

Paris was charming and challenging

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A recent trip to the City of Lights gave me the chance to enjoy the experience of a different culture and appreciate the wonderful life we have here.

We rented an apartment in Montmartre, an elevated section of the city associated with artists for more than 200 years.

The area is famous for its legendary nightclub the Moulin Rouge and offered sweeping panoramic views from the hilltop cathedral of Sacre Coeur. We found the apartment at perfectlyparis.com.

When we arrived, our hosts had prepared the quaint apartment by throwing open the shuttered windows that looked over the narrow street. They greeted us with suggestions for things to do and tips about getting around town.

The apartment was charming with its creaky wooden floors, small fireplace and a view of Cimetiere de Montmartre. The lack of amenities we often take for granted - air-conditioning, an electric hot water heater and closet space -- quickly became irrelevant as we settled into our cozy environment.

Outside, we found the air crisp and the weather cool. The wind carried the scents of flowers growing in hundreds of windows boxes and the smell of fresh-baked baguettes from bakeries lining the streets.

Everywhere we looked, there were portraits of Paris: old men playing bocce in a park on a Saturday afternoon; women strolling arm in arm through the squares, sharing confidences; a woman sitting alone in the twilight shadows of an ancient church quietly sobbing, as throngs of tourists walked by paying her no notice.

Fresh, fragrant fruits were displayed on the sidewalks in front of shops, begging passersby to sample and buy them. Couples were kissing everywhere you looked -- on the Metro (Paris' subway system), on the banks of the Seine, on the tour boats and in the restaurants.

Romance aside, being an American in Paris does present some challenges - the language barrier, for example.

Even after studying French for three years in school (of course, that was more than 20 years ago), trying to make complete sentences from the few words I know and remember was a struggle.

Admittedly, my command of the French language was so poor that the French restaurant staff often found it easier to converse with me in English. Fortunately, my reading skills are much better, so getting around town on the Metro was a breeze.

Since returning home, I've been frequently asked, "What was your favorite part of the trip?" and "Would you go again?" I have to admit that the cuisine was at the top of my list of favorites, tied, of course, with many other wonderful experiences.

Even though I will spend weeks trying to shed the pounds I gained from eating french fries at nearly every meal and countless desserts, my answer to the second question is, "Absolutely."