

Europe 2023

Highlights From Our
Travels

6/15/2023-7/3/2023



Day 1

Day of Travel

Newark, NJ

So we are to embark on a new adventure! This time, we're traveling with the kids the farthest we've ever taken them: to Europe! We'll be going to London, Paris, and Barcelona and hopefully, they'll have a great time.

So far, we have only travelled as far as the airport. I got stopped at security for having a nintendo switch, but luckily it wasn't too crowded and we were there early, so we were fine.

Our credit card got us access to the Virgin lounge, so we've been enjoying the included food.





The family posing in front of the historic Vista Parking Lot in scenic Newark, NJ.

The boys have had more servings of cheese plates, chicken sandwiches, soup, ice cream, cheesecake, and I lost track. Every time I looked over, they had something else on the table. I think the staff here is about to kick us out. Next up is our overnight plane flight to London. I can't wait to experience the joy of another Hilary-brand family vacation. She has put so much effort into this, and mostly, I just like

spending a little more time with the kids on a shared experience. It's so easy to get stuck in routines when we're at home. I'm glad we'll have this time together.

Day 2

Travel & Stay Awake

London, England

Wow, we barely got any sleep on the plane and then we had to get up, de-plane, and find our black cab Hilary had reserved. We went back and forth a few times in the arrival lobby before finding our driver, who was great, and then we jumped in the back of his electric black cab. There was only room for 3 of us to sit forward, and Hilary took one for the team, and faced backwards the whole time.





In the black cab, I forgot that we passed out on the way to the hotel.

We checked into our hotel and our goal for today was to get caffeine and to keep moving so we wouldn't fall asleep. We needed to get to our hotel.

So we checked in, changed into shorts, and began our simple journey to the Candella tea room. We only had one functioning brain among us, so we were hopping on subways

going in the wrong direction for trains that were splitting and going to the wrong place, so finally, we admitted that we were too tired to handle all that and got an uber for the rest of the ride there.



Pinkies up, everyone! The family enjoying an afternoon tea service

When we got the uber, the driver, who was very nice, accidentally started to drive off when Jacob wasn't in the car yet. The door was still open and everything.

But eventually, we did get to the tea room, and we were able to get caffeinated. I had a lovely chai. We were an hour late,

so we had to sit outside, but it was very nice out anyway, so it all worked out in the end.

After all that, we wanted to find a nice park to walk around and get some sun to help adjust to the jet lag. So we walked to Hyde park and met a local lady who moved there from Virginia with her dog George. I remembered all that, but I

couldn't remember which direction to get on for the tube ride. Amazing.

We saw an old tree called Elfin Oak that was carved out of an old 800-year old tree, and the carving was over 100 years old.

We saw the King's swans and ducks at Round Pond and got the kids a lime slushy drink. We walked by a Princess Diana Memorial Fountain and saw this wonderful water feature with water seemingly flowing around in a giant circle. It was set up so kids could splash and play in the water. We even put our hands in to cool off a bit. Finally, we walked to the Holocaust Memorial Garden and rested there in the shade of a tree.

Then, we went to the English Museum! We managed to get there without a problem this time. It was really amazing what they have on display. We saw the actual Rosetta Stone! And real mummies in perfect condition. And we saw a guy that was pickled - they think he was a human sacrifice who happened to be preserved.

Then, we ate at the museum tavern across the street! It was really good pub food (fish and chips, meat pie, etc) - Ben even tried a British beer. I knew he would hate it. It was chilled, though, at least! And I think he liked hard cider better. For dessert, we had sticky toffee pudding! And on the way back to our hotel, we saw a real red British phone booth.



Ben at a relic of a phone booth in England

Half of the day seems like a dream in hindsight because we were so tired. We took showers, collapsed, and woke up the next morning for a new adventure.

Day 3

The Market & Windsor Castle

London & Windsor

We were a little more well rested this morning, and we started our day around 9 AM local time. We took a tube ride to King's Cross, but didn't see platform 9 3/4. We went to Borough Market and just ate a brunch of sorts there. It was so full of vendors (mostly cheese vendors). We did get an assortment of cheeses from the first one we saw, though. It was very good!

We found a smoothy vendor and got fruit smoothies, and at a sausage roll from a place called the Ginger Pig. The guy who





The four of us on the Thames River - not shown "London Bridge" which was in the other direction just to the right.

handed us the rolls had the beard of a lumber jack. The rolls were delicious, but filling. I barely could eat anything else after that.

Hilary and the boys had dessert at a place called the humble crumble. It was kind of a fancy deconstructed pie shop. I had a taste, and it was good, but I was so full!

We walked from there to see the Thames river and saw London Bridge. We didn't realize there was a bad terrorist attack there in 2017. It happened in June so there were fresh flowers laid down in remembrance.

From there, we got on a train to Windsor Castle. It took 1.5 hours, but it was direct! We walked up to the castle, and



The family at the grounds of Windsor castle. That gate was keeping us riffraff off the lawn.

immediately saw St. George's Chapel, where Queen Elizabeth II was laid to rest. We were hurried through, though because I assume that's still a feature attraction. Hilary didn't even realize that was what it was because we went through so fast. It was remarkable how many past kings and queens were buried there.

When we were quickly out the other side of the chapel, we wanted to check out the rest of the castle, but not before we had a quick break to get some ice cream. Portions are much smaller here, but I welcome it.

We weren't allowed to take any pictures inside the castle, but we did see so much! We saw Queen Mary's doll house, which

was not made for a child, but for an exhibition, capturing the life of a very upscale house at the time. It was a feat of engineering, and even though we didn't hear it, there was a miniature record player that would play a real tiny record (1/12 the scale) - apparently it plays "Hail Britannia."

We then went to the State Apartment tour and we got to see so much of the castle that had been previously reserved for formal events. There were beautiful portraits by world-class painters of the time, and some that looked so life-like. There was one of a pope, for example that I kept staring out because I thought it would start moving.

Funny observation, that the pictures hung in the queen's chambers were all interesting, but nothing lewd. The king's private chambers had many nudes.

One interesting thing was that the castle had a bad fire in 1992, but everything was restored and priceless artifacts were rushed out before they could be destroyed. There were beautiful woven tapestries and paintings on the ceiling like the sistine chapel.

And they even had a lawn roomba. It was a grass-cutting robot. The kids seemed the most excited about that. By that point, we had to go, though, because it was closing time and we didn't want the red guards with the fluffy big black bear-fur hats to come after us.

We walked down to dinner (the Crispy Dosa) and had a wonderful Indian dinner! We had mango lassis, dosas, ponipori, & Manchurian cauliflower. Everything was so good!

My dosa (Mushroom Manchurian Dosa) was the best. I couldn't finish it.

We then waddled back to the train station for our ride home. Not to jinx it but I think we have this mass transit thing down now.



Manchurian mushroom dosa 🤘😋

Day 4

Tour and a View on Father's Day

London

We woke up bright and early this morning at 7:30 and headed to find breakfast at Fortitude Bakehouse around the corner and I had a wonderful cup of tea and something called a “morning bun” filled with custard and blueberries, and it wasn’t too sweet.

Then we hopped on the tubes and headed over to Big Ben for a 2 hour walking tour. We spent some time trying to recreate old Big Ben pictures from when I was there last (first in 1998, then in 2000 with TCNJ). We managed to get a good one including a red phone booth, then walked through the neighboring park and then it was time for the tour.



I think this thing might be slow



We listen intently to the stories told by our tour guide outside Westminster Abbey

I love a good tour because you get to hear good stories about what makes everything so significant. Our tour guide was very good. He spoke all about the parliament building and how every year the King goes to speak, but he's not allowed in Parliament. And his representative wears all black and knocks on the door with a special cane and they slam the door in his/her face. Then they knock again and have to join the King in the other chambers to hear the laws that are on the docket for

the year. I think he said it is a tradition that dates back to when the King abolished the parliament and they never really got over it this many centuries later.

We found out that Darwin and Steven Hawking are buried at Westminster Abby along with numerous Kings and Queens. And of course they have all those weddings and ceremonies there.

We followed our tour to the changing of the guard, which I never really saw before. They had a band and everything. They had a bunch of gates, but none for the US: “you gave up that gate when you decided to split off, you see.”

Then we checked out some old houses - one was owned by Sting and sold for 14 Million Pounds.

He showed us a building that housed the world cup trophy when England won it in the 60s, and that it was stolen, but ultimately found by a dog named “Pickles.”

We saw the spot where King Charles the first had his head chopped off. I think he was the one that dissolved parliament, so there you go.

We got to see Downing Street and the building that was used as the exterior to the ministry of magic for the Harry Potter movies.

Then we walked nearby to a place for a Sunday Roast at Hawksmoor Borough. We all had a rump roast with a whole clove of roasted garlic and a Yorkshire pudding! It was like really good bread. I felt really under-dressed in my tee-shirt and sweat-shorts, as it was father’s day and a lot of families were dressed up nice there.

We had some time to kill, so instead of the tubes, we took a ferry down the Thames river to the observatory stop. The Thames was beautiful. It was a great way to get around as the Ferry boat was very open and had lots of windows all around.



A Lovely Sunday Roast

It took a while to moor at our destination as it was very crowded, but we cut through the maritime museum and walked up a great big hill to see the observatory. We got to see the prime meridian (even though it was off on my phone by a few hundred feet).

We saw a giant telescope used to study binary stars back in the day. It was interesting to see where so many scientific discoveries had happened. There was a whole display on how pendulum clocks don’t work on a ship, so they had to invent a way to tell time on a ship that wouldn’t drift.

Then we saw a planetarium show and man, they must know people are there to take a nap. The ASMR narrator spoke in the



All of us atop Sky Garden, where we could see all of London below us

most soothing voice, the chairs are all the way reclined and they had a spa soundtrack going in the background. I was legitimately trying to stay awake and it was impossible. After the planetarium, we woke up, wiped the drool from our chins, and walked back down the big hill to make our way to dinner. By this point it had started to rain, so we put on ponchos (all except Ben who didn't want to not look cool).

We finally made our way to "Jack the Chipper" a fish and chips place cheekily named after Jack the Ripper. They had great fish and chips with a curry sauce on the side. But halfway through the meal, Jacob needed to find a bathroom quick, and the little place didn't have one, so we ran in the rain a block to find one.

After finishing our meal, we went to Sky Garden atop a great building where we could see all of London from the top floor. It was very beautiful, but the fog made it tricky to see too far. Still was a spectacular view.

Then, we headed back to our hotel, cleaned up, wrote about “Day 4” in my journal, and went to sleep.



