

EXPLORING EUROPE:

OUR EXPERIENCES WHILE LIVING ABROAD

SHELLEY ROW





Join Shelley and her husband, Mike, as they explore Europe from their home in a French village. Shelley's stories take you to the wonder of prehistoric caves in the Dordogne, the beauty of Austria, the excitement of the Tour de France, and the frenzy of Siena's Palio horse race. You'll find yourself listening to Aida in Verona's Roman arena, shopping at the Christmas markets of Strasbourg and much more. It's almost like being there yourself.

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Our Experiences While Living Abroad

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ISBN 978-0-9846989-2-9 (paperback)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011963670

First Published 2012 by
Shelley Row & Associates LLC

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Cover Design by Jackie Clements

Friday, May 28, 2010

Festival Time in Cordoba



The annual Cordoba Fair was a dazzling collection of food, festivals and music, with a carnival thrown in. Mike and I stumbled into it on our last day in Spain. It sent us back to France with a flourish. But I get ahead of myself.

The Mesquite Cathedral was our first experience in Cordoba. It is their top attraction. The cathedral was started in the 1st century. It was originally built as a mosque and expanded under three leaders to hold over 4000 worshipers. Later it was converted to a Catholic cathedral complete with a renaissance dome. The mosque portion consists of column after column of double arches on slender marble columns

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with deep russet stripes. It is dark and takes a bit of adjusting to – mostly because of the vast size.

The center section has a “new” heavily ornamented tower set into a floor plan for a typical cathedral, but this cathedral sits squarely in the middle of a mosque. The effect, for me, was disconcerting. Within steps, I felt the difference between the architectural styles and the feelings that the styles create. The building had a split personality.

Thankfully, the most beautiful section of the original mosque was preserved. Its ornamentation was delicate and intricate with a subtly crafted dome covered in mosaics. *Lovely*. Once again, I felt that the newer Renaissance portion felt overdone as though it was trying too hard. However, other visitors seemed captivated and more comfortable in that portion of the building.

We spent time wandering the labyrinth of streets in Cordoba. Too narrow for cars, it was difficult to navigate on foot and maintain our orientation. The cathedral wasn't even visible from street level because of the tall, white buildings on all sides. We toured their Alcazar (yes, it's the same name as the one in Sevilla), an old military fort where Ferdinand and Isabel planned the overthrow of the Moors. The fort contained beautiful mosaics, picture-book towers and the original baths. The baths were in the basement. They felt confined, maze-like, dank and a little scary.

Classes of school children toured the fort building learning of their history. As we left the baths, we literally ran into (or, more accurately, they ran into us) a group of five- to six-year-olds. My darling husband, who still embraces much of his childhood, took the opportunity to offer several spooky

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“Oooooohhhhs.” The Spanish-speaking kids immediately picked it up. As they rounded the bend, we heard them repeating, “Oooooohhhh.” I’m sure their teachers appreciated his help!

Behind the building, we discovered a jewel-like garden. By now, you’re probably tired of hearing me rattle on about the gardens, but this one was truly special. Yes, really. It was small in comparison to those in Barcelona and Madrid. What it lacked in size, it made up for with charm. Long narrow pools were surrounded by bright flowers and a few carefully placed sculptures. Between the pools, the grounds were landscaped with intricate boxwood hedges that contained beds of poppies, marigolds, roses, geraniums and artichokes. Aisles of lemon and orange trees completed the scene as lemons littered the ground. We wandered the garden for an hour in the cool morning sun.



From there, our day didn’t go quite as we expected... and it couldn’t have been better. We set off in search of an historic synagogue, which was unexpectedly closed due to the “*feria*” which we would understand later.

In the meantime, we repeatedly saw women in brightly colored, traditional dress. Some were walking and others were in festive horse-drawn carriages. They seemed to be going somewhere, but where? We finally caught up with two pretty young girls

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who spoke some English. As it turns out, “*feria*” is fair – *duh*. This was festival week in Cordoba. *Perfect*. The girls gave us directions and off we went to seek out the fair.

We followed the crowds across the river to huge fairgrounds. Women in their ruffled dresses were everywhere! It was quite a sight. No matter the age, the women and girls were “dressed.”

