

# The Family Trip!

## July, 2002

## Europe 2002

This time I was not alone; my entire family went, and Amy Rinaldo too. I knew that Amy (16) would be fine, but traveling with Jeff (6) and Courtney (4) concerned me a bit. Jeff has traveled well in the past, but he is so spastic and unconscious of his surroundings that he could easily get run over. Courtney does not always listen, and she is a wanderer. I fear that she may get lost if unattended. I guess that there will be a lot of hand holding, and it won't be with Barb. If we take things easy and look for kid opportunities every day, I'm sure things will go great.

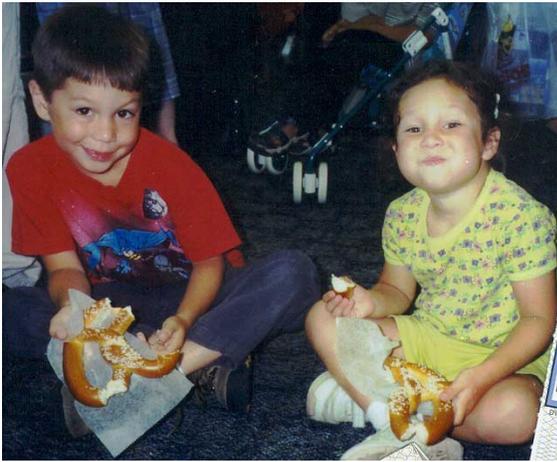


The family prepares to leave

### 6/28 Friday

After putting in a 13-hour workday yesterday to finish a project, I was quite ready to go anywhere else. Bery (Amy's dad) and Amy arrived early, which allowed us to reach the airport in plenty of time. Barbara used up much of that extra free time talking on the phone with her brother, while the kids wrestled, entertaining Amy and me.

I had never flown US Airways before, but it seemed like a reasonable choice – all the airplanes were fairly new, with modern amenities. I sat with the kids on the first leg to Philadelphia while Amy and Barbara sat across from us. They ran out of ravioli at mealtime before they got to us (we were in the back of the plane), so we were forced to eat the beef. I thought it wasn't too bad, but my kids wouldn't eat it. They were really hungry by the time we got to Philadelphia, but we only had time to get a pretzel between planes.



The kids eat “dinner”

All too quickly, we were on our international flight to Paris in a nice A330. We rearranged our seating so the family behind us could mostly sit together. The mom was a pretty redhead, and the dad looked like a French terrorist; so much so that he had to stay behind with his attractive and mature looking 13-year-old daughter so he could be cavity searched. He was not very happy by the time he got on the plane, swearing in both French and English. The daughter, Danielle, sat next to Courtney and me. The three of us had a great time together. Courtney and I watched “Monsters Inc.” together, then I watched most of “Harry Potter” while Courtney slept. Eventually, I fell asleep.

### 6/29 Saturday

When we got off the plane, I had terrible intestinal pains that were doubling me over and causing me to have frequent bouts of diarrhea. Unfortunately, there were no toilets in passport control. I went twice in 15 minutes while in baggage claim. Our bags were the very last ones off the plane. I was still not cured when we got on the Roissybus that would take us to downtown Paris.

At our drop-off point, the Opera, we got a little lost. I could not find the metro that I knew was there somewhere. I was still in a lot of pain. Thanks to a local, we were finally able to find the metro and get to our hotel – the Valadon – near Rue Cler. Saving those metro tickets from my last trip proved instrumental in getting us there. We met the very nice lady at the hotel, then bought a picnic style lunch on Rue Cler. We ate at the hotel’s breakfast nook. Amy and I got yelled at by the hotel owner for cleaning our own dishes – we weren’t insured to do this. We took a nap after that until dinnertime. Later, we said goodbye to the hotel owner, who was in a much better mood, and went to the Champs Elyseés. The first stop outside the metro was for crepes. The kids got chocolate all over. We walked all the way to the Arc du Triomphe, then found a kid friendly restaurant nearby called “Hippopotimus” two blocks down the street 90 degrees to the right of the arch. The dinner was OK, but the desserts were great. We metro’d to the Eiffel Tower, took lots of pictures, the walked home. Everyone showered and felt better. We all fell asleep around midnight.

### 6/30 Sunday

Well, one would think that getting onto a train by 11AM would be a slam-dunk; that we might even have time to go to church somewhere in town. Nope. Our hotel didn’t serve breakfast until 8:30 on Sundays. We showed up at eight and the place was deserted, so we walked around Rue Cler, then over to the Eiffel Tower and back. We were still three minutes early.

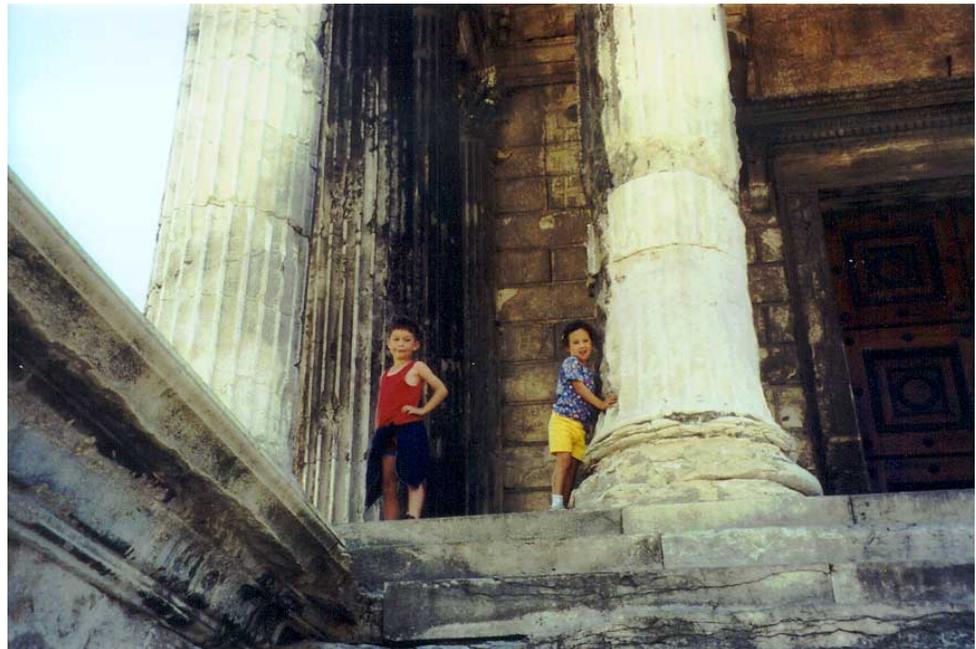


At the Eiffel Tower

The owner, Victor, talked with us and a group of ladies from Columbus, OH throughout breakfast (Bread, Croissants and coffee). Gee, when you don't tick him off, he's quite friendly. We ate at such a slow pace that we almost missed our train. I guess the family was still a bit jet lagged.

To get to Gare Lyon (the train station), we had to get across town on the Metro, get our railpasses validated, then go on the train. We got to Gare Lyon with 20 minutes to spare, but the line we chose for validation (the normal line being closed on Sundays) was painfully slow. It was made even slower when one of the cashiers took a break. I was beginning to feel stress, but eight minutes before our train was to leave, two cashiers came to help. We got our railpasses stamped, then got on the train with seconds to spare. We were so late that there was no room left on the luggage racks. We had to keep all our luggage with us. Bummer.

The TGV went nice and fast. The French countryside was lovely as always, and before you knew it, we were in Nîmes. The direct train to Arles that was due to leave in six minutes after we arrived was not running that day (perhaps a weekend thing). Our options from this train station were: to wait two hours and go to Avignon; wait three hours and take a bus; or wait four hours and go by train. We saw



The kids at Maison Carre, Nîmes

the two worthwhile sites in Nîmes, the amphitheater and the Maison Carre, then took the train to Avignon. My personal highlights in Nîmes were eating ice cream and watching Barbara clean dog poop off her shoe. Amy said it best: "This town is dull."

When we got to Arles, we only had a 30-min. wait for the next train to Arles. I can live with that! When we got on, Barb and the kids were able to find a 1<sup>st</sup> class compartment with another threesome. Amy and I got stuck with a couple of 20 something French guys who were smoking in our non-smoking compartment. I reasoned that 20 something French guys wouldn't be buying 1<sup>st</sup> class tickets, so I suspected that they would soon be leaving anyway. I was right. When the conductor came, he was first mad that they were smoking, then really mad when he discovered that they were 2<sup>nd</sup> class passengers. The two guys tried to convince the conductor that they had special dispensation to be there, but to no avail. Amy and I thought the whole thing was really funny. More people got kicked out of Barbara's berth. Gee, we could have sat together!

When we got to Arles, we had to hike across the city in the blazing sun with full gear. Amy said she was really tired. Barbara looked wilted, with her glasses falling down her nose. I knew I was tired. The kids were fine. We had hiked in Nîmes in full sun with full gear for

around two miles. It was another mile from the Arles train station to our hotel. That sun was getting to us all. Fortunately, our hotel came with air-conditioning. We rested for a while, then began to think about dinner. We first visited the hotel's outside breakfast courtyard. It was beautiful, with vines everywhere, and they even had an old turret in the place. The courtyard looked really old, especially the turret, so I asked the owner about the building's age. It turns out that the hotel was at one time a wealthy 17<sup>th</sup> century fortified residence. The turret was part of an older 15<sup>th</sup> century castle.

When we got to our restaurant, Le Cricket, we were about a half-hour early so we went shopping. Barbara bought Provincial potholders and bread holders while Amy and I tried an absinthe drink, then some apricot apéritif. Both were delicious so I bought a small bottle of the apricot liquor. The kids were really antsy in the store, and as luck would have it, we found a nearby playground, so that's where we went. The kids played and the adults rested.

