



Monthly Report from **Amber Wallour**  
Long-Term Outbound Student in **France**  
Due Date: November 1, 2010

Just a heads up: this report is long and a little scrambled, because I pasted bits and pieces from my blog.

So, October! The weather has been hot-cold-hot-cold, for which I am grateful, because I still don't quite understand cold weather fashion here. Wearing four layers of clothing never really was a must in the Houston swamp, and I've still got the dEliA boho chick American-style imprinted on my brain. I migrate towards checkered flannel, faded jeans, and converse shoes...

I went shopping with my host mom on a search for the perfect sweater dress that I can layer with some stripy tights and my new boots. Didn't find anything, not yet; the "dresses" are hardly long enough to be tunics. The French are on average two or three inches shorter than Americans, so I have a hard time finding things that fit. I have to say that I stick out quite a bit in France, with my height and big curly hair, but I don't mind too much. It gives me an excuse to dress differently. Everyone here wears black and grey all the time, because it's chic/a la mode/etc, but I love COLOR. I find solace in the scarves; they come in every color, shape, texture, and pattern imaginable and I love them! Will be bringing home a good-sized collection.

We visited my host mom's niece, whose husband had a birthday. They have a really adorable little boy, about three years old, who loves loves loves the band MUSE and the following song/nursery rhyme. I'm trying to learn it.

*Chanson enfantine*

*(French)*

*Une souris verte (a green mouse)*

*Qui courait dans l'herbe. (running in the grass)*

*Je l'attrape par la queue, (I catch him by his tail)*

*Je la montre à ces messieurs. (and show him to everybody)*

*Ces messieurs me disent : (they tell me)*

*Trempez-la dans l'huile, (stick him in oil)*  
*Trempez-la dans l'eau, (stick him in water)*  
*Ça fera un escargot (that will make him an escargot) ???*  
*Tout chaud. (nice and warm)*  
*Je la mets dans un tiroir, (I put him in a drawer)*  
*Elle me dit : Il fait trop noir. (He tells me it's too dark)*  
*Je la mets dans mon chapeau, (I put him in my hat)*  
*Elle me dit : Il fait trop chaud. (he tells me it's too hot)*  
*Je la mets dans ma culotte (I stick him in my underpants)*  
*Elle me fait trois petites crottes! (and that makes three little poos!) \*queue hysteric laughter from kiddos*

Yeah, I don't get it either.

But anyway, we drank a bit of champagne, and I wowed everybody with my French, which was surprisingly good, even though it wasn't Thursday. I listen to French radio on my phone, just to try and speed things up a bit. I'm very impatient to talk to everybody here like a normal person.

On the weekends, I eat a typical French breakfast: bread, butter, homemade raspberry jam, goat's milk (bought for me because I asked for it, not because it's a french custom) and Ricore. And an orange. Oranges and clementines are directly associated with Christmas in France. Every time I eat one, someone points this out to me.

I usually go grocery shopping with my host mom, set the table for lunch and/or dinner, and help clean the house. The other weekend I cleaned the bathroom, which made me happy, because it makes me feel like part of the family. I cleaned EVERYTHING because I was in a cleaning mood, and my host family stared and handed me cleaner products. Mom would be proud.

For lunch one Sunday, we ate foie gras on little pieces of toast with some sweet wine, zucchini and fish (I had a steak) with curried rice and some white wine, and a pear chocolate crumble that I helped to make. Then some coffee. Very good, mmm. However, one thing that I have noticed about French desserts is the lack of salt. They don't typically add any. For some reason, this seems to make the dessert lighter and more satisfying. But just for the record, I think a leetle pinch of salt wouldn't hurt.

Oh, and I forgot to mention: I took a philosophy quiz and made 11/20, which is not bad at all, by the way. But as I have eight hours of philosophy a week, it would be difficult for me not to learn *something*. It's easier than it was before to understand what's going on.

