

Holiday in France

Thursday, October 2

We planned to leave with the train from 6:47 a.m. to Rotterdam, to change there to the international train to Brussels, and from Brussels with the TGV-train to Marseille.

One problem... on this morning there were no trains in the direction of Rotterdam, because of a broken overhead line! And the other possible direction to go to Brussels wasn't a possibility either, because of another broken overhead line.

Conclusion: we had to take a train to Schiphol Airport, which was in the wrong direction, to go to the South of Europe. And that meant we didn't get on time in Brussels to take the TGV we made a reservation for. So it wasn't the best start of our vacation.

At Schiphol Airport we bought tea at Starbucks (the only Starbucks in the Netherlands) and then we went to the train office for the international directions to ask what to do. The lady behind the counter was very friendly and told us we could take another train to Brussels, but that she couldn't help us to change the TGV-tickets. She made a phonecall to the railteam in Brussels for us, to tell them we were heading there and to ask if they could help us from there.

Because of all the broken overhead lines, everyone seems to travel via Schiphol Airport. So the train we had to take was very crowded and we had to stand in a hallway from the train with about one hundred other people and their luggage.

In Brussels we immediately went to the special railteam to tell them about our problem. The Belgium man asked for the reason why we missed our train and because it wasn't our fault, but the fault of the Dutch Railway, we got a stamp with the text 'Hop on the next train' on our TGV-tickets. The only problem left: we didn't get a seat reservation for the next train, so we had to wait and see if there were any seats available. We had to contact the train manager and ask him to tell us where we could sit. Unfortunately the train manager talked French, a little English and just one word in Dutch: '*Vol, vol, vol!*' Meaning: 'Full, full, full!' According to this man there were no available seats in the TGV left.



Happily the man was wrong and we found some empty seats ourselves for the five hours we had to sit in this train. At 6:00 p.m. we were in Marseille, at the Mediterranean Sea.

The first thing my father said when he heard we went to Marseille was: 'It's a criminal city.' Even though he had never been to Marseille he thought so. I didn't believe him, until we actually were in Marseille. At every street corner stand a policeman and at the central station were many policemen and some military men walking around with machine guns. And to complete the whole picture, we heard every five minutes the sound of the *pompiers*, police or ambulance.



Our hotel was a five minute walk downhill from the station, so we dropped our bags in our room and walked to the Vieux Port to get something to eat. We chose a restaurant that said on the menucard that they talked French, Spanish and English. Well, it turned out their English wasn't the best... Tjeerd tried to order an IceTea, but the waiter looked at him like Tjeerd was talking Russian or something. Okay, then

Tjeerd tried to say IceTea in French: *thé glacé*. Unfortunately, he pronounced it not as the French, so the waiter looked to Tjeerd very surprised and said: ‘You want tea with glasses?!?’ Err... no. We changed the order into a coke (which wasn’t immediately clear to the waiter as well).

Back at the hotel we got the key to the room of 214 in stead of our room: 213. Apparently everyone can get every key they want. It’s very dark in our room (the right one) but there aren’t many lamps. I try to put on my bed light, but in stead of turning the light on, the lamp falls down from the wall.

Taking a shower or a bath is a challenge in our bathroom, because you can’t put the shower on the wall and there’s no bath stop to hold the water.

The bed is made for small people, because it’s 1.80 meter x 1.40 meter. And every time one turns around, the other person wakes up. We are happy when it’s morning again.

Friday, October 3

After a sleepless night, we have breakfast and read the *Metro*. The weather in Marseille will be around 19 degrees Celsius, according to the newspaper. We check out of the hotel en walk uphill to the central station. Right in front of the station there are huge stairs. I have never seen stairs like these! (And some people think the stairs at IKEA are big; well, they have to go to Marseille to see these.) We have to take a break after every twenty steps.



The train to Bandol, in the direction of Toulon, doesn't leave for another hour and a half, so we have some tea (just the normal tea) and buy some *baquettes* for lunch.