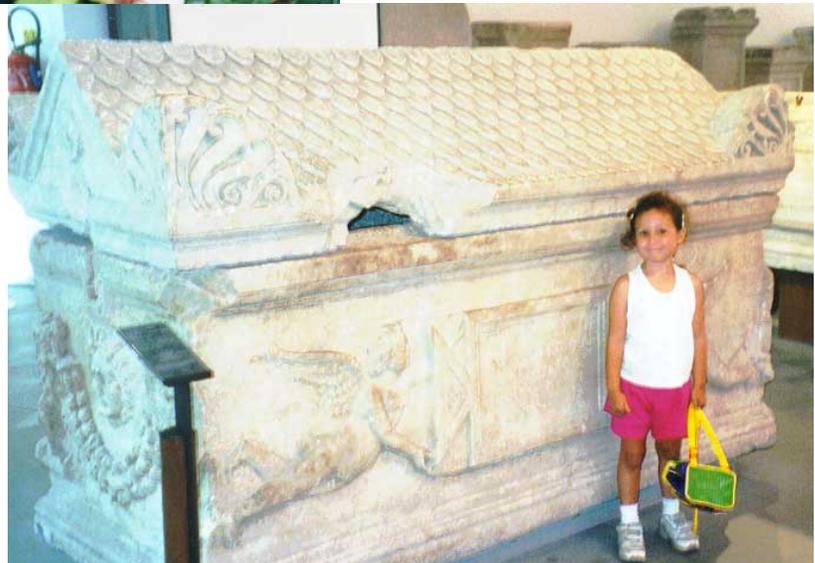


Our gang by the turret

For dinner, Barb had a delicious steak, the kids split a ravioli dish, and Amy and I had the house specialty – a plate of sea creatures in various garlic sauces. Amy was a bit apprehensive at first, but eventually dug in. Courtney kept begging for things off my plate. I had forgotten how much she liked seafood, and this was especially good. Half the food on the plate Amy and I had never tried. We (and Courtney) had: whitefish, potatoes, crayfish, clams, mus-

sels and sea snails.

After dinner, we strolled to the amphitheater where Barbara found crepes. They were delicious (and expensive!). The waiter forgot Barbara's order. We all felt bad for her. We strolled along the Rhone River after circling the amphitheater. Courtney stepped in horse poop while looking at some horses, so Barbara spent time cleaning her shoes. Both kids were on a sugar rush when we got home so it was really hard to get them down to bed.



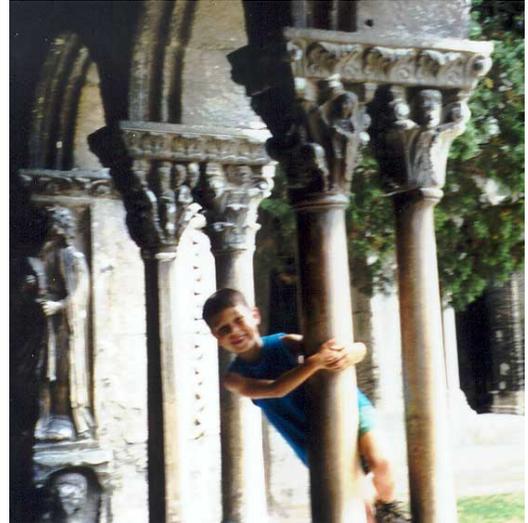
Courtney by a sarcophagus at the Roman Museum

We all showered, since we were all salty and dirty from the day's activities, then we spent the rest of the evening trying to get the kids to sleep.

7/1 Monday

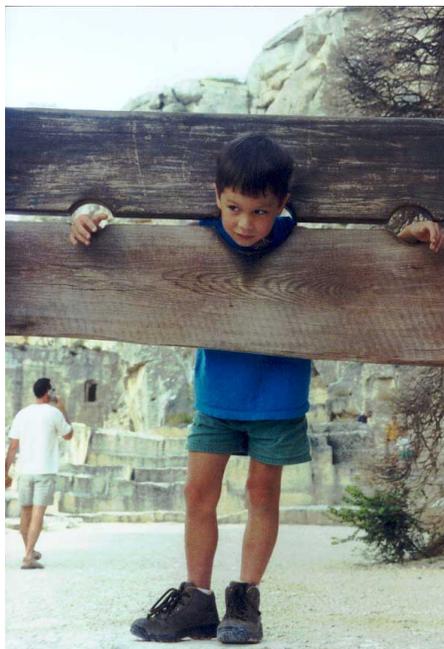
Today started late – No one wanted to get up. We managed to get to breakfast by 9AM. Barb decided that we must go to the playground first. I favored hitting the sights before it got to hot. Barb won, but that's OK because it never got above 28C (82F). After the park, our family walked to the Roman Museum and everyone had a good time – even Courtney.

It was time for lunch by the time we got back into the walled city, so we (eventually) found a place near van Gogh's Night Café. After lunch, we all went into S. Trophime. Courtney liked seeing Jesus. Amy was very impressed with the sheer size of the place. This was her first time (but certainly not her last time) seeing a large European church. We then bought Provincial dresses for Barb, Courtney and Darcy (Amy's sister). Even I got an outfit to match Barbara's. Barb, who still had a cold, was ready for a nap after that. She and the kids slept while Amy and I did laundry at a laundromat. When we were done, Jeff was awake so the three of us went to the Cloisters and the Roman bath. We had a great time in both places. We tried to get into the amphitheater, but there was a bullfight or something going on. They would not let us in. When we got back to the hotel, we were unable to awaken our sleeping zombies, so we watched French TV which was kind of fun. We saw the French versions of "Who wants to be a millionaire," "Big Brother," and "Candid Camera." We decided that we liked the commercials the best.



Jeffrey at the Cloisters

Eventually, the girls got up, so we went to McDonalds. Good food, quick dinner, and we were back on the town. Well, that didn't last too long – Jeff had to go to the bathroom – so we went back to the hotel and called it a night.

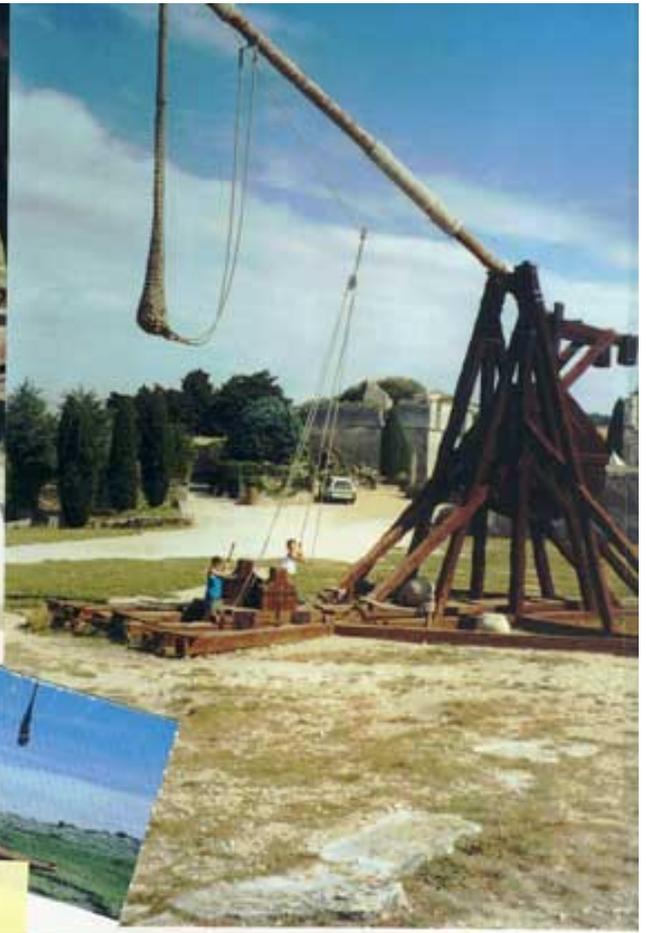


I guess he was bad

7/2 Tuesday

We had to get up early this morning so we could get our rental car. We did great, and our car was loads of fun – a Renault midsize (a step up from the Opal we were supposed to get). There were a few stressful moments here and there as we would get lost or miss a turn, but oh well, we got to our destination anyway, and we saw a lot more of the beautiful provincial countryside in the mean time.

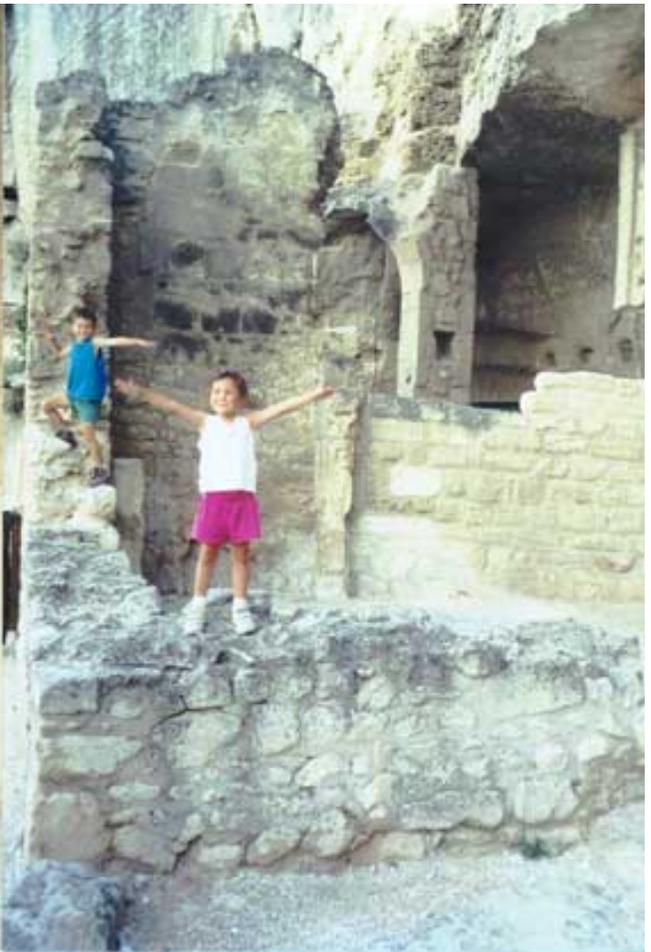
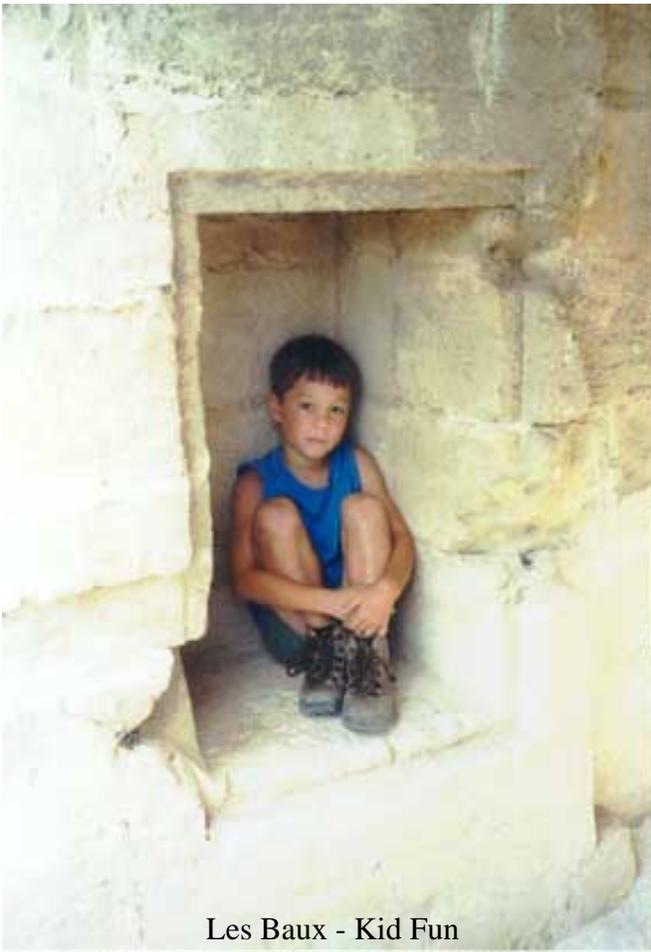
Our first stop was to Les Baux. I figured this would be a hit with the kids and it was. Anytime you can combine rock climbing and weapons, you can't go wrong. Les Baux even had a functioning medieval town with priests, warriors, etc. living there (OK, actors really), which was a lot of fun. My only disappointment was that they closed down the post office in town. I had wanted to unload a bunch of stuff before Rome and I had remembered that this post office was friendly and uncrowded last time.