My name here is pronounced Ohmbear. or Hamburg. The gym teacher has the hardest time pronouncing it and insists on speaking to me in English, which is nearly more difficult to understand than French. He can't seem to quite understand that my complete inadequacy in basketball is not a result of my misinterpretation of the French language. Despite my height, I am the worst basketball player in my class. I honestly think that I could've stayed in handball and done better

The most challenging day I encountered happened during a week when I wasn't getting enough sleep (Sleep is key to EVERYTHING), and so my French regressed nearly back to its original state of stagnant non/miscommunication. An artist visited the high school, and I pretty much fell asleep right in front of her while she was giving her presentation. Add to everything a constant state of confusion, fatigue, a bit of loneliness, and a generous dose of self pity (yes, I know! Bad Amber!). I ran when I got home, which always helps, and began packing for the Rotary weekend. I knew it was going to be cold, and I also knew from some previous poking about that there were some warm-looking scarves packed in a shoe box in the armoire I my room. So I picked out two and then bounced over to my host

mom to ask if I could use them. She told me that it was ok, but that one belonged to a cousin of my host brother who passed away when he was nine in 2001. I basically started bawling, and my host mom got a little teary, gave me a hug, and told me that she would be honored if I wore the scarf. I just didn't feel like that would be right for me to do, so I carefully tucked the scarf back into its box. God bless.

The Rotary weekend started off with a three hour drive to Nerac with four other exchange students. We didn't talk much; after a week of school, we were somewhat zapped.

Um, the driver was at one point going approximately 100 mph. Whoo, baby!

We stayed at this place called La Moulin Neuve, if I remember correctly. Same sort of set up as last time with the bungalows, except with way more space and a heater that worked. I greeted everybody (smich, smooch, smich, smooch <— the sound of bises) and then we went to dinner. (pate, bread, cheese, and an awesome flaky dessert thing) I spilled our water all over the table, because I'm talented like that.

Then we all talked for a long time and watched everyone play pool. Being the responsible, intelligent, international ambassadors that we are, most everyone stayed up until at least two in the morning. Don't worry, we didn't do anything bad. We stay up because we want the maximum amount of time together, and with everyone going to different schools in different towns with no way of traveling alone, the Rotary weekends are more or less the only times we get to see each other.

Next morning, breakfast at 8:30am. Lots of yummy French breakfast things. Hot chocolate. After that, we bundled up and piled on a bus to go paintballing/high ropes climbing. I did the high ropes, and spent a rather cold and misty morning zip-lining through the trees. I ate lunch with the Spanish-speaking kids, and afterward we experimented with a spinning contraption on the playground. Three people get on, and then someone kicks off or pushes, and then everyone whizzes around in a circle until they fall off or feel nauseous. I executed an impressive flying leap face-first into the sand, and we had a really great time stumbling around like drunkards afterwards.

Return to the camp. Everyone got together their ingredients for making a dessert native to their country. I, of course, misunderstood the directions and brought ingredients for a Texas-style casserole dish. Oh well. We were split up into groups and taken to different houses to cook stuff. At the house in which we were graciously hosted, I managed to spill cheese on the floor, stick my finger in a tomato on the counter that definitely was not mine, and cut my finger on a can. I was with two other Americans (including Ellen!) who made simple tasty cookies without hurting themselves.

We returned to camp and gave our food to the kitchen, then changed into our blazers to meet the mayor of Nerac. No hitches there. Then we came back to camp to get ready for dinner. Dinner was a little fancy, with some wine set out and important people. The entree (first course) was fish, as usual, so I had jambon instead, as usual. We all spoke english at the table, but there was an important French man so we all spoke French to be polite. We were so tired, we were practically falling asleep in the food. I woke up around dessert time, and ate everything while everyone else watched and groaned. There were about 20 different desserts, but there was only enough for a bite of each. Caramel sandy cookies and three milk cakes from the Latino/South American countries, apple crisp from Canada, cookies and brownies and cupcakes from the USA, bubble tea with tapioca from Taiwan, strange powdery thing from Japan, and a giant chocolate meringue from Australia. And one king ranch casserole from Texas, which was served the next day for lunch, to the massive appreciation of everyone in need of a little spice. I will definitely be making another king ranch casserole.

Sunday was sad, because it was the last Rotary weekend with the Australian students. We will see them one more day in December, but it'll just be for a short while. And the guy from Argentina is leaving before then, so quite a few people were crying, which made everyone miserable. We are all so crazy to

put ourselves through this; we say goodbye to our friends and family for a year, then go through an uncomfortable adaptation to a new language, culture, and country, then we fall in love with the everything and make incredible friends, and then we are torn away again. It's a really awesome experience, but it's also extremely difficult. I mean, I don't know what I'm going to be like at the end of this. Just know that when I finally come home, I will be very happy, but also very sad. And a little bit French too.

