest welcome, finally standing in front of the Eiffel Tower was the perfect "Bienvenue à Paris!" The scene was so

beautiful that it felt as if I had stepped inside a painting.

The next six weeks in Paris were just as magical. We studied while seated on blankets in nearby parks, perused open-air markets and toured everything from Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe to King Louis XIV's Versailles. We visited many museums, but in addition to the Louvre, one stood out.

Palais de Tokyo held a special, multi-room exhibit that depicted contrasting uses of the New Orleans Superdome, ranging from Rolling Stones concerts to providing shelter for Hurricane Katrina victims. This, along with a few other artistic interpretations of the Crescent City around Paris, reminded me of the unique French connection with Louisiana that still exists. Although they may disagree with American politics, it seems that the French still have a soft spot in their hearts for the Bayou State.



London

LONDON WAS FIRST ON MY LIST OF WEEKEND EXCURSIONS. THE Channel Tunnel, or Chunnel, under the English Channel, connects Paris and London by rail. Our train ride was swift and smooth.

Within an hour, we had reached the usually foggy city on a rare sunny morning. We instantly felt a greater sense of belonging than we had in Paris. We were excited to hear English spoken all around us, although the British accent made it sound like James Bond speaking in code.

We tried to see as much of London as we could in two days. We took a bike tour to all the major sites, like Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Westminster Abbey, Hyde Park, Trafalgar Square



Left: Tiffany Landry and me in front of Big Ben. Above: I'm surrounded by friends in a British phone booth. Clockwise, from left, are Daniel Allemond, Jason Emert, Hannah Gerard and Renee Justice.

and Big Ben, which we learned is not the name of the famous clock, but the name of a nearby bell.

We ate fish and chips while waiting outside the gates of Buckingham Palace to watch Changing the Guard and a practice run of the queen's upcoming birthday parade. We got a glimpse of Prince Charles but, to my dismay, Prince William and Prince Harry weren't there.

Around teatime, a Beef Eater, a ceremonial guardian of the Tower of London, gave us a tour of torture chambers and told royal tales of betrayal. Afterward, I asked if he would stand by me while a friend took our photo. While posing, he asked me where I was from.

When I replied, "Louisiana," he smiled and responded with a question: "Who is better, Terrance Simien or D. L. Menard?" Surprised by the question, I said I didn't know.

"That was a trick question; they're both incredible," he continued. "I visit South Louisiana often, mainly for the music and food, but also for the hospitality."



Interlaken

THE NEXT STOP FOR THE RAGIN' CAJUN CREW was Interlaken, Switzerland. Although our classes in Paris were stimulating, we were ready to get our hearts pumping in the town world-renowned for its extreme sports.

Interlaken is tiny, with a population of only 5,700. It's invaded every summer by American college students looking for adventure while

Some of my classmates and I decided to go canyoning. This photo was taken just after I jumped from the top of a waterfall in Interlaken, Switzerland.



studying abroad.

We had booked rooms in a hostel. After unpacking our bags, we went downstairs to the recreation office to see what activities it offered. Half of our group signed up for skydiving, while those of us who are saner signed up for canyoning, which involves rappelling down canyons and sliding down waterfalls.

The clerk failed to tell us the water would be so cold that we had to wear wetsuits. Nevertheless, canyoning was amazing and I recommend it to anyone who ever wants the chance to feel like Indiana Jones for a while.

My friend Alex and I decided to spend our last day there leisurely, so we rented bikes and rode slowly throughout Interlaken and its outskirts. At one point, we realized that we needed to hurry back to Interlaken to return our rental bikes on time.

While cutting through an adjacent town, I had to stop to fix my bike's tire, which had become warped. As I was working on it, I glanced up and saw a surprised look on Alex's face. She had spotted a poster across the street that showed an unflattering photo of President Bush, along with the word "reform" in German. A man, who must have seen us looking at the poster, started walking toward us. We began to

walk away to avoid a potential discussion about American politics. But he yelled for us to wait, adding that he had tools to fix my bike. We stopped.

