



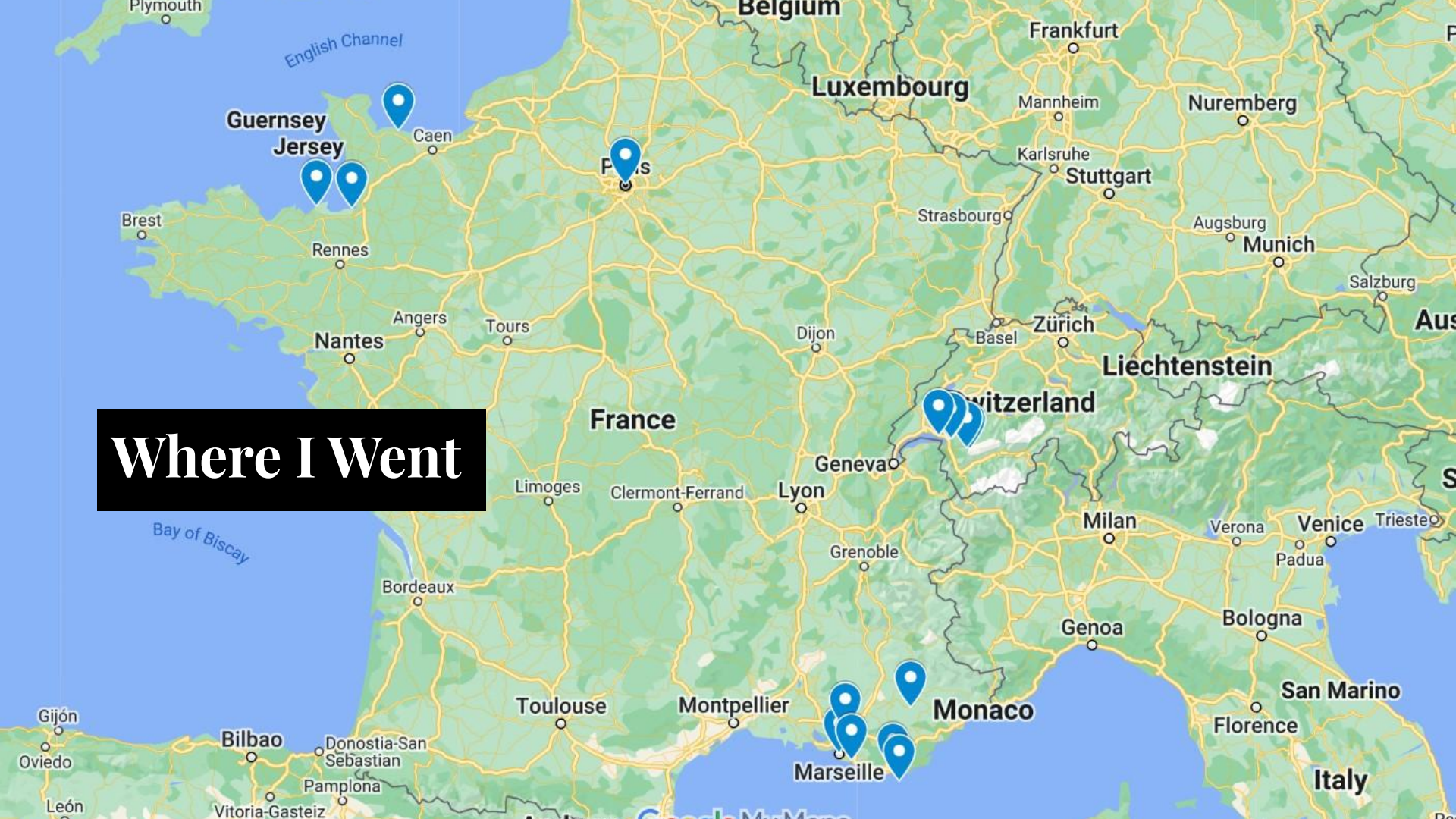
# My France Experience

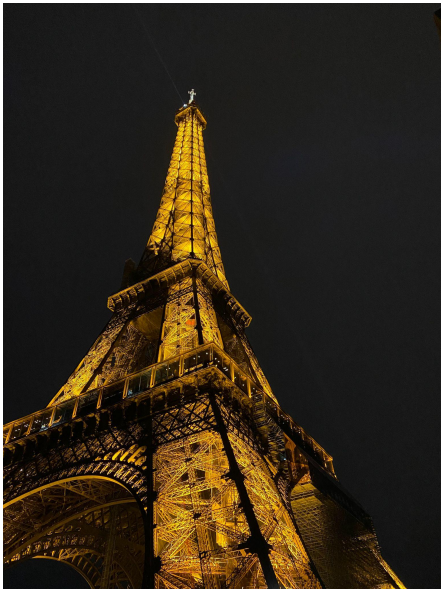
(and briefly Switzerland!)

