

Paris in December
By Rachelle Ayuyang
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Four years since my trip to France with two friends and my sisters in tow, I find myself forgetting what my week in Paris was like. Just as I feel the memories slipping, I read something like "The da Vinci Code," and I am once again transported to the Louvre and the Rue de Rivoli where we stayed on the Right Bank. So I am not unlike many others who have waxed poetic of Paris' charms: Once its spell is cast, it lingers with you long after you have left.

Certainly, the year 2001 was a cruel reality for many, which I myself was not immune. I was temping at a call center for a petroleum company, instructing its pumping stations in California to basically plug and unplug extensions on their Personal Earth Stations (yep, that's the name of a satellite device that looks similar to a VCR) that clearly was becoming an exercise tantamount to having them figure out how to sustain cold fusion.

Indeed I was looking forward to just sitting around in a café and people-watching with whomever. Initially, the trip consisted of my friend Carmen and me. My sisters, Rhodora and Rina, informed me, if they were to go, they would be embarking on an all-museums-all-the-time "art trip;" and I was a Philistine wanting simply to park my butt on a standard-issue Parisian wicker chair and just stare, although they did not say it.

Well, they finally dismounted from their high horse and decided to come, and with the addition of another friend, Cindy, we made up a rag-tag band of fellow travelers heading across the Atlantic at the end of December 2001 for nothing really profound but to do something we had never done before.

We flew into France on a rainy day, and once we met Cindy and Carmen at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, we were whisked in two taxis to the city's center. Oddly, we passed by an IKEA store--the outlying areas of Paris aren't so foreign after all. However, once we got closer to our hotel, I was entering a different world. Paris' aesthetics, balconied edifices, cobblestone streets, circulars and art nouveau, took hold, and my expectations and reality came together. I wasn't in Kansas anymore, and I was extremely glad.

We arrived at the Hotel di Rivoli to drop off our bags and, once rested up, went to the nearest café. My first time in a Parisian café was, in a word, magical. Sitting at a table together with our beverages, I instantly connected with the moment as the place filled up with patrons getting out of the cold and immediately lighting up. I was enveloped in swirls of cigarette smoke, and I felt as warm as a baby in a blanket. The deficiencies in my life situation no longer rendered me helpless.

The following morning we awoke to a sunny day and went out for our first le petit déjeuner at a nearby café and later to Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou. The beauty of Paris is that you are transported to another time and place, where things evolve in a natural progression not forced by aggressive, blind ambition (with perhaps the exception of the Arc de Triomphe and anything fashioned by French military heroes).

The streets take you to places that are so heartbreakingly beautiful that you wonder what your life has really been before you had known them. Whatever various professional and romantic disappointments I was nursing at the time melted away, and any discord forming in our small group of travelers, as sometimes the case may be, was reduced to a minor annoyance in my mind. This was my lovely dream, and I was not to be denied the pleasure of lazing in it.

We learned when we bought our metro tickets that an all-day pass would give us access to all of the museums, an advantage at the Louvre, in particular, where we can simply flash it at the door and bypass the lengthy queue for individual tickets that can stretch to the pyramid entrance on any given day. There was no avoiding the "art trip," and I personally could not resist the beaux arts par excellence of such museums as the D'Orsay, Rodin, Picasso, Nationale d'Art Moderne and of course the Louvre. Neither did I abandon my original intent of café-hopping. I spent plenty of time in cafes and restaurants from St. Germain de Pres to Montparnasse and Montmartre.

After having our fill of Impressionist art at the D'Orsay, it was evening, and Rina, Cindy, Carmen and I were crossing the Quai d'Orsay near the Ile St.-Louis to figure out our dinner plans. The City of Light emerged full force. Laser beams emanated from the Eiffel Tower, which was visible from our vantage point at a bridge over the illuminated Seine. I realized we could walk anywhere, to the Grand Opera House or even Les Invalides (Napoleon's tomb), and it would just be perfect.

One day, we also made a pilgrimage to the rarefied air of the Sacre-Coeur in Montmartre and, in our roundabout way of getting there, bumped into the L'Apin Agile where Pablo Picasso lived and painted and which actor/comedian/writer Steve Martin alluded to in his popular play "Picasso at the L'Apin Agile." On the Boulevard de Clichy at Place Blanche, the Moulin Rouge with its discernible windmill was open for business.

While Rhodora and Rina visited the gravesites of the ridiculously famous at Pere-Lachaise, Cindy, Carmen and I went to what I thought was a small, seemingly common cemetery in Montmartre, when in fact it was the Cimetiere de Montmartre where such notables as Impressionist painter Edgar Degas and movie director Francois Truffaut are buried. Strolling through the cemetery provided an opportunity of reflection and one of many moments to renew friendships, since I now live far away from my closest friends. When we repaired to our hotel room after

a busy day, I found myself catching up with either Cindy or Carmen to the wee-hours of morning.

On New Year's Eve, we all ventured out to the Eiffel Tower where the revelry was close to being a war zone. Underneath the tower, drunk and debauch Parisians were throwing bottles to and fro, and fires roared from garbage drums. Sickened by this display of an "underbelly" uncharacteristic of the famed landmark's usual pristine allure, Rhodora and Rina hurried back to the hotel. My friends and I found a spot a good distance away from the tower, yet still observable, and the raucous celebrating. We tried to stay for the fireworks but could only wait for so long before deciding to return to the hotel. This is one time I am not too keen about the French's laissez-faire attitude, especially in the freezing cold. My impression is that they care more about the light show turning out fabulous rather than punctual and perfunctory.

At midnight, my friends and I wished each other a "Happy New Year," and by 12:30 a.m. we were heading back. As often the case when one decides to go out on this night, it is maddening, and going against the flow of partygoers could be tricky. Transportation isn't often readily available, except for the trains. My friends and I took the metro three-fourths of the way and ended up walking the rest. I was a little worried about Carmen who opted for style that night in a skirt, thin hosiery and ankle boots, while I was dressed in practical Levi's jeans, long underwear, sneakers, thermo coat with a faux fur collar (that Rina likes to make fun of), hat and gloves. When we made it safely back to our hotel room, Cindy remarked, "Rachelle, you look like you can run a marathon."

However, Rhodora and Rina had not yet returned. Panic-stricken and--to my surprise--turning deeply religious (more out of fear of our dad Constantine's wrath rather than Yahweh's), I coerced Cindy and Carmen into kneeling down and praying with me for my sisters' speedy arrival. We heard their footsteps shortly, and after welcoming them back with sighs of relief, they explained amid the crazy, celebratory atmosphere they mistakenly took a train departing from the city. All accounted for, we settled in our hotel room to nosh on chocolates, courtesy of the innkeeper, and sip champagne that Carmen bought at a store.

Our last few days in Paris could play to the soundtrack of Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli's "Con te Partiro." At the end of 2001, the franc was being phased out in favor of the euro, and on New Year's Day each of us went our separate ways to explore the city on our own. On my way to the Musee Rodin, I met a woman who graciously showed me where to go and engaged me in conversation. This pleasant exchange erased any negative brushes with other Parisians who weren't quite as friendly.

Now I remember what the trip became and not what I wished it would be so that when I returned to reality, it felt like it was all I had. I sure felt fresh as a daisy during my trip to Paris. I was an intrepid traveler, who was constantly being challenged and therefore

invigorated by the experience. Every day, I want to feel like my senses are alive, and my talents are being fed, with people whom I value. Because of a sense of desperation or urgency or both, I was determined to make the trip to Paris. And it gave me something to hold on to, when everything is said and done.