From the train we see the Mediterranean Sea for the first time this trip, because in Marseille we only saw the port. In 45 minutes we are in the village Bandol. We walk through nice looking small streets to the hotel, but the check-in isn’t until 3:00 p.m. so we go to the beach, because the weather is great! The beach is right next to the hotel.



I change my pants for a skirt and we pack our bath towels to lay on. It’s really warm, so once in a while I have to cool off in the sea. I go into the water until my knees, because I wear my skirt. (Sometimes a wave comes by and then my skirt gets wet. But it dries very fast.) It’s not crowded at the beach, only some elderly people who live in Bandol and who can relax every day. I want that life also!

After two and half hours we pack our bags again and go to the hotel to check-in. We have room number 21 on the second floor and a great sea view. Unfortunately, the room has the same small bed as the hotel in Marseille. Are the French actually that short and small?

We walk around through the village and make pictures from the beach, the port with huge yachts (it’s like St.-Tropez) and the town center. As at every holiday we walk a lot... The restaurants open at 7:00 p.m. (we are used to have diner around 5:30 p.m. so we are very hungry by the time they finally open their doors). We choose a Chinese restaurant, and not one of the many fish restaurants, and fortunately I recognize the wet, warm, smelly towels after diner to clean your hands and face. Tjeerd looks confused.

Saturday, October 4

The meaning of *petit déjeuner* becomes clear to us. At breakfast there isn't much choice, so it's real *petit*. The French don't eat various and not much food in the morning, only a *croissant* and a small piece of *baquette* with jam or honey. I can't get enough of the food, so I eat a lot at breakfast every morning. I totally ignore the fact that's a *petit déjeuner*; I go for the *grande déjeuner*.

While we are having breakfast, our room is cleaned already and we have new towels. I made the bed myself after waking up, so that was one less thing to do for the maid.

We walk to the *centre ville* to buy some postcards to send home. I also buy some *timbres* at La Poste, using my best French. At the end of the morning we go to the beach to relax. We bring food and a book, and we even go into the sea. The newspaper told us the seawater was about 20 degrees Celsius. Well, this couldn't be true. Maybe they meant 2 degrees Celsius, because we were frozen!

After our trip to the beach we went back to the hotel, and sat down in the hotel garden to write our postcards. Because we didn't want to wait until 7:30 p.m. to get food, we leave at 5:30 p.m. to look for a bistro. According to my 'How & What in French'-book bistros serve food all day long, so that's where we're going! Unfortunately, the owner of the bistro tells us they start at 7:00 p.m.



We have to find another solution, so we walk to the port where we saw some snack stands. We can choose between pizza or *frites*. The choice of pizza isn't the best... It took the girls in the snack stand about twenty minutes to start the pizza making! And to make it worse, the Mistral blow and we became colder and colder every minute.

Sunday, October 5



We have breakfast and read the local newspapers to see if the weather stays this good. Yes! But first we make a walk to the other *plages* in Bandol. It's a beautiful walk along the coast. The beaches have stones instead of sand, so they aren't as loved as 'our' beach. A black cat comes by and meows to us in French.

From 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. we lay on the beach again. We go into the sea twice, like it's nothing! The macho-Italian guy who is standing in ankle deep water looks at us, but he doesn't dare to follow us into the sea. Well, who is the real macho? :)

We move from the beach to the hotel garden to eat and read. We have to be in the shadow for a while, because we had a lot of sun on our skins (and thanks to the Dutch weather, we are not used to this much sun). Around 4:30 p.m. we change our summer outfits into warmer outfits, because the Mistral makes it feel very cold outside.

Today we prepare ourselves for the late diner; we have a coke and chips to survive.

At 7:00 p.m. we walk to a hip restaurant. Of course we are the first ones there. The waitress gives us a table where Tjeerd feels a cold wind stream in his neck. So we ask the waitress for

another table. We have to use gestures to explain what we mean, because the waitress is another French who doesn't speak a word English.

The waitress understands our order (*tartine tomates*) and even the IceTea appears to our table. The food is hip, tasteful but isn't a filling meal.

After diner I use the standard phrase: '*L'addition, s'il vous plaît.*' I remember this phrase from high school, but I never used it before.