Whenever you  
Combine rock  
Climbing and  
Weapons, you  
cant go wrong



Les Baux - Siege Weapons

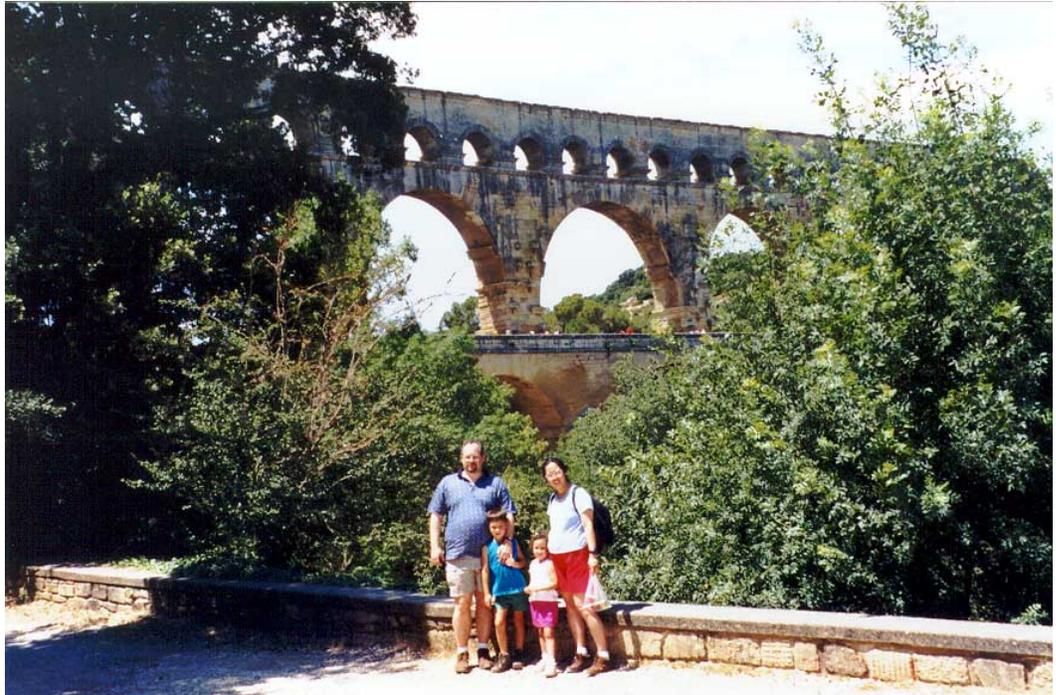


Les Baux - Kid Fun



Our next stop was to Pont du Gard. Amy was impressed, but the kids weren't. The French government had made the bridge much safer since the last time I was here by adding a pedestrian bridge with guardrails on the old bridge. You couldn't walk on the nearly 2000 year old bridge anymore and risk death. What a shame. It was good for the kids (I was concerned about losing one or two), but I saw this new walkway as an infringement upon the original structure.

We decided to skip Glanum, which was good because our trip to Nice, even at a top-end speed of 190KPH (119 MPH) got us there at 5:30 and out of the train station at 6. We had a heck of a time finding the Avis parking lot at the train station. We had



Our family at Pont du Gard

just enough time to jog to the beach, swim for half an hour, then come back. The water was great. The rocks were not. There weren't many topless bathers out today (Barb and I spotted three, Amy saw none.).

After a Gyros dinner near the train station, we got on our train and met the lady who would be sleeping with us. She was an older Italian lady with some English skills. The Italian train conductor seemed very interested in her and eventually, they went out for a coffee and she never came back. She did teach us some Italian before she left. She, like most Italians, loved kids.

The kids were fast asleep by the time we hit Italy. Barbara dozed off around eleven. Amy and I stayed awake for quite some time. We read. I have rarely slept on these trains – they're hot and uncomfortable. My hips always ache by the end of the evening. Amy thought that this night train was just awful – noisy, smelly, uncomfortable and claustrophobic. She was not thrilled to hear that we had two more night trains to go during our trip.

7/3 Wednesday

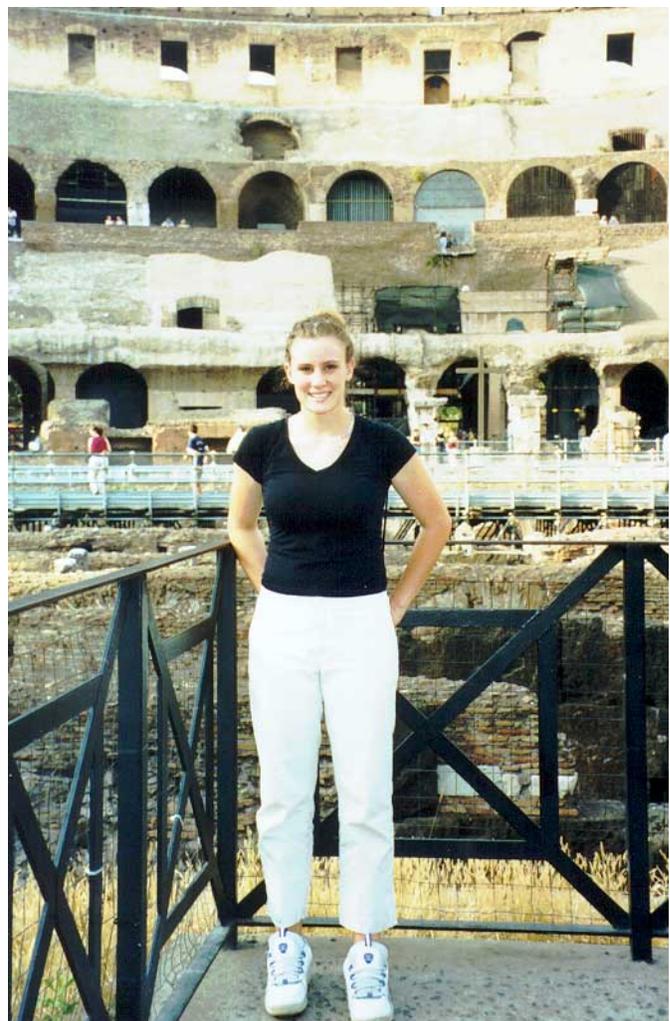
Well, we were all haggard as we pulled into the station. Good thing the Hotel Italia was so nice to us when we arrived. Within moments of our arrival, we had juice and cappuccino. Within 20 minutes, we had an air-conditioned room (at eight in the morning!). Ah, it was good to unload and collapse for a while. We all took an Italian-style shower (sitting in a tub with a wand). I then did laundry in the tub (I should have done this first then showered – I'm used to doing just my own laundry.). At eleven, we were on the town.

Our first stop was for food. We did not have a good breakfast on the train and everyone was hungry. I remembered a pizza place by Victor Emanuel II Monument, so we went there first. The pizza was still pretty terrific. Everyone agreed. It was really hot and a little muggy when we left the pizza place and everyone began to wilt.

Barb and I showed the kids our favorite fun church, St Ignazio, with its painted on dome. We got in just in time. It was being closed for a wedding. We got shoed out a side entrance where the offices were. Now there's a behind the scenes you don't often see! There were some pretty old tapestries and vestments hanging on the hallways, rarely seen by tourists. Next, we got some gelato (Italian ice cream) then headed to the Pantheon. Jeffrey got ice cream all over the place due to his messy eating habits. I had a chat with him about his inability to keep clean (while cleaning pistachio off a 2000-year-old column). Barb got mad at me for making Jeff sad. We did a quick look at the Pantheon then Barbara announced that we needed to take a nap. Now I was pretty perturbed. I had planned a circular trip around downtown Rome and we were about as far from our hotel as we could be. When would the kids see the Forum or the Coliseum? Our only chance was now, as we had already planned some afternoon free time for the kids while Amy and I looked at a lot of churches. If we took a huge nap, we'd miss a lot. Jeffrey really wanted to see Rome, but Barbara insisted that he take a nap. We headed back in the blazing sun. By the time we got back to the hotel, we were all parched and wilted. We all took a nap.

Amy and I were up after a short nap so we made plans to meet Barbara about three hours later at Piazza Navona for dinner. We headed out to see as many churches as we could.

