“The people in Paris are so rude.” We’ve all heard this before and, perhaps, there is a certain level of rudeness owned not only by Parisians but all big-city dwellers. However, you will notice a difference in how Sharon experienced her time in “the city of lights.” Living in a culture is different than being a tourist in one.

–Lyle Ring, manager, Hutton International Experiences Program

Paris – “A Movable Feast”

By Sharon Wen

My summer in Paris was so far beyond incredible that reflecting on all that I saw, learned, and experienced is still overwhelming. After a mere seven weeks in France, I adapted so well to the French lifestyle that I experienced more culture shock coming back to America than when I first arrived in Paris. Paris is a city that can offer nearly anything for students, tourists, and habitants alike. However, it was the Parisian culture that truly made me fall in love with the city.

The Culture of Courtesy

Parisians are generally characterized as rude, mean, and self-absorbed. To my surprise and delight, this stereotype couldn’t be farther from the truth. One of the first aspects of Parisian life that I noticed was the way that people always greeted each other. When walking into a Boulangerie, customers and the owner will always say “Bonjour, Merci, and Au revoir.” Madam and Monsieur were always used to show respect. Even strangers on the metro will say “pardon” or “exusez-moi” if they accidentally bump into you. I was never treated rudely when asking for directions or for help. I was even approached by an elderly gentleman asking if I needed help, when I was standing on the street perusing my map of Paris.

The Culture of Family

The best decision I made before going on this trip was choosing to stay with a French host family instead of living in apartments with other American students. I could not have asked for a better host family. Living with them everyday allowed for a true cultural immersion, where I was forced to speak the language and taken out of my comfort zone in order to completely adapt to the French lifestyle. My host family consisted of my host mother, my host father, my 19-year-old host brother, and my twin 16-year-old host sisters. Having a family with children my age not only familiarized me with the most up-to-date slang, but I also met many friends of my host brother’s and host sister’s. Otherwise, meeting Parisians would have been very difficult. I loved watching how my family interacted with each other. Every night at 8 p.m., the whole family would gather around the television to watch the nightly news. After the news, my family would watch a French soap opera that my host mother liked. Even though the kids would sometimes mock the bad acting and dull plot, they would nevertheless watch it together. I looked forward to dinner with my family everyday, as everyone would gather around the
tables and share stories and laugh about daily life that may have seemed normal for anyone else but revealed so much culture for me as an American.

The American Culture?

I was surprised that American culture was so prominent in France, a country so ingrained in its culture that its citizens staunchly protested Disneyland Paris and the first McDonald’s (known colloquially as “MacDo.”) Not only could MacDo and Starbucks be found on every street corner, but their lines were always out the doors. This shocked me because in the land where food is always fresh and even deemed sacred, how can people choose to eat dry-freeze chicken nuggets and so called “French” fries? American media can be found everywhere in Paris. Clothing stores blasted Justin Timberlake and 50 Cent from their speakers, American movies outnumbered French films in cinemas, and almost every American TV series, such as Friends, Law & Order, and even South Park can been seen in French or in VO (Version Original) with French subtitles. If I could change one thing about France, I would definitely take some of America out of it.

The Culture of Relaxation

The only part of Parisian culture that may be more sacred than the food is vacation. Most of the French work force has at least 5 weeks of vacation each year. It is unfathomable for the French to think that some Americans only have a week or less of vacation. Although yearly vacations are a must, the French also value small “vacations” during a regular day just to relax. Taking 2 hour lunch breaks is normal for students and workers alike. Cafés are always packed with people drinking coffee and just relaxing. Coffee to-go is quite a foreign concept for even Parisians who live a faster paced lifestyle than the rest of France. At Starbucks, more tables and chairs are available for customers to sit down and have a coffee. My favorite activity to do in Paris was picnicking. Especially with nice weather, gardens and parks are filled with picnickers enjoying a nice meal and the company of friends and family. What can be best described as an oversized backyard; the Champ de Mars was my favorite picnic spot. Like the red carpet to the Eiffel Tower, Parisians and tourists would gather on the Champ de Mars and gaze longingly at the archetypal symbol of Paris which stood at the end of the lawn. When the clock strikes 10 p.m., picnickers would cheer as the Eiffel Tower began to sparkle for 10 minutes. The magnificent lights display never seems to get old as cheers can be heard ever hour when the tower sparkles again. The scene of the Eiffel Tower sparkling at night highlights the beauty of Paris and will remained engrained in my memory until the next time I return.

In his sketches of his life in Paris in A Movable Feast, Ernest Hemingway wrote, “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a movable feast.” For me, Paris will remain in my memories of the past and hopes for the future as a feast. For I can still smell the scents of the city at night, taste the richness of the culture, see the places and the people, and feel the warm welcome of my Parisian family that I know will linger for each of my future journeys to the city of lights.