

## Just Deux It

When they went to Paris without the kids, their only goal was to relax. And then something wonderful happened.

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We booked the apartment in Paris. And that was it. We hadn't planned anything past the point when my husband and I set foot on the plane last summer -- our first trip without our children, domestic or abroad, in a car, plane or train.

Having flown internationally with the kids in recent years -- France, Budapest, Austria, Italy -- a kind of auto-dread descended as we shuffled our way through security. I remembered one eight-hour zombie promenade through narrow aisles with a squirming toddler on my hip. Stress crawled up my spine as I recalled two hours stuck, and seat-belted, on the Dulles tarmac while my 3-year-old's bladder filled beyond endurance.

On this flight, however, something really weird happened. We fell asleep.

And woke up over Paris, cuddled under the synthetic fibers of an airplane blanket. We pushed up the plane's window shade, smiled at the nice-smelling French flight attendant and licked full-cream yogurt off plastic spoons. So far, so good.

A French friend once told me, "The French, we are more approximate than the Americans." Perhaps our dearest hope for this trip was to let go, feel free, get lost. What better destination than France?

My sister had agreed to watch the kids. I was a wreck in the weeks leading up to the departure date. Little arms break. Drivers ignore small, pink bicycles. Oceans loom large. What if they needed me in the middle of the night? What if my sister hated me afterward? She was driving eight hours from South Carolina just to *baby-sit*. I made lists: Foods the kids like. Numbers for friends. Directions for Metro.

Four days before departure, I made my husband rent an international cell phone for \$140 a week. "That way, my sister can call while she's making a peanut butter sandwich and ask which kind of jelly the kids like," I said, feeling quite good.

"At \$1.70 a minute," he gently reminded, then added, "Our kids are nearly 8 and 5. They can talk to her about jelly." He got the phone.

Finally, I finished the lists. I secured all details. I took a breath. Something still nagged me. A real monster, hunkering beneath all those little worries slowly reared its ugly head. Something dark and unique to a 15-year relationship with kids.

"What if we run out of things to say after one hour in the first cafe?" I asked him. "What if," I added, "we find out we can't stand each other?"

Oceans loom large. Perhaps there is nothing like international travel to separate you from what you know. And force you to face what you don't.

When my more relaxed sister arrived, she laughed at the three-foot-long schedule I'd spread out across the dining room table. Surely, she seemed to say, you don't expect . . . She suddenly developed Euro articulation. "Nice shed-ules," she said.

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On previous international trips, we spent an inordinate amount of time standing around in playgrounds and searching for the international bathroom symbol. We dubbed our 2004 trip to Austria the Toilet Tour.

This trip? The answer to my monster-size question came quickly. The sleepy airplane joy gave way to giddiness. We stood in the airport, completely lost in time and space, and said, "Hmm. Where's the subway?" It was so nice to not really know. I began to remember that my husband and I were different before kids, before living in Washington, where a good deal of our time is devoted to cussing at traffic. We were . . . more approximate.

Still in the airport, two funny, good-looking men, one Parisian, the other Italian, joked with us as we pondered the automated subway ticket machine and tried to make it work. Modern technology is absurd. Language differences are silly. A kind of Sartre absurdism took over the moment, and the four of us could not stop laughing. I suddenly felt 25 and wondered if the airplane yogurt had contained cannabis.

The good vibe continued on the train as we laughed with more locals and verified our impression from previous trips to France: The French are friendly. Really.

Later, we met the apartment owner at the building's doorstep in the Latin Quarter, on a street between the Pantheon and the Luxembourg Gardens. I was overjoyed with the location. Pigeons flapped across the narrow side street. From our window -- which opened, of course, French style -- we could see a student studying in her apartment across the courtyard.

We speak very little French. The owner spoke no English. But we managed a lively conversation about the unusually hot weather and about his daughter, who was studying to be a scientist like my husband.