The family standing with a foot in each hemisphere.

Day 5

Church, Ferris Wheel, Tea & Shakespeare

London

We woke up and headed downstairs to the Holiday Inn Breakfast and it was very good! Ben tried some beans on toast, though, and was not impressed.

We took the tubes to Westminster Abbey and downloaded an audio tour. It's just a beautiful and historic church, and it has so many people buried there. We saw Elizabeth the 1st, Mary-Queen of Scots, Stephen Hawking, Sir Isaac Newton, Lewis Carroll, and even Darwin buried there.



How is this breakfast?



One of the many images of people buried in Westminster Abbey, this one with his “come hither” pose.

We were lucky enough to get tickets for a viewing of the 2nd level with some older antiquities, too. We saw a beautiful view of the church from higher up and got right next to the stained glass, too. They even had some old fabrics from 1100 AD. And most of the frescos and marble statues are in amazing condition.

After spending the morning in Westminster Abbey, we went to get some lunch at the highest rated Indian Restaurant in London: New Dishoom. We tried to take a bus to get there but the roads were complete grid-lock, so we just got out and figured out a way to get there via the tubes.



We walked through Covent Garden, where they had lovely pride flags on display

Not only was the restaurant the best Indian restaurant, (the kids said “this is the best chicken I think I’ve ever had!), but the Wi-fi for the place was “Chai-Fi.” Instantly the best in my book.

After lunch, we went for a walk at covent garden, which had a lot of shops and street performers. We heard an awesome string quartet and just stopped to listen. They did a “can can”

song, which was great, even kicking their legs in the air for the chorus.

We stopped at a magic booth, too, and a guy did a pretty great card trick with a trick deck of cards, hoping we would buy the cards. We almost did! So many of the shops had “Ben’s” name on them. Benjamin’s cookies, Benjamin’s toy shop. He was starting to get a complex.



The four of us atop the London Eye, overlooking the river Thames

We did buy some macarons (2 of them cost over 6 Lbs!). And I discovered the joys of a pay toilet.

After that, we walked over to the giant ferris wheel overlooking the Thames called the London Eye. We waited in line for only 30 minutes and then we were on. It swayed only slightly, and so I wasn't too scared of the totally enclosed structure. It went

all the way round in 21 minutes, and we saw some spectacular views of the city.

When we got off, we were close to the covid memorial, so we stopped there to check it out and honor the over 230,000 people who died due to covid in the UK. It was a moving memorial of hearts along the riverfront of the Thames.



The rebuilt Shakespeare Globe Theatre, located within hundreds of feet of the original. A terrific performance!

Since we were right on the river, we took a Ferry boat to diner, a tea service at a restaurant called the Swan. Since it was attached to the Shakespeare Globe Theater, everything was Midsummer Night-themed. Even the menu and the plates had little quotes from the play on there.

The boys and I had what I called the “dude” tea service which included less treats and more meats. Hilary had the traditional, and the boys had buyers remorse.

After tea, we went to the Globe Theater and saw “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” It was amazing to see it in a rebuilt replica of how it was intended to be seen. There was no amplification, just a 4 piece band, a floor area where people



A nighttime view of St. Paul's - the first time we saw anything in London at night.

could just stand for less money, and 3 levels of seats all around. It was all wood and Tudor construction, too.

The play itself was the best production of the play I have seen hands down. It had music and dancing, real British actors and the lead was a little person. And little person or no, she was the best one on the stage. There was even some lines in the original play that made more sense for her being a little person.

It was remarkable and funny, and witty, dramatic and fun. The play within a play aspect was so funny, and the characters just came to life. The kids even seemed to enjoy it, although it did go very late (after 10 pm).

So we walked across the Millennium bridge, took some great photos, and got an Uber to the hotel and passed out. Tomorrow, we should have more time on the bus to recoup.

Day 6

So many hippies...

Avebury & Stonehenge

We had a very long day planned, because today we are taking the longest trek we've taken so far to go to Stonehenge. And we had to change hotels due to changing rates. So we rolled our suitcases down the street, checked into the new place, and went to breakfast at a Gordon Ramsay restaurant (Heddon St. Kitchen) - it was delicious! The pancakes were amazing, and the eggs were the most orange yolks I have ever seen in an egg.

The boys have started playing a contest where they try to be the one that has last bite among them. It helps them eat slower, so I'm not opposed to it.



This was one of two days of the year when you can go right up to the stones



The family in front of a stone older than Stonehenge (over 5000 years old) in the town of Avebury

After breakfast, we headed to our bus tour near a hotel for pickup. I love a good bus tour. We learned a lot about the local area. We passed by Alfred Hitchcock's house, and a private hospital with bullet proof glass that costs \$12,000 a night. Celebrities like Freddy Mercury went there.

After an hour or so on the bus, we arrived at Avebury, which was another town with Stone Henges, which were actually

older, but not as famous as THE Stonehenge. They had 3 concentric circles of stones and a really deep trench (as deep as a typical moat). Incidentally, we learned that a moat was not filled with water, or ... anything really. This whole area (called the Salisbury Plain) has a lot of these stones. They even discovered some holes in the ground where stones used to be (called Aubry Holes). We saw stones along the road placed there long ago. We learned that these stones are from 60-160

miles away! That is a long way to transport these multi-ton behemoths.

We learned about thatch roof cottages (originally, they were for people who couldn't afford a more expensive roof, but now only really well-off people can afford an authentic thatch roof). We also saw a lot of people with flower headbands and dream catcher tattoos. And the area generally smelled like skunks for some reason.

We stopped in a few of the local stores in the town, and I couldn't fit! I had to stoop over since the ceilings and doorways were so low. They had very interesting sculpture - lots of small, naked women.

When we got back on the bus, we learned about these images of white horses that were carved into the hills of the area for ancient castles that used to be nearby. The castles are long gone, but the hill carvings remain (or have been maintained). We saw one of the horses, but I didn't get a picture in time.

After a while, it was time for supper (an early dinner or late lunch in England), so we stopped off in the lovely town of Lacock. Now, to be fair, we weren't the **first** on the bus to make reference to the phallic nature of the town's name, but we definitely (to this day) are making jokes about it still.

It was a nice enough pub-style dinner and I had a local lager that was very good. Then we walked around the square and learned that they filmed a lot of movies and shows here, including Downton Abbey and Harry Potter. It was the site of Godric's Hollow where Harry's Parents were killed in the flashback. We saw the house!



The house from Harry Potter (where they killed his parents)

We made it back to the tour bus in time, and now it was time for the main event: Stonehenge!

We got within 3 miles and traffic just stopped. It reminded me of stories of Woodstock, where Hippies were just abandoning their cars and walking up the road. Some of our tour group wanted to do that as well, after an hour because we were getting close to sunset, which was why we were there. So we were really racing the sun.

It was then, that Tyrone, the bus driver, took matters into his own hands. He threw on the turn signal, and abandoned the line



The place was packed with people throughout the ancient site.

of cars, trucks, and busses, and went into the oncoming traffic lane and raced all the way to the front.

We weren't out of the woods yet, though, because once the bus was parked, we had to walk 1.5 miles in a grassy field to get to the legendary stones.

We met a lot of fascinating people along the way. There was a guy in a kilt, couples looking to get married, monks, people dressed like wizards, and the list goes on. Lots of bare feet.

When we finally saw the stones, we had about 10 minutes before sunset, so we walked right up to the center of the stones. We were amazed we could go up there. There were ceremonies going on (we think weddings) and chanting, and drum circles

and body odor. We touched the stones! There were little plants growing on them that we later learned only grow on the stones, which is one of the reasons they don't let people touch them, but only twice a year. A local guide even explained that there was ancient graffiti from the bronze age on the stones (an old hammer chiseled into the side of it) from over a thousand years ago. It was on the inside of the ring, so I would never have seen it if it weren't for it being the solstice.

After a while in the center we walked around and put a blanket down and just watched the people, and the sunset (it was cloudy so we couldn't see the actual sun through the stones), but it was pretty awesome just the same.

The kids turned to us at the end and said "this was my favorite day so far." And we know they loved the other days too, so that meant a lot to us.

As we walked back to the bus, we saw some tank military exercises over the hill. We saw flares going up there.

By the time we got on the bus and back to London, and back in the Uber to our place, it was 2 am, so we just collapsed, and went to bed.



We make new discoveries not yet noticed by scholars

Day 7

Harry Potter and a Play

London

We slept in until 10:00 am after our late night, ran to the train station, and took a special Harry Potter bus to the Harry Potter Exhibit. We took in a Harry Potter-themed afternoon tea. It was great. We chuckled at the dessert named “Luna Lovegood’s Little Loaf.”

Right away we walked through the doors and saw this gigantic dragon suspended from the ceiling. It filled the room. What was great about this tour was that it was the set where all 8 Harry Potter movies were filmed! And because they never knew

HAVE YOU
SEEN THESE
WIZARDS?



APPROACH WITH EXTREME CAUTION!
★ DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE ★
MAGIC AGAINST THESE WIZARDS

Any information leading to their arrest
shall be duly rewarded
Notify immediately by owl the Ministry of Magic

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Gringotts Bank set piece exactly as it was for the first Harry Potter movie.

when they would need the same prop in the future films, they saved everything!

We saw original costumes (even Harry Potter's first and last robes from the movies). We saw original props like the triwizard cup and a giant clock on the wall, etc. And we saw huge set pieces and huge models like a full model of Hogwarts castle, the full Hogwarts express train and Platform 9 3/4 set, a

full, walkthrough forbidden forest, and Gringotts Bank (both before and after it was destroyed). Multiple times the kids (and Hilary and I, too) said "wooooah" as we turned a corner and we were instantly inside the movie.

When we went on the Hogwarts Express, we could see the set where Harry met Ron and Hermione. It was a very tight set. I can't imagine anyone moving through it, but the actors *were*



The boys try to find the cup of Hufflepuff!



We got on the Hogwarts Express!



Gringotts Bank after some dragon-based renovations

tiny at the time. And they had a staffer introduce the tour and it turns out he was in 5 of the movies as a death eater! He even had a dark mark recently on his forearm, but he couldn't allow me to take a picture of it in his tour guide outfit.

We saw a very touristy place where you could get your picture and video in front of a green screen and the kids were cracking me up with silly faces while they pretended to fly through London and Hogwarts on a broom in front of a green screen. The video was priceless!

Just about the time we started fading, the place must have known it because they put a cafe where you could order food and drinks. We got ... what else? Butterbeer and butterbeer ice-cream for everyone, of course.