On our way back to the hotel we post the postcards in a mailbox that's placed in the middle of the road, so everyone can post their mail directly from their car when they drive by. We have to cross the road and stay at a dangerous point when we post the postcards.

Monday, October 6

When we wake up in the morning it's cloudy, but while we are having breakfast the clouds disappear and it's again a sunny day.

We walk to the train station in Bandol to look at the timetable of the trains. Then we go to the supermarket (8 a Huit) and to a *cybercafe*. We will look for a hotel in Aix-en-Provence, close to the TGV-station, but we find out it's not easy to go there and to leave early in the morning on our way back home. So we decide we won't change the hotel in Marseille, even though we are not big fans of that city.



Today, the sea is transparent and we see white fishes swimming around. As a proof we actually went into the sea, we make pictures on Tjeerd's telephone.

After a couple of hours in the sun our skins turn red, so we have to leave the beach. We go back to the hotel and sit again in the nice garden to read another book and watch the beach (are there any people swimming?) and the sea. At the sea we see a group with people who get surf lessons. Two motorboats are in their neighborhood to see if the surf people are okay. One surfer is far away from the group, he's almost at the other side of the sea, in Algeria. After a while one motorboat goes on high speed to assist the surfer back to the group.

We have to wait hours before we can have diner, so we watch some French television. From now on we watch every day the program *Le Diner Presque Parfait*, where five people make diner for each other and the other four people have to rate the quality of the food, the ambiance and the decoration.

During our holiday we got to know the candidates better and it was fun to look at the houses and the people. Although it was hard to watch all the food, before we actually could have diner ourselves. Even during the commercials we saw food on television!

When it's finally diner time we go to a cosy Italian restaurant and we try to speak only French to the waitress (and it turns out well). Tjeerd says hi to some people he recognizes from our hotel. After diner we are afraid the waitress didn't understand the part where we paid her and gave a tip, but we also wanted 20 Euro back as a change. The waitress isn't showing up again and after 15 minutes I take my 'How & What in French'-book to look up a phrase I can say about the change she took and never gave back to us. I find the following sentence in my book: 'You have forgotten my desert.' I can change desert into 20 Euro! But then another waiter shows up and gives me my change, so I don't have to use the sentence I just made up.

On our way back to the hotel I see a hedgehog on the small sidewalk. On one side of the sidewalk is a street where cars come by and on the other side there's a wall, so the hedgehog has to walk pretty far to go into the nature again. I have never seen a living hedgehog (I only know them from the side of the road, after someone crashed into it) and I want to be sure this one stays alive. So we have to find a way to bring this hedgehog to the nature.

I try to put it on my bag, so I can carry it, but the hedgehog immediately walks away from the bag. Okay, then I have to carry the hedgehog in my hands. I take it up and it goes well. I feel one very small paw on my finger; the hedgehog leans on my hand and looks where we are going. About 30 meters further there's an opening in the wall and I can put the hedgehog back in the nature. The moment it touches the ground it runs into the bushes. I am happy to know I saved him from a very dangerous walk.

Tuesday, October 7

Again a night without much sleep, thanks to the small bed. When we go downstairs to have breakfast, the other guests who ate in the Italian restaurant also have breakfast. We all greet each other.



In the morning there's a market in Bandol, so we have something nice to go to. At the market are many stands. They all offer different things: clothes, bags, jewelry, food, souvenirs and even clothes for the dog. If you don't have a small dog in this town, you won't be accepted.



We buy some lavender souvenirs and I find a very nice purple purse. I ponder if I should buy the purse, but I get flashbacks from a pondering moment years ago in Siena, Italy. I was also at a market and I saw a nice purse, but I thought about buying it for too long, and then someone else bought the purse, just at the moment I decided I wanted to buy it! So I don't ponder anymore and I buy this purple purse in Bandol.

I also buy a packet with some original Orangina-bottles from glass, to bring home as a souvenir for myself. The packet is quite heavy, but I love this drink so I have to have it.

