



Merveilleux! French students have a grand time on ten-day trek across Europe

M. McKinnon

“No one wanted to come back.”

That's how teacher Sylvie Cyr described the feeling as thirteen AHS students and twenty from Fort Frances High reached the final day of their fabulous excursion through Switzerland and the south of France.

The French students from the two schools (along with Ms. Cyr and three teachers from Fort High, Dany Michaud, Erika Handberg, and Sarah Arpin) arrived in Zurich on March 29. The trip was a culmination of over eighteen months of fund-raising for the Atikokan students, who had been counting down the days before their arrival since the start of 2017 (400 in all).

For about half of the Atikokan group, it was a return trip to France - they were part of the 2017 Vimy Memorial tour. This trip had a “had a very different focus” and was much more of a cultural experience than the “very solemn” cadet trip.

Of course, there was also at least one student who was experiencing her very first plane ride. And it was a gruelling one, overnight from Toronto to Zurich. The Swiss city was under a good deal of fog when they arrived, so the final approach, with the Alps intermittently peeking through the clouds and fog, was a strange one.

“It almost felt like we were landing in the clouds,” said one student.

The trip was organized by Explorica Canada, and the itinerary it laid out was much appreciated by the students. The mix of sight-seeing, hands-on activities, site tours, and free time was just right, judging by the enthusiasm of the ten students we spoke with last week.

Their Zurich tour director was actually a Canadian who now lives in Germany, and she connected with the students right off. They visited the Old Town, the quays (public spaces developed in the 19th century that transformed the city into a lakeside community), and Bahnhofstrasse, the shopping Mecca of Europe.

One thing they learned in Zurich: “You don't want to get yelled at in German!” A few did experience that in the shops or hotel, but there were no serious incidents.

The day before Easter they got to make their own chocolate Easter bunnies in a workshop at la Maison Truffe, an experience everyone enjoyed. “Their

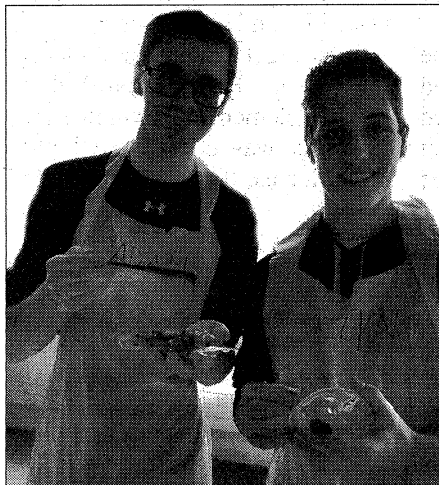
chocolate was soooooo good!”

They melted down and mixed the chocolate, then poured, moulded, and decorated their own creations.

“Our stuff was pretty sad looking compared to what they had in the confectionery. But the women helping us were very nice.”

Several of the chocolate creations did make the trip back across the Atlantic. “We had to layer the chocolate on pretty thick for transport!”

Then it was through the Alps to Lucerne, a small city rich with Medieval heritage. The sightseeing highlights there included *Löwendenkmal*, a rock relief which commemorates the Swiss Guards who were slain during the French Revolution (1792) and the Kapellbrücke, the covered wooden bridge across the River Reuss, noted



Chocolatiers Adam Poulin and Kelyn Vos

for the paintings in its interior.

By this point in the trip, the Alps dominated the scenery, and became central to everything the group did. Experienced bus drivers made the switchbacks and narrow mountain roads bearable and the lofty digs added excitement to the simple chore of heading back to the hotel.

The group enjoyed several gondola rides during excursions at Mt. Pilatus and Mt. Titlis, and a visit to an igloo village, a functioning hotel and eatery made almost entirely of ice and snow.

“They had all different kinds of theme rooms, even hot tubs.”

On April 2, it was off to Geneva, with a stop along the way at Grindelwald, for the *First Fliieger* ziprider. This is the Alps, so we are talking a zip line on steroids. It takes a three-stage gondola ride to reach the

First Fliieger. Once harnessed in and set up on a simple canvas seat, it's off you go. The line is almost a kilometer long with a vertical descent of about two hundred metres... which produces speeds reaching upwards of eighty kilometres an hour.

The *First Fliieger* staff had a little fun with a few of the students, speculating about how their line looked broken, but assuring them before release that there was “no need for fearing - it's Swiss engineering!”

From Grindelwald it was on to Geneva, where the *lingua franca* changed from German to French.