Then, we finished the tour, but had to hurry because we had tickets to a play at night. We could have easily spent 3 more hours there. We saw 4 privet Drive, the Knight Bus, and a huge bridge portion of Hogwarts castle to full scale. It's amazing they really built these things.

So we had to wrench ourselves away and get to dinner at a fela fel place near the theater that was really good!

We went to see the show, "Idiots Assemble: Spitting Image" a parody puppet show in the West End, a theater district in London that reminds me a lot of Broadway in NYC. They had a lot of famous figures from Britain in it that we wouldn't recognize, but they had enough pop culture people that we wouldn't be completely lost. They just used puppets to parody King Charles and the royals, and even American people like Tom Cruise, Donald Trump in an orange jumpsuit, Elon Musk

as a Tesla transformer, and Rue Paul. They had a Zalinsky and Putin puppet. They even did a very inappropriate Chinese accent for Ping. They did give a warning before the show that it would be inappropriate.

But we won parents of the year when one of the women puppets in the show, exposed her puppet breasts (complete with singing puppet nipple mouths) and then a chorus of singing penis puppets came out. They all sang "Men think with their Dicks" and shot white streamers all over the audience.

I was hiding my head through intermission. We didn't realize it would be so adult oriented. But again, the kids leaned over and said, "no THIS was my favorite day so far" so we must be doing something right.

We took an Uber back to our hotel and went to bed early because tomorrow would be our last day in England.



Very funny, but not appropriate for kids under 16.... d'oh!

Day 8

Right in the Crown Jewels

London to Paris

We grabbed some breakfast on the go this morning (tea and a croissant) and went to the tube stop for the Tower of London.

We rope-dropped the thing and still had a long line to wait in by the time we got there. It's a very popular attraction and there were many students on class trips.

So we headed straight to the main attraction - the Crown Jewels. We saw the world's largest diamond and the crown





The Beefeater from our tour gave a lot of funny and some harrowing anecdotes about the Tower of London

that Charles III wore on his recent coronation. We passed through 18" thick doors to get to them, too. You could tell they need to protect them.

Then we went to the moat area to get a Beefeater tour. The Beefeaters are the special guard that protects the Tower of London and they give the tours, and because they give so

many tours, they have some standard fun lines they use. There was a gate by a water way and he called it the original Watergate, for example.

We learned about all kinds of interesting and heartbreaking facts, mostly about Henry the 8th's wives. He had two of them killed at the tower. Oh, and we



The family posing with the Beefeaters, who were very gracious in letting us take so many pictures.

learned that they would behead the prisoners set to death and boil the heads in salt water and other spices to prevent the birds from pecking at the heads when they were put on a soldier's spear and put on display at London Bridge.

Also, the moat would fill in with water originally at high tide and wash the poop away since the toilet systems were

comprised of pooping out the window and it would land in the moat. The guide said it was another line of defense. Eventually, the poop wouldn't wash away anymore and it created a real problem, so they filled it in with dirt.

It turns out, the only building that is the Tower of London is the central building. So I don't think I was ever really

in the Tower of London. We walked up the steps, and greeting us on the first floor was a sword from Final Fantasy 16. They did a friggin cross promotion with a video game at the Tower of London?

They had all kinds of interesting things here, though: torture devices, dragons made of powder kegs, a still functional toilet (but it just was a chute in the wall) - but it was sealed off so no one would try to use it. And the gift shop was where the original dungeon was.

After the official tower and all the steps that involved, we went to the holding areas where many famous prisoners were held. There was some harrowing graffiti carved into the walls from some of the prisoners. Since it was solid stone walls, this must have taken forever to accomplish. Some were ornate scenes they carved into the wall, as well.

We had to move fast, though, because we had to catch the train to Paris! So we ate at a fast food Indian chain restaurant and it was really good! Then we picked up our bags from the hotel, went to the train station, and hopped on the “Chunnel” train to Paris. It’s an underground high-speed train that can go from London to Paris in just about 2 hours! We saw it top off at 174 mph! And whenever a train was coming from the other direction, it would make us jump, because it was here and gone again in under a second. We would go into tunnels along the way, besides the main one, and our ears would all pop at the same time.

We ate dinner on the train at like 3:30 so we were not terribly hungry, but it was pretty good. They had real french butter, so we honed in on that.

I took the time to get caught up on my journal. The kids ate an entire box of fudge and a box of toffee cookies when we weren’t looking.

Before we knew it, we were in Paris, so we took a cab, which was a bit of an ordeal because so many roads were shut down. We may have seen the prime minister zoom by in a motorcade. So many roads in Paris were blocked off.

We arrived at our Air BNB and it was like an escape room: put in the code to open the front door, then put in another code to open the mail box, which has another code to get the key which has a FOB that opens the first gate. Then another code on the gate, and use the key on the door and hit the button while you turn the knob and phew! It’s as simple as that to get in! (No exaggeration on those steps, by the way.)

Once we figured all that out, we were slightly peckish since we ate at weird times so we didn’t really eat. So we found we’re staying at some kind of asian food district! There were at least 5 Japanese restaurants nearby. So one had a long line, so we’d go to the next one. We ate at a Japanese sushi restaurant for our first Parisian meal. It

was great! They did speak better English than we spoke French. It's fun trying to teach the boys the basics of French.

One bad thing was that Hilary's crown came out while eating the complementary dinner candy. Luckily it popped right back on. We're hoping it holds until we can get it properly looked at.

We have a washer / dryer in the place, so we're going to do our laundry while we are here, too and call it a night.



Ben and Hilary at our Paris Sushi dinner before losing the crown



Jacob and Jason enjoying our Parisian Bento Boxes

Day 9

Mona, Macarons & the Tower

Paris

We woke up early again today (I'm noticing a trend) and hurried around the corner from our place to grab a great French breakfast: chocolate croissants and a cafe. Then we walked over to the Louvre to get in as soon as it opens. We wanted to see the Mona Lisa before it got too crowded.

We followed the signs, got right there and saw the Mona Lisa! They have a good set up for there for a lot of people to go through and see it. I feel bad for the other paintings in that room, though. They were all amazing, but everyone is facing



We made these! Well, half of these.



The boys taking a picture in front of the Mona Lisa and ignoring all the other great art... just like I was complaining about

one direction. We saw so many paintings where some looked almost like photographs, and with such control of light. And the sculptures had cloth carved to appear to cling to the body where it looked like it was frozen in time.

We also checked out Napoleon's quarters when he lived at the Louvre, which was incredibly opulent and extravagant, but

beautiful. Every now and then, we had to remind ourselves to look up to see the beautiful paintings and carvings on the ceiling.

Then we headed to the basement, where we saw the history of the museum back when it was just a small square fortress. They excavated the original foundation and you could walk

underground around it! It was very well done. It reminded me of how they showcased the 9/11 memorial in NYC.

Then, we walked through the castle and it was starting to get hot to walk in the sun, so we relaxed and got a coke and sat on some tables in the shade. It was good to see a lot of tourists from all over to struggle with French like me. I saw some Italian women speaking broken French ordering from the counter. So far, everyone has been really nice here.



We walked to our amazing lunch at Restaurant Le Soufflé. As the name suggests, we had 3 soufflés. A ham and cheese, another with chicken and mushroom, and a dessert one with apples and apple brandy. Ben tried the brandy on his and it was a little strong for him.

To keep the food theme alive, we walked to make macron cookies at a place called “Le Foodist.” We joined another few families to learn how to make macrons together from a real French chef. It was so much fun. We measured out ingredients, and she gave us all the tips and tricks to getting good macrons. We slammed down the trays on the counter

to get the air bubbles out, and learned mixing techniques to get just the right consistency in the batter.



Jacob drops the macron tray to get out all the bubbles.

Ben and I were on one team and we made the chocolate macrons in an “Eagles green” color. Hilary and Jacob were in charge of the Vanilla macrons (and made them “cookie monster blue”). The other families we didn’t know yet (one guy also named Jason), made lemon and mocha (coffee and chocolate) macrons.



Our picnic feast we ate on a bench overlooking the Eiffel Tower. We drew a lot of stares. Probably jealous. Or I had food on my shirt.

By the time we were done, we had all tried all of them, and all the families got to take home the rest. We personally left with two boxes totaling 40 macrons in there! Those cookies sell for \$3 a piece sometimes. We couldn't let them go to waste, so we took the metro back to our place to put them in the fridge, then doubled back on the metro to go back to the same place we were to go to the supermarket to buy dinner.

We got sandwiches and sausages and salads and French desserts and took a cab to the Eiffel Tower. This was a slight ordeal because the driver didn't expect 4 of us. I was able to apologize in French that the g7 app we used let us put in 4 people and he explained that he thought it was a covid restriction. We were able to figure it out and he was very nice

after driving us right to the perfect spot near the tower on a bench in the shade to eat a picnic dinner.

People were looking at us chow down on our supermarket diner, but we didn't care. It was fun to just sit in the shadow of the Eiffel tower and eat snack sausages.

We walked over to the tower when it was time to get to our reserved time, and we saw a dreaded sign: "Tower Closed due to technical difficulties." Hilary was pissed. She had planned this out and fought and stayed up late to get the

reservation time of sunset, and *womp womp* nope, sorry. the line was long for the thing still, too (probably people waiting to get refunds), so we're just going to get a refund later.

We walked back to the metro, climbing many steps to get back to our place. We were exhausted by the time we got back, but we cheered ourselves up with you guessed it some macrons!

A very busy, but wonderful day in Paris in the books.



The lighting was so perfect, it makes it look fake. It was beautiful to get away from the crowd and take this shot.

Day 10

Day of Versailles

Paris & Versailles

We saved the coffee flavored macrons for this morning so it would help us wake up. We also swung by a local bakery and since we're in an Asian district of Paris, it was a lovely Japanese bakery. They had both traditional Parisian pastries as well as mochi and stuff like that. It was great!

We went next to the Opera de Paris (aka Palais Garnier), an opera house that is really beautiful and ornate. It was also the origin for phantom of the opera story. The architecture was brilliant, but the kids are getting a little tired of audio tours.



The family hating their audio guides at Palais Garnier



The view of Paris from the top floor of an up-scale shopping mall. See the Eiffel Tower in the background? To the left is the Opera House.

So we headed out from there and went to a nearby mall. Now, this was not a typical mall. It has a rooftop viewing area with a great view of Paris! And there's a great area to buy lunch and we sat by a window that overlooked the Eiffel Tower and the recently viewed opera house.

From there, we took the metro to the train station, and man it was crowded. We had to squeeze in there. We each were facing a different direction to keep an eye out for pickpockets.