I’m still not clear how they could eat *anything* in those tight dresses. They managed somehow. In fact, there was a mob of women clustered around the chocolate churro booth. Chocolate crosses cultural lines!

Babies in carriages were encased in ruffles that spilled over the sides of their stroller. The babies had shoes and dangling earrings to match their dresses – yes, the babies! Mother and daughters dressed in matching outfits and everyone was happy to have their picture taken. They all knew they were beautiful.

Dance troupes of little girls performed flamenco dances. Petite five-year-old girls swished their skirts, stomped their feet, and tossed their heads in time with the music. It was the cutest thing ever! We watched these



kids perform for an hour. The little boys were also dressed in traditional costumes of grey striped pants, a scarf around

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their waist, white ruffled shirt with suspenders, and a matching grey striped page-boy cap. Clearly, the *feria* was an “event” for which everyone prepared!

We relished the women dancing in their fancy outfits. No matter the age or body shape, women in bright, festive dresses danced like no one was looking, even though everyone was looking.

Apparently, everyone learned the same dances as kids. No one was left out. Finally, I could resist no longer and joined in, too. They happily accommodated me – someone who hadn’t the slightest notion of the proper steps. It felt festive and light-hearted, and even Mike joined the dancing. I think he enjoyed being the only man in this group of women and they doted on him! He was in heaven.

The fair grounds were covered with large tents, each containing food, a dance floor and booming music. Fair-goers wandered in and out – drinking, eating and dancing. One tent played a Spanish version of Donna Summer’s “I Will Survive.” Through it all, horse-drawn carriages passed filled with ladies laughing and singing. Men rode elegant Andalusian horses through the grounds, prancing as they went. Tradition and modern life mixed comfortably – typified by a young, traditionally-dressed horseman who texted as he rode!

Across the fair grounds was the carnival filled with all the typical rides, games and even cotton candy, but, here, patrons were “dressed.” Other tents had traditional Spanish food – tortillas (not like a flour tortilla but more like an egg and potato frittata), roasted Serrano peppers, Manchego cheese, Iberian ham, shrimp, langoustines, gazpacho,

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samplerjo (cold tomato, garlic soup) and, of course, beer and wine. All in all, it was a wonderful and unexpected afternoon and evening. Those are the best kind. It was the perfect ending to our trip.

Mike and I talked about the highlights of our time in Spain. Here's the list:

- Spanish-guitar concert in Barcelona
- Picnic at the Prado
- Street dancers in Madrid
- Flamenco in Sevilla
- Alcazar in Sevilla
- Bird nesting on top of the church in Arcos
- Spanish horses in Jerez
- And the best of the best, the festival in Cordoba

As we reflected on these highlights, the two of us realized that it was experiences that stood out, more so than seeing the sights (with the exception, for me, of the Alcazar in Sevilla). It's *participating* in life that makes it enriching.

With that thought, we started our journey back home to France. We took with us wonderful experiences from our time in Spain and a better appreciation for the Spanish culture and the warmth of the people. And we were glad to go "home" but it took effort to get there.

Our train was scheduled to leave at 7 am from Cordoba. We arrived comfortably in advance at 6 am to make sure all was fine with our train tickets. The train station was dark and locked when we arrived! The security guards let us in. I had never been in a train station with absolutely no other people. It was 6:30 am before other people began arriving.

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The shops were still closed when we left so Mike missed his morning cup of strong Spanish coffee. After five train changes, we arrived in Avignon at 9 pm. Thankfully, we had a hotel next to the train station.

On our drive to Cotignac, we stopped in Isle-sur-l'Sorgue and discovered it was market day! *Yippee!* There were no markets in Spain so we missed the fresh fruits and veggies. We shopped and enjoyed a pleasant lunch sitting at a café next to the Sorgue River. Plus, Mike bought a new hat! It was a perfect welcome back. What could be better?

Well, we found out. When we arrived at our house in Cotignac, the rose bushes by the entry were in full bloom, bent over with blossoms. They begged to be cut – so I did. That evening, after unpacking and starting laundry, we fixed lush fresh salads for dinner – something we'd missed in Spain. We sat outside with our salads, cheese, olives and fresh bread and with a bouquet of roses. And there was a full moon. This was participating in life at its best!



