

American retirees in Paris

A St. Petersburg couple trade the creature comforts of American living for daily aromas of freshly baked baguettes, rich cultural experiences and new friendships.

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PARIS -- Many people retire to Florida. My husband, Jim, and I left our St. Petersburg home of 22 years and retired to Paris.

So far, life here has been good. Different, of course, and with some surprises, but good.

On April Fool's Day 2005, we left our bungalow in the Old Northeast for the last time. Loaded with 12 pieces of luggage, our tabby cat, Maggie, and our French poodle, Chablis, we flew to what we thought could be our retirement home.

Jim recently turned 70 and I am 58.

Now, instead of viewing sunsets on St. Pete Beach, we celebrate the day's end on the wooden Pont des Arts, which bridges the River Seine, steps from the Louvre museum. Sunset worshippers gather daily, even in the winter, to play guitars and lift wine glasses as the sky turns Day-Glo orange over the Eiffel Tower.

Questions about French rudeness still come from friends and family. Overall, we have encountered helpfulness, not cold shoulders, in the City of Light.

If French radio hosts disparage Americans as Florida radio jocks sometimes bash Canadian visitors, we aren't aware of it. Admittedly, our French language skills constitute get-by at best, despite classes at St. Petersburg College, Roberts Community Center in St. Petersburg, a personal tutor in Florida, and our current classes with a no-nonsense local woman.

AARP reports that learning a foreign language in later life stimulates brain neurons; maybe it does. But we also face our French tutor to further immerse in this culture.

Similar to life in the Tampa Bay area, summers here are quiet - except for the tourists. Paris' social and school season gears up in September.

So next month, I'll have coffee with Diane Johnson, author of the novel *Le Divorce*. That same week I have a lunch date in Burgundy with Leslie Caron, star of the 1950s classic film *An American in Paris*.

Goodbye, hello

Friends and family ask why we moved to a place more than 4,500 miles from what had been our home - especially at this stage of life.

An answer for me is that Savannah, Ga., is my hometown. I lived in Savannah's historic district as a child, walking to elementary school on cobblestone streets similar to those in Paris.

After three vacation visits, Paris felt like that home.

I am also an Air Force brat, so moving to Paris feeds a long-buried wanderlust and desire to meet new people. But Paris wasn't our initial retirement choice.

Jim and I had spent several summer vacations in the North Carolina mountains, and we had visited Asheville months before making the decision. Asheville offered an urban lifestyle with cafes, bookstores and universities. But it wasn't Paris.

Obsession began to replace desire for Jim's move to Paris. "The more it became an obsession, the more the desire grew to make it happen, to make it real," he says. "As I was approaching 70, I saw it as the last great adventure, which it has certainly proven to be."

Two years before we left Florida, we bought a giant color photograph of Paris at a Corey Avenue art show on St. Pete Beach, and we hung it over the fireplace in our St. Petersburg bungalow. The photo captured Shakespeare Books, on the city's acclaimed Left Bank. Notre Dame Cathedral was reflected in the bookstore's window.

Now, that bookstore is one of Jim's favorite haunts.

From SUV to Metro

By the time we moved, our plan to test Paris with a three-month move had morphed into a one-year plan. Now, we don't know when we will return to the United States.

Jim retired from Honeywell in Largo in December 2004 after a 30-year career there as an electronics engineer. In January 2005, we sold our 79-year-old home in three days.

Two days before we left for France, we unloaded our SUV and our pickup truck.

We traded what had been a 1,700-square-foot house for a 500-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor; there is an elevator. The structure was once a series of horse stalls and had been converted into an apartment building between World Wars I and II.

It is one short block from the Seine and Notre Dame, as well as close to Shakespeare Books.

We said farewell to the world we knew - long-held friendships, family, central air conditioning, gulf beaches, a dishwasher, an automatic clothes dryer, plentiful ice cubes and personal vehicles.

We traded all that for daily aromas of freshly baked baguettes and croissants, good public transportation, and an urban atmosphere mixed with awesome sights - the cathedral, boats along the Seine, centuries of history and art.