The train from there was 30 minutes to the town of Versailles. The train was not air-conditioned and it is getting above 80 degrees at this point. We needed to rehydrate, so we found a hotel with a nice quiet bar area. We got some coffee for us and



This place is friggin huge. Versailles Palace had so many rooms and gardens and fine art and sculpture. Too much to comprehend!

cokes for the boys, and sat in front of some French TV (the 2023 NBA finals summary).

Then we went to the Versailles Castle and took the audio tour. The kids are really sick of audio guides now ... especially when they go on about each piece of art in a large room filled with art. It's a lot to take in. We saw some amazing things there, though! We went to the hall of mirrors, which was very

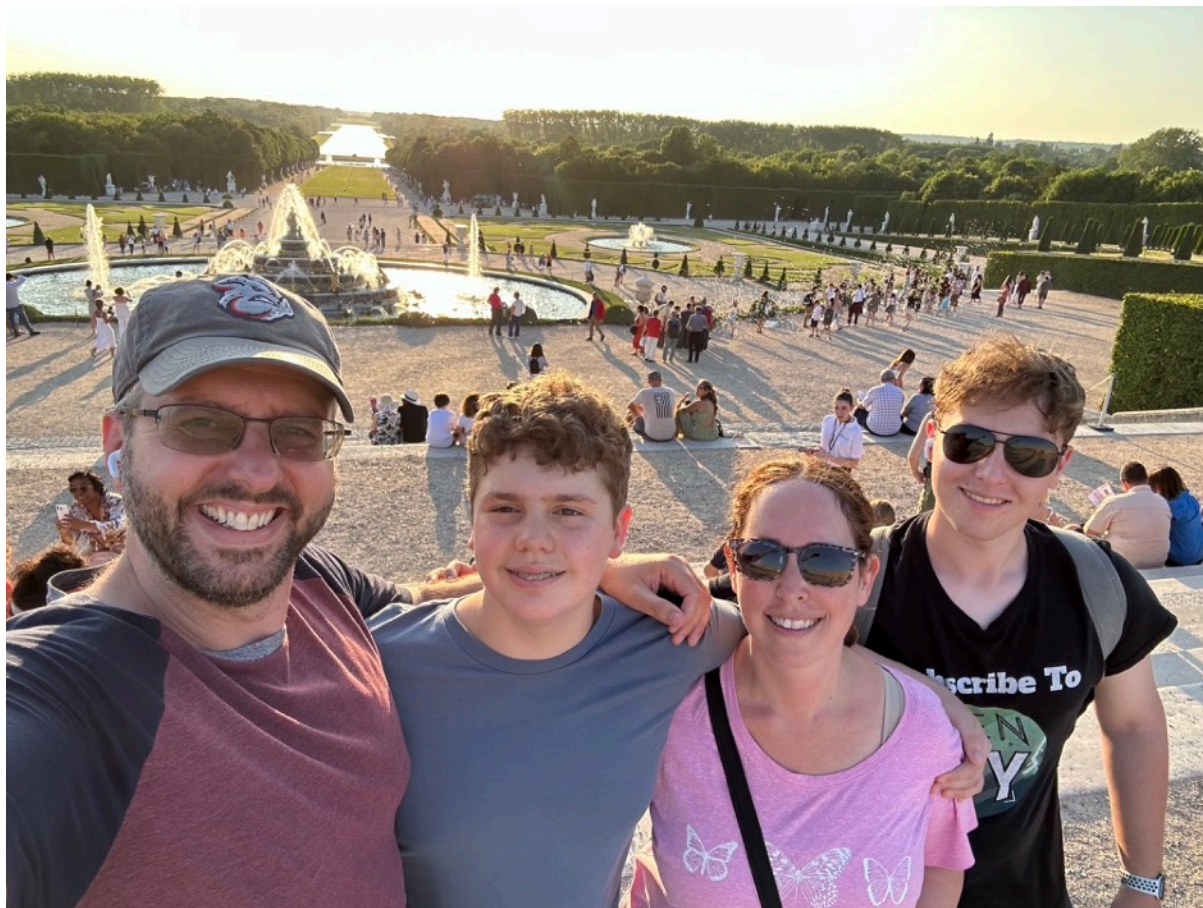
advanced for its time. We saw some amazing art, including some ceiling paintings by Rafael, and we noticed some duplicates of paintings we saw at the Louvre.

After a while on our feet, we felt the need to sit. It's a bit overwhelming because there is so much here. So, we sat on a bench in a staircase that had an open window overlooking the gardens and white marble statues.

We saw a few more things, and then headed out to dinner. There was this amazing crepe place, so we had some savory and some sweet crepes, and then walked to a nice little square in the shade and relaxed for a bit.

In general, we loved Versailles even more than Paris. There are less people bustling around, so you find places to sit and relax more.

We then walked back to the castle for our garden access and to see the fireworks over the vast garden. No surprises here, but the Versailles Gardens are ... to put it mildly ... friggin huge! They just kept going on and on for ever. Think it's done?



See how the gardens just keep going on forever into the horizon?

Nope ... here's a reflecting pool and fountain. How about now? Nope ... here's a topiary garden.

It was very fun to find little things that were different in the garden. You'd go through a hedge passage and there would be a nice fountain or set of fountains all different. We even used the "Rabbids" app that featured silly rabbit characters in the garden and you had to find them on the app. Jacob liked it a bit when we found them. The layout of Versailles inspired early city planners who helped design Washington DC, so there were parts that looked familiar (the reflecting pool, for example).

As we walked around the main area, classical music was playing and giant flames shot out of the ground in time to the



Ben is scaring me ... he seems to like the fire too much.



used to seeing in the states, but it was very beautiful. Ben kept trying to tap me to time the “booms” of the fireworks. We were about 3.5 seconds between seeing them and hearing them.

When it was all over, we ran out of there and took the pre-arranged black cab ride back to our place, and thanks to Hilary for that, because it was bedlam trying to

music. That’s right, baroque classical music with timed flames shooting out the ground.

We walked around the flames and knew we should sit up by the castle to see the fireworks display for 2 reasons. (1) to get a view of the whole grounds at once and (2) - to get the hell out of dodge when it was all over and the 10,000+ people were heading for the same metro stop.

So, we saw the fireworks, which were much more dignified and reserved from say the Philadelphia boat barge explosion we’re

get out of there. We just drove off. He did almost drop us off at the wrong place (Terrace St. instead of Therese St.). Easy mistake, but it would have been a 30 minute walk from that drop-off, so we asked him to drop us off at the right location, and on the way, Jacob got a little car sick, so we asked to be let out for the rest of the walk back to our place (only 5 minutes at that point) and it was a nice night. We rolled in well after Midnight and here I am writing in this journal. Nite!

zzzzzzzzzz...

Day 11

Hot as Testicles

Paris & Montmartre (93 F)

We were able to sleep in a little bit this morning, and we snuck macrons from the fridge when no one was looking as we were getting ready. We headed out, took the metro to a spot where we crossed the River Seine on Pont-Neuf (New Bridge) which incidentally is the oldest bridge in Paris.

We went to lunch at a place called “La Jacobine.” We had escargot! And French onion soup (just called “onion soup” here) and it was the best soup I ever had, and the snails weren’t half bad either.



Ben and Jacob (eyes closed) on Pont-Neuf



The four of us at the top of the hill on Montmartre. If we look hot and uncomfortable ... that's because we are. It was over 90 degrees there.

For the main course, Hilary and the boys had Duck, and I had pork in mustard sauce. Everything was incredible-tasting, and the sauce was just too good.

Then, we walked down the street and found some ice cream at the Smiths Bakery, where they sold Berthillon Ice Cream, and no surprise, it was fantastic! We just sat there and slowly ate our ice cream in the shade while we people-watched and dog

watched. All the tables to the cafes faced the people walking by. It was nice sitting down, but awkward when I was walking and see everyone watching me as I hit my head on an awning, spin around and trip over my feet, for example.

We took a metro from there to Montmartre, and we got in the front car of the subway so we could see ahead of us. Then a French family with 2 little kids (maybe 6 and 7 years old) came

in and pretended to be conducting the metro train, repeating the announced stops, asking people to leave and be careful (all in French). It was adorable and quite helpful.

When we got out of the metro, we took a funicular to the top of Montmartre to see a fantastic view of the whole city. It was touristy, though, so there were some buskers and street musicians, and Ben swears he felt someone bump his wallet, but he had his pocket zippered. It was SO hot today. It reached 93 degrees so everyone was huddling in the shade wherever they could find it. We also got some icees from a vendor to help beat the heat.

We walked up to Sacre Cour (Sacred Heart) church which is a beautiful church and (even more beautiful) it was air-conditioned, so we went in and there was beautiful artwork, and sculpture here, as well. After walking around nearly 3 quarters of the church, we get blocked by a cordon. We didn't know what to do. All the signs said to walk one way around. Then a bright bell began to ring, priests with full robes on walked out in front of us, and after they walked by, they opened the cordons again so we could pass. It was like a stop light for the inside of the church. That's right ... it's Sunday at a functional church. Then, the organ started to play and that was awesome. They had some really deep bass notes in there that felt like it rattled your chest.

We didn't want to stay for the service, so we walked through the streets of Montmartre and stopped at a cafe for some frozen drinks and watched some more people.

We then walked through a festival where there was live music and found our way to the love wall, where "I Love You" was spelled out in all the languages of the world.

Then we made our way to dinner, which was awesome, but a weird day for it with how hot it was outside: fondu and Raclette. It was so cool. Fondu was familiar - we dipped bits of bread and potato in the melted cheese bowl. But I've never heard of Raclette before. So this was a wedge of cheese that sat beneath two heating elements that plugged into the wall. The heating elements (yay more heat) melted the wedge of cheese and it ran down the wedge and onto two plates below.



A cheese toaster called a Raclette - just what we needed - more heat.



Hilary in front of an awning where they filmed “Emily in Paris.” Also seen: the boys making fun of Hilary. Note the punishment backpack on Jacob.

And it was delicious, but what we would have given for some air-conditioning.

We were close to a place where they filmed one of Hilary’s favorite shows (Emily in Paris) and the kids kept making fun of the overstretched premise of the show. And whenever one would make fun of her, we would make that boy carry the backpack. It’s great coming up with parenting hacks.

Correcting behavior and not having to carry the backpack myself: priceless.

But the funny part was, there were other women in the same demographic as Hilary who would turn a corner and shout, “there it is!” and then they’d make their husbands take pictures of them in front of a red awning or a wooden door.

After we were done taking pictures, we accidentally saw the Pantheon, a huge beautiful building with a giant dome and columns. One of the boys just caught it in the corner of his eye and said, “uh ... what is that giant building?”



