Places I Love

Paris has something for everyone

by Connie Brisson

J’aime ca. [I love it.]

That’s what I’m thinking as we are sitting in a taxi driving from Charles de Gaulle Airport heading into Paris.

As I looked around, the trees looked like our trees and the buildings looked like our buildings. I’m thinking we could be anywhere - maybe even Kansas. When Marcel worked in Kansas over two years ago, Gabrielle and I went there to see him and the trees/buildings looked just like this.

But then, I saw the Eiffel Tower standing majestically in the distance and murmured to myself: “Connie, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Soon we were driving around the famous Arc de Triomphe (from which 12 avenues radiate out, like the spokes of a wheel). Its construction was ordered in 1806 by Napoleon, the French Emperor but was not completed until 1836. This is one of the most famous landmarks of Paris.

Our hotel, Chambiges Elysees (www.hotelchambiges.com) was just off the Champs Elysee, one of Paris’ (if not the world’s) most famous avenues. I chose this hotel because it was #11 (of a billion possible in Paris) on Trip Advisor. As our cab driver took a right at a Louis Vuitton store, telling us we were close, I pinched myself. Another left at the Fendi store (after the Dior, Gucci, and yet another Louis Vuitton store) and we arrived at our small hotel. I’d never seen so many luxury brand stores in such tight quarters, not even in Vegas. I sighed (a French sounding sigh, of course).

Alors, our hotel was quaint but pricy (over $500 CDN per night), although a basic European breakfast was included (cheese, bread, cold cuts). The hotel had free WiFi which pleased my 13-year-old daughter, Gabrielle.

In Paris, we sought out the usual tourist lures. First, we took a 30 minute train ride to the extravagant Palace of Versailles (www.chateauversailles.fr), the last home of Louis XVI, with 2,300 rooms! The line-up was long (over two hours). Once inside, there were so many tourists (we were packed like sardines) that it was unbearably claustrophobic and the heat made it even worse (late August). In the end, I couldn’t believe that some people really lived in such opulent extravagance and that I was now, over 200 years later, standing in a place that had played a part of the French Revolution.

Of course, we also went to the Louvre and bless them (after only a one hour line up), they made it quite easy to find Mona Lisa once we were inside. We also took a cruise on the Seine River to see the many architectural highlights of Paris. We later bought a pink metal lock, wrote our initials and date on it, and then locked it on one of the famous ‘lock bridges’ that the cruise goes under. We also visited the Notre Dame Cathedral where Gabrielle and I lit a candle and said a prayer.

To celebrate Marcel’s 60th birthday we went to the Eiffel Tower’s 58 Tour Eiffel restaurant, (www.restaurants-toureiffel.com), on the first tier of the tower. I pre-booked it about a month ahead as it is a popular place. It was a pricey event (about $115 CDN per person for a pre-set dinner meal, not including drinks) and although the service was really slow, the food was good and the wonderful view of Paris made it a special event.

One day we took the metro to visit Montmartre, the city’s highest quarter, a hill in the north of Paris (130 metres high). Oh yes, there’s a whole lot of stairs to climb to get there! Montmartre is primarily known for the white-domed Basilica of the Sacré Cœur and also for art/painters.

Long ago, many artists had studios or worked around Montmartre such as Salvador Dalí, Amedeo Modigliani, Claude Monet, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh. Today there is a square where many artists gather and sketch portraits of tourists and where you can buy the work of local artists.

In 1989 I had my portrait sketched there by Steffi and I could not believe when she was still there this summer, 24 years later. We had her sketch Gabrielle for about $75 CDN. It’s an amazing keepsake she’ll have forever.

But the highlight of Paris for me was not the artists, designer boutiques or historical sites, but our late night strolls when we would wander, passing different cafes, listening to the live music on every street corner and immersing ourselves into the unexplainable magic of Paris at night.

Mais oui, lastly, when you’re in Paris, I would highly recommend a wonderful Lebanese restaurant we discovered: Al-Ajami (58, rue Francois 1er - 75008 Paris, www.ajami.com). We had the usual traditional dishes that left our tummies tres content.

It’s easy to enjoy Paris, no matter what it is that you love to do. There is truly something there for everyone!