

A CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



Happy Holidays and New Year !

Bonjour à tous ! Here we are again, already at the end of another month (and a year) ! I hope that you all had a wonderful holiday season and a happy new year, and I hope that your 2012 gets off to a great start.

My holidays in France are wonderful ! In fact, I'm even starting to have the feeling of a pit in my stomach each time I think about the fact that the year is almost over, it's almost time to switch host families, and everything is going by too quickly. But I still have 6

1/2 - 7 months left here, and I hope to make the most of them!

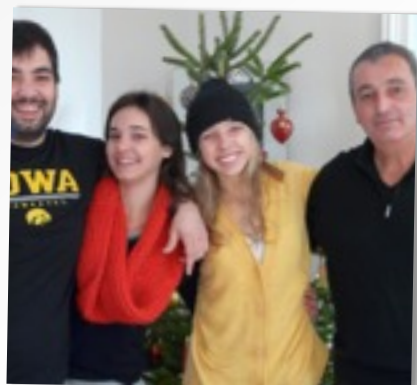
So here's my last newsletter of the year - I hope you enjoy !

As always, thank you for everything.

Nathalie



FÊTE DES LUMIÈRES, P. 2



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Fête des Lumières

The Festival of Lights

is the grand party that takes place every year in Lyon, starting on the 8th of December. It is the grand fête of the city, with over 4,000,000 people who come from outside Lyon to take part in the festivities (we heard all sorts of languages - english, spanish, italian, dutch, and chinese were just a few!).

HISTORY OF THE FESTIVAL

This festival actually has a religious background, and there are several stories as to why it came about. It's a festival to thank the Virgin Mary, and it dates back to 1643. There was a plague that affected the south of France during that year, and it is the story that the Virgin Mary protected the town from the disease.

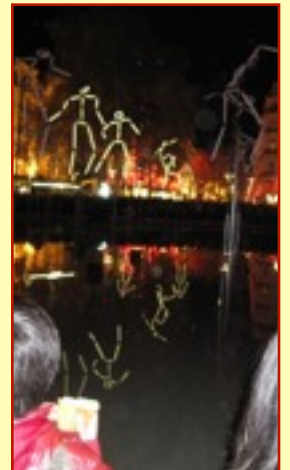
Throughout many regions in France, the residents place a candle in their window, traditionally as a sign of thanks.



What is it?

There are simply a lot of lights throughout the city! Above, you can see some of the buildings lit up (the blue building is the Basilica, and the two lights to the right say «*Merci Marie*» (Thank you, Mary). Below you can see some of the other things : a giant ferris wheel where you can see all of Lyon, a parade of Chinese-style floats, the buildings

lit up, balloons, stick men who light up to form a dance to music. There was a building that was set up like Pinball, and you could play it at certain times. There was a giant elephant that you could walk under, and it made noises and squirted water at you. There was also a fantastic fireworks show at the end!



Visiting Vichy

At the beginning of the month, I had the opportunity to visit the town of Vichy, where my host brother had (until now) worked (he just changed jobs, so he moved to a different city). We went to help him move out some things, and while we were there we walked around in the city. Unfortunately, there was a thunderstorm, so walking around lost a bit of it's charm, but it was still nice. There are a lot of quaint boutiques and cafés, so it was fun to window shop with my host mom.

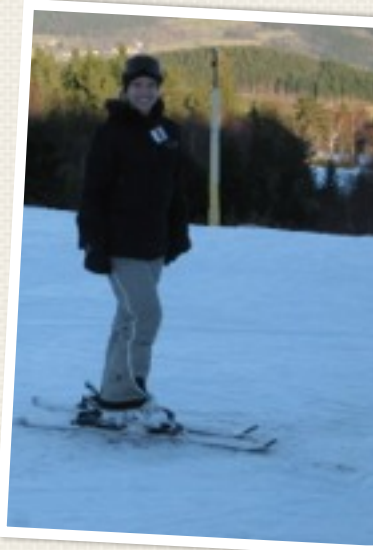
HISTORY OF THE CITY

The name «Vichy» is one that most people recognize as the government in France during WWII. The town of Vichy was their headquarters (and it was for that that it was called the Vichy government), but the town existed before that. It is a city that has a water source, and for that it became a relatively important city early on. (In fact, it was because of the water source that my host brother worked there: his job involves water management and the ecological effects of various treatments, etc). The first people to discover the city were the Romans. Juilius César was the first person to exploit the water source, but he certainly wasn't the last. Vichy became the headquarters of the Vichy government during the Second World War, and after it knew a period of great prosperity. This period of prosperity ended with the Algerian War, which caused and high-lighted problems in the city.



