

# Field Trip: I Go to France and Learn Weird Stuff

## Ologies Podcast

October 17, 2022

Oh hey, it's your internet Dad who hadn't taken a vacation in 13 years, Alie Ward. And I'm sending you an audio postcard from a trip I took to Paris this week. Y'all, I broke the drought, I took a vacation, the first one that wasn't a work trip in so long. Although, this is kind of like, you know, when you write a postcard from a café, maybe you're pensively squinting into the distance over a tiny cup of coffee and just drinking in vibes, but you don't have stamps and so you give up and then you just mail it when you get home, and you hope that no one notices that the postmark is from Burbank.

So, we flew over an ocean yesterday. I am now home, I'm back in the arms of our dog baby, but I wanted to just put together some memories, and facts, and some weird shit that I learned while I spent a week in France with your PodMom Jarrett, and his mom, and sister, and nephew. We took a little fam trip. They were like, "We're going to France, want to join us?" And we were like, beep-beep-beep-boop-beep-boop. We calculated, we had some points lying around, we were like, "Let's just go." So, we went.

So, I'm just going to tell you about some stuff I saw and learned. You don't have to listen to this, but I figured, I learned some weird stuff while I was there. So, we're going to just do the minisode theme and then you can come with me and learn some weird France stuff. No jetlag, no passports, no life savings or Fraunch needed. Pack up, come on! Let's go, let's hit the road.

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Okay, so when you go to France, you are there for pastries, but you have to say that you're there for history. We had a cab driver ask us on our last day what we did, and we were like, "Man, we ate, and we walked, and we ate, and then walked more." And he just said, "So... No culture?" And in that moment, I felt my soul leave my body out of shame, for a moment. But then you know what? I roped it back with some logic that said, "Hello, walking and eating *is* culture," but people will judge you if you don't spend any time looking at old stuff.

So, one of the cultural things that you can do, in France, is you can walk through houses of dead rich people. And I also just learned that a big-ass house is called a palace, technically, only if royalty live there. So, you can't go to someone's house and be like, "Augh, this is a palace," unless they are wearing a crown.

So, as you may have guessed, we went to Versailles; this is the world's most renowned dead, rich person house. And we took in some of the opulence that led to the owner's downfall under the feet of an uprising populace. Because no matter what history you learn, I always like to find the thread of Greek tragedy, like how did greed and hubris fuck you over in the end? So, let's examine it, let's get back to this mansion.

So, Versailles, all right? It's about an hour's drive outside of Paris and it started as a rustic hunting lodge in the 1600s, but the royal line of King Louis was just, like, in an HGTV frame of mind and kept doing renovations and additions, and now it's this giant building, and the one-time royal residence, and the center of the French monarchy. This thing is 680,000 square feet of house. Do you know how many Roombas you would need for that? You would need Roombas going 24/7, all the time, in every room.

The last king who lived there was Louis XVI, who was married to someone named Marie Antoinette, an Austrian princess. And I'm sure this is not breaking news to you, but Marie Antoinette liked money and to spend it. And even though she apparently did not say that the famine-stricken French should simply opt for cake in the absence of bread, she did build her own mini palace behind Versailles. She built another palace behind the palace; she built her own palace. And then behind that palace behind the palace, she built a backyard rural playground hamlet consisting of seven thatched-roof houses with gardens. Each one of them was bigger than a normal person's house but the queen and her rich friends would go to the houses in the backyard of the backyard of the palace, and they would wear bonnets and simple muslin frocks, and they would pretend to be peasants, just for fun, and dairy farmers, just having fun. Like, the most bonkers she-shed aesthetic but also cosplay of blue-collar workers. While meanwhile, real people were suffering and dying of hunger. So, pretty huge not-cool factor.

People were *pissed* and her PR machine was already doing overtime. But I just imagine all of them quitting in a fit of rage and opening an Etsy store, or whatever the equivalent was in the late 1700s, because Marie Antoinette was embroiled in a scandal. In 1784, there was a disgraced colonel who got catfished by a con artist who hired a queen lookalike, pulled some literally shady shenanigans in the palace garden, pretended to be the real queen, but put the queen on the hook for a diamond necklace that cost the equivalent of \$15 million. So, this con lady put the necklace on layaway in the queen's name, using the colonel, she made off with it, she left the country, she sold all the ice on the black market, and the queen was like, "I didn't even buy that necklace, okay, and I have forged letters on crinkly 18th-century paper as receipts." But people were still like, "Yeah right lady, the economy sucks, you spend money like water, we're starving in the streets, you have a playground hamlet, I'm sure you bought the necklace. We're over your spending, you B-word."