Saturday, July 17, 2010

The Magic Bus

This story is a companion to the following story, “A Special Story for Teddy.”



Let me introduce you to our friends, Mindi and Steve, along with Sharyn and Tommy and their eleven-year-old son, Teddy. They all visited us last week. We had an unforgettable time together and the week was go, go, go – or as they say in French, *allez, allez, allez.*

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It all started with the Magic Bus, which over the week lived up to its name. They had reserved a van that would hold the seven of us, but when they arrived at the Nice airport the van was broken. Rather than wait, they accepted the larger mini-bus which became the Magic Bus.

Tommy piloted the Magic Bus to Cotignac, arriving in time to walk into the village for mussels and fries at the *boule* court. The organizers (it was a fund raiser for the local *boule* tournament) weren't expecting a late-arriving group of seven but they quickly rallied and in ten minutes had steaming bowls of mussels and hot fries for us all. Welcome food for exhausted travelers.

The first trip on the Magic Bus was to the Saturday morning market at Aups. We explored the market, shopped for dinner, and stopped for lunch at the charming town of TourTour. That evening, Mike worked his own magic with a lovely dinner which we enjoyed on the patio, under the linden tree overlooking the valley. It was delightful and a wonderful start to our time together.

We girls made an excursion to the lavender fields around Riez. It was peak time for the lavender; in fact, next week the lavender would be harvested and at the distilleries. But this week – the lavender was breathtaking. We took photos and trekked into the town of Riez, where we discovered a Renaissance festival. Vendors with lavender-scented goodies made for fun shopping. After lunch and a taste of lavender ice cream, we headed to Moustiers for some final shopping. It's a captivating town and we all came away with some of the well-known, local pottery. Of course, the best part was spending the day together, talking, laughing and making memories. The road home took by the Gorges du Verdon,

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where we could see canoes, kayaks and paddle boats floating in the blue waters around the entrance to the deep river canyon and the mouth of the lake. This would be an activity for another day!

While we were at the lavender fields, the boys had their own eventful day. They hiked around town and to the local waterfall where Tommy and Teddy eased their way into the cold, blue water. We heard tales of their adventures climbing the rock walls and jumping into the pool under the falls. Their excitement was evident in the energy with which they told the stories.

But the day wasn't over yet! It was the night of the final match in the World Cup games. We arrived at the Modern Bar in time to nab one of the three booths and settle in for the game. We ordered pizza takeout from the restaurant across the Cours. Soon the place was full, including a group of women dressed in Netherlands colors – construction-worker orange. They had a ball! They sang songs, waved flags, fussed at the referees, and slammed down a stream of beers. In other words – it was like a sporting event in the U.S.! The Spanish fans were more subdued, although there were “discussions” between them and the women from the Netherlands who proclaimed in their accented English, “If I cheer for Spain my whole vacation will be b...s...!” Ultimately, Spain won. As the Spanish fans cheered their historic win, the Netherlands fans good naturedly joined in singing and waving Spanish flags. Being in a stuffy, non-descript bar with pizza boxes strewn across the table, drinking rosé wine from the tap (and a “baby whiskey”) made me feel a part of it all. We watched as this event that galvanized the world was brought down to a local scale. It

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was a big day for Teddy – the best so far, the young man said, but he could not have foreseen what else was in store.

The Magic Bus was pressed into service the next day. The gang loaded up and drove to the beaches of Bandol on the Mediterranean. Mike and I chose to stay home, relax and putter around the house. Our big event of the day was the harvesting of Mike's first tomato, which we promptly ate! They all returned about 10 pm filled with stories of their day on the beach. They had a great time!

After a late morning, long walk and leisurely lunch, we piled into the Magic Bus for the short trip to the Gorge du Verdon and the paddle boats. There was still a long wait for paddle boats so we opted for three canoes and a single person kayak which Tommy took. Thankfully, he stayed close by to rescue me and Mike. Mike and I managed to sit with both of us in the front of our canoe so that, no matter which way we paddled, we went in a circle! Tommy sorted us out and it worked much better!