“Hey, look at this cool, old-looking building that happened to be the Parthenon”

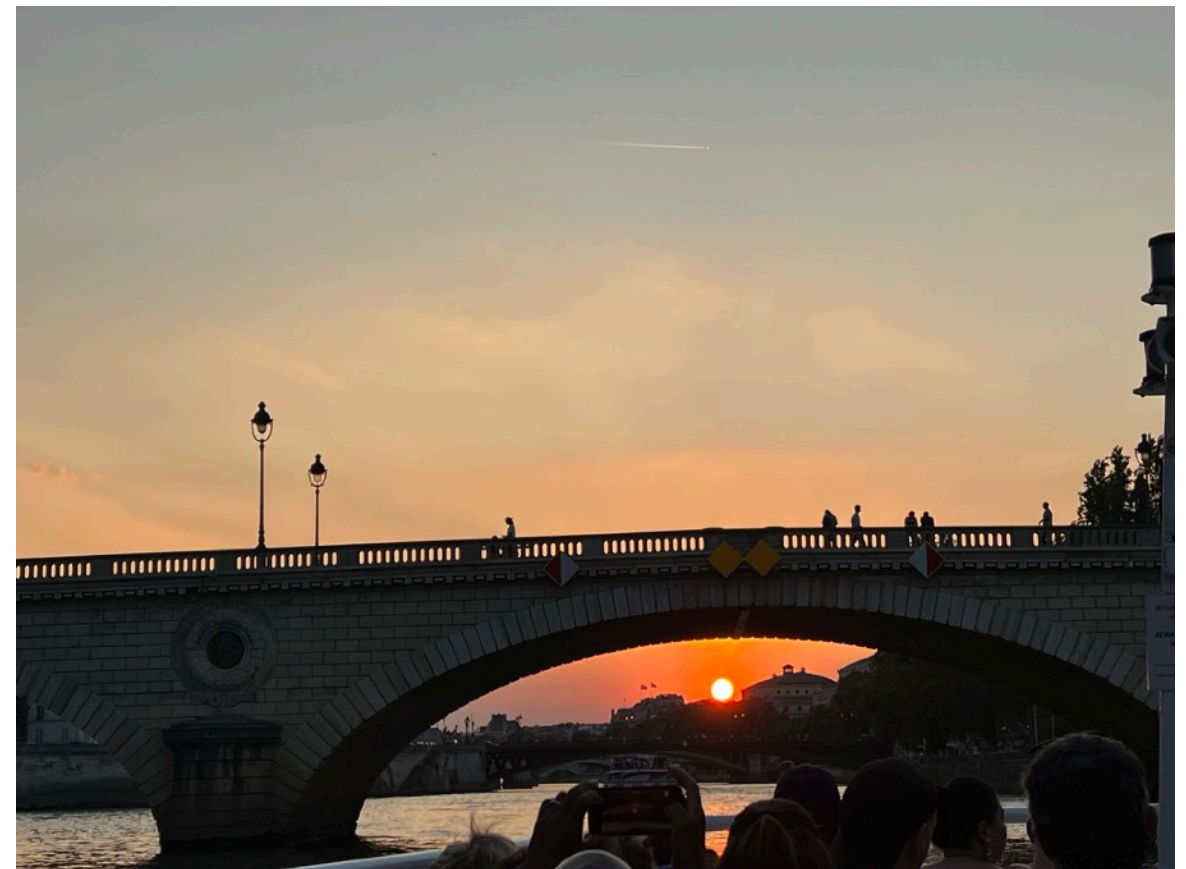
But we had to rush back for our boat tour, so we rushed back down the Seine and we made it before the boat left, but then a huge American tour group cut us off. We were in the middle of them, technically, and since they were all together, one of them said to me “uh, we’re a tour group, so you have to go to the back.” (for reference, picture someone making a face like they smelled something funny and—even though it’s a statement—

going up in the end of their sentences like they are asking a question).

Then, I asked if I could go to the front of them instead, but they said “uh ... noooo?... because we started boarding?”

Ben leaned over and whispered, “I’ve never seen so many Karins in one place.”

It was a huge group, so we were concerned we wouldn’t get on the boat, but in the end, it was a huge boat with plenty of seating, and we ended up sitting right in the front, which was in the shade most of the time, so it all worked out.



River boat ride on the Seine at sunset. Great way to end an evening.



Ben and I tried to capture the splendor of the Eiffel Tower!

The hour-long boat ride down the Seine was wonderful. The guide called out interesting things to look for (first in French and then English), and we saw things we wouldn't have noticed otherwise. (in addition to the Notre Dame cathedral still being repaired, the Eiffel Tower, and about 27 bridges). We saw a building that looked like a tiny White House, and sure enough, it was the building that inspired the construction of the White House in the US.

After we were done with the cruise, we were beat, and the heat finally broke when the sun set and we were thrilled to have the temperature down to 79 again. We made it home, opened the many series of locks and gates, showered and called it a night.

Day 12

Walking Tour & Falafel

Paris

I was outvoted - the majority of us wanted to wake up early to get a hot chocolate breakfast at Angelina's. So we got up early and dragged our butts to this place. We waited in line for about 40 minutes to get in. I admit, the hot chocolate was very thick and tasty, but I just can't stomach chocolate in the morning.

After a nutritious, chocolaty breakfast, we dropped off the leftover croissants at our place and headed out to our walking tour. It was interesting! We learned about the French Revolution and how much of it was entwined with US history. King Louis the 14 gave \$14 B in today's money to the US to help



Hilary, Jacob, Ben at Notre Dame - not seen: hunchback taking the picture

fight the British because he wanted to weaken England, but it ended up being a contributing factor in bankrupting France that led to the French revolution. Also, there were multiple revolutions over time. We learned about the ladies of the revolution, who could not vote until 1944! Oh, and this printing press guy got murdered in his bathtub, rigor-mortis set in, and they couldn't fit his arm in the casket so they cut it off and sewed on another man's arm, but that fell off while he was on display, so they carted him off.

Another fun fact: France and the US have never fought in a conflict on opposing sides: just spats here and there.

The tour ended at Notre Dame Cathedral and we got to see how repairs are going. There is still no spire, but they are still on target to finish by the end of next year (2024). This 60 minutes segment sums up where they are with the project currently:



Latest Reconstruction Progress 2023 | Notre-Dame Restoration.

One thing we noticed (both here and in England, as well) is that there are a lot of people wearing NY Yankees hats (and even a few LA Dodgers hats) - from hearing them speak, it appears the locals are wearing them, not the tourists. I should have brought my NY Yankees hat! I would have blended in more than with my "Iron Pigs" hat.



We had a great lunch at Esmerelda's Brewery

For lunch, we stopped at a place our tour guide recommended called "Esmerelda's Brewery" (touristy name, to tie it in to Notre Dame) right next to the cathedral. It was very good, but



The view from Pompidu Center (Centre Pompidu) featured in the “French in Action” series we learned about in the French class where Hilary and I first met.

they brought the wrong crepe at the end. The sandwiches were very good, though!

From there, we went to Conciergie where Marie Antoinette was held before she was executed. They gave out these great tablets that showed you what the place looked like back in the day. It was a creative way to recreate the place without overhauling what construction had gone on in 200+ years.

After that, we went to Centre Pompidu (a modern art museum) that was featured heavily in the French class we took in college. The fountain was closed but we saw the art, even if it was a bit drier. I remember taking pictures in front of that fountain with Hilary over 22 years ago now!

We figured out a way to go up the escalators on the side of the building without needing to buy admission to the museum since we didn't have enough time to enter anyway.

All these places we are stopping at remind us of our French class the day we met. I even looked it up, and YouTube has all the episodes we learned about.

We walked around some stores, even found the equivalent of a dollar store here (called "C'est Deux Euro"). There was nothing in there we wanted though, so we kept walking. Then Jacob started giggling uncontrollably, and we asked him why. He said there was a store with lots of penis-shaped foods in the window. Boys.

We stopped at "L'as du Falafel" in a Jewish / Gay district for dinner, and had the best falafel wrap of my life! It turns out, it is the highest-rated restaurant in Paris! It even paled with an Israeli beer (Maccabee).

We got some ice cream before calling it a night. Tomorrow, Disney!



Best Falafel of my life at the best-rated restaurant in Paris!

Day 13

Time Warp to Disneyland Paris

Paris —> Chessy (Disneyland Paris)

We got up early this morning (sensing a pattern of sleep deprivation), and frantically packed up the entire air BNB we were staying in so that we could make it to our new hotel.

Our cabby was very nicely bragging about his kids going to Cambridge and California / working for NASA, etc... and before we knew it, we were at the New York Hotel (a marvel-themed hotel in the Disneyland park campus). We left our bags behind the desk and we walked out the Iron Man-festooned lobby to walk to Disneyland Paris!



Vader meets the Victors



The family in front of "It's a Small World.". It's a really repetitive world, but with a nice message of world peace.

We got on rides right away (thanks to Hilary's battle plan). Ben and I went for the roller-coasters and Jacob and Hilary went for more of the calmer attractions. Our first ride was Thunder Mountain Railroad. It was so much better than in the US! Because it's newer, the seats are wider and more comfortable. And it didn't break down when we were on it! Then we went to Indiana Jones and the temple of peril and it

even had a loop in it! We were the literal first people on it for the day.

We went on Hyperspace Mountain and it was totally different (probably our favorite ride at the parks). It was a Star Wars-themed Space Mountain ride, the harness was comfy, and it was an in-the-dark roller coaster. It had a few inversions, too (something they don't have at all in the US). Ben & I loved

going on those rides together. I finally have a rides buddy who will go on roller coasters with me.

We met up later and all went on “It’s a Small World” which was different, in that it started outside and all the scenes were different and it was in French most of the time, but it still makes me smile. Just a bunch of kids singing and playing together in harmony. What’s to not like. Oh yeah, the repetition. If you listen too long, you’ll go mad.

We headed over to the Haunted Mansion ride and it was also much better! They had a story that held the narrative of the ride together better, and the animatronics were really life-like and smooth. The story was centered around the wedding day of a bride and groom that goes horribly wrong and so they are cursed. There was some French, but then they’d repeat the lines in English, too.

One highlight of the morning was meeting Darth Vader. He was really funny and assertive and the kids really were cracking up the entire time, being wise-asses. We cursed ourselves as we got the pictures taken, because we knew we had to get the photo-pass at that point. They were just too good and captured the sheer joy in the boys eyes.

I went on the tea cups with Jacob and it was very similar but smaller than in the US. There wasn’t too much theming either there.