Anyway, this all happens in 1784, 1785. And in 1789, the French Revolution kicks off. In 1791, Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI try to flee because a mob is about to storm the palace. But King Louis is draggin' ass, can't make up his mind on where to go. So, they get a late start on the road, like the worst road trip vibes ever. They pile into too-big of a carriage that was not inconspicuous for what they needed to accomplish, and people were like, "Dude, is that the king?" Some guy who's a postman is like, "Pardon me, are you the king?" Holds up a banknote and was like, "Yeah, that's your face motherfucker," and then they were caught trying to escape the mob.

They were both imprisoned, and at 37 years old, Marie Antoinette's hair is said to have gone stark white overnight, which is a condition called Canities subita, or AKA, they call it Marie Antoinette syndrome. Although, I looked into it; the scientific jury is still kind of out on if hair can turn white overnight. Some studies like a *Nature* article from two years ago titled, "Hyperactivation of sympathetic nerves drives depletion of melanocyte stem cells" show that stress does mess with stem cells that might cause a person going through trauma to be "Blanched by sorrow," in the queen's own words. What can cause that is the sudden loss of all the hairs that are pigmented, leaving only the white behind and that is a type of stress-induced alopecia. But again, jury is still out, they're doing a lot of studies on poor, stressed mice.

Either way, the now white-haired Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI were both executed in 1793 via guillotine in the center of Paris in what's now called the Place de la Concorde, which is where they filmed that iconic scene from *The Devil Wears Prada*, where she chucks a cell phone in a fountain. How fucking nuts is it that you'll drive past a roundabout in the middle of the city that's the square where a queen was executed, and today it's just full of commuters and a hot dog stand?

Oh also, you know the wax museum, Madame Tussauds, in London and Hollywood and stuff? Okay, so Madame Tussauds was Fraunch, she got her start because her mom's boss was a surgeon and a

sculptor who was really good at making wax models. So, Madame Tussauds learned from him when she was kindergarten age, she got an early start. She even tutored the ill-fated Louis XVI's sister in art. But Tussauds was later arrested, she was sentenced to the guillotine, but she got out of it by making death masks of executed royals, including Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, whose head bloodied her lap as she worked quickly to cast her features before the bodies were tossed in a grave in a French cemetery.

And side note, watch out because it's still Spooktober and we have an episode coming up about French cemeteries I think that you are going to like. Also, Marie Antoinette's last words were, "I'm sorry, I didn't do it on purpose," which she said to her executioner after she stepped on his toe. And apparently the executioner was one of a long line of executioners, like their son would be an executioner, then that person's son would be an executioner. They say that the blade that [clicking noise] her head is on display at Madame Tussauds in London. Creepy? Macabre. But anyway, her last words were, "I'm sorry."

And as long as we're apologizing, let's talk French, shall we? So, I took a few years of French, when I was 12 but the only sentence I can really say with confidence is, "*Pardonnez-moi, je suis désolé parce que je ne parle pas bien. Je ne suis pas intelligente en français.*" Which means, "I'm so sorry I don't speak well. I'm not smart in French." But my wonderful sister-in-law Samantha heard that rather than saying, "*Je voudrais*" when you're ordering something which means, "I want," it's more polite to say, "*Je mourrais*" which we looked up and that means, "I would die for." So, we went about ordering things by saying, "I would die for a coffee" or "I would die for a chicken burger." And it wasn't until mid-trip that we learned we were supposed to be saying, "*J'aimerais*," which is, "I would love." And there is no chicken burger I would actually die for, but it's possible I just haven't met the right chicken burger.

But some sprouts of my forgotten French kind of blossomed as I was there for a few days and I was able to say, to locals, things like, "Your dog makes my heart larger," and, "I hungry and promise to eat fast." And the restaurant owner replied to that in perfect English, "Oh, you will know when we close because I will kick you out." But the biggest lesson we learned from a very friendly barman was just to say "Please, and please, and please. And thank you," a lot. So, I learned to say, "*S'il vous plait, un pain au chocolat, s'il vous plait. Merci, merci, merci.*"

Also, did you know that a chocolate croissant is called a *pain au chocolat* in most of France, including Paris, but in the west and the south of France they call it a *chocolatine* and it's a culture war; people are very divided on this. And I would like to thank Dr. Niki Ackermans, AKA Dr. Headbutt of the Bovine Neuropathology episode, who I saw in New York days before my flight to France. And Dr. Headbutt is Team Chocolatine and has a small, dainty tattoo of the pastry on her inner forearm and I understand why. Because the only other time I've been to Paris was in 1999 and a week after I got back, I found a half-eaten *pain au chocolat* in my backpack and it was smooshed flat, and I was... I ate the hell out of it, no hesitation. So, yesterday in the airport before boarding our flight back, I bought two and I plan to season them by squishing them in my backpack for a few days. That is tradition.