The water flowing through the gorge was the pale blue-green of glacier-fed lakes and it provided a refreshing contrast to the heat of the afternoon. It felt soothing to be between the soaring rock walls of the gorge with cool water running down my arms as I paddled. We saw waterfalls cascading down the rock face as people scrambling up to jump off. There were lots of other boats trying to navigate the narrow gorge. At times it was like bumper cars! Teddy swapped boats with his dad so that he had the kayak alone. He paddled his way back to the dock and beat us all there!

And, finally, the big event – the Tour de France. Steve and Tommy are avid cyclists and followers of the Tour. Teddy,

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too, is the veteran of the one-hundred mile Seagull Century bike race. Mindi, Sharyn and I biked in the metric century and Mike follows the Tour each year since the first time we saw it in 1999. Needless to say, we were all excited about the prospect of seeing the Tour in person. But viewing the Tour is not the easiest thing. First you have to find the specific route – they ride very small backroads – and then pick a likely spot that is accessible by car (or bus), find a place to park before the roads are closed, and wait for hours. It was with a sense of adventure and expectation that we all climbed into the Magic Bus at 9 am that morning in hopes of seeing the Tour about 4 pm that afternoon. We opted for a location approaching the Col du Noyer – the largest hill climb for that stage – hoping the cyclists would be more spread out and moving more slowly.

The Col du Noyer is the start of the French Alps. We drove almost three hours into increasingly more spectacular scenery as the highway climbed into the mountains. About noon, we got to the road we believed was the Tour route. There were already people and cars around. We confirmed with a bystander that we were, at that moment, stopped on the Tour route. I felt thrilled and relieved that we found the right place, but little did I know what was to come.

There is no way to avoid a long wait at the Tour. We planned for it and everyone was in a festive and expectant mood. After parking the Magic Bus... not an insignificant feat... we walked along the course into the village of St. Etienne. The road was small and winding, with a mountain face on one side and a deep gorge immediately on the other. Sharyn couldn't look down! Ultimately, we ate our lunches – sandwiches of roasted turkey on fresh baguettes a la Michael – on a rock wall in St. Etienne. As we ate, the first

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of the team cars started rolling past! That's when I realized that no matter what else happened we would indeed get to see the Tour. Now it was just a matter of finding The Perfect Spot from which to watch.

After walking up and down the course, eyeing it from different angles, Steve helped us decide on a spot where, along a slight curve, we would see the racers approach across a bridge to climb up the mountain. We were wedged into a ledge next to guardrail – not the most scenic spot except for a view of the mountains – but it proved to be perfect. Now it was time to wait. We had backpacks with water and soda, trail mix and sunscreen. We needed it all. The sun was intense. I found myself rotating like a chicken on a spit to even out the sun exposure.



During the wait, there was a steady stream of team and sponsor vehicles zipping by, honking horns and waving to people lining the route. There wasn't an empty spot along the roadside. The passing vehicles kept up an air of anticipation but nothing prepared us for the fun and

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mayhem of the caravan! The caravan is a semi-organized procession for wild, wacky, sponsor cars. There were cars that looked like a rubber duck, a bottle of water, and tires, among others. They throw trinkets to the expectant race fans lining the road. We shouted, waved and jumped for junk in the hopes of catching something. Our haul included four Carrefour hats (red and white polka dots), two LCL hats (yellow), four Skoda hats (white), one tee-shirt (which Teddy wore), four magnets, two bottle openers, three key chains, and an assortment of candy, biscuits, cookies, and even a packet of sausage. It was great fun to participate in the excitement... plus, it helped to pass the time. It wasn't long before the concession trucks came by selling Tour de France souvenirs. Four trucks worked the course. As one stopped, the others pulled ahead a few yards. They continued skipping their way along the course selling from the back of the trucks. It was efficient and effective. In a matter of minutes, we all bought our souvenir packet – yellow hat, yellow shirt, yellow headband, key chain, wrist bands, and playing cards!