Vanessa Rebentisch

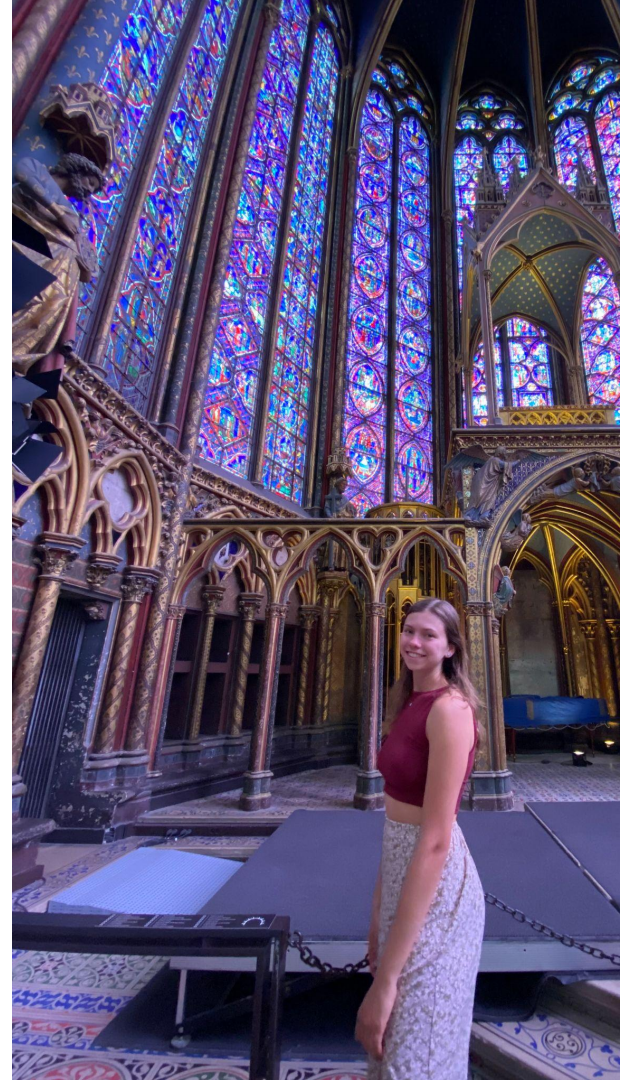
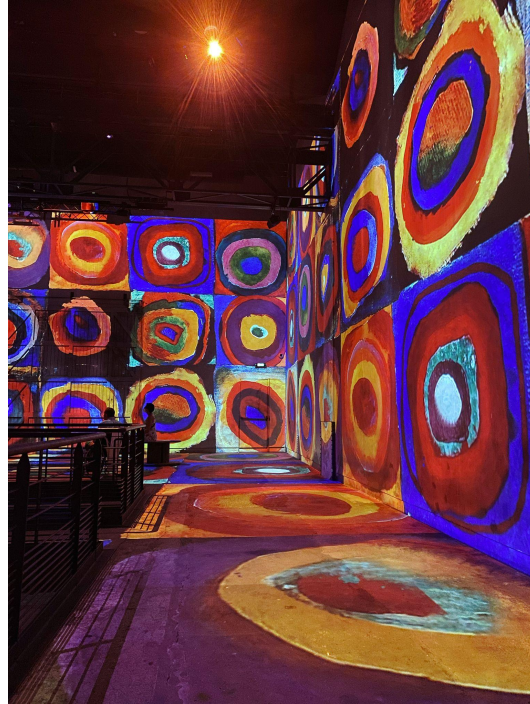
Summer 2022 // EVEN 311

# Where I Went





# Paris



The first part of the study abroad was made extra special by the fact that we had no class yet. I loved the tours done with our fantastic guides, Patrick and Giannis. However, my most memorable moments were when we were set loose on the city during free time. A nighttime run in the rain to the Eiffel tower only to miss the boat (but don't worry, we got on the next one). Finding our way to Saint Chapelle, a place my grandma had urged me to visit. Relaxing and people-watching at Luxembourg Gardens, noticing that in France, a lot of gardens do not have flowers. Visiting L'Atelier des Lumières, an immersive art exhibit I found during my internet research which featured the work of Paul Cezanne, who I did not know was from Aix-en-Provence (our home base city). All of these experiences, and many more, added to my confidence of going out independently.

