**A Journey to France, By Georgia Pearce**

I left the cold rainy Tassie at 2pm on a Saturday afternoon, dressed in a bright green jacket and armed with an extremely heavy suitcase threatening to push the luggage weight already! A quick trip to Sydney and a four hour wait until we boarded our first big plane. Most of the team met about half an hour before we bordered, except J’Amie who was late flying in meaning we had to run to our gate while last call for our flight rang out throughout the airport. The team consisted of Jess, Hannah, J’Amie and Danae our coach/manager. We all got to know each other a little bit over the 14.5 hour flight to Abu Dhabi, a 3 hour stop over before another 7 hour plane ride to Paris, nothing like getting to know someone being sleep deprived and not showered for 21 hours!

Thankfully we had Sue Williams meeting us at the airport, we were tired and keen to have a sleep. Sue would be staying with us throughout our trip acting as our tour guide, interpreter, entertainment and driver. We all piled into the mini-van for a 3 hour drive to the accommodation which was a farmhouse near Fontaine Le Pin. As we were all plum tuckered, we ate tea which was prepared for us by Axelle, another person we had to help us get around, then sent ourselves straight to bed.

Our first day was a free day to pick whatever we wanted to do, we were all extremely tired and didn’t feel like doing much, so the decision was made for some relaxing sightseeing for a couple of hours at Cabourg, a little French town beside the sea. We were able to go for a look around, and dip our toes in the water before having lunch in a restaurant by the shore. Much to Sue and Axelle’s surprise we all thought it was far too cold to have a swim, take a Tasmanian to a warm 25 degree part of the world and she still won’t consider swimming!

The second day we got to go Caen where we visited the war memorial museum. We had other people who worked for the Coren come with us as well as two other riders from the French team. We started the day walking through the museum with English speaking headphones. It was interesting to find out that Caen was heavily bombed and damaged during the war to the point they had to rebuild most of it. We were able to see pictures and films from when it was bombed, and then see it for ourselves to how it looks today. After the museum we went on a bus tour to go see the beaches from the d-day landings. Seeing some of the big bomb craters and the extremely tall and sheer cliffs where the American soldiers climbed. We also visited the American War Memorial where 9,000 Americans are buried. The Memorial is extremely well maintained and is beautifully immaculate. We had spent a full day touring around but there is no rest for the wicked! We were invited to a cocktail party by the Coren with the Mayor of Caen. Before the cocktail we got a tour of the Abbey, where everything was first explained in French, then English.

Day three we went to Haras National de Saint Lo, where we got to have a look around at the riding school which featured a huge indoor arena, barns, plenty of stables and outdoor arenas. You could compare it to The Saddle Club, where everyone keeps their horses at the riding school, or if you don’t own one you can have your own school horse. This is an extremely common occurrence in France, for them it seems strange that we have our horses in our backyard and might not ride on a sand arena! While we were there we also got a chance to go and see a foal show that was in full swing. We had the opportunity to go talk to the judges about what they are looking for when judging the foals, which was different points of conformation. We went walking around the big lot of stables around where the show was being held, where we got to see the famous stallion, Mylord Cathargo who was one of the best showjumpers in the world before retiring in 2014. After spending our morning looking at horses we got to do what we were most looking forward to, riding horses along the beach on the Mont Saint Michel. We were so excited to finally be able to hop on some horses. We had a pretty interesting looking bunch of horses, most of them being over 20 years old. We cantered up and down the beach along the trails while waiting for the tide to be just right. Before you can go across the crossing to the Mont Saint Michel you must wait until the tide is fully out as we have to cross over the ocean floor to get there. You can only go over with an experienced guide as the path changes every day due to the tide and it’s very easy for people to get into trouble. We all had some interesting horses, with Jess having a small pony that bolted off past the leader every time we cantered and J’Amie had a horse which tried to buck her off for most of the ride!

Day 4 we got up nice and early to head out in the mini-van to our adventure to go kayaking on the Orne River. We headed out in pairs for a peaceful kayak along the river which took us about 2 hours. Hannah and I managed the journey quite well, unlike Danae and Axelle who couldn’t quite get the hang of it to begin with and spent quite a bit of time going around in circles! We were all pretty excited when we got to treat ourselves to an icecream afterwards, even if it was a little hard to order considering we didn’t know any French.

Day 5 meant that we journeyed to the Chechiniere, the riding school which would be supplying half our ponies and where we would be staying until the competition. Sam was the owner of the Chech and would be driving the horses to the competition and staying with us. We got to meet the all the horses at the stable before having dinner and head to bed.

The next day we got to get our horses out to have a ride, the Chech was supplying two of the horses and the other two were coming from another stable. We were able to go watch one at another competition. We all shared horses until we could decide who went better on each of the horses. They were quite different to ride, so it took us all a little while to get used to them.

