

ABAC Trip Finds Best of London & Paris

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TIFTON—From a Ploughman’s lunch at a genuine English pub to a fabulous dinner on the Eiffel Tower, the recent Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College trip to London and Paris was absolutely off the chart when it comes to the fun factor.

My wife, Kris, and I led an enthusiastic band of Tifton travelers including Billy and Geri Selph, Scott and Barbara Chestnutwood, and Joe and Laura Pope. We dined on the Eiffel Tower, heard the gonging of Big Ben, and cruised the romantic Seine River.

The trip was organized by the Office of External Affairs and Advancement at ABAC. Other trips planned for this year include Australia and New Zealand and a journey through the Smokies. In 2012, travelers can sign up for Ireland, the French Riviera, Panama, or Hawaii. Visit the web site at www.abac.edu/travel.

The trips are open to anyone who has a zest for travel. E-mail Diane Kilgore today at dkilgore@abac.edu or call her at (229) 391-5070. Below you will find just a small taste of the great time we had on our July journey across the Big Pond.

DAY 1: Flying out of the Jacksonville, Fla., airport is so convenient for Tifton travelers. We had plenty of time to make our connecting flight in Atlanta for our 11 p.m. Delta jet to London. Flying eight hours across the Atlantic Ocean is always an adventure so I pack a book and watch several movies. With some long naps, the time passes swiftly.

DAY 2: We land at Heathrow in London at 12:15 p.m. since that magnificent city is five hours ahead of us. Mark, our Collette Vacations guide, is waiting, and we board the motor coach for the hotel, located 10 minutes from the Thames River, near the Tower of London.

The Romans founded London in 55 B.C. because of its advantageous location on the Thames. It’s a tidal river so there’s a 15 to 20 foot difference in the water level.

Our tour package includes dinner at the hotel, and we have basically been awake all night but we’re in London! So off we go for a 10-block hike to St. Paul’s Cathedral. We exchange dollars for pounds along the way. Carry your ATM card although you will not enjoy the exchange rate which is \$1.64 dollars for one pound.

St. Paul’s is absolutely stunning. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire in 1666, you have to see the gleaming dome, the mosaics, the stonework, and the sculptures.

About that fire. Eighty percent of the city, including 13,000 homes, was destroyed. Amazingly, only nine people died. The blaze came a year after the Great Plague which killed one of every three Londoners. The fire actually helped in that it cleaned out the rats and fleas which had been carriers of the Plague. Remember, this is 1665 so one remedy to the Plague was to actually board people up in their houses so they couldn't spread the disease to others.

DAY 3: Our London guide gives us a fantastic tour of the city. We disembark for pictures at Westminster Abbey, site of the Royal Wedding. Later in the day, we return to Westminster for the complete tour which includes a fabulous selection of William and Kate wedding pictures. The high definition photos add a modern day quality to this awesome abbey, which was built well before the coronation of William the Conqueror on Christmas Day in 1066.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, D.H. Lawrence, Charles Darwin, Sir Isaac Newton and Lewis Carroll are buried here. There's a monument to William Shakespeare but he's buried at Stratford-on-Avon.

We see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, which is so very proper and done with lots of pomp and ceremony. We walk past 10 Downing Street, one of the most famous addresses in the world. It's the 300-year-old building where the British Prime Minister lives and works. We have our photo taken with a British Horse Guard and proceed to Trafalgar Square with its famous Nelson Column and the four gigantic lion statues which guard it.

Lunch is a delight at a pub called "The Clarence" with a wonderful atmosphere, flowerboxes all around, and plenty of Guinness in big mugs. Two of us have the authentic Ploughman's Lunch with ham while others opt for the fish and chips.

Then it's on to the Phoenix Theatre for an afternoon matinee where we see "Blood Brothers." It takes awhile to get there because everyone we ask says it's only 10 minutes away. Ah, the British, what a wry sense of humor they have with these tourists from South Georgia.

Our plan for the evening is to ride the London Eye, a mammoth ferris wheel-like attraction, which has 25-person enclosed cars. It moves so slowly that the ride never stops while people enter and exit. Alas, it's sold out for the day, and we catch London taxis back to the hotel.

DAY 4: It's a gorgeous blue sky day as we take the coach to the largest inhabited castle in the world, Windsor Castle, one of the official residences of the Queen. Our guide tells us that the Queen lives and works in Buckingham Palace but prefers to stay in the country at Windsor Castle. The Queen's standard is not flying at Windsor so she is away but we explore the perfectly landscaped grounds and gasp at the weaponry display.

Sunshine warms our faces as we wander through the shops and restaurants around the castle. On the ride back to London, we talk about the English terms for American words. Bathroom is loo, trunk is boot, apartment is flat, to rent is to let, and gas is petrol. Petrol prices in London are \$8.38 per gallon. Wow!

We spend the rest of a wonderful afternoon at the Tower of London, where the Crown Jewels are located and where we hear some former inhabitants left without their heads. The Tower is actually a 900-year-old castle-like structure on the Thames, beautifully lit at night.