On the other hand . . .

Another former Pinellas County resident, Macey Smith, used to alternate three-month stays between Clearwater Beach and Paris. Last winter she made the permanent leap to Paris. She says that while she misses her beachfront condo, it is surpassed by the special sense of history and culture, the physical beauty of the architecture and the way of life here.

As Jim and I do, Macey sees everyday challenges as learning opportunities. And we second her in saying goodbye to gas-guzzling cars and traffic jams.

"There are some practical, down-to-earth realities that are special, too, like knowing your neighborhood florist, the delicious fresh food in the markets, the ease of getting around on public transport so that I no longer need a car," Macey said.

Yet Jim and I sometimes find ourselves in an outraged, "what were we thinking?" state of mind, frustrated by the language, the cigarette smoke, the dog waste on the sidewalks, the scant air conditioning, a clothes washer but no dryer, the steep steps to climb and the miles to walk.

However, we've conquered the Metro (subway) system. Civil servants in green uniforms wash sidewalks daily, and many French people have helped us find everything from the post office to public toilets.

Our neighbors have invited us to cocktail parties where a teenager of French-Portuguese heritage, who is fresh from living with a family in New Jersey, serves as interpreter. These neighbors applaud our language efforts.

Our poodle, Chablis, works everyday as a goodwill ambassador, as many passers-by stop to admire her on our market walks.

To market, to market

And those outings are significant, because despite its gourmet-capital reputation, we think market food tops most restaurant cuisine.

Tourist traps abound in Paris, just as they do in Pinellas, and paying out big bucks for greasy-spoon French fries and overcooked salmon cuts severely into our budget.

Of course there is good dining to be found, but after eating as if on vacation during our first months here, our wallets and waistlines dictated cooking at home.

Therefore, shopping adventures regularly fill our mornings. Our refrigerator is just over 3 feet tall and less than 2 feet wide; its tiny freezer holds two ice-cube trays.

So off we go to the butcher, cheese shop and boulangerie (bakery) at nearby Place Maubert, carrying tote baskets and our rolling grocery caddie.

Three times a week, Place Maubert hosts an open market, a tradition dating to the Middle Ages. Bearing a faint, gritty resemblance to St. Petersburg's Saturday morning event, open markets here provide fresh fruit and vegetables straight from farms, line-caught fish, nonpasteurized, aged cheese, and flowers.

For other items, narrow-aisle food stores - promoted as supermarkets but actually convenience store sized - offer free delivery.

We do still dine out occasionally. We eat lunch at small bistros and brasseries and even at top-drawer restaurants that offer three-course meals for as little as 10 euros (about \$13). And that often includes a glass of wine or sparkling water.

We have discovered other, easy ways to save. For instance, before noon, movie theaters post half-price tickets. And for our inter-city explorations, people ages 60 and older get breaks on train tickets.

As for big-city safety concerns, I have none here. After all, it was in St. Petersburg where a gun was pressed to my head during a robbery in 1994.

Pickpockets prevail here instead of guns. We've avoided losing money - and wallets - by using money belts and by heeding the advice of my late grandmothers: I routinely tuck euros and Metro tickets in my bra.

"People will steal your purse, but you don't have to worry about going out at night and getting stabbed or raped, so you don't huddle at home instead," fellow American expatriate Suzanne Justen says.

"You go out at night and do things with friends or by yourself and come home on the Metro and feel perfectly safe. It gives you a great deal of freedom."

I met Suzanne through the American Women's Group in Paris, a 365-member social and educational organization that will celebrate its 75th year in 2007.

My age and divorced, Suzanne moved here six years ago from Seattle with her Steinway piano. She hosts classical concerts in her spacious Seine-view apartment. She calls living in Paris liberating.

Suzanne and I will have coffee with author Johnson and lunch with actor Caron through our membership in AWG. I already serve as membership vice president and helped organize those two events.

Jim takes photographs all over Paris including book signings, museum tours and social events.

We have retired to Paris; we have not quit busily enjoying life.