

# Europe - A Student's Playground - France

By Brandon MacKenzie

I will always remember my time in Normandy. The wars we always read about happened here and unlike us, the citizens in Normandy do not have to fight to keep the memory of past sacrifices alive - not when German artillery still lay in their concrete bunkers, not when whole cities were flattened - no one forgets. I did not want to leave this land, but I knew I had much more to see.

France is huge, not in comparison to Canada, but for Europe the country is massive. Fear not long boring train rides stuck next to someone with clinical body odor problems, travel times in France have been shrunk by the TGV - Train a Grande Vitesse. For those of you who failed French class, that translates into High Speed Train. This bullet shaped torpedo cruises between 200 and 300 kms per hour and can hit top speeds of 500 kms per hour. This translates into jumping on a train in Charlottetown and ending up in Quebec City 3 ½ hours later. The rail system in France is fantastic and many bulk ticket options are available to the budget student traveler.

In total, I spent nearly one third of my travels in France, not because I overly enjoyed myself, but because it has so much to offer. Inevitably, everyone ends up in Paris, the city of love, of romance, of street thugs, of wine and cheese. At first, I was a bit reluctant to spend time in Paris as my reasoning had me dead set on never spending a second in the city unless I was hand in hand with a love of my life. Perfectly good reasoning, Paris is great for honeymoons, and this most certainly was not mine. Unfortunately my plan went out the window the night I fell asleep on a train in Italy and woke up in Paris. Strong wine and fatigue can do strange things to a man, so I gave in and decided to check into a hostel.

A word of advice to those Canadians who learned our second official language in French immersion class and who plan to show off your skills in Paris, be prepared to be labeled Québécois - and there is

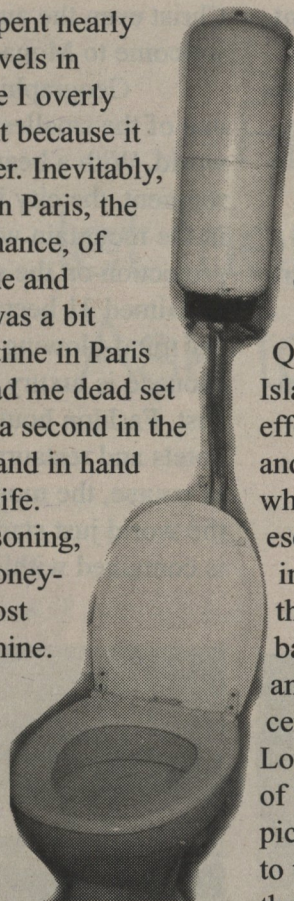
no use fighting it. To Parisians, our slang French is a bit amusing. Many appreciate your effort, but some will only smile at your best efforts and make you feel like you're an exhibit in a zoo. Our French is very different.

Despite being labeled Québécois (no offense, but I'm an Islander), Paris is well worth the effort. The city is remarkably clean and welcoming, offering a city-scape which screams Europe. Paris escaped much of the carpet bombing which punished Europe during the war and as a result the city still backbones itself on cobbled streets and traditional architecture from centuries ago. Museums like the Louvre seem to hold all the wonders of the world, breathtaking Cathedrals pictured in Disney movies are open to the public, and of course there is the Eiffel Tower - which is a great landmark to help provide direction to the lost Canadian in search of his hostel bed. Nightlife in Paris is amazing, as concerts, clubs, and very cheap wine abound. Parisians most definitely enjoy life and never miss a chance to eat well and drink well - I was sad to leave.

From Paris, a traveler has

many options. Head southwest to the city of Bordeaux in search of the wonders of French wine and 'les chateaux' vineyards culture. Travel even further to Biarritz, home to one of the most stunning beaches in the world - shared now by topless bathers and fanatical big wave surfers. Or from Paris head southeast and climb into the snowy Alps, enjoying sights only matched by our Canadian Rockies. Where else can a train ride take you from summer, to fall, and then winter all in one day? Spend a night above the low clouds in the towns of Annecy or Charmonix, the mountain air will remind you why you've traveled so far. While here, do not miss out on the abundance of extreme sports - the people of the Alps love to stare death in the face and crazy Canadian students are definitely welcome to join in - at a cost of course. You only live once, go for it.

No travel through France is complete until the traveler experiences Nice. Its too bad though because despite being charming, Nice is a bit of a disappointment. Be prepared to shell out some serious bucks for a one star cheap hotel with community super-flusher toilets (see centre picture) and beds built at an



The Eiffel Tower in Paris - Not so big in person



One of the countless reasons for silence this Remembrance Day