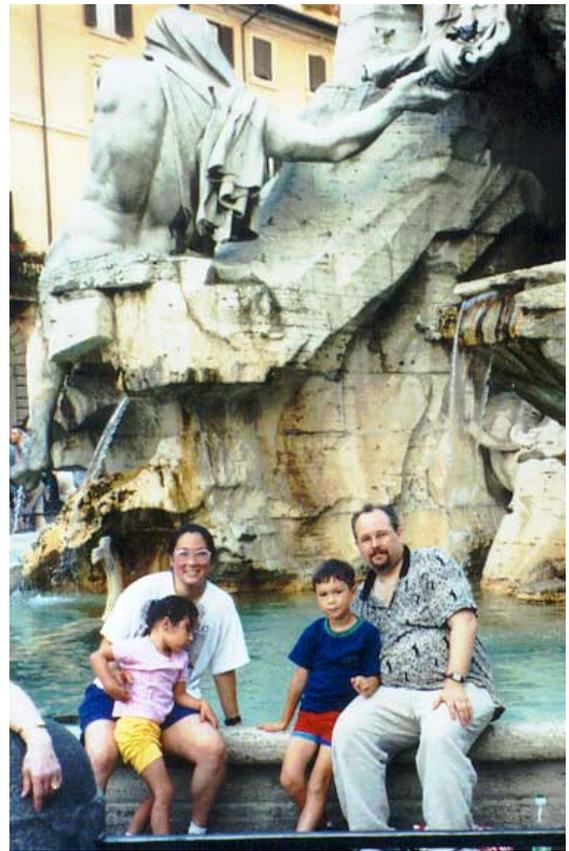
Our first two churches were only a couple of blocks away. S. Carlo was a church by Boromini. It had a great exterior and a boring interior. Bernini's S. Andrea was just the opposite. It's interior was stunning. We found a shortcut through a park and walked to S. Maria Maggiore, taking a break for water and fococca bread. This church was large and impressive. We got a little lost after that, but eventually found S. Peter in Chains (we decided to skip S. John in Lateran). Michelangelo's Moses was impressive. Next up – the Coliseum. We got in just as they were closing the gates. Amy marveled at the size of the place. We saw the forum after that, and then it was up to the Capitaline, passing where Peter and Paul were once held prisoners. We had just enough time to walk to Piazza Navona, where we made it to Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain right on time. Barbara had apparently had a hard time getting the kids up and she had to almost jog



Amy at the Coliseum

to reach the fountain half an hour late. Amy and I had a lovely time talking and people watching while we waited. I was most interested in watching a teen-aged redhead in a very revealing outfit. I think she was American, and she was shopping with her parents; buying even more revealing outfits. We watched as she got a temporary tattoo on her lower back while her parents watched. Amazingly enough, as all this was going on, Amy recognized a school buddy named Steve who was a bit shocked to see someone he recognized in the middle of Italy.

Well, my family arrived and we all sat down at the same restaurant Barbara and I had gone to eight years ago (almost to the day!). The waiter recognized us at once... just kidding! Our waiter had kids of his own and he doted on our kids, especially Courtney. The food was good and the street entertainment wasn't bad. Amy and I continued to people watch. She critiqued shoes; I critiqued outfits.

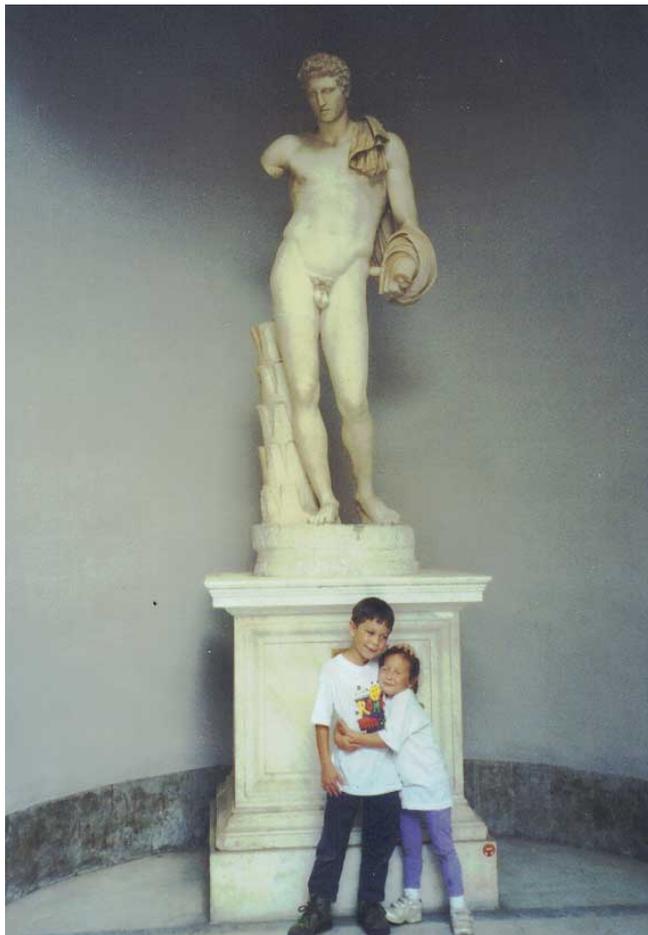


At Piazza Navona

We had more gelato on the way home via Trevi Fountain. When we got home, the kids were still wide-awake. The adults showered and watched really bad Italian TV. The big production, semi-nude commercials of eight years ago that Italy was renowned for were now gone, replaced by tame American-looking commercials. Pity. We all went to bed around 12:30.

#### 7/4 Thursday

Amy's alarm went off at 5:30, and mine at six. We had decided yesterday to go see the Vatican today instead of Ostia Antica. We had breakfast at seven, and were out by 8:15. We metro'd across town and got in the long line just as the gates were opening. Just like last time, we rushed all the way to the Sistine Chapel. Unlike last time though, the Sistine was already packed. We enjoyed it anyway. It was so hot in the place that we were forced to seek refreshment before we could do anything else. After



In the Vatican Museum Courtyard

water and a bathroom break, we went to the picture gallery, then to the sculptures before we exited the place and had a mediocre lunch. Barb's lunch was skipped again by the restaurant (this happened in Arles as well). Maybe she's invisible?

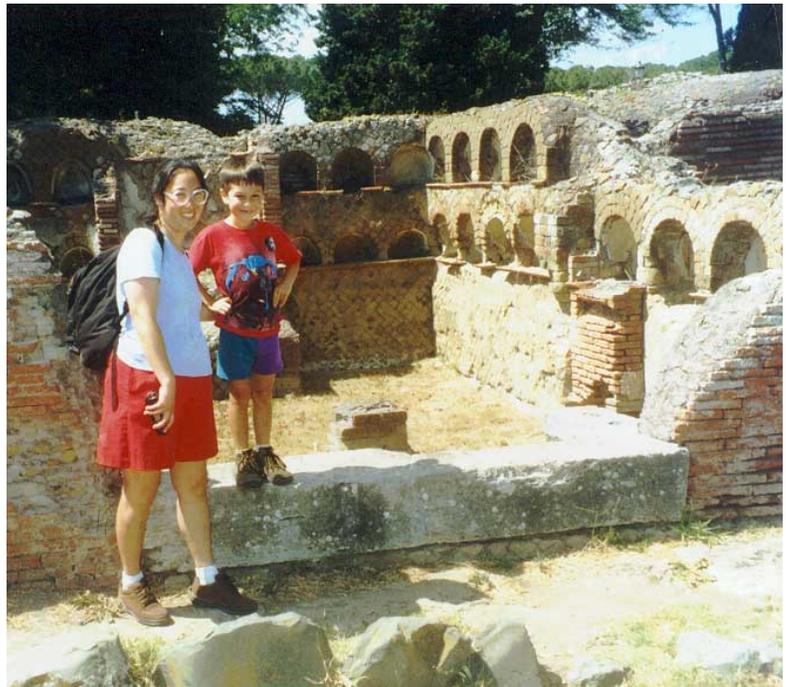
We walked the wall to St. Peters. It was still impressive. Amy went up to the dome while the rest of us played in the fountain below. We then went into the crypt before heading home. Once home, with a sleeping girl in my arms, I did laundry again and watched the kids sleep while the girls went out shopping.

We decided to choose a "Rick Recommendation" for dinner, based on the raves of a breakfast companion, but we actually wound up at the wrong, similarly named, restaurant about 100 feet away. It was OK, but not kid friendly. We searched for gelato after that and finally found some. Jeffrey spilled his chocolate all over the place. Everyone bathed when we got home. It was hot and sticky out.

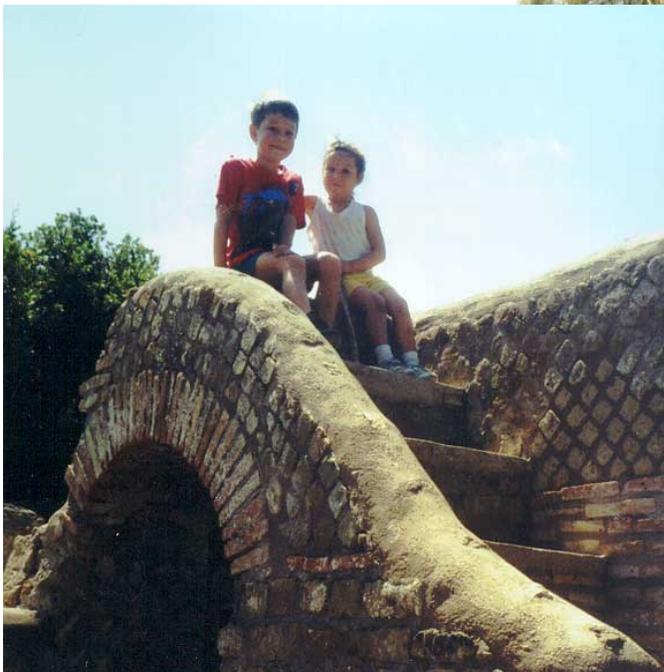
7/5 Friday

Today started late. We all slept in until 8:30. Barb was really tired, and she still had her cold. She was dragging a bit this morning, but we waited for her.

