

## ***A learning journey (part 2) – France and the 2019 World Cup***

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Almost 12 months to the day from seeing the men's 2018 soccer world cup in Russia, we arrived in France to see the women's tournament.

We had no shortage of anticipation and excitement. I had visited France (Paris mainly) in my early 20s and 30s but I'd never done it with a rising high schooler who was keen (or so I had suggested to him!) to apply his middle school French.

Arriving at Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, we picked up a rental car and set off for Valenciennes, in northern France, close to the border with Belgium. Our first game, Germany v Spain, was in a few days time, so we had time to settle, sight see and enjoy some fabulous food including some amazing continental breakfasts.

A trip to Lille ahead of the game did not disappoint - by an amazing stroke of luck we met the German national soccer team, who were having coffee in the town center. They chatted with us and we had our photos taken. A highlight of our trip and not something you could plan for!

Later that day, we visited one of the largest bookstores in France, [Librairie Furet du Nord](#), that has an amazing collection and the largest section of comic books and graphic novels we had ever seen. We enjoyed interpreting Garfield in French.

Our next port of call was the "FIFA fan experience" in Valenciennes. On arrival it started raining and, ducking for rain cover, we met and were interviewed by a journalist from Grand Lille TV who was covering the women's world cup. When the rain stopped we played 2 v 2 soccer against people of many nationalities in the fan zone (...the French players were the most skillful we played against...) and enjoyed fun games of giant soccer skittles and soccer darts (I almost had a bullseye!)

In Valenciennes we also had the pleasure of visiting a 16th century library, Bibliothèque Municipale, in the old Collège de la Compagnie de Jésus. The books are all still housed and ordered in their original sections. It was like a living museum.

Game day 1, Germany v Spain at The Stade Du Hainut in Valenciennes, a modern multi-use stadium completed in 2011. At the concession stand, we enjoyed collecting our memorabilia of FIFA plastic drinking cups (handed out when buying a stadium drink) commemorating the game. By this time I had become a master in saying "Je suis Anglais" and having my son translate for me — a switch in our ever evolving father-son relationship.

Spain were very skillful. Germany had a strong team (ranked world #2). We were on the lookout for the players we had met the previous day in Lille — a number of them were playing. Germany created a few more chances and won a tight game 1-0.

The following day we were off to our next destination, Le Havre, by train(s). I was impressed with the efficiency and comfort of the French national railways — a very relaxing and enjoyable way to see the country. Part of our journey was on the TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse*) - in other words, fast!

Le Havre, a port town, was very different to Valenciennes. A large part of the city was destroyed during the Second World War and it has been re-architected and rebuilt. In 2005 it was recognized as a world heritage site (<http://unesco.lehavre.fr/en/discover/world-heritage>.)

We were staying at a very modern hotel — modular in design where the beds could be moved together and connected as needed, or separated, where a space-age like shower was in the middle of the room (and whose shower lights you could change to any color you wanted!) and where the shower and tap water was captured and recycled through basins and drains on the roof. Earlier, at the front desk, my son had taken the lead on checking us in. We explained to the receptionist we were learning French and for the next 5 minutes he spoke slowly to us, in French, giving us directions, instructions, sight seeing tips and more.

The English channel (southern part of the North Sea) and the ferry across to England were nearby. The art and architecture in and around the port was spectacular - in particular we enjoyed seeing the multi-colored "container art," the Musee d'art Moderne Andre Malraux (MuMa), the Niemeyer Culture Center that houses a volcano shaped library and St Joseph's Church (rebuilt) that has multi-colored stained glass all the way from it's base to its spire, gradually getting closer to white as you reached the top.

Our 2nd game, England v Argentina, was at the Stade Océane in Le Havre —another modern stadium, opened in 2012, a 40 minute walk (we skipped the bus) from the town center. While walking, we met a couple of guys from Birmingham, England who said they were on a road trip, driving across France and taking in as many world cup games, cities and towns as they could.

This was our first time seeing a national team from my home country play a sport. As with the 1st game in Valenciennes, the standard of play was high. England had the edge and won 1-0 courtesy of a goal by Jodie Taylor. The Argentinian goalkeeper was outstanding and voted player of the game.

The next day we were off again, on the SNCF train back to Paris - the hustle and bustle of the 3rd most visited city in the world.

It didn't disappoint, We were staying in the 17th Arrondissement, walking distance from the Arc de Triomphe. 9 years prior we had visited Paris and taken in the amazing Louvre museum and many of the famous sights (including the Sacré-Cœur basilica and Notre Dame cathedral). This year, Notre Dame was under scaffolding and at the beginning of renovation after the recent devastating fire.

This time I was seeking to visit different museums. I researched and found out about a small but very important museum, Musée Curie, formerly [Marie Curie's](#) laboratory, where she performed research from 1914-1934. It is located on the grounds of the Institut de Radium. It contains her laboratory room as well as equipment used to understand and analyze radiation. Well worth a visit.

After some vegetarian sushi lunch and a metro ride we walked by the Eiffel Tower, built as the entrance to the World's Fair in 1889. The tower cost almost 8 million francs to build. You can now buy the Eiffel Tower for 5 Euros (well, a 3" miniature version that is!)

The following day, before heading to our 3rd and final game we spent a morning at the amazing Center Pompidou, the largest Modern Modern Art Museum in Europe. Taking the external escalators up to the top floor provides views of the city that compares with any. We enjoyed both the modern and contemporary art, and in particular the special exhibit: "Prehistory - a Modern enigma" looking at the ties that unite prehistory with modern and contemporary art - including a fantasy vision of what preceded history.

Our final game, USA v Chile, was at the Parc Des Princes in Paris— the home stadium of Paris Saint German football (soccer) club. Having watched England play live for the first time we were now about to see the USA for the first time. I had reserved seats near the center (half way) line and we had a fabulous view of the US and Chilean teams as they came out to warm up and, later, sing their national anthems. The attendance (45,000 people) was impressive, and included a large number of traveling supporters as well as many locals.

The USA continued in their strong start to the tournament scoring 3 goals without reply, with Carli Lloyd getting a brace. They were impressive to watch and other than for a great performance by the Chilean goalkeeper, it could have been more.

That night we walked down the [Champs-Élysées](#), visited the Renault Car showroom which had a Formula 1 car, and reflected on what a fine trip it had been.

We had enjoyed visiting France. We'd gotten a real kick out of meeting the German team and seeing them play the following day. There were many standout moments in the 3 games we saw and we had witnessed some great performances including from Sara Daebritz (Germany), Jennifer Hermoso (Spain), Lucy Bronze (England), Vanina Correa (Argentina), Carli Lloyd (USA) and Christiane Endler (Chile).

3 weeks after returning home, as the final whistle of the tournament blew, the USA were crowned as worthy winners after defeating the Netherlands 2-0 in the final. The pack following the world champions are getting closer, which augurs well for an exciting Olympics in 2020.

We have become fans of traveling to these international events as a means of experiencing new places, mixing with local and international cultures, sampling new cuisine, learning a language (or at least a few words) and - in our case - the opportunity to see professional soccer players from all around the world.

My French improved a little (“un petit peu”), my son's - a lot (“beaucoup”) and through these international cross-cultural experiences the world seems a lot smaller and our minds a little broader.