I am grateful that we started out in Paris because since then I've realized I don't enjoy cities as much as smaller towns and nature. However, I definitely did appreciate the architecture, museums like the Louvre, and the plethora of boulangeries and bistros.



# Le Mont Saint Michel

Le Mont Saint Michel was breathtaking. I will forever be confused by how it was built so long ago without power equipment. Actually, I wonder that about many of the castles and churches we visited. The day had two main highlights for me: 1) enjoying one of the famous fluffy Mother Poulard omelettes with my friend Luke and Professor Olivera, and 2) walking around the entirety of Le Mont Saint Michel. We were barefoot, trudging through slippery clay as the tide receded, not following a guide like most other groups out there did. I joked that it was a free spa treatment; the entire walk was filled with laughter and awe as we earned a unique view of the giant hunk of rock that looks like it was dropped in place by some giant hand.

This day, after our experience at the cliffs of Normandy, continued the trend of my favorite days being the ones spent outside (as you can probably tell because of how much outdoor activities are featured on this presentation).

# Hyeres



# Porquerolles



For the first long weekend, I knew that I wanted to stay in France. So, I googled “best places to visit in the South of France” and the name Porquerolles kept appearing. I didn’t have much of a plan but I asked Bailey if she wanted to come. The Airbnb I booked declined my request, so the day before we left I scrambled to find a new hotel in the nearby town of Hyeres. It was an all-inclusive resort meant for families and not many people spoke English, so it was up to me to figure it out. We had a few more mishaps like eating a vending machine dinner, me getting stung by a jellyfish at the island, riding a bus more crowded than one on Aggie game day to get back to town, and having our train back to Aix get cancelled because of regional strikes (luckily some backpackers helped us figure out a new plan). It’s in my response to challenges like this that I feel like I have grown the most as a person.

I felt so carefree on the island, riding rented mountain bikes along rocky paths and stopping at random spots to swim, climb trees, and eat a baguette sandwich on the edge of a cliff at the end of a road. There’s a whole other side of the island I have yet to explore, so I guess I will have to go back! I also made a friend named July at the hotel who taught me French line dances. We talked about the prevalence of American entertainment in French culture and doing things that get us out of our comfort zones, and she also shared how she has been practicing an American accent, which I wasn’t aware that someone would want to have!





**Moustiers  
Sainte  
Marie**



**Verdon  
Gorge**

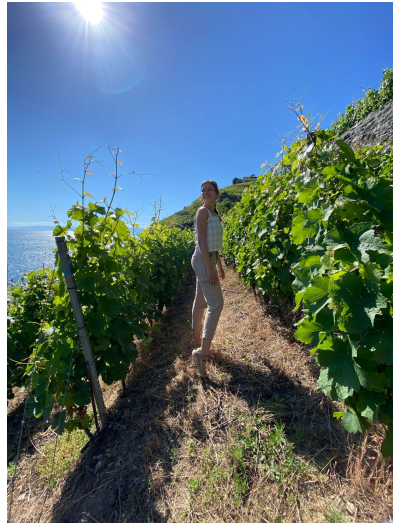


The town of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie took me by surprise in the best way possible. Sure, it was touristy, but also extremely charming. The entire town is built into the rock, so town streets turn into hiking trails. I didn't venture too far down the trails due to lack of time, but I did scramble up some rocks. For lunch in Sainte-Croix-du-Verdon, three of us made a makeshift casual picnic out of supplies from the local grocery store rather than eating at a formal restaurant. I love improvising like that, it often leads to some of the most memorable experiences.

It seems impossible but the Verdon Gorge is as turquoise as the photos appear, due to rock particles mixed with algae. We got to rent kayaks and paddle around the calm water for an hour, refreshing ourselves with splashes of cold water. As a girl from Southern California, I feel very much at home when I am on the water.