Our first stop was to the post office. This seemed innocent enough at first, but it took us an hour to get boxes, then another 45 minutes before we could get them mailed. The Italian postal system is insane! I was pretty frustrated when Amy and I emerged from that ordeal. Barb and the kids were saints. They were so patient and



Barb, Courtney and Jeff at Ostia



kind to us. I love my family! The next long line was to drop off our luggage, since we were now out of our hotel and on our way to a day trip to Ostia. I waited half an hour in that line before getting the bright idea of putting Barbara in that line while I went to pay for the Austria portion of tonight's night train. Well, I spent 45 minutes in the wrong line. I was so mad. When I got back, Amy was mad too for having to wait around all day. Barb and the kids were strangely calm, and they were at the head of the line. We stowed our bags then took the Metro and train to Ostia. The Metro was hot and packed. The train was not nearly as bad.

Because of all the delays, we were only able to spend two hours at Ostia. We actually missed quite a bit of the place because it was also very hot and we were all frazzled. The food place and the museum were the highlights of Ostia because they were indoors. On the way back, I was able to see the same pyramid that Paul would have seen at the entrance to Rome. Cool!

Our evening plan was to send everyone to the park while I stood in the correct line for the Austria night train. It took an hour to pay for Austria, but I didn't care because also in that line was Josh McDowell (famous Christian writer and speaker) and a couple of college seniors from Iowa State and Texas A&M. Josh talked to us for a while, then latched on to a guy from the Philippines and talked to him the rest of the time. By the time Josh left, the guy had Josh's email address, a tract on God, and a copy of "More than a Carpenter." Josh told us that he tries to hand out three copies of his book per day – even on vacation. He and his 18-year-old son Justin were trying to get to Nice. Josh was a pleasure to watch because he was so expressive (and spastic) and he was so committed to saving people.

I got our tickets (yeah!) and power walked to the park. I made the mile trip in 13 minutes. The family then went to the correct restaurant and it was amazing! The waiters were funny and the food was awesome. We commented about our delightful food experience all the way back to the train station. We got our bags, tried (and failed) to find our last gelato, then got on the train. The accommodations were about the same – blech! Courtney had only a little nap at the park and she experienced total meltdown on the train. I was just happy to get out of my shoes and off my feet – they were swollen.



Courtney likes her train bed



Jeff struggles with his train bed as the wind blows his paper blanket all over the place

#### 7/6 Saturday

Well, no problem sleeping this time! I was up at six just as the train was crossing the Austrian border. I watched the beautiful scenery for a while then realized that I was still very, very sleepy. I tried to get Barbara up to enjoy the view, but she would have none of that. Amy woke up at Innsbruck and kept me company. Too bad she missed most of the mountains. At the German border, the conductor demanded our bedsheets (how rude!). The kids slept through all of that.

There were some pretty ominous clouds near Munich when we arrived. We (Barbara) decided to forge on to Salzburg rather than spend two hours in Munich. She and the kids were just worn out. Amy was sad that she couldn't go into Munich.

Our first-class cabin to Salzburg was excellent. Everyone but me slept the whole way. Too bad too, they were missing some great scenery. Hopefully, they would see it in a few days when we returned to Munich on our way to St. Goar.

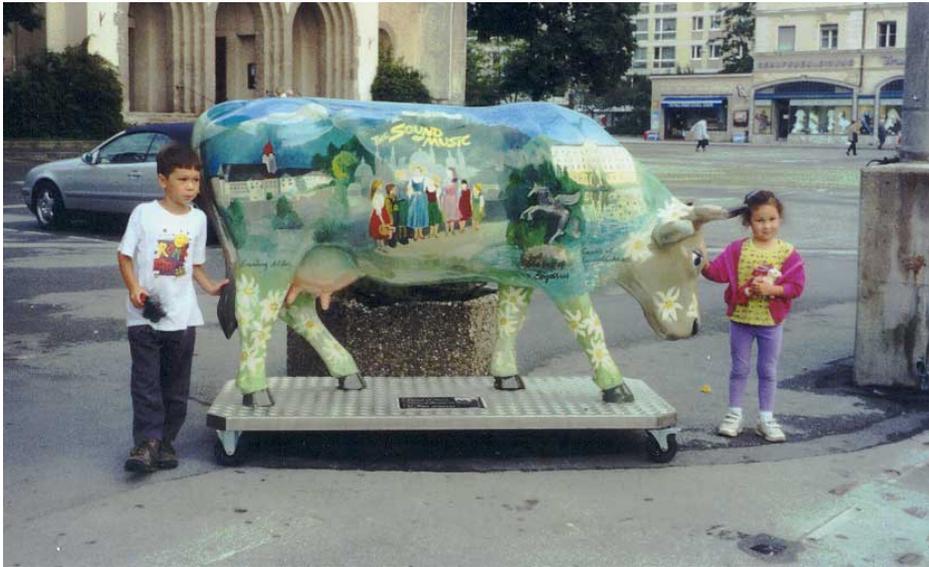
When we arrived in Salzburg, I did something really stupid – I did not go to the TI to get a map and directions like I usually do. We went into town anyway and promptly got lost. We asked for directions, but came to the conclusion that no one knew where Rupertgasse Strasse was. Even when a storekeeper called our hotel, she couldn't give us accurate directions. Eventually, we found a city map, then easily made it to our hotel. We all bathed, then went out in search of food. We found a Biergarten that wasn't too bad, though the service wasn't that great. The beer was pretty great though! After lunch, Barb said that she was too worn out to go into the town. She and the kids took a nap then went to the park. Amy and I headed to the bus stop that would take us to Salzburg's Old Town.

Well, I was in shorts and Amy was in a sleeveless shirt when the sky clouded over and a cold wind began to blow. I was cold; Amy was freezing. I did my best to block the wind from her, but her teeth began to chatter. Our hotel had told us that the bus ran every 10 minutes: they were wrong. We had just missed the bus and the next one wasn't for 30 minutes. Well, when it did arrive, we got on. Just as we were getting off at Old Town, it began to rain. We walked through the touristy section while dodging raindrops, tourists, and their umbrellas. What I could see through my spotted glasses was quaint and festive with lots of banners and wrought iron signs everywhere. When it began to rain harder, we walked faster until we reached Salzburg Cathedral. We shouted "sanctuary!" when we got inside. The inside was huge, Baroque, and beautiful. Both of us were impressed. We spent some time viewing art and drying off. When we got out the door, there was thunder and a huge downpour. Figuring that we were already drenched, we ran to the second church. This church was much smaller with a Romanesque nave, a Gothic choir and Baroque chapels. It was very dark inside and the thunder continued outside. We ran to church number three, which was a large Baroque church done in white and gold. It was so dark outside that we had a difficult time seeing the interior of this church. Still, Amy voted this one as her favorite church. I liked the first one the best.

Just as we were getting to the bus stop, it stopped raining. We had 27 minutes to kill, so we went to get cash, see Mozart's house, and shop. Amy bought Eddie some lederhosen at a reduced price. Very cute! On the way home, we spotted a pizzeria. Jokingly, I said, "Let's go there. We haven't had pizza in a while." Well, as it turned out, that's exactly what the family wanted for dinner so we went there in the rain. What a place! Great atmosphere, great



The Cathedral on a sunny day



The Sound of Music Cow

food, and a great price! Aside from our favorite Roman restaurant, this was the best Italian food we had had (and some in our group would vote it the best!). The rest of the evening was spent putting the kids to bed (it took us 2 1/2 hours!). The adults watched "The Shadow" in German on TV. I never knew Alec Baldwin spoke German.

7/7 Sunday

It was very difficult to wake up the family. Good thing we would spend most of the day on a bus being "tourists." We waited a very long time in the lobby before the tour bus picked us up for our Sound of Music (SOM) tour. Our tour guide was easy on the eyes, and had a great singing voice. I actually thought we would be seeing more than we saw. The places I wanted to see the most (the cemetery of St. Peter, the Abby, the Salzburg Folk Festival site), were not the things we saw. Instead, we saw the back of the Von Trapp house (now a Harvard extension for cultural studies), the gazebo (now moved to Helbrun palace so the Harvard guys wouldn't be bothered), a pretty lake with a luge ride, and the church where the Von Trapps were married in the movie. We also saw the grove of climbing trees, the Abby (from a distance), the opening/closing scene place, and three "do rae me" sites (bridge, horse fountain, steps) while in motion. The guide mentioned at one point that only one of the seven kids had pursued a movie career, and that all seven kids were reunited on the tour in 2002. Well wait a second – I thought that Keith Green played Kurt in the movie, and he was dead. The picture she passed around showed some other guy as Kurt. So, "Fredrick" pursued acting and directing in Australia. What about Nancy Cartwright who was in "Lost in Space" and is now the voice of Lisa in "The Simpsons?" I'm pretty sure that the cast she was talking about must be the stage cast, not the movie cast. Otherwise, one of us has their facts wrong.

The kids liked the luge ride the best even though the gal in front of us went slow, even stopping at times. She also slowed down to a crawl around every turn. Everyone enjoyed the second tour much, much better. It was the Berchtesgaden Salt Mine tour.



Knitters at the Gazebo



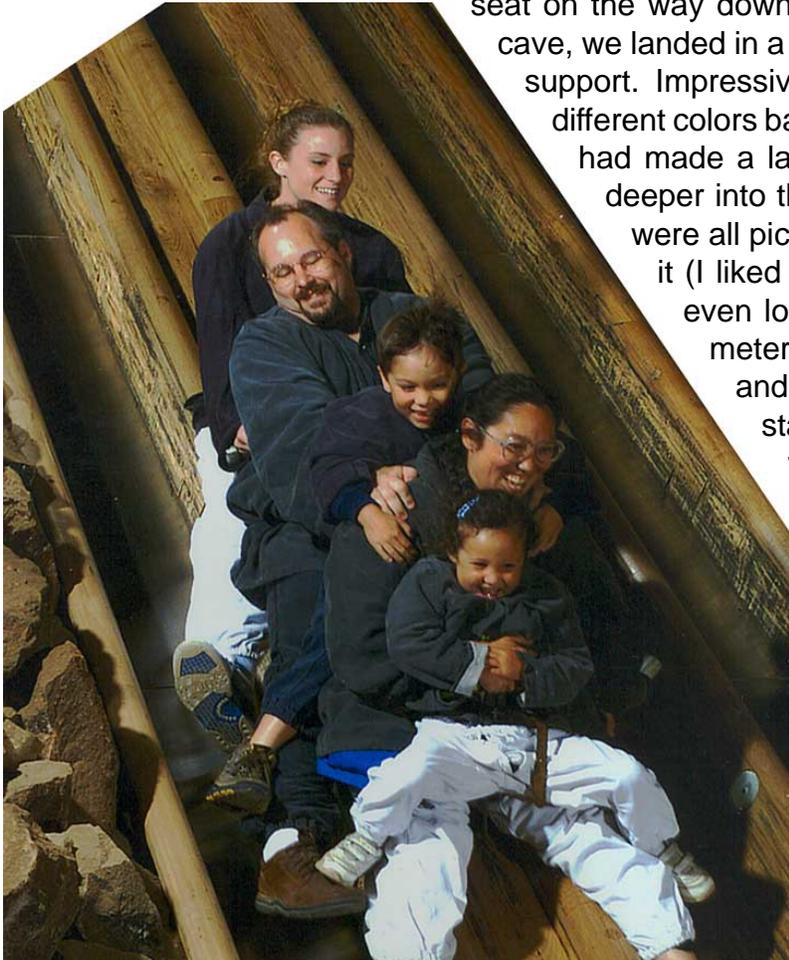
Courtney liked the luge

Our guide was a native of Salzburg, but had spent 23 years in Australia. He seamlessly slipped between languages, and joked the whole time. He was very funny. Our first stop was Hitler's Eagle's Nest site. We didn't actually go up to the Eagle's Nest, but we went to the command site where the housing and admin was. The Britts flattened the place, so we mostly got a view of the tourist shop.