When he was near us, he asked a peculiar question. "How does Switzerland compare to home?" Assuming that his question was politically motivated, we didn't answer. Instead, we just shrugged. Then he pointed to Alex's UL Lafayette sweatshirt and said, "Come on. You should be proud of your home. Louisiana is beautiful and the beignets are fantastic!"



Loire Valley

DR. DAVID BAKER, A UL LAFAYETTE MARKETING instructor for the 2008 Study Abroad program, had told us about a class trip we would take to the Loire Valley.

That region of France is best known for its wine, breathtaking vineyards and stunning chateaus. And, as if visiting the quintessential medieval towns of Saumur, Chinon and Azy-le-Rideau wouldn't be enough of a treat, he promised a visit with a successful UL Lafayette alumnus, Ted Breaux.

Breaux is the founder of Jade Liqueurs, whose brands of absinthe, including his best-known American product, Lucid, is made in a small distillery in Saumur.

Breaux gave us a tour of the historical Combiert Distillery, which houses antique copper equipment designed by Gustav Eiffel, the engineer of the Eiffel Tower, in the 1830s. The distillery looked more like Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, with its wacky spiral staircase in the center of the main room.

After completing a sensational wine tasting session, we set off to tour the castle atop the hill, where past kings of France had overlooked Saumur's townspeople so many centuries ago. It was like stepping into a storybook as we walked along cobblestone roads, staring up at the cold stone fortress and down on the town's red rooftops.

Chinon, our next stop along the Loire River, was the sequel to Saumur's fairy tale. One afternoon, stuffed with French food, we decided to get a little French-style exercise by renting bikes and venturing out into the vineyard-filled countryside. It was hot, but we stayed cool by joyriding 20 miles up and down hills on the outskirts of town.

On both sides of the road sprawled open fields, farmlands, vineyards and the most beautiful summer homes I could never have imagined before.

We formed a single line on the winding road, trying to steer the bikes with one hand and balance our cameras in the other.

Aside from the occasional passing car, the only sounds we heard were the chirping of birds and the warm greeting, "Bonjour!" from French neighbors.



Top left: Dr. David Baker leads us on a 20-mile bike ride through the picturesque vineyards of Chinon, France. Top right: I explore the grounds of the Chateau d'Azay-le-Rideau in Touraine, France. Left: Ted Breaux, founder of Jade Liqueurs and a UL Lafayette alum, gives us a tour of the Combiert Distillery in Samur, France.

two sundresses the day before we boarded a train for a 14-hour ride to Rome. We were in a sleeper car stacked with bunk beds called *couchettes*.

I have to admit that, although I am a Cajun, I am an air-conditioned Cajun. And, while the air conditioning units work on the train, they – like many others in Europe – aren't as powerful as the ones we are accustomed to in the

United States. We were fanning ourselves while practically hanging our heads out of the windows to cool off. But more than heat drew us to the windows. The rolling hills of Italy held our attention. It was as if we were watching scenes from *Under the Tuscan Sun* and we were afraid to tear our eyes away for fear of missing an important piece of the plot.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted by Italian graffiti-filled walls, which were mostly illegible except for repeated references to "Bush." We braced ourselves for an unwelcoming weekend, but to our surprise, the Italians were the nicest yet!

Most spoke English, going out of their way to help us with directions



Rome

THE COOL BREEZE OF FRANCE'S LOIRE VALLEY WAS replaced with the sweltering heat of Roma the next weekend. Our instructors had warned that the sun would be almost unbearable, but I was skeptical. After all, I'm Cajun!

My ancestors survived the heat and stifling humidity of Louisiana's mosquito-infested swamps. I didn't think the temperature would bother me.