The heat from the sun and the cars and trucks took a toll on the pavement. The road was seeping with hot asphalt and missing chunks from its surface. A water truck came by to cool the pavement in advance of the riders. A steady stream of police motorcycles, TV and radio station vehicles with a forest of antennas on top, and sponsor and team cars passed. Still, no cyclists. Then we heard the helicopters. We saw them in the valley some distance away. Motorcycles carrying photographers wheeled up, parked, took some shots and motored away. Finally, after all the waiting, and, almost as in a dream, the lead pack of cyclists came around the bend. Even now – days later – the emotions flood back. We were about to see amazing athletes in a one-of-a-kind event, and,

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most importantly, we were sharing it with friends who were having the time of their lives. There is nothing to compare to that feeling.

We screamed and yelled as a group of about six cyclists came across the bridge below us and rounded the bend to climb the hill. We looked straight into their faces as they leaned into their bikes and the power in their legs propelled them up, up, up. It happened so quickly, we could barely tell which teams were represented in the group. There was no time to think as, right on their heels, the team cars zipped past, bunched together on the narrow road with spare bikes and wheels mounted on top of the cars. These bikes are specially made for the riders and the Tour. The materials are lightweight and strong. The bikes are cared for – as we were to see – meticulously. For cycling aficionados, it is a thrill to see machines of this quality as was evident from Steve’s and Tommy’s reactions. From now on, each time I see a cycling event I will remember Steve yelling, “Look at the bikes! Just look at all the bikes!”

We had about ten minutes to laugh, cry and excitedly talk about what we’d just seen. What teams were in the break-away group? Who were the riders? Who was leading? One of the riders was from the Radio Shack Team. For those who may not follow the Tour, Lance Armstrong rides for Radio Shack. By this stage, however, Lance was not a contender to win, but he holds a special sentiment – whether for the attention he brought to cycling in the U.S. or for the work he has done raising money to fight cancer. Even if he wasn’t going to win, we still rooted for Team Radio Shack.

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Our focus returned to the course waiting for the first glimpse the next riders. You never know what the Tour holds. The next cyclists could have been another small group or the entire peloton. Since we had no media access, we had no way to know how the stage was unfolding. And then, there they were. The initial riders came into view, one behind the other, spreading into more and more cyclists as their

numbers consumed the entire road. It was the full peloton – all of the remaining riders in the Tour. What a moment! We watched about one hundred of the top cyclists in the world come across the bridge and start the climb. It was like seeing the films from the Tour but, this time, it was real. The seconds felt desperately short trying to absorb it all. The teams were clumped together protecting their lead rider. Andy Schleck was in the middle with his yellow jersey. A cheer erupted from us as we picked out the Radio Shack team and saw Lance's jersey. The riders literally filled the road. Sharyn and I backed into the guardrail as they pedaled by only inches away! It was the thrill of a lifetime.

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And then, they were gone. Just like that. We looked at each other – laughing, smiling and hugging, with no worries about our hot, sweaty bodies. There were sounds of joy and excited jabbering as we compared stories of whom and what we'd seen. It was a celebration of an event and a memory made and shared with friends. *What a day!*



Back at the Magic Bus, we toasted the day as we prepared for the long drive home. But all was not well with the Magic Bus. It appeared that we were very low on gas – in the middle of the mountains, with few villages, and slow moving traffic ahead. The nice police officers advised us to go to St. Etienne – but the road was closed. We'd have to wait – a small price to pay for the experience of the day. Except, when we finally got to the gas station, it was closed. Now, however, the Magic Bus magically indicated a quarter tank

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of gas. We, belatedly, joined the other cars driving down the mountain. Meanwhile, the cyclists, by now, had finished the course at Gap and were on their way to rest for the next day's race. We, on the other hand, headed for the nearest gas station.

We found one outside of Gap. As we pulled in, across the street at a small hotel, were the Cofidis buses! Cofidis is one of the cycling teams. Apparently, their team was staying at the hotel by the gas station. We left Steve to fill the tank as we rushed over. Talk about icing on the cake! Here was the bus for the team and the bus for the bikes. The Cofidis staff was busy disassembling, washing and repairing bikes. The bike frames, with the names of each rider, were lined up alongside the road where we could look at them up close. Steve decided that he aspires to be a tire washer for the Tour in his next life! *And* Teddy had his picture taken with one of the Cofidis riders! *Unbelievable*. I don't know how the Magic Bus knew to misinform us about the gas, but if it hadn't we would have missed this experience.