Now, if you're traveling to a country and you don't speak the language, one giant tip: bring corded headphones if you have them. Because not only will you not have to waste the free pairs that they give away on the plane if you need to watch movies, the ones that people just use once and then throw into a garbage can forever, but also a lot of places have phone-sized devices with audio tours in different languages, kind of like a podcast as you walk through a museum. But you have to hold this dirty brick of a device up to your face, so bring headphones for that. Came in clutch for me. And hand sanitizer, and a mask. Does anyone wear masks on planes or indoors? Barely. Do I? Heck yes.

My French is dicey enough and I don't need my health to be. Also, I always have bamboo utensils in my bag because you never know when you're going to need a frickin' fork, or when you don't want to use a fork one time and then, again, put it in a landfill for pretty much eternity.

So, if you're traveling, also hot tip, and you found yourself out of clean socks or undies, you can always sink wash them, wring them in a dry towel, and then just lay the damp stuff out overnight near the heater and blast them with a hairdryer in the morning to warm them up for your feet and your butt. Have I done this many times? It's none of your business.

Now, what about flying? What is the price that the Earth pays for us to go gawk at a dead rich person's house or eat a muffin on a different continent? I'm glad you asked because I think of that all the time. First off, did you know that packing lighter is easier on the fuel tank of a jet plane? So, you can bring less stuff and you can do laundry if you need to; you can get an hour or two of living like a local at a laundromat, or sink wash.

And I have mentioned this in a previous minisode on travel tips, so I'm going to repeat it here. So, flying is huge, enormous, terrible carbon suck. It accounts for approximately 5% of global emissions. So, travel, tourism: significant contributor to climate change. So, how can you reduce this if you have a business trip or if you have a vacation coming up once every 13 years? So, airlines with newer planes can have reduced carbon emissions. Also, sitting in coach and traveling lighter can help. You can also look into different airlines that have lower carbon emissions. For some reason, Alaska has the lowest carbon emissions of domestic airline carriers, partly just because they cram people in tighter, which is, you know, economical. Direct flights produce less carbon than ones with more layovers, so if you want to spend a *little* extra money and a little bit less time just think, "Hey this is better for Mama Earth, and me."

Also, if you want to offset the carbon emissions from your travel you can go to websites like CarbonFund.org, they're going to be getting a donation from this episode, and you can look for different carbon offset programs. You can look around for different places that do this but just make sure that wherever you donate to offset is a legit one. There are sites like Charity Navigator that can help you decide which charity to go through. It's not terribly expensive in the scheme of a vacation, maybe 30 bucks each way flying across the ocean, and that goes toward tree planting, things like that. If you can offset, do it. And of course, we'll be making a larger donation than 30 dollars for this episode, which wouldn't be possible without sponsors of the show which you may hear about now.

[Ad Break]

Okay, back to things I learned in Paris. One thing is not to walk nine miles in one day wearing high-heeled boots. Have I mentioned, *je ne suis pas intelligente, en français*. So, day two, I was in so much pain and fashion be damned, I switched to a dirty, battered pair of flats in my suitcase. So, the last time I went to Paris was in 1999 and chunky shoes, baggy jeans were of the moment. But right now, what's in style are... chunky shoes and baggy jeans. So, that's weird emotionally for me. Also, I saw so many beige trench coats I'm going to share a tip. If you ever need to disappear into a crowd in fall in France, wear a beige trench coat because whoever is on your tail doesn't stand a chance of finding you. You'd be one in a sea of them. And I almost bought one by like day two.

So, another place that we went, we happened upon this really lovely antiques market in the Place Saint-Sulpice in the middle of the city. I got myself a tiny pair of antique earrings. Jarrett got himself a vintage jacket, it is... a beige trench coat because the French just have a way of being very fashionably persuasive. He looks amazing in it even though, a few times, I couldn't find him in a crowd. I was like, "Where did he go? He's in the beige trench coat, I'm never seeing him again."

