

Study Abroad Diary in Angers, France

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Hello again Angels!

Some of the best things you learn about a culture you learn from sheer observation. There are so many things in this world we don't see in the confines of our comfy American borders. Before I traveled abroad, I didn't nearly understand the interesting thing that is the world in which we live. It was such a daunting thought, leaving home. I mean, you'd have to travel over this big pond-like thing and step out of good familiar Tar-Heel soil to set foot on the ground of a country you've only seen in movies and heard of in fairy tales. Some people figure that they see the movie *Amelie* and "voilà"--they know everything there is to know about surviving in France. The truth is that *Amelie* is just a good movie in which you get to see the nice parts of Paris and a shy young woman who is eccentric by any culture's standards. Although it is true that you see a little of what the French might be like, it cannot be the sole basis for your understanding the French. If my two years at Meredith have taught me anything at all, it is that you can't fully understand anything until you EXPERIENCE IT!

There are so many things you learn from a culture by

living in it. I've only been here for a little over a month, and I've only had a taste of a culture that has literally been in formation since Pre-history. I mean, some of the world's most renowned painters are French! And where are some of the oldest known wall paintings in the world? That's right; they are in Lascaux, France. What I mean to say is there's obviously something innate about culture, and the French live up to theirs. It's in their language, their architecture, their art, and their SHOPPING! Of course, we were bound to have this as a topic at some point...Not many people that I know back home can say that they've been shopping in a real authentic 100% French boutique (and there are some great ones, too; trust me).

The French word for "size" is "taille" (like tailor), which I didn't know at first, or had forgotten at some point. So thinking "taille" was like "tall" I spent about 20 minutes looking for the petite length jeans. The happy ending was I eventually found the right jeans, but my eyes must have been as wide as the first time I saw a Frenchman sporting "man-capris" (the hobbit-like wardrobe of many a European male). The sizes here aren't exactly literal, but when you see a pair of size 40 jeans, you nearly think you're in the men's

section. The first time I went shopping in Angers, I nearly went into shock from seeing the size label on the pair of jeans that fit me. French sizing charts are as different from American ones as Celsius is from Fahrenheit: my American 7.5 shoes are really a European size 38, and my American size 10 jeans equal a French size 40. I still haven't figured out the bra and t-shirt sizes. It's a great time though, shopping in a designer French store. You really see a preview of what styles are going to be in fashion in the United States within the next two years. The first time I was "let loose" onto French streets, I remember thinking something like, "Is that the style now? We're so behind the times back home!" It's just another one of those cultural wonders that everyone marvels at. Here's a tip from the land of the roosters and cheese: the dress over the jeans look is what everyone is doing, and don't forget your scarf! Not winter scarves, but the long, soft cotton pashminas in every color. I bought six in Florence, Italy. What can I say? I'm a sucker for scarves.

Grocery shopping is different, too! Every Saturday, the people of Angers come out to the market in "Centre Ville" to buy and sell their goods and services. The best things about these markets are the fresh produce and the flowers. There's really something to be said about walking by a table and being able to smell fresh spices or taste free portions of Mango fresh from South America (shipped by plane). The grocery stores here are interesting unto themselves. Generally, the French take their own bags (which are huge) with them to the "supermarchés" to place and carry what they want to purchase. It's a lot nicer than hauling around three plastic bags

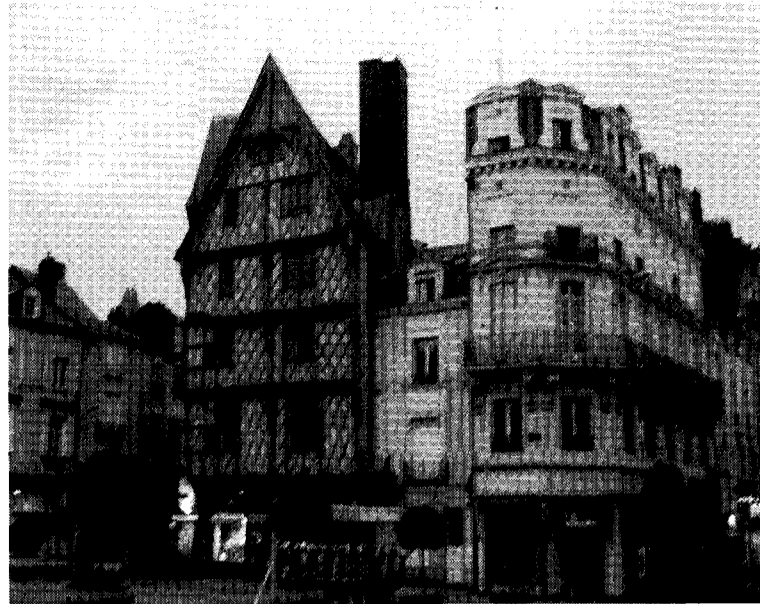


Photo courtesy of Genevieve Boisvert

A famous scene from downtown Angers at the Place de Rallment. This house is indicative of the older style houses most commonly found in Bretagne, but also in the Loire regions.

that will break on the way to your car or fumbling with paper bags from the B and G lot to Springfield. Plus, you get to keep and reuse your bag. Some stores have attendants in the produce aisle ready to assist you in picking the right apple or the nicest grapes. Think about it; it's nice to know the person who touches your plums and pears. Milk isn't always in the fridge because its packaging can be kept in any temperature until you open it (kind of like mayonnaise). It lasts forever, too. My favorite thing about French grocery stores is that the food is almost always healthier and cheaper. You can buy twice as much yogurt for the same price in the States, and good bread is the best deal. Bad-for-you foods that we all love like potato chips, and high-sugar frosted cereals (I'm looking at you cocoa puffs!) are much more expensive than back home (that's one way of protecting the population from those nasty carb-cravings). Also, shopping in France is exciting for another reason--while you're shopping, you're studying your vocabulary and using it right away. The French like their bread harder than we tend to in the States. In fact, they call that wonder bread

stuff "American bread," and it often goes bad on the shelf. It's also more expensive than the bread from the boulangerie (bakery).

The best and most different item as far as shopping between the US and Europe is that unlike in the US where we have these great superstores for purchasing frozen pizza, a hammer, Sudafed, toilet paper and school supplies without walking three feet, you essentially have to go to a different store for everything you want to buy in Europe. Now, I know what you're thinking, "Gasp! No Target?" Some places do have sort of mini malls with four or five different stores in one building, and there are some stores that have everything, but going to those places isn't getting the full French shopping experience. It's more fun to go into different stores; you see more and you are able to say, "I've experienced it!" Hope Midterms went well.

Love from the land of croisants, châteaux, and café,
Geneviève Boisvert



Photo courtesy of Genevieve Boisvert