We spend the afternoon in the hotel garden, in the shadow of the trees. After a short siesta we walk to the town center. At 4:30 p.m. the local school is out. The *police municipale* shows up to escort the children and their parents to the other side of the road/ to their cars, and one policeman closes the street that leads to the school, so the children are safe. They really take good care of the children in Bandol!

At the snack stand in the port we have 'diner': hotdogs and fries. Tjeerd tries to order once again, but it's not working right... He orders: '*Deux hotdogs et une petite frites...*' The girl in the snack stand repeats: '*Deux hotdogs and one big chicken?*' What? Where did she hear the big chicken-part? I can't stop laughing.

After diner we go to the supermarket to buy some yogurt as desert. We eat the yogurt at the beach, where the die-hard elderly people just pack their bath towels to leave the beach. Because we go to the beach for a couple of days now, we recognize many people. And they recognize us also! They say '*Bonsoir*' and '*Bon appétit!*' when they walk by. We feel at home in Bandol.

Wednesday, October 8

No more sunshine. Today it's raining and thundering. We have a long breakfast, just like all the other hotel guests, and then we go back to our hotel room to read and relax until it will stop raining.

At noon we put our raincoats on and go outside, because we need food and the shops close a couple of hours during the afternoon. We buy a lot of food, so we won't necessarily have to go outside again, if it won't stop raining. In this weather I can test if my new purse is waterproof (yes, it is).



I still don't have a souvenir for my sister, because nothing was good enough, but now we won't have much time anymore. My sister takes care of our cat Jarre during our vacation, so she sure deserves a present. Tomorrow morning we have to look again in Bandol.

We have lunch at our hotel room, while our pants and raincoats hang out to dry. At 3:30 p.m. the rain stops. Our pants aren't dry yet, so we go outside in funny outfits: a raincoat with a short pants (Tjeerd) / a skirt (me) and walking boots. We walk through the *centre ville*, but most of the stores are closed. Apparently, a rainy day means no customers, so very flexible opening hours (or just closed all day long...). Still no souvenir.

Back at the hotel we have something to eat, drink Orangina, watch TV and I play Solitaire on my phone (didn't know I have games on my phone, until today).

Thursday, October 9



It's the last morning where we wake up with the sound of waves in the background. We have breakfast and then we have to pack our bags. When we check-out the receptionist tells us she went to Amsterdam twice, and once to Zandvoort (she pronounces 'Zandvoort' in a whole different way, so it took us some time to find out which place she meant).

We pay by credit card and the problem we had in Denmark last year appears again; we have to use a PIN to pay. Tjeerd asks if we can pay by just placing a signature. The receptionist checks a list and says it's okay. So that's an easy solution (in Denmark they didn't let us pay without the PIN, so we had to take out money at an ATM).

We walk to the station from Bandol. It's a 20 minute walk uphill, with a backpack with heavy Orangina-bottles... But we make it and we sit down in the hallway of the station. There's a line in front of the counter, so we wait until the line shortens. But it stays the same, with the same man at the front and probably with a hard question that takes a while to answer.

We find out that there's a ticket machine at the platform, so I go outside and buy our tickets at the machine. When I come back into the hallway, still the same man stands at the counter. It seriously takes half an hour to help him! And the line is getting longer and longer. We are relieved we already have our train tickets.

The information screen tells us that our train has a five minute delay, so we sit relaxed in the hallway and watch the line. Suddenly the train is already at the platform, there's no delay at all! So everyone is in a hurry to take the train.

At 11:30 a.m. we are back in Marseille and we see the police and military men again. We put our backpacks in a safe at the station. It's not easy to go into the safe room, because you have to pass security and go through a scan machine.



We take the subway to Palais Longchamp en we have lunch on a bench in the palace garden. Apparently, we are trendsetters, because suddenly more people take place on benches to eat their lunch.

The palace and the garden aren't very spectacular, so after this visit we take the subway to the port. We have to find some souvenirs! I only find soap shaped like a *cicade*, but it's a start.

When we walk on the sidewalk, a woman in a car shouts many French words to us. We look at her and her car and we see that the passenger door of the car is wide open. Apparently, she is too lazy to go out of her drivers seat and close the door by herself, so that's why she shouts. I close the door for her, even though I didn't understand a single word she said.