Jeffrey liked the lake towns

The next stop was the salt mine, and what a great time we had there! We all got into miner's clothes, then got on a train that took us on a bone-jarring ride through claustrophobic tunnels that took us to our first wooden slide. The slide was great fun, but it did get a little warm in the seat on the way down.



Once down in the bowels of the cave, we landed in a room with an expansive roof and no support. Impressive! We also learned that the salt had different colors based on nearby elements. Someone had made a lampshade to show this. As we got deeper into the cave, it began to get damp. We were all picking the salt off the walls and eating it (I liked yellow the best). We slid down an even longer slide, then went across a 100 meter salt-brine lake (still no roof support and the roof was so close you couldn't stand up. When we got out of the boat, we all tasted the 27% salt brine from the lake. Salty! I mean SALTY! Most said "blechh!" I said "yum!" and I licked my whole hand clean. I loved the air here too. From what we were told, asthma patients are sent to these caves for the medicinal salt air, some living here for three months. I could breathe so well here. We bought some salt samples and were given free samples before we took the train back to the überworld.

Our last stop was to the town of Berchtesgaden. Nice town, but we spent most of our time visiting the facilities. Our bus driver gave us directions to his favorite biergarten just before we got off the bus, then off we went with Courtney on Amy's shoulders and Jeffrey on mine to that spot. Well the kid's ride didn't last much past the pedestrian bridge because we had to walk many, many stairs to get to St. Augustine's Garten.

Hey, wow, and Austrian Food Court. We had many things to choose from, and downstairs was a huge biergarten complete with home brewed beer. Amy and I figured out how to buy food and beer, then got some. Amy enjoyed her first official beer. Everything we had tasted great! Barbara, who had a headache, was even feeling better: so good in fact that we were able to walk three miles all the way home. Amy wanted to see the downtown without the rain, but we visited the "New Town" instead. On the way home we bought some Mozart balls. They were delicious. When we got home, Barb took the kids to the park. I did laundry. Amy helped wring out the clean clothes. Sleep came shortly after that for all of us.

7/8 Monday

We all got up early, some grudgingly, to catch a series of trains that would take us to St. Goar. Amy, who was sleeping with the kids, informed me that Courtney was screaming for mommy at 1:00AM Jeffrey was also complaining that his sister was kicking him. Amy got only five



Amy's first beer

hours sleep and she was cranky. I gave her lots of room. Fortunately, after the early morning wakeup, it was a slow and easy day. Amy grabbed two hours sleep on the train to Munich while Barb and I played with the kids. We had 15 minutes between trains so Barb and Amy got lunch while I got the kids on the train.

On train #2 (Munich to Mainz) I colored with Courtney and wrote silly things on her coloring page. Lunch was yummy (thanks girls!).

Train #3 (Mainz to Bingen) lasted all of 12 minutes.

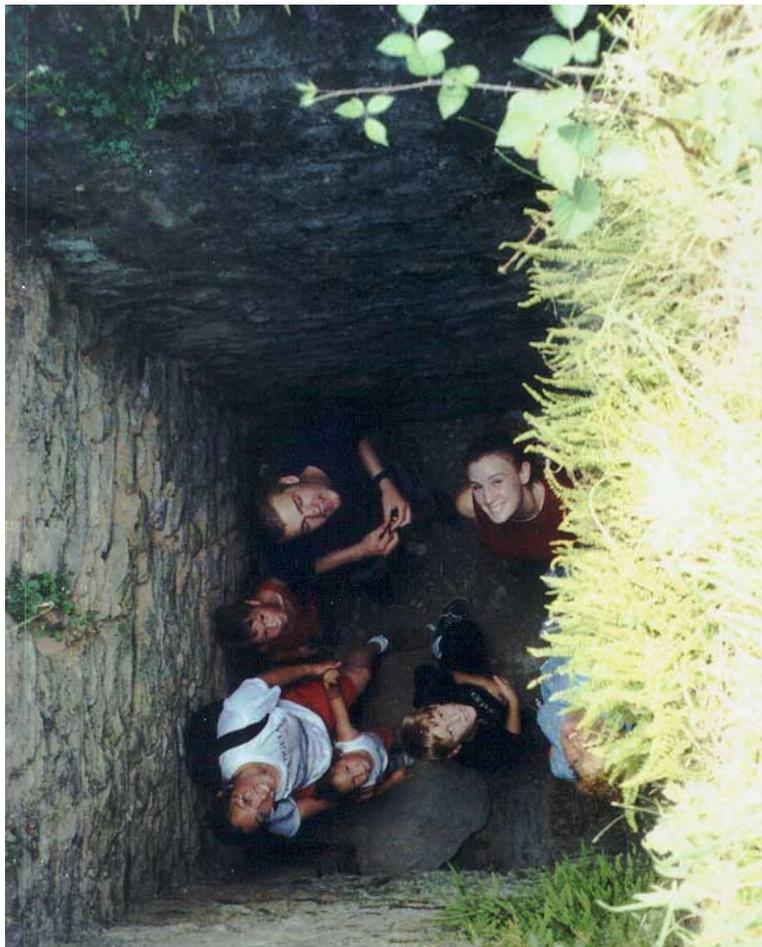
We had only three minutes to catch our last train (Bingen to St. Goar) and our car was at the opposite end of the connecting track. We ran. Courtney found some rebar, tripped over it, and did a pancake on the ground. Her knee and elbow were bleeding. We used the last train to clean, disinfect and bandage while Courtney screamed. She had almost calmed down by the time we reached St. Goar.

Our hotel was just down the hill, and right on the waterfront. We even had a balcony that we used as our reading room. Eventually, we met up with our friends, the Gibsons, and we chatted for an hour in the hallway. We then moved our conversation to a small German restaurant. It was nice to see Andrew after he had spent a year in Germany as a foreign exchange student. He had lost a lot of weight, and his German was excellent. We all talked well into the evening then most of the adults spent



Side by side balconies

the evening reading on our respective balconies (I had asked in advance that our rooms be side-by-side. It was nice to have top floor side-by-side balconies that faced the water as well).



Knitters and Gibsons in a medieval cistern

7/9 Tuesday

Most everyone was able to sleep until 8:30 today. I'm sure it felt like a luxury. I was up at 5:30 so I read on the balcony. After breakfast, our gang and the Gibsons took the trolley to the castle of St. Goar, Burg Rheinfels. Jeffrey and Timmy had to find every cave. Courtney fell again. At one point, we were trapped in a slippery, narrow, dark passageway going down while 20 preschoolers in medieval costumes went up. It was difficult to get by. My flashlight went out, I tripped and cut my thumb. Rheinfels wasn't as much fun this time (not for that reason), but because they had sealed up some of the passageways and made other parts "safe." Last time, there were very few safety bars anywhere. It was also a very hot, muggy day. Once we got out of the castle, we immediately looked for ice cream and drinks. We then went down the hill for lunch.

The Gibsons had to leave for their airport hotel after that, so we bid them farewell, then Amy Barb and I chatted on the balcony while the kids played in the bathtub. A while later, we went souvenir shopping. The kids made one beer stein shop very nervous. Jeff was being a little unconscious of his surroundings, and he was being his usual bouncy self. The shopkeeper stopped him very brusquely, so I shooed the kids out rather quickly. We let the kids run off some excess energy at the park while we read. Our late night dinner was Greek/Italian at a local dive. Dessert was ice cream for Barb and the kids, and sweet Rhine wine for Amy and me. Amy liked that a lot. Now we know that she's a sweet wine person, but will probably never be a beer person. The evening was spent putting the kids to bed, and for the adults – baths (there was no shower).

7/10 Wednesday

Car Day! I got up early and went to the train station while my family slept. The plan was for me to go to Koblenz, pick up the car, drive back and pick up the family, then drive to Liege, Belgium via Cologne.

I arrived in Koblenz, but my car, and Avis for that matter, was not at the train station. They were located “up-town.” If I hadn't

asked the local TI, I would have never known this. The TI said that a man would come with my car in 15 minutes. I was hungry, so I wolfed down two custards and coffee, then waited an hour for the driver to pick me up. He would take me across town to where Avis was.

The man was speaking to me in German. I was able to reply (much to my amazement). The man at the counter started talking to me in German until he saw my US passport, then he switched to English. After I got my car seat, the counter guy told me to get directions from the pick-up guy. I was a little concerned because up to this point, I didn't know if the pick-up guy knew any English. It turned out that the pick-up guy's English was perfect. Wow, I had never had a sustained conversation in German before because the Germans always switched to English after my first sentence(I know little German).

Well, it was 11:00 and I hadn't even left Avis yet in my gutless Opal. I was supposed to have breakfast with my family at 9:30. I'm sure they must be getting concerned. Almost immediately, I got caught in construction and somehow missed my turn. I was looking for “B9” instead of “9” signs. I wound up going the wrong direction towards Cologne. Realizing this, I turned around only to find myself on the wrong side of the Rhine. 45 minutes later, I was back where I started at the construction site. I found “9” and zipped back to St. Goar, through construction, and made it to the hotel around 12:30. It began to rain.