That day we ate *salade paysanne* -- layers of greens, ham and potatoes topped with an egg and served with toast and a wedge of very warm goat cheese. We checked out the Pantheon, took a short nap, woke to the sounds of our neighbors getting dinner, watched the student still studying, walked through the Latin Quarter and stopped in a few cafes for

beer. The sun was still up at 10 p.m. (Paris is on the same latitude as Newfoundland), and the juxtaposition of light and time only added to our goal of getting lost.

We decided to walk to the Eiffel Tower, arriving just moments before it closed at midnight. We rose through its golden tiers of light as happy as two beetle bugs in June. Afterward, in another cafe, we ordered a dessert of baked egg whites floating on a pool of sweet creme. At 3 a.m. We wondered at what point in our lives such pleasantries had become radical.

Back at the apartment, I felt comforted by the soft glow of the student's lamp across the alley. During our four days in Paris, she never stopped studying except to sleep a few hours in the early morning. Probably a student at the Sorbonne, just one street over. Studying something classical, lyrical, lovely. I liked having her around.

Over the next two days we visited Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, Sainte Chapelle and other sites -- whenever we felt like it. During the heat of two afternoons, we could not pass up a pair of exhibits we would have missed in a more rational state of mind, especially with young kids: Montmartre's Musee de l'Erotisme, which features hundreds of phallic symbols of many shapes and sizes from a variety of dates and cultures, and the Catacombs, burial grounds more than 65 feet below Paris that feature tunnels lined with the skulls and femurs of 6 million dead and signs that read, "Stop! This is the empire of death!"

We stayed out late. We slept late. We found margaritas, mojitos. We found way more ice than I remembered from previous trips. We bought Gauloises. We smoked them.

The Fete de la Musique, an unofficial national holiday, took place while we were there, and from dusk until dawn the streets filled with people and music. After watching a street crowd sing along to Queen's "We Are the Champions," we ended up at an English-style pub in front of an ancient church near the Pantheon and watched a priest and several nuns belt out French evangelical youth rock while we sipped a pint.

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The liberating moment of the trip, a kind of quivering crescendo, occurred on our final day in Paris in front of the "Mona Lisa." Reasonable, seasoned travelers, we meant to get to the Louvre early in the morning. No way were we going to get trapped in long lines with bus people from Ohio.

We woke up four hours late. Oops, we said, then took leisurely showers and wandered over to the patisserie for croissants.

Finally, a few hours later, we followed the museum map's convenient but cheesy arrows (What? The other 34,999 pieces of art are no good?) straight to the source. Sweating heavily, I wedged my way into a sea of pungent tourists to glimpse the portrait featuring those fabulous curling lips. Tourists heavily armed with phone cameras, digital cameras

and video recorders swarmed like paparazzi toward the little painting. Shoulders bumped against mine. Breasts pressed into my back.

Suddenly, I began to giggle and could not stop. A stranger's male voice in back of me said in American English, "I'm moving up. I came all the way to France to see this damn painting. I'm getting in front no matter what." I laughed harder. The people pushed on -- Portuguese, Japanese, American. Above head level, hundreds of cell phone cameras, brandished like battle swords, recorded a piece of the Renaissance world.

My husband got to the front before me. I was faltering, laughing too hard, letting the moment take over. Then I saw him. There he was, a tall guy by European standards. He turned his back to the painting and held his digital camera at arm's length for a self-portrait of himself in front of the painting. Then he did the unthinkable. He made a goofy face. Then another. And another.

I held up my regular camera, shaking with laughter, and snapped a shot of him taking a picture of himself in front of the painting that Leonardo da Vinci adored -- so much that he carried it around with him. The American behind me grew agitated and pushed on. I was in tears. I had to cross my legs. And it dawned on me that this moment of delirious stupidity was exactly what I needed, exactly what we came for and need more of in a life so driven by Palm Pilots and paper calendars, carpools and PTAs.

Shed-ules be damned.

My Mona Lisa Moment. It's a keeper.

*Pamela Gerhardt last wrote for Travel about renting a cottage in Tuscany.*

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