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Mark Twain called the Löwendenkmal (The Lion Monument) “the most mournful and moving piece of stone in the world”



Sam Ribey, Claire Poulin, and Candra Urbanowicz enjoy some sunshine at Cassis, a fishing village on the Côte d'Azur

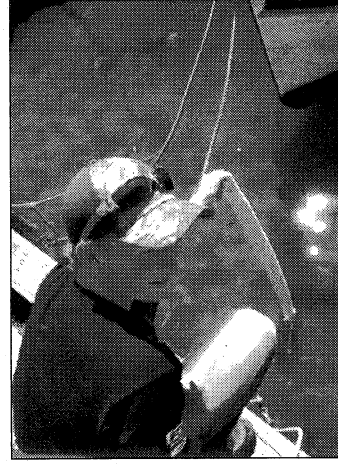
understand us, so we decided to make our own."

Using a towel, the string from his shorts, and a key ring, they fashioned a make-do rig and started jigging off the edge of the pier. That the French fishers understood, and soon one came over and offered a piece of squid to use as bait.

"We never though we'd get a hit, but pretty quickly we had some small fish coming in..."

Wrap up

Cyr extended a thank you to



all the Atikokanites who supported the fund-raising efforts that made the trip possible. A dedicated group of parents spearheaded the effort, which netted about \$22,000. That brought the per student cost down to \$2,000 (plus lunches and shopping).

"These kinds of trips really add something to the French program here, and we'd like to see them continue every other year, so that senior students all get a chance to go on one," she said.

The students did have a fair number of chances to use their second language skills, but it usually took a pretty firm commitment to do it.

"What would usually happen when we spoke French was they would laugh, then start talking to us in English."

"We were able to get by in restaurants and shops most of the time speaking like Fran-glais... but there was one time I think we said no to the bill when they asked. When we weren't a hundred percent sure what they were asking, we just said no."

Day six included visits to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, which turned out to be far more engaging than they anticipated. They found one interactive feature in particular quite absorbing; it involved working as a group to prepare an island for a coming hurricane. It is a collaborative game designed so that anyone at all familiar with the digital universe can quickly grasp and play the game; players don't even have to speak the same language to play together.

The students also had the option of visiting the United Nations' European headquarters, and the CERN, the giant particle accelerator. (Cyr, who also teaches in the sciences, was disappointed this did not actually involve a trip down to the 27 km. long large hadron collider located a hundred metres below the surface.)

From Geneva it was onto France on day seven, beginning with a tour of Avignon, a city with a history that stretches back well before Roman times. The Pont D'Avignon, built almost nine hundred years ago (and subject of a song the students had learned in French class), and the Palais des Papes, a papal residence (Avignon was the seat of Western Christianity in the fourteenth century) were highlights.

An even older and more fabulous structure, the Pont du Gard, part of a two-thousand-year-old Roman aqueduct, was on tap for the day eight trip through Provence to the town of Nîmes. A pair of other significant Roman artifacts, an amphitheatre and the Maison Carrée, are also in Nîmes, whose history stretches back to the Bronze Age, six thousand years ago.

Les Baux de Provence, one of the most beautiful villages in all of France, capped the day, and

really impressed the students.

"They really loved this part of the trip; we could have stayed in Provence for several more days," said Cyr.

The trip finished on the Cote D'Azur, France's Mediterranean coast. The palm trees caught them by surprise, and although the locals considered the twenty degree temperatures way too cool to do much outdoors, it was beach weather for the Canadians. They visited Aix-en-Provence, Cassis (a cruise of the Calanques, a system of long natural harbours, was a hit), and finally Nice.

Sharing it all with the students from Fort Frances added a positive element to the whole trip.

"That was one of the highlights for us, the teachers, to see you guys making new friends," said Cyr.

The French classes from the schools have combined on trips (Winnipeg, Montreal) the past few years, and they did get together beforehand as a group, so it's not like they were complete strangers.

The kids ate well - pizza and crêpes were staples - and at least some got a little more adventurous. One student found that French shrimp were truly jumbo.

"They were real shrimp, with legs and faces and everything. I didn't know what to do with them, they had to show me [how to eat them]."

Other notable adventures included a trip back to the airport on day one in Zurich to recover an iPod, a class in snow sliding



They have faces!

(Adam Poulin showed a bunch of California girls how to turn a garbage bag into a snow slide. He says: "For the record, they weren't all girls."), and a bit of impromptu fishing by Chris Strom and Fort Frances's Callum Galusha.

The last was at the pier in Cassis, a fishing village. "We asked if we could borrow a fishing rod, but we couldn't get them to



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