*When the French came to Toowoomba for Pony Club Nationals where they competed at the Aquas Challenge, they had a task where one of the Australian managers got horses for them, took them to a trail ride, then left them with a map so they had to find their own way home*. So Sam and Sue decided to do this to us as well. Sam drove the ponies out into the middle of the forest, they gave us a map which Sam had highlighted the path we need to take and we had to find our way home. It took us about 3 hours and we were pretty sure we were lost, but we had a great time and got to ride through the forest and through some small towns along the way.

Once the other 2 horses arrived from the other stable we had all made decisions on which horse we would like, or the horse that we got stuck with, then had a day to set up a full jumping course with some tricky lines with the jumps about 95-1m high like they would be at the competition. This gave us a chance to have a feel to see what our horses were really like to ride in a show jumping course situation and any quirks they had- mine liked to go quite fast and jumped to the right of every fence. I got a horse named Spontanee.

Soon it came time for us to head to the completion at La Mott, which was about a 3 hour drive from the Chech. We got there, set up our stables and put our Australian flags up around our stables. It was EXTREMELY hot, and we couldn’t find shade quick enough. None of us were sure how on earth we were going to put jodhpurs on and ride in it! We were staying at accommodation about 5 minutes away from the competition grounds which had a waterslide and pool so we knew that would come in very handy.

The competition we competed at is a month long horse festival consisting of various different competitions. They have everything from dressage, eventing, pony games and everything in-between- even a competition dedicated to ride and run! The week before we arrived was Pony Jumping, which we don’t really have here so seriously in Australia yet, but is a jumping competition dedicated just for ponies, so under 15hh. It’s a very wealthy and prestigious jumping circuit. They have about 13 competition arenas, cross country course, 2 indoor arenas and a huge forest for hacking out in. Probably our most favourite thing about it was the hundreds of trade stalls they had.

First day of comp was warm up rounds, each country got about 5 minutes allocated to them where the whole team would enter the arena which was fully set up with a course, and we got to do whatever we liked during that time. We decided to each just do a jump round like we would in the competition then with some leftover time we practised some jump off turns.

To determine which country would jump first they had random draw. They pick a country first then a number which they go in. We were second last to be picked, so stress levels were high as first place was still open and we didn’t want to go first! We ended up being picked to be 6th so we were quite happy with that.

On our first day of competition we just had a one round stakes. We were all just aiming to try and be clear, not worrying about being fast. I think we all just wanted to be in and out as soon as we could as it got to something like 40 degrees! Walking the course was extremely hot as the glare from the white sand enhanced the heat you could barely open your eyes. My first jumping round wasn’t too bad, I ended up with 4 jump faults and 4 time penalties. I definitely got more of a feel for Spontanee and how jerky and quick her canter was. Overall I was still happy as she tried her hardest.

The next day of competition was the last day but we got to have two rounds. The first round we were still trying for clear, then the final round would be based on speed and for any countries on equal penalties the country with the quickest time would be the winner. I had the first rail of the first round, it was a better round so I was happier with that! On my final round I was nearly clear, but just clipped the last rail! When you get a clear round over there, they play this very upbeat music for you. So I was very close to getting the music!

Just as we were getting ready to head to presentations, Jess was in the medic tent as her horse had trodden on her toe and pulled the toenail off! They patched her up but wanted her to go to hospital in case it was broken. We were about to be late to presentations so I quickly piggy backed Jess over, I’m sure we were quite the sight to all the other teams. We ended up placing 8th out of 14 countries so we were happy with that! The top 3 placegetters all had their own horses.

We helped Sam pack up the horses and put them all on the truck so he could head home. We stayed for another night at La Mott, and I tried to repack my suitcase so everything would fit again- in the end I need to sit on it to zip it back up.

The next day and our second last day in France we drove back into Paris where we spent the day sightseeing. We had tickets on an open tour bus so we just drove around looking at everything, and getting off to see the Champs’-Elysees and the Eiffel Tower. Poor Jess hobbled around as much as she could. Sue dropped us off at our hotel for the night and we said our goodbyes, she was going back home that night. We all loved having Sue around and we definitely would’ve been lost without her, she got us out of all the awkward situations when we couldn’t understand or ask for anything as we didn’t know any French.

We all made the journey home that next day, all a little more tired than when we came over. Overall it was an incredible experience and we all had so much fun throughout the trip. I can’t thank Pony Club Australia and Tasmania enough for this wonderful opportunity. I hope I might be able to encourage some of the younger riders to continue to achieve their K and B certificates so they may have the chance to have the experience that I was so lucky to have.