For lunch, we went to an Aladdin-themed buffet and it was really good! They had a lamb carving station that was amazing, and all these different humuses.



Darth Vader really made the kids laugh.

I have to say, it’s weird being at Disney in Paris. It’s like bizarro-US as most everyone speaks English (and multiple other languages, too), and it’s so familiar, but different.

We checked out the Lion King stage show, which was tremendous - filled with acrobats hanging from wrist straps, spinning from the ceiling. There was live singing and music and drummers on stage that was fantastic, and they even changed some of the songs to be more French. There was like a French accordion tango added to Scar’s song, “Be Prepared” that made it extra expressive.

We walked through a lot of areas, too (that’s why we hit over 20,000 steps today). For example, Tom Sawyer’s island wasn’t

on an island this time, and it was easy to walk through it. It's still creepy and weird and I don't know why it's there, but c'est la vie!

We walked through the main castle (Sleeping Beauty's castle) which was really beautiful - it had tapestries and stained glass windows depicting the story of sleeping beauty, and it even had a walking area where you could climb a flight of stairs and look out over the park. And the castle used tree designs to support the ceiling, not unlike the Spanish architect, Gaudí! I wonder if there was a nod to his famous architecture.

Even the parades were fun. We hung back a bit, but could see the whole thing, and the music was fun and sounded like dance remixes of Disney hits. Usually the songs are pretty cheesy, but I want the soundtrack to this one!



Great floats and great music at the Disneyland Parade

One funny moment was when a grown woman who was balancing on a hand-rail to see over everyone's heads fell into the bushes. I think I caught that on video, too!

We had an extra dinner service, so Hilary pulled her magic and got us a reservation at a Chicago-themed aptly-named steakhouse restaurant called "Steakhouse." The steak was really



We all look happy to see each other

bad (chewy, stringy skirt-steak), but it was nice to sit and eat with the family in the air conditioning at the end of the day.

What's nice to know was the kids confided in us that they were getting a little bored of Palaces and Museums and audio tours, and it was nice to do some fun kids stuff for a change of pace.

On the walk back to the hotel, we stopped in some shops to find a travel mug for Hilary (she has a collection at this point) but we didn't find anything that spoke to us. We did see a new Lego store and the dinosaur that was outside the Lego store in downtown Disney. Here, it was circling the ceiling of this store! It was like seeing an old friend. The kids kept begging us to buy more lego sets, but we have no space! And they were all really expensive.

So we finished our walk back to the hotel. Ben and I took a tour of the grounds and found all kinds of cool stuff. The hotel was Marvel-themed and had a ton of Avengers art work and statues that just looked awesome. There was a lot of Alex Ross paintings, which are really amazing.

We checked out the gym, the pool, which was a subway theme. Then there was an art gallery which was fun to see all these Jack Kirby covers to comics on the wall like art. There was even a room where you can take a lot of silly pictures, so I got a bunch with Ben looking like he was posing from the ceiling (like Spiderman).

By this point, I was about ready to pass out from exhaustion, and it's not a surprise why. We did a LOT today, and there was more in store for tomorrow!



Ben just hanging out in his room as Spiderman

Day 14

The Other Disney Park

Disney Studios, France

We woke up early again so we could get a buffet breakfast in our hotel. It was really great! They had a pancake printer and everything (and Master Chef scrambled eggs).

We had to hurry, though, because we were going to rope drop the other Disney park, Disney Studios (like Hollywood studios back home).

We did the same thing where Ben and I hit the more grown-up rides while Jacob and Hilary stayed back. There were a lot of new rides we have never seen before. One was the Crush



Hey, let me outta this thing!



The boys meet French Spiderman.

Coaster, but that made us a little sick because it spun in a circle as it went on the track. There was one like it at Hershey Park, but this was much better as a lot of it was in the dark. Any visuals during that much motion would have made me want to vomit.

Then, Ben and I went on “Avengers Assemble” which is a Marvel-themed version of the Rockin’ Roller Coaster in

Florida. The ride was fantastic, but unfortunately the harness was WAY too uncomfortable. I’m writing this a day later, and my shoulders still are sore. If they got a better harness system, the ride would be amazing!

They even had a “Tower of Terror” here, so we had to try that. It was the original ride like in Florida almost exactly. It was supposed to have a faster loading system, but it seemed to take

longer. The seatbelt next to Ben was “out of order” so we were extra concerned, which made for a better ride!

Then we went on a Spiderman WEB ride! I knew nothing about it, but it was amazing! We just sat in the ride car and held out our hands like we were web-slinging like Spiderman and webs would shoot out and strike the bad guys (evil robot spiders) - we got the high score for the car, and it was such a fun ride! We could even hit buttons or levers to make things happen. It was just so much fun. Our arms were exhausted after that! It was a good workout, too!

We then got a reservation to meet Spiderman! He was very funny and had a French accent. The boys were happy to meet him, and we got a lot of fun pictures.

We then ate lunch at Ratatouille! It was a cafe that was themed to seem like we were the size of rats, with things like bottle caps being the seats, and chandeliers were old Christmas lights.

Then we went back to the hotel early to relax a bit. It was Jake’s turn to take super-hero pictures at the hotel. But when we got there, there was a character meet-and-greet with Loki! So we called Ben up to get him down there too. We took a lot of pictures with him and Jacob, and then Ben ran in out of breath and, when asked who Ben’s favorite super hero was, he said, “Thor.” At which point Loki winced, and sent Ben away mockingly (“why did we wait for you, then”). The boys were laughing!

From there, we went to the pool, which was really nice. It had a hot tub, sauna, steam room, and the indoor pool connected to the outdoor pool. I didn’t spend too much time in the pool



Remy’s restaurant made you feel like a little rat... in a good way

because Ben wanted to play basketball and ping pong. So we played and had a blast. Ben learned how good I am at ping pong from all those years working as a lifeguard at the Livingston Pool.

We took showers and chilled in the room a bit because we were just so exhausted from the prior days. We had a buffet dinner at the hotel, but it was just okay. 1/3 of the buffet was “American food” and it wasn’t as good as food in America, and the Chinese food portion tasted like it was made from a kit, so there wasn’t too much to choose from. But it was a buffet, so the boys loved it! And Ben must have had 11 plates. We had to cut him off so he wouldn’t get sick. They did have cute themed desserts. One looked like mini Thor hammers.



Thor Hammers were a nice touch for dessert

We walked back to the park after dinner and got right on Haunted Mansion again.

We walked around some of frontier land looking for a good spot to watch the fireworks, but the best thing to do was just sit on some rocks until it started and then walk into the main area.

So before the fireworks, they did a lot of projections on the castle with drones behind it! It was very impressive and made it look like there was a shooting star around the castle (or a giant 30 to celebrate 30 years of Disneyland Paris)

Then the fireworks started and it was beautiful. They continued with the projections on the castle and integrated fireworks timed to the animations and music. It was great to

revisit the music from all those classic Disney movies I grew up with, too.

When it was over, we had to wait for the masses to clear out because it was wall-to-wall people, so we sat for a bit, and then



The castle lit up at night for fireworks.

Day 15

Everything we didn't have time for

Disneyland to Barcelona

It was our last day in Disneyland Paris, so we used this day as “batting clean up” for anything we haven’t seen yet.

We woke up in the night with Jacob on the floor because Ben had rolled over and Jake couldn’t move Ben to get back into bed. Hilary helped shove him over. Ben didn’t remember a thing.

We frantically packed up the room into our 4 suitcases and 4 backpacks and left them at the hotel desk while we checked out.



Then, we briskly walked to Disneyland once more. Ben and I rushed to Space Mountain to ride it one more time because it's such a unique ride and we wouldn't have the opportunity unless we came back to Paris, and this time we sat toward the front and it was a different ride! It felt like it was changing direction in a space battle. Really great.

Hilary and Jacob went to the Haunted Mansion again, but it wasn't open yet, so they ended up going shopping for a bit.

We met up at our buffet breakfast at the Plaza Garden restaurant. It was laid out just like the Crystal Palace restaurant in Disney World, but on the wrong side of the street! The food was just okay. The Mickey Waffles looked like they were reheated from the night before and were more of a representation of that famous "Scream" painting. But it was a

character breakfast! So we got to meet Eeyore, Tigger, Pinocchio, Geppetto (who by the way, scared the crap out of me by sneaking up on me and then tapping me on the shoulder). It was very funny, but we learned he was a sidler! Captain hook stopped by and took a great picture with the boys, and then it was time to get out of there!

We went on a few rides after that, as well (slower paced ones) all together. We went on the Storybook Boat Ride, which was cool that it went through the mouth of the cave of wonders.

Then we went on the Casey Jr. Ride which was a little faster than I remember it. It was fun to watch Hilary as she really doesn't like fast rides.



Photo bomb!



Before the fast paced Casey Jr. Train ride



Ben tries to get Jacob wet with the dancing fountain, but the Imagineers made that option just out of reach for Ben.

Then we walked through Alice's curious labyrinth, which was fun to walk through the hedge mazes with the kids and find scenes from Alice in Wonderland. There were dancing fountains that they used to try to get each other soaked. And in the middle was a small castle; we could climb up the stairs to get a nice view of that side of the park.

After we found our way out of the maze, we settled down for our last Mickey Ice Cream bar (Glace Mickey) and went to go shopping. Hilary found a mug she liked! And I got a subtle Pixar hat I liked that doesn't have an Iron Pigs logo on it.

We took a final look at the castle and left for the other park. We were done with Disneyland Paris, and now we had to finish Disney Studios.



Kachow! Ben getting a picture next to his favorite childhood Disney character, Lightning McQueen

We had a ticket for the Mickey Magic stage show, which was very nice, but a little juvenile for the boys. And Mickey spoke in French the whole time, which made it tricky for them to follow the plot. But Elsa came out and sang “Let it go” and Rafiki sang “Circle of Life” - so it was kind of a review kind of thing.

As we left the show, though, we saw a ruckus and a bunch of people waving, and we saw Lightning McQueen drive by! The kids lost their minds. It was cute to see them get excited by a chance encounter like that. It reminded me of the dozens and dozens of times we saw that movie when Ben was a little kid. Then we rounded the corner and saw Spiderman up on the roof waving to the crowd.

We would have stayed longer, but we had reservations for a late lunch buffet (that's right — the third buffet in a row—blarg) at the Hank Pym Cafe.

Now this was really fun because they had a theme as this was the cafe of the original Ant Man. So some food was really big and some food was really small. So I had a slice of a big hot dog, and a little tiny hot dog; a slice of a really big burger, and a slider. Get the idea?

