



Monthly Report  
from **Amber Wallour**  
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Due Date: March 1st, 2011

Bonjour a tous! Desolee que ce soit en retard...

The months are going by faster and faster now. February really flew by. I changed host families on February 12<sup>th</sup>, and since then everything seems to have gotten 100% better. The family I am staying with now has a daughter in Taiwan through Rotary, and they understand completely. They've done more than give me meals and a bed; they've given me a home. They treat me like a daughter, and it means the world to me.

With spring just around the corner, the sun has been coming out more often as well. I have never appreciated it so much! Maybe that's why we have winter--- so we can appreciate spring. I went biking with a friend from school one Friday. We grabbed some bread and a bar of chocolate and rode down the river. We biked around a few traffic circles as well; that is definitely an experience I could never forget. We stopped in what I thought was a forest until I realized that all the trees were lined up. Someone had planted them there. They weren't just poplars or little pine trees; they were huge and ancient. They've probably been there for at least 200 years. People have been living in France for a ridiculously long time!

The second half of February was yet another random, glorious, two-week long vacation. I went with my host family to Toulouse to visit family. Toulouse is a city in the south of France. People call it "la ville rose" or the pink city because all the buildings are built with brick or other reddish-pink stone. It was a city that made me think of Sesame Street and New Orleans at the same time, if that makes any sense. The atmosphere is sort of warm and jazzy, and the people have a more artistic flair. I live in the department of Charente, where people are known for being both remarkably shut off to strangers (at first) and extraordinarily sincere and affectionate with the people they love. Les Charentais generally consider southerners in France to be warm as well, but a bit on the superficial side. I used to think that these sort of stereotypes were irrational judgments, but now I think it's simply how the French show their pride in their roots. Here, where you're from has everything to do with who you are.

In Toulouse, we did a lot of shopping for nothing in particular. I found nothing at first, but the last day I found a gorgeous dress that fit perfectly. It also cost 100 euros. So I quickly put it

back on the rack and apologized to the salesman for backing out, since he had done everything to help. My host mom asked me how much I would normally pay for a dress like that, and I said maybe 30 euros. Then she said that she would pay the difference if I paid the 30 euros. All I could say was “Non, non, no... tu ne peux pas faire ça pour moi, non...” but it was too late, because she had already grabbed the dress and ran off to the cash register with it. I was in shock for the next three hours.

We continued on to the foothills of the Pyrenees to stay with some friends of the family for the rest of the week. They lived in a huge house almost in the middle of nowhere, and they were extremely nature-meditation-organic sort of people. It was odd at first to have the mom plunk down on the couch next to me and start breast-feeding her one and a half year old son, but I got used to it. There was homemade brioche in the mornings, and delicious, generously portioned meals for the rest of the day (the dad used to own an asian restaurant, and he could really cook!) and tisanes made with hand-picked wild thyme. I haven't eaten that much or slept that much since I got here!

During the day, it was rainy and foggy, so we left in search of sunshine. We drove all the way to the Mediterranean, which was beautiful, blue, and clear as can be. Another day, we drove to Catalan country (the region between France and Spain that resembles both and neither at the same time) and saw a really, really old town. It looked like something out of Lord of the Rings. There was a moat, a drawbridge, a wall around the whole thing with slots for arrows... I couldn't believe it. The fact that it was still there and that I've only been around for eighteen years was staggering. And yes, staggering is the best word to use in this case.

In general, although I went through a bit of a rough patch in the winter, things keep getting better. It's hard to describe what was making things quite so difficult. What I do know is that it's essential to have someone to talk to. That problem has more or less resolved itself in the past few months, but there's still always a sort of ache for *home*. At the same time, after six months in France, home is beginning to seem less and less familiar. My home is in France now. I'm thinking more often in French than English; sometimes I don't remember how I would do things other than the French way. I'm proud of the progress I've made in understanding, speaking, and writing, but at the same time it seems like nothing extraordinary, since everyone around me is *French*. I'll get to see just how much my French has improved in May; I'll be taking the DELF test, which will allow me to show just how much French I know, and then have it officially documented in a sort of diploma that I can take back with me.

Thank you again for your continuing support and for all you did to prepare us for our year. I am learning so much.

Bien amicalement,

Amber