The best cider and crepes I had was at a café called Brietz, and if you ask me, the extra brute or the dry ciders, augh! They taste like liquid tiger lilies; I love them so much. For more on ciders, you can check the Ciderology episode, which we did last year; it's going to be linked in the show notes. It's great. My biggest regret of this whole trip is not finding a place that served cider in bowls. I should have looked into it harder. And I know I could drink cider out of a bowl at home and maybe I will because sipping a beverage out of a bowl when it's on purpose, not because you refused to load the dishwasher, is pretty magic.

Now, if you go to Paris to visit a garden such as the Jardin du Luxembourg, you might notice that there aren't a lot of park benches but there are these cool metal chairs everywhere. And I thought, "Such lovely chairs, I'm going to google this for an hour back at the hotel when I should be sleeping off my jetlag." So, now you have to learn about these metal chairs.

So, they decided that park benches weren't comfy enough, so they started putting out chairs they called SENAT chairs because the Senate ordered that they be available for people enjoying the gardens. This was in the '20s. And then in 1990, they were redesigned by the company Fermob, and one thing that struck me about all these chairs in the garden is they're, like, this perfect sage, green color. I was like, "I bet there's a name for this color." They're all the same color, there's hundreds of them. I looked it up, it's apparently called Reed Green, color number RAL 6013. And now I have to hunt down an equivalent and paint a bunch of chairs for my backyard because I love them so much.

Another observation about France is that everybody smokes everywhere, which was a real brain scrambler because I was like, "What is this, 1999 again?" People just having a Virginia Slim for breakfast? I'm not used to this as someone who lives in LA. Vape clouds everywhere you go. There were babies smoking, dogs twisting rolling papers, a baguette asked me for a light. I was like, "France, you're out of control, but you do you." At one point I went into an art store to buy some chalk for an Instagram chalkboard post I was going to write on the sidewalk... (I was going to wash it off with water, calm down.) But two days later, I remembered that I had this pack of chalk in my purse, and I realized, "This is perfect if you want to make your husband's family believe out of nowhere that you're about to toast up a smoke at dinner and then be like, 'LOL, it's chalk. Aren't you guys glad I'm on vacation with you?'"

Another fun thing that they had to deal with was me sobbing in public. Here's the thing: we all love Paris, but my parents especially love Paris. My mom is fluent in French, she's a city girl and Paris is just... it's heaven to her. My parents went three times together over the years. They loved to just sit and people watch on these little alcoves on the Pont Neuf, which is an old bridge. So, while walking across Pont Neuf with Jarrett's family and thinking about my folks spending their favorite days there, my face just imploded with emotion, and my nose and my eyes crumpled onto themselves, and I just began leaking out of every hole in my face. And luckily, I learned in the last few months to always carry a hanky for such an occasion. So, I'm on this bridge, the autumn air is crisp and perfect, and I mopped up my face while Jarrett's wonderful family literally dogpiled me on a bench with hugs.

As long as we're being weird... So, my nine-and-a-half-year-old nephew was with us on this trip and at one point he was like, "Do you want to see my favorite rock I keep in my pocket?" I was like, "Sure buddy." And it was this nice, sharp, russet-colored rock and I was like, "Dude, you'll never believe this," and then I pulled *my* favorite rock from *my* pocket, which was a perfectly egg-shaped black rock that I picked up from a garden courtyard a few days before when Jarrett and I got stuck in an M.C. Escher parking garage situation. We were apparently being watched by a guard on a speaker who voice-commanded us and told us to get out of the courtyard. We were like, "We got lost!" But the guard did not seem to care that I took a rock from their gravel rooftop. But it's such a nice rock.

Here's an embarrassing story. We drove a few hours outside of Paris to a medieval-themed amusement park, featuring these historical reenactments. There's a Viking siege, and there's the Verdun Battle of World War I, and Roman chariot races live, like racing around this huge arena. Now, this place is going to remain nameless, but it had 67,000 five-star reviews and is named one of the best amusement parks in the world. Every detail has been thoughtfully executed... well, no actual execution reenactments. But everything from tiny, real piglets romping in the mud in these recreated villages, and ancient looking stonework. I mean, it was like Antoinette's hamlet but on a bigger scale and pretty cheap admission, so even commoners like us can enjoy it.

So, we went to three or four reenactment shows before we realized that the message behind all of the historical reenactments was just about converting people to Christianity. And we were like, "Mm, what?" How does the website and Wikipedia... no one mentions this aspect of it, that there's an overriding thesis to the whole thing? So, if you're considering going to a place like this, do some digging first.