Good pictures abound later that evening when we return to the Tower Bridge over the Thames and look back toward the Tower of London. The Tower Bridge is actually the bridge you think about when you think of the London Bridge, which is now located in Arizona of all places.

DAY 5: Up early to ride the Eurostar train underneath the English Channel to France. Smooth ride through lots of English countryside. Then we spend 20 minutes underneath the Channel in the tunnel which opened in 1994. In less than three hours, we are in Paris.

The City of Lights. The City of Love. It's Paris in the summer where the temperature is perfect, and the trees lining the avenues sway in the gentle breeze. This is no doubt one of the most beautiful cities in the world. The architecture is uniform with consistent height on the buildings, and only a couple of skyscrapers disturbing the landscape.

Fifteen minutes from the hotel we walk underground and come up at the renowned landmark, the Arc de Triomphe. Twelve avenues radiate from the 164-foot high Arc, and there are no traffic lanes surrounding it. Hundreds of cars make their own lanes. No wonder only 50 per cent of the people in Paris have autos. It's wild.

Completed in 1836, the Arc was commissioned by Napoleon to celebrate a French victory. Actually, he had another Arc built but determined it was too small so it now sits in a courtyard at the Louvre. We stroll down one of the most famous streets in the world, the Champs Elysees, which translates "Fields of Paradise." Life is good.

But it gets better. The highlight of the trip for me is the dinner that evening on the Eiffel Tower. The food, the atmosphere, and the location make that night something really special. Built in 1889 as the entrance to the World's Fair, the Eiffel Tower was the tallest building in the world at that time. It was only supposed to stay up for 20 years but it became such an icon, the French just couldn't take it down. It's 1,063 feet tall, about the size of an 81-story building.

After dinner, we cruise down the Seine River, which is to Paris as the Thames is to London. Both cities are defined by their rivers. Hand-held phone-like devices give a pre-programmed commentary on the buildings as we glide along the Seine.

DAY 6: Our expert tour guide has a wonderful French accent and gives us an insightful tour of Paris on a cloudy, cool morning. A brief rain shower soaks me as I exit the bus to take a long distance shot of the Eiffel Tower with the still and video cameras. My companions elect to stay on the bus.

The weather clears, and the sun shines brightly as Kris and I figure out the Paris subway system, called the Metro, to ride to the Musee d'Orsay where we wash our eyes with the paintings of

Monet and Manet. She loves Monet but I am equally impressed to see the works of Van Gogh, Degas, Renoir, and even “Whistler’s Mother.” The converted railway station, built in 1900, is really a work of art in itself.

Our other travelers leave Paris for the day to visit the Palace of Versailles. Louis XIV moved to Versailles in 1678 and made it the largest palace in Europe. We had seen Versailles on a previous ABAC trip, and it is a sight you cannot miss. The Hall of Mirrors will take your breath away.

That night we get adventurous, and everyone takes the Metro again to Montmartre, the highest point in Paris and home to Sacre-Coeur, a beautiful cathedral where priests still pray for the souls of the dead 24 hours a day. It took 46 years to build and was completed in 1923. It’s at the top of a hill, and we take numerous rest stops while climbing hundreds of steps. The view at sunset looking back over Paris is worth the effort. Lots of souvenir shops in this area.

We dine that evening at one of the many French cafes which offer both indoor and outdoor seating. The French fill these cafes for espresso in the mornings, and wine in the afternoons. People-watching in Paris...priceless.

DAY 7: The Cathedral of Notre Dame is our destination as we pile on to the Metro to visit the world renowned landmark which had its cornerstone laid in 1163 but was not finished until 170 years later. Yes, there are gargoyles, placed on the outside by architect Viollet-le-Duc to ward off evil. You can climb to the top and pretend to be the Hunchback but we took a long, leisurely walk beside the Seine to the world’s largest museum instead.

The Louvre includes seven miles of galleries and 350,000 works of art. The famous glass pyramid designed by I.M. Pei became the entrance in 1989. Crowds are huge inside the museum, and we have to shoulder our way to the “Mona Lisa.” It took Leonardo da Vinci four years to paint his masterpiece. The painting is on a wall by itself behind bulletproof glass. Guards keep the crowd moving. Before making its permanent home in the Louvre, it was stolen and went missing for two years. It is not insured because no insurance company will take the risk.

We spent our final night in Paris at a cabaret with a mouth-watering dinner, lively music, a trapeze artist, a juggler, and lots of can-can girls. It’s a great show.

DAY 8: An afternoon flight to Atlanta takes over nine hours since we are heading into the wind. I watch three movies and get deep into my book. Paris is six hours ahead of Georgia so we land in America before 6 p.m. After being awake for over 20 hours I sleep right through the thunderstorm on the short hop from Atlanta to Jacksonville.

We arrive home at 1 a.m., still talking about the sights and sounds we have experienced in the last week. If you haven't seen the world, there's no better day than today. ABAC can take you there.

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