It was very cute and actually the food was all very good. I would have sworn that the big food would have been worse, but the big burger slice was really tasty and the large hot dog slice tasted like a well-seasoned kielbasa.

When we were done with lunch, we saw a commotion on the roof again and this time it was Black Widow and Black Panther joining forces to fight a bad guy and his minions. Because it was on the roof, we could all see great! They were doing some amazing moves, too. She did the thing where she jumped up, wrapped her legs around the bad guy's neck, and swung around, flinging him to the floor. I thought you could only do that with wire work, but she did it live on top of a roof!

After that, we were all done with everything we wanted to, so we sat for a moment and I downloaded Duolingo to try to learn a little Spanish before we get to Barcelona. Nothing like a little last-minute cramming!

As I write this, I'm all caught up on my journal. There was no time to write any of this down for 3 whole days and I admit, I was getting a little anxious.

I'm currently on a plane in the air on the way to Barcelona, and there are kids singing songs in Spanish behind me. It's cute. The only concerning thing is an announcement came over the plane's PA system after we were sitting for a while: "uhhh, we have to have the maintenance crew replace the front landing wheel so it's going to set us back ... uhhhh.. about 20 minutes or so... we thank you for your patience." The entire plane just kind of looked wide-eyed at each other. I'm sorry, you have to replace the wheel? I hope it's not the donut they're putting on there.

But on the plus side, the guy sitting in the middle seat just moved, so we have a lot of extra room next to me! I can't wait to see Barcelona and see how different it is from the last time Hilary and I visited over 20 years ago.



The more you know ...

Day 16

Gaudí Day!

All Around Barcelona

We started our day with a cab ride to a sandwich shop where Hilary and I had a Bikini sandwich (like a ham and cheese panini). I wolfed that down because we were going to be late for the Sagrada Familia.

This was one of my favorite places when Hilary and I visited 20 years ago. It's Gaudí's most famous and ambitious architecture project: that tallest church in the world (when completed).



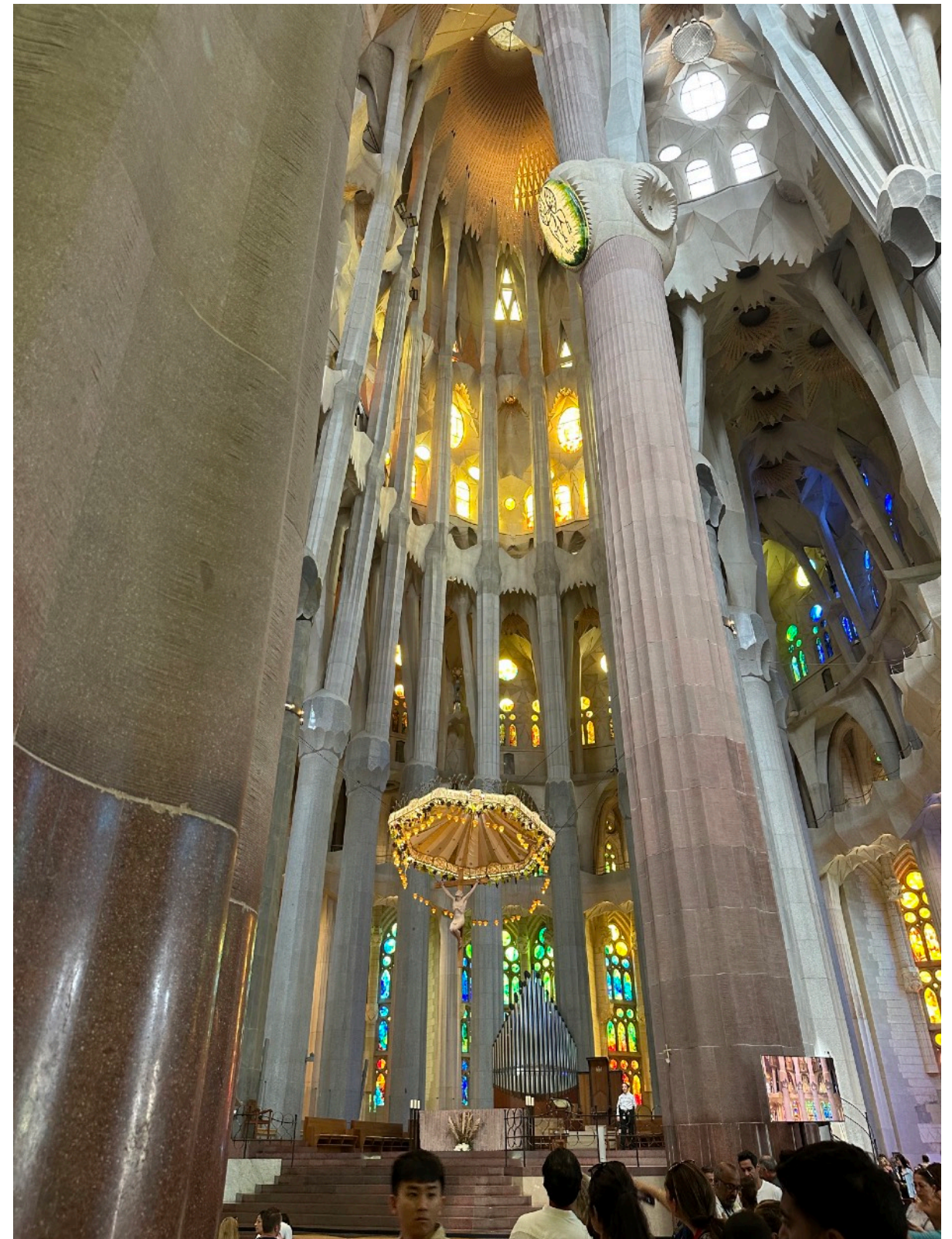
Ma Familia in front of Sagrada Familia

When we were last here, they projected it would take 70 more years to complete. They've got a lot of it done now, to the point where it should be done by 2026-2032.

We walked around. The kids weren't in as much awe as I was, but the scaffolding around the interior is all done. You can walk through almost all of it. Cranes were going the whole time we were there. They are working on the tall center spire now.

After walking through and listening to the audio tour (the kids were not enthused about architecture audio tours), we hopped in a cab for lunch (Kitchens of Saint Catherine Cuines Santa Caterina). And it was bad. They gave us a paella with muscles that were closed. And when we asked them what was going on they took it in the back, forced open the closed muscles and brought it back out. All the seafood was rubbery and stale, like it was microwaved. And they are right next to a fish market. The place had 3k reviews and 4.2 stars. Go figure.

To continue our Gaudí day, we went to the garden he designed. It was spectacular. There were so many things he designed, like walkways up to the top. You could see the beauty and apparent asymmetry in his designs. From the top of the garden we could see a lot of Barcelona, including the church. And there were platforms that looked like oversized dinner plates, and guard-houses that looked like gingerbread houses, all set with wonderful, shiny tile work.



Inside Sagrada Familia - Like a forest with light peaking through trees.

From there we walked down “La Rambla” which we were warned about. It’s very touristy, so lots of beggars, street performers, venders, overpriced food, etc...

It was all true. We saw one guy trying to sell drugs, so at that point, we went down off La Rambla to a town square, which is also fairly touristy, but we sat down at a fountain and then saw some Hare Krishna guys blow through.

We also went to a market where we saw huge cherries. They were almost the size of plums.

Anyway, the town square felt like Italy. We saw shirtless guys busking in front of a restaurant, but in this case, they were actually really good. They were doing acrobatics work that belonged in a show in Vegas: Handsprings on pavement for the length of the square. One guy did a one-handed hand-stand on another guy’s head. While the bottom guy was also holding onto another guy!

We found a good Paella at a restaurant off the beaten path a bit (which most people recommended if you want good food). And it was great! (Colom Tapas). We got 2 paellas and a lot of tapas, and even with Sangria it was under \$80 for all 4 of us. And they even threw in a Limoncello and Kailua as a thank you at the end.

We got a cab back to the hotel and I watched the finale of Season one of the TV show “Silo.”



Gaudí park - see the structural columns holding up a walkway.

Day 17

Walking tour to Dancing on Roof

Barcelona

We had breakfast at our hotel - it was ok - Holiday Inn level good. We met at that same fountain we were at yesterday for a 2.5 hour walking tour. I said it before: I love a good walking tour. Our tour guide was great. He had interesting tidbits of info, he would show us maps of where we were and how that corresponded with Roman times, and he always had us stop in the shade. It was about 82 degrees today so that was appreciated.



The boys favorite store ... I don't know why....

We learned that Barcelona was an ancient city (100 BC) founded by the Romans. So we toured that very small area of Barcelona that was the Roman city.

We learned that there really wasn't a Latin Quarter (or Gothic Quarter). That was just re-branded that way to increase tourism. They even made new avenues through the old sections of town and bull-dozed a path through the center of it. In some cases, they took the original buildings—brick by brick—to a new location. But even though things were moved around, they were still really impressive.

We learned about these homes that were being renovated fairly recently, and they discovered still-standing Roman



Look at these columns from an ancient Roman Temple! Discovered them when renovating their house.

columns from an ancient temple in the walls. People just kept building around them.

We saw the original gates to the city and the aqueducts that flowed water there. Although, the aqueducts were replicas re-built in the 1950's on the footprint of the original footings, though. Much of the city still was laid out in the original way since roman times (the main street was

still aligned to the main gates to the city over 2000 years ago. It was really neat to see how it all fit together over time.

Our guide talked a lot about social changes over time, as well. He spoke a lot about Jewish persecution and the elements that led up to that. He spoke about anti-jewish

propaganda hung up in churches to sow distrust. He also talked a lot about Catalina independence. I don't have an opinion on it, but it was interesting to hear the struggle they are going through to figure it out. It sounds like there are close to a majority of people who want their independent state, but Spain doesn't want to do that. I imagine it would be like if half of Texas wanted to leave the US and form their own country. It's not really typically allowed.

We ended the tour on the place near the executioner's house where the inquisition executions were held.

So all-in-all, it was a great, thought-provoking tour. And like any good tour guide, he came with restaurant recommendations.

We went to his recommendation for lunch: Bodega La Palma, and had tapas. They had really great olives (local to Barcelona) They had fresh Razor clams, which I don't recall ever having before. They were in a garlic butter that was awesome. These tapas were even better than the ones from last night.

As if that wasn't enough, we left there and got some ice cream. And across the way, we noticed a store ONLY selling statues of famous icons taking a crap. They were out of Donald Trump ones.