IRONIC AND AMUSING DISCOVERY

I discovered that Des Moines, the capital of Iowa, is in fact a Twin City with St. Étienne, a city just 30 minutes from me ! I have the impression I was meant to come to this corner of France.



1ST TIME SKIING

During my winter vacation, my host parents and I went one day to a Ski Station about 40 minutes from my house. I tried skiing for the first time, and it was really fun ! It took me a long time to master the art of going slowly - at the beginning I went way to fast and was scared I was going to kill someone, but luckily no one is dead and I have no broken bones, so I'll consider it a success!



ROTARY

We had several events with Rotary this month, including the Christmas Dinner. Like all of the other Christmas meals I had, it was extraordinary, with a lot of appetizers foie gras, Croque Saint Jacques, and a delicious dessert. There was also a raffle of an old car from the 1950s to raise money for Rotary.

«Christmas is a time when you get homesick - even when you're home.»

Carol Nelson

The Christmas season is a classic favorite, and it was amazing to get to experience the traditions of a different family and culture. With my host family, we celebrated Christmas with the family of my host father one week before Christmas. There were about 25 people, and it's sure that we ate well (escargots, an assortment of appetizers, salad, *foie gras*, a mixture of duck and mashed potatoes, cheese, la Bûche de Noël (Yule log), etc). It was nice to have a last opportunity to see all of the family.

THE FRENCH CHRISTMAS: A TRYING TEST OF ENDURANCE FOR THE STOMACH. ALL DELICIOUS, BUT THERE'S A LOT OF IT.

Here, they celebrate Christmas Eve as well during the night, a remnant of a country that is traditionally predominately Catholic with the midnight mass. We started eating our dinner between 9pm and 10pm, and we finished a little after midnight. At the end we listened to some French music, including a band called Mickey 3D (you can find on YouTube) which originated here in Montbrison !

Christmas day we opened presents in the morning, just like in the US (but sans the stockings!), and afterwards we prepared lunch, which we ate with my host uncle, aunt, cousin, and the boyfriend of my host cousin. It was all extremely delicious, complete with appetizers, two entrées, a main dish, cheese, and dessert. We started eating the appetizers around 1:30pm and we finished around 6pm. (Needless to say, we didn't eat dinner afterwards.)

PHOTOS



PREPARING THE MEAL



PERFECT PRESENTATION



TABLE DECORATIONS



CHOCOLATE PIE



Holiday Reflections

...

It's true that the holiday season is always a time when you return home, you see everyone that you haven't seen for a while - family that lives far away, friends and siblings who are away at college, etc - and you find the time during the vacation to spend time with people (even the people that you see often). When you think of things from that point of view, it's extremely odd to think of being in a foreign country, away from all of your friends and family. All of the people with Rotary warned us that this is a really difficult time of the year and that a lot of people become really homesick and have a lot of difficulties. It's true that it was odd to be away from my family and friends, and there are several times when I wanted to see them and be with them, but there was never a time when I said that I wish I hadn't come to France because I missed it too much. I think that being away from everyone has allowed me to grow and hopefully in the future I won't take for granted of the presence of my family.

PLAYING SANTA

More Difficult Than You Would Think: Finding Presents for the Host Family

I have always been a fan of the Christmas season, and I like to find presents to give to people. I didn't have too much trouble finding presents for my family in the US, but finding gifts for my host family was more difficult, for several reasons, the most predominate being that I don't know them (particularly my host siblings) as well as my real family, and the fact that this is the only year I'm going to be here and I would really like to show them that I am grateful. For the family, I bought one day-by-day desk calendar with a lesson of English everyday (a joke with my family) and I created a wall calendar with all of the birthdays, holidays, concerts, anniversaries of things we had done together, etc, along with pictures of various things we've done. For each individual person, I tried to find different things according to their interest. My host sister was a great help for finding a gift for my host brother (and for her)... so advice to any future exchange students, get started early, be creative and put some thought in to it, and utilize your resources !

However, more saddening than the fact I'm not with my family and friends in the US is the idea that this is the last Christmas I'll spend with my host family and friends here in France. With everyone in the US, I know I'll be seeing you in July, but with everyone here, it is perfectly possible that after I leave here in July,

I'll never see them again in person. Knowing this fact gave these holidays a special meaning, and it's not something that I'll be forgetting. While I didn't spend time (apart from Skype) with my family in the US, I've been able to find a new family and friends here, an experience which is truly incredible.