Was I wrong. I was thankful that I had bought

The Coliseum was first on our list of Roman landmarks to visit. From left are Elyse Marks, Tiffany Landry, Catherine Calhoun, Britnee Ulmer, Alex Landry and me.



and recommending their favorite restaurants.

But some Italians didn't speak or understand English well or at all. Sometimes, I could speak Spanish, my second minor at UL Lafayette, to get around. It was such an amazing feeling to ask a question in Spanish, receive the answer in Italian, and actually understand it.

Our first stroll through the city, we were too distracted by ancient architecture to notice the 104-degree heat.

First on our list of places to see was the Coliseum. I had seen lots of photos of Rome's historic icon before this trip, but not even Google Earth could have prepared me for this first-person encounter. I stood still for at least 10 minutes, staring up in awe of this famous structure before I could grasp that I was standing where advanced civilization began.

From there, we practically ran along narrow, cobblestone sidewalks and weaved in an out of traffic jams to see the rest of Rome in two days.

We visited the Vatican, the pope's holy city inside of a city; saw Michelangelo's ceiling masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel; and traipsed through many Roman ruins, including the steps where Caesar was supposedly stabbed.

One morning, making sure our shoulders and knees were covered with shawls and conservative dresses, my girlfriends and I attended mass with the pope presiding at St. Peter's Basilica. Theresa Frederick, the UL France Study Abroad Program on-site director, had arranged for an exclusive guided tour of the pope's private gardens afterward.

When we weren't sightseeing, we lived by the saying, "When In Rome, do as the Romans do," by eating as the Romans eat. I made sure to get in all the important Italian food groups, like spaghetti, ravioli, pizza and delicious Italian desserts like *conollis*, pastries stuffed with creamy fillings, and *gelato*, Italian ice cream.



WE SPENT OUR LAST WEEKEND IN Europe in places with a much slower pace. We toured Amsterdam's canals by boat and traveled by horse-drawn carriages through the medieval town of Bruges, Belgium.

At some point, between taking a picture of the Netherlands' famous windmills and ordering the Belgian delicacy of French fries and mayonnaise, I realized that I had left my camera on one of the trains that



travels back and forth on a rail line from Amsterdam to Brussels.

I was devastated. Two and a half weeks of memories from Loire Valley that were on that camera were gone. I filled out reports, mostly *en français*, in every city where the train had stopped that day. I held onto a sliver of hope that someone would turn it in, but I knew I would probably never see it again.

I tried to enjoy the last week in Paris before our trip home. But I was distracted. I took the metro to the train station alone every day to check the lost and found.

Friends and family tried to console me by telling me that the memories I made were more important than the photos I took. I didn't believe them.

But now, I can honestly say that they were right. A scrapbook of portraits in front of famous European landmarks only skims the surface of my adventures. This wasn't just a trip. It was a journey, one with many lessons that led to self-discovery.

Above: Up at 6 a.m., Allie Roth and I hurry to catch a train in Gare de Nord, Paris' busiest train station. Lower left: Despite the dreary weather, Hannah Gerard, Alex Landry and I were all smiles in London's famous Trafalgar Square. Lower right: Study Abroad students always made sure to show their Ragin' Cajun pride during visits to the Eiffel Tower.

I learned that I am more independent than I give myself credit for. By riding the metro alone or managing to buy stamps at the post office using only a French phrase book, I proved this to myself too many times to count.

I also learned that as an American, I have political and cultural beliefs that may offend some Europeans, but as a Cajun, I am often welcome because of my culture's French connection and a world-renowned reputation for being friendly, fun and food-loving.

Now when I think of my study abroad, I remember shopping in Parisian flea markets, dancing in the streets at the Fête de la Musique and sipping coffee in small cafés. Those were the simplest and most special times of the experience. And I was too busy laughing, singing, and listening to everything around me to even think about taking my camera out of its case.

Those are the moments that really count. And, this article is a journal of some of those special memories that can't be put in a scrapbook. ■

