

Voilà! French without tears in Montpellier



The Place de la Comédie, Montpellier: the fountain, the Three Graces, dates from 1790 Getty Images

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When Janice Turner sent her 14-year-old son on an intensive language course, he was not amused to find her there too

Try telling a teenager who loathes languages that a week of his precious holiday must be spent conjugating French verbs. Joe, 14, was not happy, especially as this was an “immersion” course — ie, no English spoken during lessons — and he’d be staying with a French family in Montpellier so he would be expected to use his newly acquired lingo even in his down time. Worst of all, I was coming too.

Since my son has apparently inherited my tin ear for foreign tongues I felt duty-bound to share his suffering.

Besides, I have always felt that my inability to speak French — I failed O level — was a chasm in my education. Was I too late to fill it, my short-term memory shot to bits by motherhood and middle age?

As it turned out, our “*amille*” was an elegant Parisian architect called Caroline, who lived in an exquisite, straight-from-*Elle-Décor* apartment in Montpellier’s Medieval centre. My shuttered windows opened on to honey-coloured roofs and churches. Despite being one of those fine-boned, effortlessly chic French women who make me feel like a shire horse, at our first evening meal Caroline patiently endured my tenseless crashing around in her language and Joe’s absolute silence. Part of his problem with French, I suspect, is simple fear of sounding stupid.

Next morning Joe was cheered that we wouldn’t have a gruesome Mum & Son class. He’d be at the Langues Sans Frontières (LSF) junior school while I was at the adult college with, well, slightly older kids. My husband had predicted that I’d be surrounded by retired English civil servants. But, in fact, most of my fellow students were lolling, tanned, gap-yearers.

After a gruesome test to put me in the appropriate — lowly — group, I joined our teacher, Eddie, and we launched straight into those gnarly problems such as why do you say “en Suisse” but “au Canada”, before tackling the lower slopes of the “*passé composé*”. By the end of the first day my brain was writhing. I needed a huge glass of vin rouge, and it was an effort to speak French at dinner with Caroline.

Joe was cheerful, delighted with his multinational gang, marvelling at the Swedish and German kids already fluent in English, and mortified that he was the only one who had come with a parent.

After class, there was plenty of time to explore Montpellier, which rapidly struck me as just about the most perfect French city: compact yet full of fine architecture and street life. I loved walking from Caroline’s flat, through the labyrinth of narrow car-free alleys, down to the Place de la Comédie, a vast square at Montpellier’s centre with restaurants, fountains, a useful English-language cinema and, one evening during my visit, a throbbing gastronomic festival at which you could sample local wines and dishes.

And what is there not to love about a city with a tram system, particularly when the deep blue of its livery was chosen by Christian Lacroix himself. Every afternoon I’d travel five stops to cool off at the Olympic swimming pool, then stop for an apéritif in a pretty square where — my school French teacher would faint to hear this — I pored over my grammar book for pleasure. Why had I not appreciated the sheer joy of learning when I was a student?

Learning a language in the country itself means that every day, in each encounter in a cheese shop or café, your world grows a fraction. Staying with the elegant, philosophical Caroline, I found myself discussing love and politics: I felt as if I was in an Eric Rohmer film.

During lessons we were frequently sent out to find information. One day we went to the covered market to price ingredients for *Salade Tunisienne*, and returned to learn the terms for dicing and deseeding. On another afternoon we trooped off to the local record shop to quiz staff about trends in French music. It helps that the citizens of Montpellier are the most friendly French I've ever encountered: what a contrast to the usual Parisian *froideur*. While school-French was dreary and abstract, here it was useful and alive. In class we had to act out the roles of shopkeeper and customer in a shoe-buying skit, which I found useful when I bought myself some sandals. Eddie, a droll and mischievous teacher, liked to drop in cultural references that you'd never find on a formal syllabus. As a comprehension exercise, he played a terrible summer hit by a French *X Factor* contestant. He dropped in amusing trivia: there is a local sausage called a "Jésus" and an insult for a woman who does not look good is "*un thon*" (a tuna).

Joe, meanwhile, had started speaking up at dinner, intent on telling Caroline about his pet chickens. Grammar that he had covered in school had finally clicked. And I hardly saw him since most evenings he was off on organised excursions to the beach, only 10km away at Carnon.

I was so entranced with the ancient town that I barely left. But Montpellier could not be better located for trips to the coast or the Camargue countryside.

The only downside of college was being a mother among teenagers. In one class, partnered with an 18-year-old American girl, we had to tell each other how we had spent the previous evening. *Moi*: dinner with son, DVD, bed at 11pm. *Elle*: tequila shots until 3am, lost key, broke into host family's house. I learnt the term "pre-gaming" — getting drunk in the park before hitting the bars. By the end, I was at least fluent in American teen subculture.

Luckily there was a fortysomething cardiologist in my group so we visited the Roman aqueduct and had dinner in the Sisters' Café on the Rue des Soeurs Noires.

By the end of the week, while I still made ghastly errors, my comprehension had soared. I could chat to Caroline with greater ease and, because the photographer sent by *The Times* spoke not a word of English, I managed to orchestrate the shoot in French. And one night I was on the phone to my husband explaining that today "*Joe est allé au plage*" and he piped up, "No, Mum, it's *à la plage* ." *Mon dieu!*

At midnight in Place de la Comédie when I collected Joe after his last-night disco, he said: "Mum, can I stay another week?" Bit late now. Our flight was in a few hours. But before he tackles GCSE, I might send him back for a fortnight. And what he won't like is that I'm coming too.

Need to know

Halsbury Travel (0115-940 4500, halsburylanguages.com) has a one-week French course for adults from £492 and for children from £615, both include host family accommodation on a half-board basis. Flights not included.

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