Can I tell you one thing that fascinated and unnerved me about Paris? Okay. There are so many chestnuts on the ground, and acorns, and I was like, "I want to scoop these up and I want to roast them and eat them." And for more on this you can see our Foraging Ecology episode with Alexis Nelson, AKA @BlackForager or Indigenous Cuisinology with Indigikitchen's Mariah Gladstone. I looked it up and it's a good thing I did not scoop up any of the chestnuts and try to eat them because the ones in Paris are horse chestnuts, they're not the same as sweet chestnuts, which are the kind that are roasted over an open fire and sold by street vendors. The horse chestnuts are toxic, you're not supposed to eat 'em. So, that's why they were everywhere. I was like, "Why isn't anyone scooping these up?" It's like, "Because you'll barf if you eat them, that's why." But sweet chestnuts, totally okay, they're just not the same ones growing in the garden.

Now, why don't we eat roasted chestnuts in the US anymore, especially since there's that holiday song about them? Well, I learned on this trip that in the eastern United States, they used to have so many sweet chestnut trees; some that would live for centuries and grow 100 feet tall and, like, 12 feet in diameter at the base. But in the 1950s, a fungal blight tore through the population and killed them all and now those woods are dominated by oaks and maples. Meanwhile, the edible chestnuts that we eat in the US are typically imported... and I want some.

Speaking of food, I will tell you, I ate exactly one snail in France, and it wasn't the hot garlic butter bathed ones, it was just a boiled sea snail. It was served with a long metal pick to rouse it from its deathbed shell, it was very oceanic, and cold, and one was plenty. I had no frog legs, but there are plenty of them to be had in California, they're just still alive and woefully so, if you ask wildlife experts.

Did you know that folks brought bullfrogs to California because the supply of endemic red-legged frogs had been overharvested after the Gold Rush? So, this guy in Sonoma named Randolph Spreckels, an heir to the Spreckels Sugar fortune, bought 12 dozen bullfrogs from the east coast hoping to breed them and sell them. But the big, meaty American bullfrogs didn't taste as good as the other species so no one wanted frog legs. And guess what? The bullfrogs escaped. Shocker, their legs are catapults, of course they escaped. And they eat everything, sometimes even each other. Some ecologists call them mouths with legs, and they'll just stiffen an upper lip and smash them with rocks if they spot them, kind of like what we're supposed to be doing with those spotted lantern flies on the east coast. New York, I visited you a few weeks ago and I smashed at least a dozen, so keep squishing those things; they look like polka-dotted moths with red underwings but they're just the Grim Reaper for trees, just ask Philadelphia. You see 'em you smash 'em.

Okay, let's wrap this up with a secret at the end. My favorite memory in Paris, we had walked about 10 miles a day all week, my shins were barking, my feet felt like bloody stumps, and Jarrett and I decided to ride those rentable, stand-up scooters across a few neighborhoods. I'm so glad he rode motorcycles for years because he's good at being safe navigating through traffic, and he's very patient as I lag behind. But I have to tell you, being on an electric scooter, zipping past stone buildings, and just gliding through roundabouts, and bumping over cobblestones, wind in my hair on this crisp, autumn morning, I don't know if I've ever felt so free and happy. And thankfully, I didn't even get killed by a bus so, *merci* Paris, I shall remember it *toujours*, all of the days.

Also, if you go on a trip, challenge yourself to unpack as soon as you get home; set a timer, tell yourself you're going to do it in 30 minutes, or make a deal that you don't get to open any mail or packages until your suitcase is empty and back under the bed. I did that yesterday and I'm so happy because it would have been weeks if I didn't give myself that challenge.

Also, just thank you just for accepting this field trip postcard in lieu of a regular episode this week. I just hadn't taken a vacation in forever that wasn't for a shoot or for work and now that I made it an episode, I guess I didn't realize I was working as I was enjoying it. But I hope that you get some pleasure in this next few days, I hope you get some good sleep. Turn in early and have a good coffee as the sun rises, or explore your own city or neighborhood on a bike or a scooter, if it's safe. Helmets kiddos, please. Or just take an hour or two and give yourself a break. Check out a park, cry in public if you need to, cut bangs, text your crush, take a walk, have a pastry, we're only here for a little while, so let's enjoy it. Okay, berbye.

*Transcribed by Aveline Malek at TheWordary.com*

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