St. Goar at dusk

The family and I headed back to Koblenz and we wound up on the wrong side of the Rhine, going the wrong direction again. I recognized this familiar terrain, and the “wrong” castle, so we turned around, only to get on the wrong road heading north (Belgium is West). It was raining so hard that we were forced to travel at a snail’s pace. I saw Koblenz for the fourth time on the way back and I was beginning to feel that we could not escape. Koblenz was some sort of black hole. Well, this time we were able to break free from it’s gravity, but our speed was one half of what it needed to be for us to do what we wanted to do. With some mental calculations, I came to the conclusion that we could in no way make it to Liege, and in fact, couldn’t even make it to Cologne. This made Amy very sad because she wanted to get some gifts of chocolate and lace for some friends. We got off the road in a small town and found a McDonalds. We decided to head to Frankfurt, since it was already 3PM. Good thing too, we had a hard time finding the center of town once we got to Frankfurt. Fortunately, we made it before the 6PM deadline.



Stadtkliche Museum

Barb and the kids didn’t want to go to the Stadtkliche Museum in the rain, so Amy and I went alone... again. (This was becoming a theme that Amy and I found alarming – the kids were not seeing a lot of the art and culture, and Barb seemed to be constantly worn out.) Anyway, we loved that museum. I saw some old friends (Vermeer Canaletto, Rembrandt, Rubens & van Eyck) and Amy enjoyed them as well. She seemed particularly fond of Vermeer’s “Geographer.” (We would see the matching “Astronomer” tomorrow in the Lourvre). She also loved the gift shop which had two floors of books. We browsed for almost an hour. We got outside and the rain had stopped. By the time we got back to the family, everyone was hungry. The Frankfurt HBF had a good food court, so we dined there.

When the time came to find our train, we couldn’t find it! Eventually, I went to ask. The gal at the counter assured me that it was at one of the tracks, maybe 8 or 9, but it may not say Paris on the marquee. With 5 minutes until the train took off, I found my family, and we found our car at the end of a very long train on track 11.

Well, this train was different. The windows didn’t go down, but it was air-conditioned. The cushions were leather and comfortable, but there was no headroom on the top bunks. I banged my head a lot on the ceiling. Amy felt claustrophobic. My kids were asleep in moments, Barb soon after.

7/11 Thursday

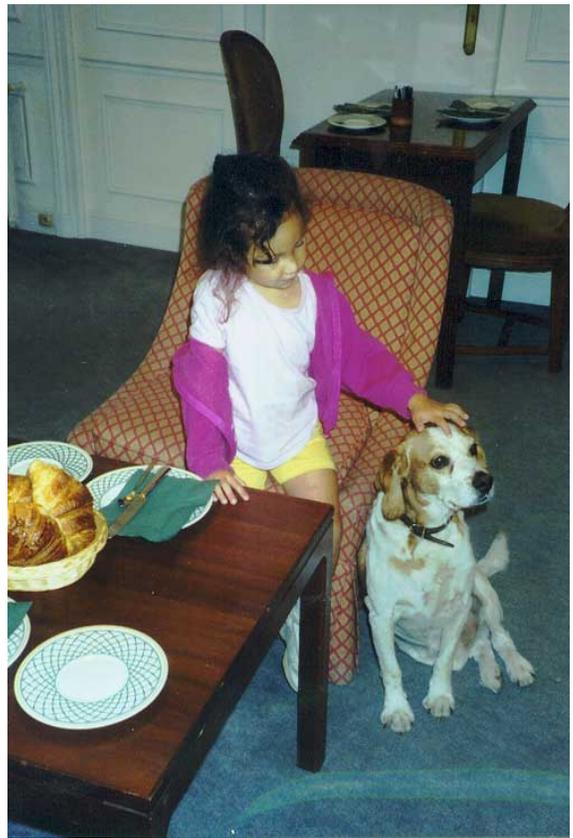
Everyone slept great except for Amy. The ceiling kept coming towards her during the night.

When we got into Paris, we were able to get to our hotel in no time. We still had plenty of Metro tickets from the start of our trip. Well, that's odd, there was no one there to greet us or serve us breakfast. We stowed our bags and waited. Perhaps this was some sort of French holiday? We thought not. The mystery was soon solved – the receptionist had called in sick. Someone came by and posted a sign saying that we should go to the LaTour Marbourg hotel for breakfast (Marie and Victor own that hotel too). Breakfast was about the same, but the hotel was more impressive. We ate in the reading room. Marie served us, and her dog, Faust, kept us entertained. We were all able to check into our hotel rooms upon our return.

Today was museum day, but Barbara and the kids didn't want to go. They did laundry instead. Amy and I went to the Orsey museum. The plan was to meet outside the Louvre at 12:30 then have lunch at the Louvre food court.

Amy liked the Orsey. We saw everything but the furniture and architecture sections. We even had time to shop and eat some baklava.

We met Barb and the kids then went for lunch. It was crowded, but the food was good. I really wanted the whole group to go to the Louvre, but Barbara had had a bad experience there last time and did not want to go. When Jeffrey heard about the alternative, the amusement park at the Tulleries Garden nearby, his mind was made up as well, so Amy and I went alone. We were able to see everything of value (my value anyway) in only 2 1/2 hours. It was too bad that the early Flemish rooms were closed for the day. Amy liked looking for the bugs in the still-life pictures.



Courtney and Faust



Amy and Lamassu in the Louvre

Our two groups met at the pyramid and walked to Ile de Cité. Amy bought a painting along the way and had herself photographed with the artist. Courtney had fallen asleep on me, so I had a load to carry most of the way (I didn't mind – I love it when she cuddles with me). She was still asleep when we got to S. Chapelle, so I stayed outside with her while the other three went in. She was awake by the time we got to Notre Dame.

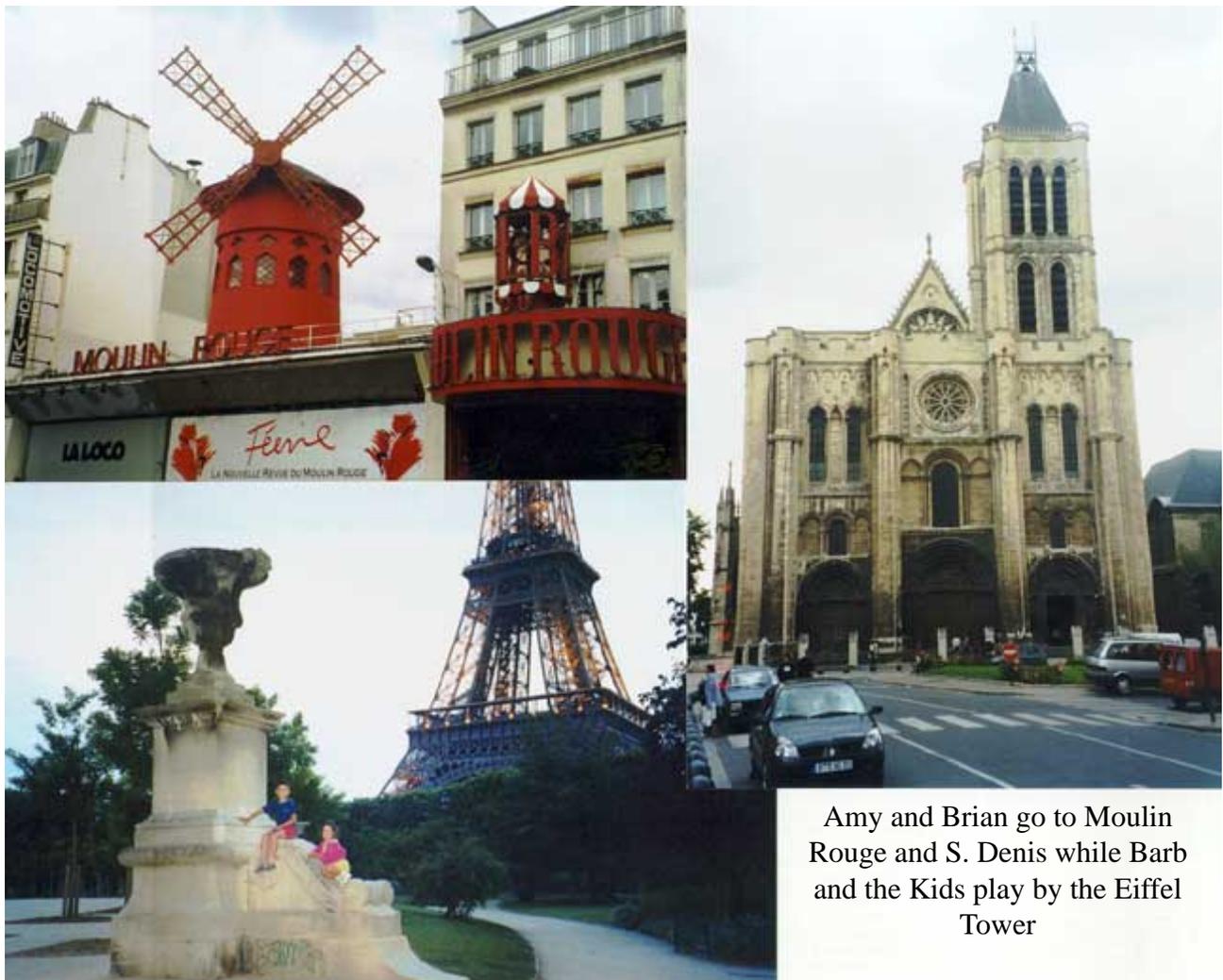
We made our exit from Ile de Cité and went to the Champs Elyseés for dinner and a movie. "Lilo and Stitch" was only in French so we watched "Scooby-Doo" instead. Jeffrey thought it was awesome. I thought it was too far-fetched. Courtney got scared and had to leave. Dinner was cheap pizza at a very snooty restaurant.