From there, we were very close to the Barcelona Museum. We went in and there were so many Roman ruins that were discovered underneath the current city, that they just kept excavating. They found old wineries, laundry, old cloth dyeing stores, and more. And they had these laser lights showing how what was below aligned with the street level.

What was also fascinating was how they would just toss the heads of funeral statues into the walls to help fill them in. And they used old tombstones to build foundations to walls that were built on top.

Once we got tired of being underground, we climbed our way back up to the surface and emerged by where the executions took place. It was time to go to the beach and walk around. Barcelona is known for its great beaches.

So we walked our way down to the beach and just hung out. We found some stone chairs we could sit in, and there were a bunch of guys playing a pickup game of soccer in the park.

When we got tired of watching shirtless, sweaty guys playing soccer (had to pry Hilary away) we went to dinner at a lovely restaurant overlooking the beach. We shared another 2 Paella, and this was the best one yet.



Flamenco guitar and dancing on the roof of a Gaudí-built house

It was beautiful to look out to the beach and ocean while we ate, and we were completely in the shade with a wonderful ocean breeze.

This time Hilary had to pry us away from our ocean view, and we went over to the Gaudí house to take a tour. It was amazing! There were curved walls and ceilings and

irregular-shaped windows, and innovative designs throughout. It was commissioned by one rich family back in the day and they just lived there. It looked like a fairy-tale.

After our tour and a brief bathroom stop, (Yes, I peed in a Gaudí toilet) we were ushered to the roof for a concert.

We were to see two flamenco guitarists play while flamenco dancers went around dancing with little finger castanets. It was beautiful being on the roof with lights strewn about, the colorful tile Gaudí designed, and the cool breeze of a Spanish sunset. It was magical.

I felt bad, though, because people kept talking while they were playing. And for some reason, they served champagne from the bar with two rockets on the side of the bottle. It was super distracting! The guitarists were excellent, and they even played a flamenco version of “I will survive!”

We had a full day, so tomorrow we are looking forward to some time to relax at the beach.



The boys keep themselves entertained during the concert.

Day 18

The Last Full Day

Barcelona

So, this morning was like a “best of” all the other days in Barcelona so far. We got marscapone (cream filled croissant) from our favorite bakery. We got horchata from our favorite horchata place. And we even went to Colom for tapas for lunch.

But before lunch, we went back to the Gothic Square because they were doing a very unique display that is specific to this Catalonia region: a human tower. I don't know what they call it here, but that's what it is. We tried



The Human tower got 6 people tall!



The boys decide how to divvy up our favorite paella. There was much debate.

to find shade by some steps to watch what looked like 50-100 people all supporting a human structure. First a few people would join arms on level 2 of the structure, then they would have people climb up those people to form level 3 and so on. At one point, we saw little kids with helmets on climb up to form level 6!! Everyone was shaking and the whole thing could have come crashing

down, but luckily it did not. There were no mats - just hard stone. It was really an amazing sight.

From there we walked to Colom for lunch and had tapas and paella, and this might have been the best so far because all the noodles were so crispy.



The family took in a beach day in Barcelona. Beautiful sand, refreshing water.

Then we took a cab to a beach that was supposed to be a little less crowded, and it was packed. We bought a few towels to put down and Hilary had a rain umbrella she used to provide some shade.

It was beautiful, though. The water was a little dirty and the drop-off was steep, so I only went in to take a dip with

the kids when I got too hot. I was even able to take a nap for a bit.

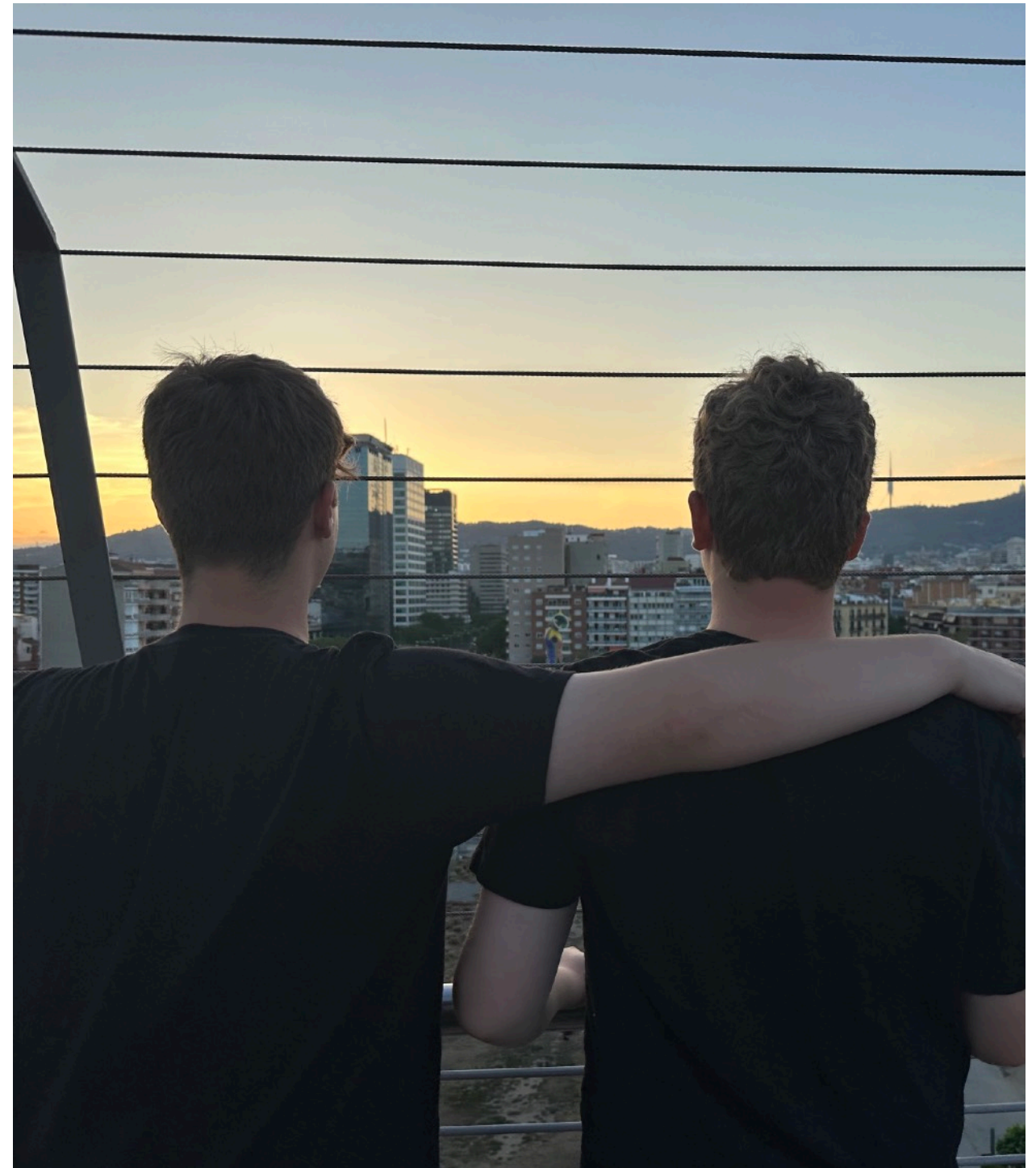
When we were done with the beach and Hilary pulled us away from our beach-front views, we took a cab back to the hotel to get showered up and we headed out to Poble Espanyol. It was billed as a type of Epcot where they had

different areas of Spain represented, but when we got inside (after paying admission, I might add), there was hardly anything open. The restaurants that were open would only serve drinks. Eventually, we found one spot where we could get some snacks.

We walked around a little bit, but it felt like a ghost town, so we left and went to the Barcelona Arena (las Arenas Mall), which was an old bull-fighting ring transformed into a 6 story shopping mall, complete with movie theater, food quart, numerous shops, and an observation level on the roof with restaurants.

We found a decent place with a view overlooking the museum and mountains and it was really nice to sit there with the kids and enjoy a meal together. The restaurant was kind of unique, too. There was a live DJ, and the Maitre D kept dancing through the aisles and was hysterical, pretending different objects were microphones, sitting next to dining guests and lip syncing songs to their faces. It sounds more obnoxious with me writing about it, but he was very funny.

After dinner, we went out to the observation deck, took a lap around the whole thing, and saw the last 10 seconds of sunlight dip below the horizon. We took a picture of the kids looking off into the sunset over the city of Barcelona that I hope works as a symbolic and literal book-end to our trip journal.



The boys say goodbye to Barcelona as the sun sets on the mountains

Day 19

The journey home

Barcelona —> Lisbon —>
Newark

As I sit in the airport lounge in Barcelona, I like to reflect on our journey together. It's sad that the trip is over, and it will be good to go back home, but I will miss the sheer amount of time I've been able to spend with the boys.

As they grow older, it's natural for them to start to want their own lives and their own space. I will always treasure this time I spent with them and Hilary, the inside jokes we told, the wonders we've seen, and the meals we've shared.



This guy doesn't know he's about to say goodbye to his luggage.

Editor's update - we had some interesting travel stories on the way home:

We paid extra to load first on the plane from Barcelona to Lisbon because we heard that overhead room was scarce. Despite this, the people behind the counter at the airport singled us out, and held a cardboard "sizing chart" to just two of our 4 identical-shaped bags and said "these are too big. You have to check these." We tried to protest. There were others with way bigger bags. They didn't take any bags from later boarding groups either.

At the end of the day, we didn't want to be jerks about it, so we just let them cart our bags away. As of this writing, we still don't have those 2 carry-on bags as they were lost, just like this same airline checked and lost our bags 20 years ago.

When we landed in Lisbon, the flight was late, so we raced to the gate to make sure we didn't miss our flight home to Newark.

Luckily, we made it in time. When we were about to get on, they tried to hold a scale to our two remaining carry-on bags and we must have shouted at them, "it's two bags for 4 people. Leave us alone!" and the guy sheepishly moved on.

It was a nice, uneventful flight (but long - 8 hours) - and we went through customs (30 minutes), then waited 30

more minutes at baggage claim before I determined they must have lost our luggage. Note, that it felt like 3 am for us by this point.

So we got in our van back to the parking lot, loaded up the Prius, and were on our way back home. We rolled in just before midnight local time (feeling like 5 am for our jet lag).

We took out those free dentist toothbrushes we've been saving for such an occasion, brushed our teeth and passed out.

Some things we are still missing:

- * about \$200 in charging cables and adapters
- * my mouth guard
- * both our electric toothbrushes
- * Jacob's electric toothbrush and water pick
- * Hilary's souvenir mug from Disney! Nooooooooooooo!