The drive home was also enjoyable, as we whooshed past countless of the famed lavender fields that were about to burst into bloom.

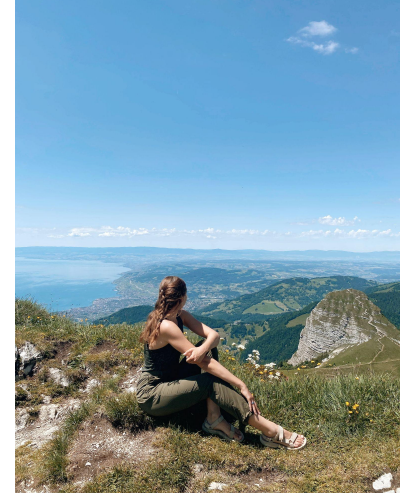
# Montreux, Switzerland



The four day weekend was my personal “crowning achievement” of the program, as I planned the Airbnb and activities for myself and six other people. I was a little nervous the night before we left because I was feeling responsible for how good of an experience everyone would have. I later realized that ultimately everyone is responsible for their own experience and I can’t control that. Nonetheless, I was given the nickname “Swom,” which stood for Swiss Mom. Travel went smoothly, the Airbnb was as advertised, and the town of Montreux was delightful. A lot of time was spent down at the waterfront of Lake Geneva, skipping rocks and relaxing on lounge chairs. We also rode on a ferry, explored Chillon Castle, and walked through the UNESCO Lavaux Vineyard terraces.

You may be wondering about the random nacho photo: our first night we got in around 10:30, and went to a pub where I tried to order soup but was told by the waiter to try the nachos. I guess I have high standards from my California/Texas background, but they were the same sort you would overpay for at a sporting event: slightly stale corn chips, congealed American cheese, and salsa obviously from a can. Though my stomach may have not been too happy in the moment, it is now a hilarious story. The rest of the food on the trip did not disappoint, from Swiss fondue to rostis (kind of like a hash brown cake) to barley soup to the pasta Mauri and I cooked.

# Glacier 3000 & Rochers de Naye



Both Glacier 3000 and Rochers de Naye exceeded my highest expectations (thanks TripAdvisor)! After taking a series of cable cars up to the glacier (after 2 trains and a bus), we walked across a suspension bridge connecting 2 mountain peaks, and walked in the snow to a small restaurant overlooking the cliff, where Swiss hikers were singing traditional songs and playing the alphorn. It was one of the most special cultural experiences I had, especially because it was so unexpected. Later, we explored the ski town at the foot of the glacier called Les Diablerets.

The trip to Rochers de Naye involved a cogwheel train that climbed slowly up the face of a mountain, providing spectacular views in the process. The views only got better at the top, where we explored an alpine garden and trekked along the peak. Sure footedness was required, as there were no guardrails! We also hiked down the mountain to the nearest town. Luckily, the trail was well marked because we had no service. On the way down, we met a paraglider named Marshall from Salt Lake City, and also happened to run into him the next day in Montreux (hence the selfie).

For a girl who is happiest outdoors, I felt extremely fulfilled by Switzerland. I will definitely need to go back in the winter and ski! I was also very grateful for the 30 euro waterproof hiking shoes I had bought at a sports store in Aix before the trip.

# Final Thoughts and Takeaways

- In the suburbs outside of the historic downtowns, France really does look similar to America
- I love how meals are long-lasting, as eating is sacred time to connect with yourself and those you are eating with
- I might not ever understand the high percentage of people that smoke
- In most encounters everyone has been very willing to help even though my French skills are extremely limited
- Balancing class with wanting to make the most of the experience was difficult but doable
- The daily markets in Aix are fantastic and full of some of the best produce I've had (especially the Provence melons!)
- Public transport is extremely useful (except for the strikes that happen sometimes). Lots of walking keeps people fit as well
- Many places use bamboo and paper products rather than plastic and styrofoam alternatives, which is more environmentally friendly
- I was nervous I wouldn't find a group of people to go on weekend trips with, but that was never an issue. I have definitely made lifelong friends and am more confident in bringing groups of people together.
- Also, I am more confident doing things on my own (art museum, market, shopping, etc)!



**Merci...**

**and eat as much  
bread as you can!**