The kids play at the pyramid

7/12 Friday

We spent the morning deciding what to see and where to go. We had one day left on our railpasses because the plan was to spend the day in Chartres and Versailles. Only Amy wanted to still go however. I think the trip had worn Barb out. She wanted to rest at the park with the kids instead. I thought that Versailles was important because of its historical value, plus I knew that the kids would love the back yard, but I didn't want to go to Chartres either because Barb and the kids had no interest. I didn't want to drag unwilling folks an hour outside of Paris only to show them a Cathedral, and then return. My only reason for planning the trip to Chartres was because Barbara wanted to see the Cathedral that was the inspiration for my Master's Thesis. Now she didn't, so I didn't. I must admit, I was still a little discouraged from yesterday when Jeffrey didn't join Amy and me at the Louvre. I had spent a solid week with him prior to the trip explaining all the treasures of the Louvre to him. In truth, I had planned much of this trip around Jeffrey and the valuable education he would gain, and he was missing it! (well, hey, he is a kid after all...) I did not want him or the rest of the family to miss Versailles. Amy and I planned on going to S. Denis (my favorite Cathedral) and Moulin Rouge instead for the first half of the day while the kids played at the Eiffel Tower park (Champs du Mars). We would then pick up the gang at the Eiffel tower and go to Versailles.



Amy and Brian go to Moulin Rouge and S. Denis while Barb and the Kids play by the Eiffel Tower

Anyway, I still made one last effort to get Jeff to come with us, but Jeffrey said that he had seen enough dead people in Rome (St. Peter's crypt) and he didn't want to see the dead kings of France who were all buried at S. Denis. He would much rather be at his favorite spot in all of Europe – the Eiffel Tower.

Amy loved S. Denis, and was in awe of all the French kings who were there. She recognized a great number of them. I think it became her favorite church as well. I forewarned Amy that Moulin Rouge was in the seedy "Pigale" district, but she was in shock anyway once we arrived. Pigale is quite the red light district. Fortunately, there is a middle of the street walkway that avoided all the hustlers. We took our picture of the red windmill, then had a lunch of Belgian waffles.

One of our missions on the trip was to get real Belgian waffles, Escargots and cremé Bruleé. To this point, we had only had the snails in Arles. We bought extra waffles so Barb and the kids could have some. After a slight wrong way on the Metro, we were able to find Eiffel and our family. We then headed to Versailles.

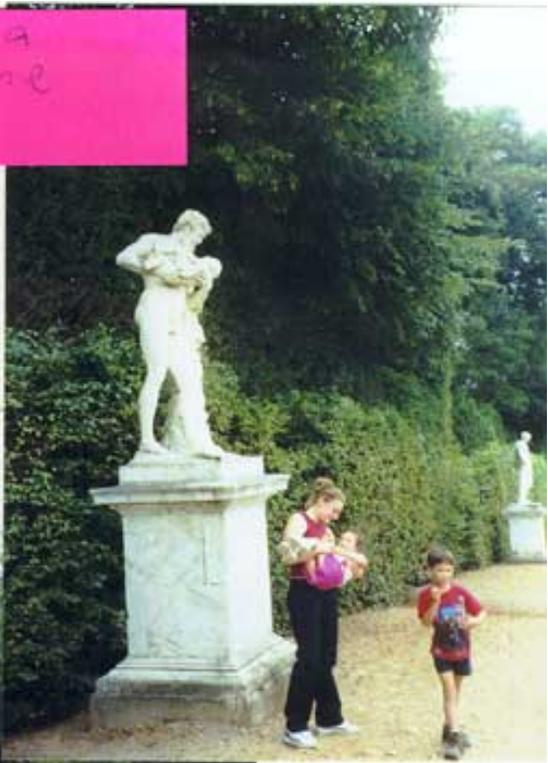
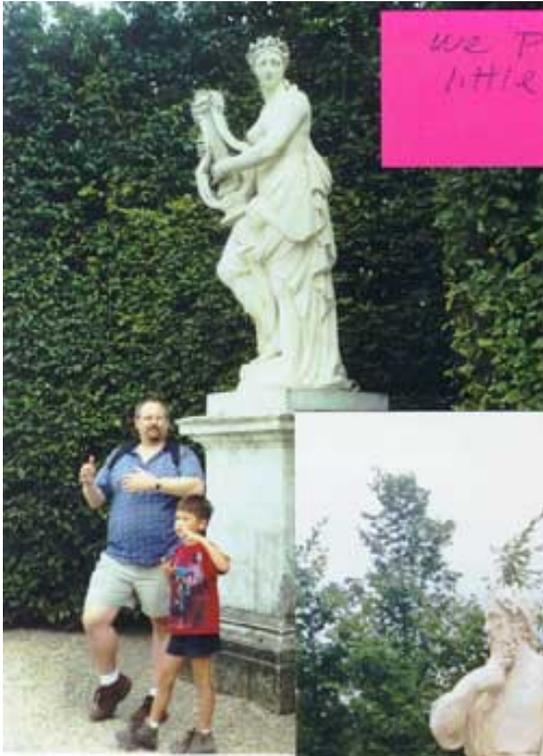
The kids thought the palace of Versailles was huge (and yesterday, they thought the Louvre was small. go figure.). I tried leading the family through the palace using Rick's self-guide but it didn't work out too well. The kids were squirilly.

Everyone loved the backyard garden. We took turns posing like nearby statuary, then taking pictures. We were at the canal when Barb told me that we had 20 minutes to get the stroller before the place closed. What would have been an easy task at the palace was now a much more difficult task now that we were a mile away. It was fastest if I went alone, so I power walked all the way back (mostly uphill) and made it there in 13 minutes. Later, I met up with the family and we left the palace grounds.

We decided to eat in town rather than head back to Paris immediately. Since this was our last dinner, this was also our last chance to get Cremé Bruleé. The one place in town that had Cremé Bruleé was too expensive. We settled on a crêpe and omelet place for dinner instead. Barb explained that we could simply eat dessert at the fancy place. I explained to her that this was very un-French (and hence rude), but she didn't care. She also tried ordering food for us even though none of the waiters spoke English (she had done the same at McDonalds in Germany yesterday. I truly longed for the days when she would depend on me in these situations. I would have been most helpful since I am a littl familiar with both languages.). Anyway, she had the waitress pretty confused.

Dinner was really good. It began to rain by the time we got to the "dessert" place. When we got there and explained that we only wanted dessert, the waitress looked shocked, then annoyed, then she got the owner and all the other waitresses together and had a conference on what to do. They finally decided that we should sit at the bar. This was OK because a club band was practicing and we got to watch. Barb tried to order even before we got the menus. This time I stopped her because I knew that this was considered very rude. We waited for our menus then I ordered. I was willing at this point to be an inconsiderate American, but not a rude one. The Cremé Bruleé was excellent. We then went home. Barb and I had a discussion about the trip and we came to the conclusion that we like completely different types of vacations. I like to see everything and do everything and she likes to relax. Barb also has very little interest in traveling for the sake of art, history and culture as I do. This concerned both of us. We wondered what we would do together after the kids left home. I had always hoped we would travel together. She hoped we would settle down. Well, at least we still communicate well.

We played a little game



We pretended to be statues in the Versailles Gardens



7/13 Saturday

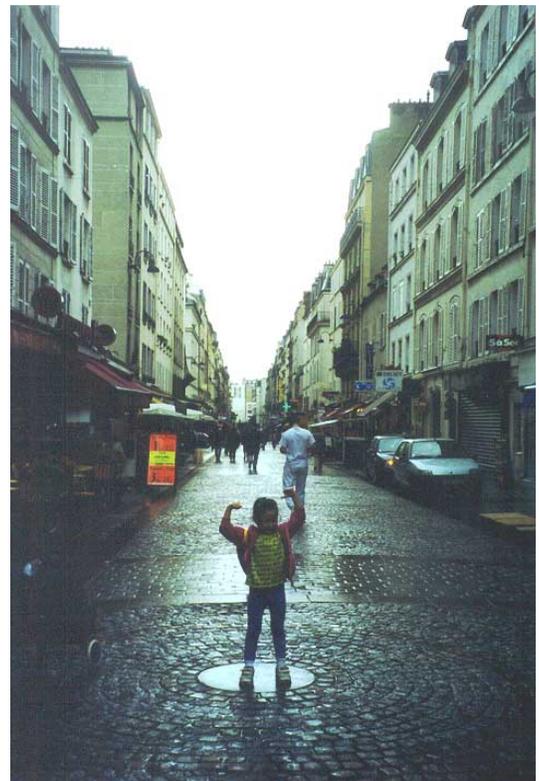
Time to go home! We said our good-byes to Victor and his hotel then went to the supermarché to shop for food. We also had time to spend our remaining Euros when we got to CDG. When we got on our plane and Courtney's video monitor wouldn't work. Barb switched with Courtney and read her book. I watched "Lord of the Rings," "Ocean's 11," and "The Rookie." All were excellent.

Philadelphia was evil. We got into our customs line and found ourselves at the end of a very, very long line. Four planes came at about the same time and ours was last. We had an hour and 15 minutes before our next plane left. It took us 35 minutes to get through customs. We then had to retrieve our luggage, the check it into domestic (which was just outside, thank God). The lady at the counter told us to keep the stroller and run! We ran to the domestic gates only to find another long line at security. We had about seven minutes to go when we got to the metal detector. My belt buckle tripped the alarm, so they decided to search me and have me take off my shoes. Barbara tried to push the stroller through the metal detector, so that slowed them down a bit. Once my family got through, I told them to run. I'd catch up. I was still being searched. Of course, our gate was C30, the farthest gate from security. I ran behind them in my socks because I didn't feel that I had time to put my shoes on. We got on the plane just as they were shutting the door.

We were all tired on that last leg. Sleepy too. The kids slept. I couldn't because I found the chairs very uncomfortable. Barb found a young Army guy to talk to, and perhaps convert, so she talked to him for the entire five-hour flight as I tried to sleep in my uncomfortable chair..

Bery met us at the gate. Our luggage did not. We had to go to the land of lost luggage to request a delivery tomorrow. This is the third trip in a row that this has happened to me. Oh well, it was good to be home. Jeffrey was just glad that he could read the street signs again.

The next day, Barb and I strategized on how we might have a successful family vacation, since, although we had a great time, this trip did not entirely meet either of our expectations. We decided that if we ever went back to Europe, we would stay at a place for a minimum of a week at a time, have a rental car, and do satellite day trips in the area. That would be a much more effective way to travel in Europe with kids.



Courtney as Reptar takes on Paris



Hey, at least the kids picked up some French while on the trip!