

# Learning a Language, and a Few Life Lessons, in France

After a painful breakup, the author travels to Provence for a language immersion homestay and learns the value of facing up to mistakes.

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**By Jenny Gross**

Reporting from the South of France

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When I booked a one-on-one intensive language program in France, I envisioned a dreamy getaway, where I could practice French while getting to know Provence through the eyes of a local.

But as soon as I arrived, I had immediate doubts. Days earlier, my long-term relationship had collapsed. As my head spun, I wondered how I was going to weather four days of forced small talk, away from home, in another language, with a stranger.

Or was this exactly what I needed?

Brigitte Miramont, the host of my program, suggested over the phone that we meet at the Starbucks near the Marseille train station's "dépose minute." I had no clue what that was, but at our agreed upon time and day, I found the Starbucks and met a beaming Ms. Miramont. She pointed out the "dépose minute," explaining it meant "drop-off point."

That explanation was the last exchange we had in English.

There are no official statistics on how many language homestay programs exist, but many have popped up in recent years as alternatives to formal language schools, not just in France, but also in Britain, Spain, Italy and elsewhere. There are companies, like Lingoo, that connect students with preapproved home stay programs, while other hosts, like Ms. Miramont, operate independently.

Ms. Miramont started hosting students at her home seven years ago when she retired from her position as a teacher of French for foreign speakers at Aix-Marseille University. She has had more than 100 students, and most sign up for a one-week course and stay at her countryside house, which has an infinity pool and panoramic views of the Mediterranean.

I chose her program, Live and Learn en Provence, which I found on Google, because it had good reviews and offered both rigorous study and cultural immersion. She shows students her favorite spots in the region, planning excursions tailored to their interests. For me, that was swimming, hiking and trying local food.

On that first day, from the train station Ms. Miramont took me on a tour of Marseille that included dinner and a jazz concert. We didn't get to her home until late. There I settled into my room, which had its own entrance, bathroom and a private patio where I could do my homework.

The next morning, over coffee and croissants on her patio, she told me about the unusually strong winds in the area, her upcoming travel to Uzbekistan and the increased activity of the cicadas chirping around us.

I forced myself to focus. I intended to ask a question about the times of day when the cicadas, or “cigales” in French, start and stop chirping, but used the word for “cigars” instead. She looked at me quizzically.

Then I asked another question, using “à” improperly with the word “difficile.” “Difficile de!” Ms. Miramont interjected, correcting my usage of a preposition for what felt like the tenth time that day, and the day had just begun.

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I had studied French for more than a decade, enchanted by the beauty of the language and motivated by the progress I was making. At the same time, I felt like I was hitting a wall, repeating mistakes, no matter how many flashcards I reviewed or episodes of “The Bureau” and “Lupin” I watched. I had come to Provence hoping for a breakthrough, but instead I felt mounting frustration.

The problem, Ms. Miramont said, was that incorrect grammar had been “fossilized” — “fossilisé” — in my head. What she needed to do was deprogram me.

A deprogramming of any sort sounded like a good idea. We headed to Ms. Miramont's study, a place that she told me her students refer to as “la chambre de torture,” to start our first lesson. She marked up a test she had asked me to complete before the trip, pointing out my misplaced pronouns, misused transitions and, with blue and pink highlighters, misgendered nouns.

Later, over lunch in the shady gardens of the Hôtel de Caumont in Aix-en-Provence, I ordered a “tarte aux abricots,” mangling the pronunciation. “Liaison! Liaison! Liaison!” Ms. Miramont said, referring to the rule that requires the gliding together of certain words in French. She enunciated “tarte aux abricots” (pronounced: tar-toh-zabry-koh) for me to repeat. I contemplated taking a break from speaking altogether.

Even in my haze, parts of the trip brought me unfiltered delight, in the way that discovering new places has always done. Ms. Miramont took me to Christophe Madeleines, a hole-in-the-wall bakery where I sampled a warm, orange-flavored madeleine, the best I have ever eaten.

Ms. Miramont gave me recommendations for hiking trails outside Cassis with access to secluded narrow inlets, known as calanques, where I swam in turquoise waters. At an outdoor concert at the Théâtre de la Sucrière in Marseille, we got lost in the beauty of a performance by the Cuban jazz pianist Omar Sosa.

Ms. Miramont also took me to the Eden Theater in the town of La Ciotat. Opened in 1889, the Eden is the oldest public cinema in the world in operation and where the Lumière brothers, among the first to create motion pictures, screened their early films.

Over car rides, walks along the coast and glasses of wine, Ms. Miramont and I discussed not only grammar and usage, but also a decision by her daughter, a dentist, to become a professional actress, our careers and ambitions and how to talk about politics with friends who had different opinions.

With Ms. Miramont, there was no glossing over mistakes. She tells her students that she is “not a magician” and that progress takes daily, hard work. You screw up, you accept what went wrong, and you start again. Maybe this was what I needed to remember, and not just in my approach to learning French.

On my last day of the trip, Ms. Miramont drove me to La Ciotat train station to see me off. I asked the clerk for a ticket “à Marseille.” “Pour Marseille,” Ms. Miramont corrected me a few minutes later, explaining that “pour” was used when buying a ticket to a destination. We hugged, and I boarded the train, heading somewhere new.

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