When I got home, I could barely speak French. After a weekend of English and very little sleep, I was a zombie. Monday was fun... cough cough.

The French have been holding strikes for awhile now. I only see protesters on TV, there really aren't any crazy bottle smashers in Angouleme or anywhere else that I've been. They are holding a strike because the retirement age was changed from 60 to 62. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that the retirement age is 65 in the US. Every time something about the strikes comes on TV, my host family just shakes their heads and says "N'importe quoi, n'importe quoi" which is like saying, what nonsense, or what bullhockey.

I'm on a holiday break at the moment, for which I am grateful. The French are very hard-core in their studies, and 9 and a half hours of school a day can be a bit draining.

I'm working on a few drawing projects right now, mostly portraits for friends and host families. I'm glad to have something productive to do, and everyone enjoys watching me work.

I spent last weekend with my second host family, because my first host family had some business in Paris that wouldn't be too practical for me to attend. My second host family lives on a hill next to a golf course, and keeps up a bed-and-breakfast in this vine-covered stone villa next door. There's a gorgeous view of the whole city of Angouleme from the breakfast window, and I have my own room and bathroom. Once again, spoiled rotten...

We spent the weekend playing the Frenchified version of life, which my little host brother loves, and watching real-people versions of the infamous bands-dessines (comics) Lucky Luke (pronounced lou-key louk) and Asterix. I enjoyed the Lucky Luke movie immensely, because it's all set up to be a parody of the super-American wild-west shoot-em-up movie, complete with Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Calamity Jane. But it's all dubbed and acted in French, so it's sort of a massive paradox. If you get a chance to watch it, please do, because it is really quite incredible. I only watched a little bit of Asterix, because I was skyping home, but apparently it's really popular here because it full to the brim of famous comedians.

I also made a chocolate mousse with my second host mom, and it was really easy and I think it might even be slightly healthy. So here is the recipe:

#### Mousse Chocolat

2 big-Hershey-sized bars of dark chocolate, somewhere around 70% cacao.

5 eggs.

A few spoonfuls of coffee.

First, break up all the chocolate and put it in a microwaveable bowl with a few spoonfuls of coffee.

Melt it in the microwave. Then separate the eggs, yolks from the whites, stirring the yolks into the melted chocolate mixture and put the whites in a non-leaking food processor. Make sure that not even the teeny tiniest bit of yolk gets in the whites, or the whole thing will deflate and make a mess. Whip up the egg whites into stiff, foamy peaks with the food processor. Fold the egg whites into the chocolate mixture CAREFULLY so that it's just barely mixed. You don't want the egg whites to

collapse. If there's still specks of white or little lumps of rehardened chocolate, no worries, it tastes awesome.

Stick it in the fridge for a couple of hours. Eat as much as you like.

We also made croque-monsieurs/madames on Sunday, and they were delicious. They're sort of like a grilled cheese, but made more carefully with cream and eggs and ham.

After I came back to my first host family, I went with my host sister to her horseback riding lessons. I didn't get to ride, I'm not allowed to do anything remotely dangerous, but I got to watch and take a few pictures, so I was happy. I also walked around and took a few photos of the surrounding area, because the trees are beginning to turn all these gorgeous colors and there are some sheep down the road. I've never lived down the road from sheep, and they're all woolly, so I took some pictures of them too.

I'm going to make buttermilk pancakes for my host sister's birthday; I explain that they're just like crepes, but thicker and with butter and syrup, and also typically eaten with eggs and bacon. This then leads to a discussion of American eating habits (the French are under the impression that we are all monstrously obese and eat microwaved hamburgers for lunch every day) and a rejoicing of baguettes and jam.

That's all for now! So glad I've been keeping up a blog; sometimes I get too used to things and begin to think that this is all normal, but one fifth of my exchange is already over!

Take care, bisoux!

Amber



^ A view of Angoulême from my bus stop.



When we all went to go meet the major of Rotary in our blazers! (there's a picture of Nicholas Sarkozy in the background! haha)