

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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As part of a four-month Sabbatical leave, Jeffrey Frantz is currently living in Aix-en-Provence, France (140,000 people, thirty miles west of Marseille), along with his wife, Yvette, and their five-year old chitz-a-poo dog, Niko. While in France, *Echoes of the Heart* will be comprised of his reflections and musings on a *Summer en Provence*. If you wish, you can follow his blog at <http://summerinprovence.blogspot.com>.

Summer en Provence. Thus far, our *summer* en Provence has been anything but summer. We’ve had ten days of mostly cool (high 50’s/ low 60’s), cloudy days interspersed with showers. However, every day the locals promise us that, soon, the famed *soleil* of Provence will fill the daily skies. Actually, today (May 11th) offered a beautiful afternoon and evening—much appreciated by all.

Gradually, we are settling in to our upper level (34 steps up and down), rustic, three bedroom flat, which offers a cheerful and spacious (for Europe) combo kitchen, dining and living room area. Our location (which we’d selected on a trip here last fall) is a hundred meters or so from Aix’s famed *Cours Mirabeau*, a quaint and dazzling, tree-lined boulevard with cafes reaching out on the ample sidewalks while—all the time—buzzing with people.

Without a doubt, Niko has made the best adjustment. After spending the trans-Atlantic flight (8 hours) in his cage in the hold, along with the luggage (we had a three-hour lay over in Munich), he’s quickly adapted to the new surroundings. Imagine, from a dog’s perspective, all the new smells in an urban environment where dogs are everywhere to be seen (yes, you can even take your canine companion into most restaurants in France). Already—we’re convinced—he’s barking *en Francais*.

An emerging routine. As the days unfold, our mornings are spent checking the internet for weather projections and news (I’m closely following the NBA playoffs) and, then, it’s off to the nearby *Boulangerie* (bakery) for our morning *baguettes et café*. Always, it seems, there’s a steady flow of people (the French are famous for their breads).

Soon after, three days a week, we find our way to the outdoor *marche* (fresh produce market). These markets are an experience to behold. Filling one of the historic plazas, there are vendors all about and shoppers—both locals and all stripes of international tourists—everywhere. With our shopping bags full of fresh tomatoes, potatoes, avocados, asparagus, onions, and fruits of all kinds, we’re ready to take on the day.

To put our French experience in context, it’s important to know that our over-arching goal (the reason we came to France in the first place) is to become conversational (i.e., a reasonable level of fluency) in French. Although she was born in Panama, Yvette is half French but never had the opportunity to learn French at home; and I’ve always wanted to

speaking French, particularly with all of the Haitians in Miami, many of whom speak French as well as Creole.

Finding French-speaking opportunities. Although learning a new language at our advancing age is not easy, it is exciting and challenging. In addition to our months of preparation and study before arriving, the key is to find and/or create situations for speaking.

Already, we are following through on situations for tennis (we normally played two or three times a week in Miami Lakes), for Yvette's painting (she's a water colorist), and for getting somewhat involved in the International Christian Church here in Aix. However, our most successful venture by far has been through an English-speaking coffee shop/book store called Book in Bar, three blocks from here, where it's possible to arrange conversation-exchange sessions with people who want to practice their English in exchange for helping us with our French.

Another *situation* we've been working on recently is to find people sitting on benches along *Cours Mirabeau* (the nearby boulevard) who look like they might welcome some friendly conversation. Thus far, they've tended to be a cadre of seniors—very interesting and learned—who have been patiently receptive to (*plus lentamente, s'il vous plait*) passing a half hour or more as our language professor.

In any event, we're loving our time here. For now. a bientot from Provence!