Back at the station we pick up our backpacks and walk to the same hotel as we spent the first night of this vacation. The receptionist gives us our key, and we walk to the first floor to our room. When we walk into our room, the phone rings. Tjeerd answers. It's the receptionist, telling that there's been a mistake and he asks us to come back to the reception desk.

Turned out the receptionist gave us the key from a room where another guest stays in! I noticed some clothes in the closet, so I was already wondering what they were doing there...



After a short break we walk to the port again, to go to a brasserie. The text on the outside of the building says: 'Non-stop food, from 11:30 a.m. until 12:00 p.m.'. So we can't wait to have something to eat, even though it's 4:30 p.m. We walk inside and I ask if we already can order. The woman who is cleaning some tables looks at me and tells us that we have to wait until 7:00 p.m.! Non-stop doesn't mean 'non-stop' in France... Maybe they don't know the definition of the word.

Because we are really hungry we have nowhere to go, except McDonald's. After we ate a burger and a salad, we went into some shops to look around. There's a huge store full of candy and chocolate. But it's all very expensive and when I look at the candy it feels like my teeth spontaneous fall out of my mouth, because it's too sweet. So we don't buy anything.

Then we go to the Monoprix, where they have many things. I find shower gel from the brand 'Le Petite Marseillais', so that's souvenir number two. To make it three, I buy some Toblerone (always a welcome gift).

And then, on our way back to the hotel, we walk by a *librairie*. We like to look inside the store and there, out of nowhere, I find another souvenir! It's an agenda for 2009 with nice pictures and French phrases. When my sister and I were younger, we always wanted to buy an agenda in the country where we had our summer holidays. It was kind of a sport for us to find one we actually liked, and that wasn't easy, especially not in France. So this agenda I found in Marseille was a perfect gift.

Back at the hotel, the receptionist recognizes us and he gives us the right key. We watch the last part of our favorite French TV-program and then we watch some other programs, like *La Roue de la Fortune* (a program that was on the Dutch TV many years ago).

Outside we hear the sound of the *pompiers*, police and/or ambulance again. It's like whole Marseille is on fire or every person in Marseille has immediately to go to the hospital, but (happily) nothing is really going on.

Friday, October 10

After another sleepless night, we have an early breakfast and we check-out at 7:45 a.m. It's a heavy walk to the central station, even though it's only a couple of minutes. On our way to France my backpack was half empty, so I had no problem carrying it, but on our way home it's full and too heavy for me. But I have to carry the bag to the train, so I walk (not very fast, but I do walk).



Our TGV leaves at 8:39 a.m. and I decide to walk through the train to the bistro, to buy some tea and sandwiches for lunch. The whole TGV-trip I try to close my eyes and rest, and I look around to see what other passengers are doing. It's hard to do both (rest and look around), but I think it's an even fifty-fifty during the trip.



In the TGV are many English passengers (all elderly people), and I don't know why but we like the English. Maybe it's because they are just like us: normal people, used to a climate like ours, but living in a beautiful country. The English people leave the train in Lille, to change to the Eurostar-train to London.

Around 2:00 p.m. we are in Brussels and we have exactly 3 minutes to change trains. We make it! We have a lucky day today. In Rotterdam we change to the train which is heading to Utrecht. A girl from around my age puts a baby carrier (including baby) in front of Tjeerd. That's the only place where there's enough space for the baby carrier. When people are passing us they look at the baby and then at Tjeerd, and then they smile. And when a man passes to leave the train, he asks Tjeerd how old the baby is. Tjeerd looks panicked; he and a baby? :) The girl who is actually the mother of the baby answers that the baby is almost six weeks old, and she smiles at us. When she put the baby carrier in front of us, she already told us that people will think it's ours. It could be. Although, this baby wasn't white, so it had to be adopted by us then.

At 5:15 p.m. we were home again. The cat was happy to see us and we were happy to see our big bed again, so we could sleep normal again. It was very nice to go to France in October and lay on the beach, so maybe it's the start of a new tradition!