With stunned and happy faces, we reboarded the Magic Bus. By now, it was early evening so we decided to stop in Sisteron for dinner. Sisteron was the starting point for the stage the following day. It seemed like fun to see the preparations for the next stage. It was a good choice.

We pulled off the freeway onto the small side street that leads to Sisteron. That's when we saw them. The Radio Shack buses! Tommy was in the back and yelled to Steve, "Stop the bus!" There was a chorus of "Stop, stop!" Conveniently, there was a parking area directly across the street. As before, this was the location of a hotel where a team was staying, the Team Radio Shack, in fact. We rushed

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over and, there, lined up, were all the bikes for the Radio Shack team. The mechanic was working on number 21 – Lance Armstrong’s bike! *Oh my*. He must have felt sorry for us as we clustered around, gawking and pointing. He called to Teddy and gave him a Team Radio Shack tee shirt. I was in tears. How... how could this day have been any better? The only other thing that could possibly happen would be for the winner of that day’s stage to walk up – which he did!

Unbeknownst to us, Sergio Paulinho from Radio Shack won the day and boosted the team to the third spot. He walked up, still in his cycling clothes, amid hugs from his Radio Shack teammates. As we stared, slack-jawed, the sponsor manager, Glen Kasin, started a conversation with us. *Wow*. As it turns out, Glen is from Austin and has a friend in Smithville – my hometown in Texas! He was wonderful. He told us about the team standings and gave us inside information about how an event of this magnitude is managed. He told us about dietitians who customize diets for each rider, their fluid intake (three liters immediately after the race), and how one rider, in particular, functions on Coke and Snickers bars. He patiently answered our questions, but what I’ll remember the most is his graciousness. How many people does he talk to in a day? And yet, at the end of his workday, he smiled and shared his knowledge with a Magic Bus load of American tourists. It reflected well on him, his team and the Tour. Plus, it made an already rich experience astounding. We left dazed trying to absorb it all. The Tour alone would have been enough, and yet we saw the Cofidis team and were made to feel welcome by the Radio Shack Team.

Dinner was filled with recaps of our day and personal reflections, amid a backdrop of vendor tents for the next

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day's start. The ancient towers of Sisteron, hung with huge yellow and green jerseys, and the old fortress on the hill made a breath-taking setting. With stomachs and hearts full, our Magic Bus driver, Steve, took us home.

A tired group pulled into Cotignac about midnight, only to be stopped at the main street. In all our excitement, we'd forgotten that it was Bastille Day! The Cours was filled with people, a band was playing, and fireworks were exploding. This was not just any fireworks display! They were fired from the ground, across the street from the crowds of people, by a man who was lighting them with a match! Sparks were flying and the air was filled with smoke and the smell of sulfur! As the crowd cheered, we watched fireworks reflected in the windows and waited. It was somehow a fitting end to the day. The band played "In the Mood" as we walked up the driveway admiring the sky full of stars. Sharyn frequently asks Teddy, "Is it a good day to be Teddy Collinson?" Today, she didn't need to ask. It was a good day to be any one of us.

Our week was filled with activities and a never-to-be-forgotten day at the Tour de France. But mostly, it was filled with togetherness. We walked, talked, ate and laughed. I was surrounded by the energy from my "girls." I experienced France through the eyes of an astute eleven-year-old and enjoyed the companionship of dear friends. We have shared memories that will forever be a bond. The Magic Bus returned to the airport this morning, but the magic of the memories float in the air around me and the magic of the friendships stretch around the world. It's not about the bike, or the bus, or the trip. It's about the love, affection and sharing between special people... but the Magic Bus helped.



Join Shelley and her husband, Mike, as they explore Europe from their home in a French village. Shelley's stories take you to the wonder of prehistoric caves in the Dordogne, the beauty of Austria, the excitement of the Tour de France, and the frenzy of Siena's Palio horse race. You'll find yourself listening to Aida in Verona's Roman arena, shopping at the Christmas markets of Strasbourg and much more. It's almost like being there yourself.

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