WINTER WONDERLAND: WHITE CHRISTMAS?



When I first heard that I was coming to the the Rhône-Alpes, I thought of a lot of things. After the initial excitement, I thought of the beautiful mountains, all of the snow, skiing, and other wintery scenes. Sadly, we actually haven't had much snow here. This picture of my winter wonderland is the most now we have had. It was my first non-white christmas ! How bizarre to think about!

NEW YEARS ODDS AND ENDS

Calling my «exchange sister» : One of the friends of my «exchange sister» (the girl who is the daughter of my host parents' and in Iowa right now) was at the same party as me, so a little after midnight (we tried at midnight but everyone was trying to call so we didn't get through) to say *Bonne année* !

Dancing: It was amusing to dance here, and everyone was interested to learn the dances american, leading to some interesting times teaching the French how to do the «Soldja Boy.» We also had fun dancing to music like «America» from West Side Story. In fact, the worst thing of the night was the fact that it was a lot of music in English - the most english I've had in a long time!

Aftermath of New Year's: Here it is really a tradition to wish everyone a happy new year, and each time you see someone, you kiss them on the cheeks and wish them a happy new year and «bon santé» (good health). For a lot of the students, people also wish them good luck with their exam for the end of the year

New Year's Eve in France

A wonderful way to celebrate the last new year's (before the end of the world in 2012)



The New Year's celebration was extra special this year; first off, because I'm in France, but secondly because it is supposedly the last New Year's before the world's end on December 21, 2012, so we had to make the most of it. Two of my friends in my class invited me to celebrate with them (because in France, the celebration for high schoolers is more important than in the US, or more important than it was for my friends in the US at any rate; here, they start planning the New Year's Eve Party about 1 or 2 months before hand!). It was a lot of fun. At the beginning I felt a little bit awkward because I don't know all of the people very well, but it got better throughout the night. We danced for most of the night. At midnight, we didn't watch the ball drop in NYC : instead, we did our own countdown and everyone drank a glass of champagne at midnight. After that, it's necessary to «faire les bises» (to kiss everyone on the cheek), and since we were about 20 people, it took a bit of time. We went to bed around 5am (everyone brought sleeping bags and we were spread out on the floor, a consequence of the fact they can't drive here).

**ALREADY
2012?**

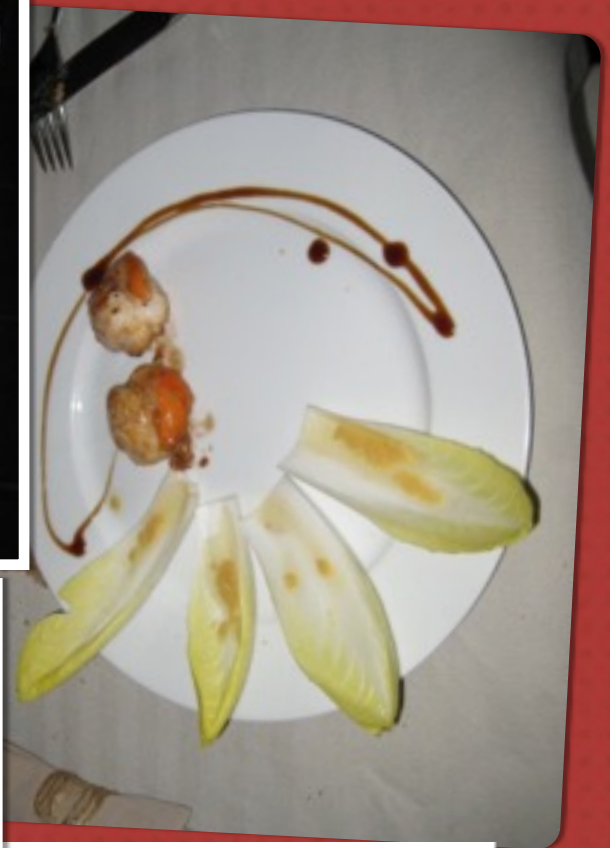
**Time spent so far in
France:**

**130
days**

Time (approx.) Left:

**205
days**

A Few Images of the French Christmas Cuisine



*Clockwise starting with the top left.
Foie Gras, Figs, and a salad (1st entrée)*

Croquee Saint Jacques (2nd entrée)

Repas de Noël at school - they have a special meal each year at school for Noël. There were a lot of choices! Here you see foie gras, mixed vegetables, Croque de Saint-Jacques, a box of chocolates, orange juice, a clementine, fromage blanc, and raspberry tiramisu!

