

A World Away
By Chris Fort

“This is it,” I kept telling myself on that nine hour flight from Chicago to Paris. “For the next four months I’ll be eating, sleeping, and going to class in another country”. No matter how many times I said it to myself, though, it never really sunk in. Once I arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport I met up with my roommate, a fellow Monmouth student who would become my only reminder of home for the next fifteen weeks. I exchanged some of my American cash for Euros and lamented the paltry sum I was handed back. After a bomb threat delayed our exiting, we were driven to our studio apartment in the 19th district which, suffice it to say, did not meet our expectations. Our living room was composed of two flimsily-built beds, two crude tables we used as desks, and a small dresser covered in pink cloth. The bathroom still had garbage from the previous tenants scurried about. The kitchen didn’t have a working stove or oven and to top it all off, the apartment made a loud, obnoxious rattle whenever a sizeable gust of wind swept past it. “This is it,” I told myself.

I went to France expecting to learn about a new culture; a new way of life. In the process I ended up learning more about my own.

Americana is prevalent everywhere in France. From Pizza Hut to denim jeans, the way America has impacted the rest of the world is evident everywhere. There were, however, some very obvious differences that screamed out at me. Simply put, France is not a capitalistic society like America. Grocery stores aren’t opened late in the evening, and not at all on Sundays! Food vendors shut down for two hour lunch breaks, which isn’t that shocking until you find out that their breaks are usually around noon, during prime lunch hours. Fast food restaurants are incredibly slow and inefficient. I learned a great deal in school there about the regulation the French government put on the business world too, prohibiting some corporations from entering French markets for fear of endangering the sanctity of more local and national businesses. This isn’t out of the ordinary in America, but it’s a far more common practice in France.

Another thing that struck me was the lack of concern for liability. For instance, it wasn’t odd to see a dog follow his owner into food establishments; a major health code violation in the States. Also, there was no real drinking age for teenagers, and they could consume their intoxicating beverages almost anywhere they chose: on the subway, in the street, and even in an automobile to name a few. “That kind of thing would never be allowed in America,” I thought to myself. “The chance of a law suit would be too great”. All of these things combined as undeniable proof that Europe, in stark contrast to the States, was far more laidback and liberal.

The socialistic attitude and lack of concern for liability made me think long and hard about the way America operated. Were we a country of heartless tycoons, willing to sacrifice our morals and values to make a quick buck? Were we a society so fearful of getting sued that we were figuratively placing ourselves in a protective bubble? Did France, and Europe in general, offer a superior way of living than the United States I had always assumed was the best? I had a lot of time to assess how I felt about the new conditions I was living in, as opposed to the ones I was raised in. Despite my enjoyment of the relaxed atmosphere in Europe, I eventually came to the conclusion that America

did things more to my liking. Everything is easier to get done in the States, and cheaper too. People are held accountable for their actions because they know if they don't meet their responsibilities, there will be consequences. Plus, my own political ideology left me puzzled as to why France wasn't more capitalistic. People live easier in places like America, where there's incentive to create ways of doing things better and more efficiently. Plus, dogs aren't allowed in restaurants.

I enjoyed every single minute I spent in Paris. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I'm thrilled that I took advantage of it. Yea, I saw the Eiffel Tower, and the Louvre, and even Notre Dame. However, my favorite thing to do while I lived in the city was to strap my headphones on and walk aimlessly around the city for hours on end. It was the best way to take in the city and make it feel like more than an improbable dream. I was living in the Paris, France after all. I just wanted it to all sink in. It's been one hundred and three days since I left, and I'm still waiting.