Bouches de Noël

Baignée with salmon and cream. (I found this particularly amusing because a «baignée» is almost exactly the same thing as a pancake!)

Les escargots (appetizer)

GOALS FOR THE NEW YEAR

Find a New Club to Participate In

I want to make sure that I take advantage of every opportunity possible, so I hope to find a new club that I can take part in.

Integrate Well Into my Next Host Family

With the Rotary Club, we are obliged to change families during the year as a way to see more of the culture, etc. In principle, I like this idea - you can see more of the different ways of life, you can have different opportunities, etc, and I've read that it usually goes really well. At the same time, I've become close with my family now and it will be hard to leave them.

My next host family has four children (one of which still lives at home (a host brother who is 17 years old) and 3 of which are older, but one who works in Montbrison). The father is a doctor and the mother is now retired, but she worked in Hospital management. They live in a different town which is 25 minutes from here, which will be a change (right now I live right next to the «centre ville,» so going to town is a 5 minute walk and I can walk home from school every day). I hope that I can integrate into their family, and I hope that I still have plenty of opportunities to see my current host family.

Go to a Soccer Game and a Rugby Match

This one shouldn't be too hard, but I need to find the time with my host family or friends to go to a soccer game and a rugby match.

Improve my French

This one goes without saying. I have come a long ways - I can now watch movies with essentially no problem and hold a regular conversation, but there's still plenty of room for improvement.

Read a French Classic

I've gotten a lot better in my ability to read French; I've progressed from just understanding Harry Potter because I know the story to reading Tristan and Isolde. Next, I hope to read a French Classic (as to which one, I'm not sure).

Watch French Movie Classics

I've had a lot of people tell me about certain French movies I need to watch. Before, we never watched too many because of the difficulties with understanding all of the language. Now that that is less of a problem, it's time to tackle this goal !

THE NEW YEAR'S

Assessment

As 2011 comes to a close, it's the perfect time to reflect on my time already spent here in France and to think of what I want to do in the future.

Goals Already Accomplished

Play in Band

Play on a Soccer Team

Ride a Train

Cook a Thanksgiving Meal for my Host Family

Try at least 20 Types of Cheese

Go to a French Movie

Volunteer in the Community



Favorite Memories

Thanksgiving Dinner with Friends and Family

Thanksgiving in France was wonderful with my host family and friends. We cooked the day away, making a full and traditional Thanksgiving meal, the meal went well, and afterwards my friends stayed at the house.

Dinner Party with Host Parents

At the beginning, these weren't as fun because they finish at 2am in the morning and I was exhausted from speaking in French all day, but I've grown to really like them

Going to St. Étienne with Friends

I visited St. Étienne with my friends, went to a café, saw a movie, went to a «disco» club, and just spent time in general with my new friends.

Going to French Film and Understanding All of It !

Despite the fact we went on the one day where I was really sick (it was necessary to run out of the theater at one point), I really enjoyed realizing that I could follow the film without a problem.

«For last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning.»

T. S. Eliot





Christmas Celebration at my Host Aunt's House



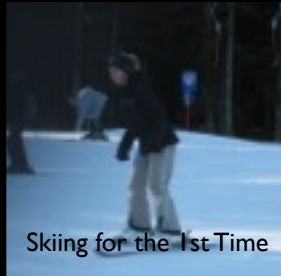
Christmas Eve Dinner and Tree



Christmas Eve Dinner



New Years



Skiing for the 1st Time



Opening Presents on Christmas



Ice Skating with friends

Month in Review

1. Visit Vichy
2. Fête des Lumières
3. Attend several Rotary Meetings
4. Dinner parties with host parents
5. First snow of the year !
6. Celebrate Christmas at my Host Aunt's House
7. Go ice skating with friends
8. Celebrate the Reveillon
9. Celebrate my first Christmas in France
10. Go skiing for my first time
11. New Years with Friends

Thank you to all of my donors for your support.

Aimee Williams

Amy March

Ann Scherf

Anonymous

Carolann

Morykwas

Cheryl Niemeyer

Chris Lindell

David Kennedy

Davis and Eunice
Folkerts

Debbie Tyson

Denis and Denise
Deaver

Erin Wagner

George and Alyce
Werkema

James Hines

Janette Fiedler

Jay, Ann, and Quinn
Murphy

John and Marge
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