I’m not sure that I’ll ever give up the chance to travel. Yes, yes, you’ve heard it all before, but I honestly believe that experiencing the way other people live, even if just catching a sliver of what their daily lives are like, is the best way…no, the only way to truly gain life experience. Seven billion people are on this planet and not one of us is more important than the next. Each of, however, is as interesting, with his/her own story to tell. So when Kellie (first employer, turned awesome friend) asked me to see some of Europe with her and boyfriend Mike, I inevitably said, “yes”.

A late add-on to the trip is Mike’s little brother Jonny. Born in raised in California, he hasn’t done too much traveling, and it’s his first time to Europe. He and I once met, but, I forget what he looks like. Jonny texted me the night before saying that he was going to be at the airport at 6:30am. My flight is at 7:50, so I tell him that I’ll be there at the same time. It seems as though we’re on the same flight. Once I’m through security and waiting to board, I text him that I’m wearing a long-sleeved blue button down shirt and am standing near the entrance to the gate. Of course, once I send this, I look one foot to my left and see a young man dressed like me. Perfect.

Jonny is nowhere in sight. We somehow miss one another’s calls, but the texts are clear: I’m waiting, they’re about to board, and Jonny is just now pulling up to the airport. “Great”, I think, “I’m flying with a kid who can’t be on time…” “Door closed!” is my last text to him. Either this guy is messing with me, or he just missed the plane.

It’s neither. His flight is 2 hours later than mine (which really only shows the difference in how we travel; he arrives, as they suggest, 2 hours before your flight; I, on the other hand, half of that).

First stop? Houston. A layover on my way to Amsterdam. I’m in the airport for about two hours or so. I had intended to call my uncle who lives there, but thanks to post 9/11 security, I didn’t think I’d be able to make it out, grab a bite with him, and make it back in time. That’s ok. I’ll talk to someone else at the bar. I don’t get his name, but he works for Texaco oil and has for the past 25 years. He travels quite a bit and is on his way to the Middle East. He convinces me to get oysters (I had my doubts, as we are in an airport restaurant). To my surprise, they’re quite good. The gentleman and I chat a bit; I get a second beer, and ask if he would like a shot. He agrees and I ask the bartender for 2 shots of Grand Marnier. We toast, and I laugh and say, “I don’t suppose you’ll toast to ‘alternative energy’?” He chokes a smirk out of the corner of his mouth.

I pay the tab, say goodbye to a man who would sooner die than believe that this world needs alternatives to oil, and meet up with Jonny on line to board. We laugh at the comedy of errors, each cautiously checking the other to see if he knew what the real deal was but decided to mess with the other. It seems we’re just both idiots.

On to Amsterdam, Netherlands.

There’s something about the air on a plane that puts me to sleep. This trip is no exception. I pass out and sleep much of the flight, which is good because there’s a nine hour difference in time that I’ll have to adjust to quickly in order to keep up with the mad schedule Kellie has set out for us.

We hit the ground running; sort of. We land early and Kellie and Mike aren’t there yet. My new global phone that I’ve rented from Verizon for $20 seems to be working just fine because I sent a text and received one back from Kellie; they’ll be here shortly. Jonny and I grab a shot and a beer at the bar next to the customs exit. It’s 8 a.m.

Once we get picked up, we head straight for the heart of the city. We explore the city by day, walking the canals and snapping pictures at every turn. It’s beautiful. Cobblestone everywhere, trams whizzing by at every turn, and people flood the streets. But what’s more are the bicycles. TONS of them. Everyone, both tourists and locals alike ride them. Business man on bicycle? Check. Barista on her way to work, chatting on her phone while riding? Check. Girl holding a map while riding? Yep. So you’ve gotta be on your toes while you walk around the city, careful not to mistakenly end up on a bike path, or you’ll get the adorable “ring, ring” sound from a biker who inevitably wishes that the sound of the bell was angrier.

I’m already thinking about what to get for all the people that have demanded souvenirs, and it kind of stresses me out, so I try to let it go. I’ll end up getting the good stuff in Bruges, anyway. And it’ll be edible. And it’ll be amazing.

We walk through the famous Red Light District and it’s just as weird as you’ve heard; probably weirder. There are dark alleyways that cut through the already small streets. Old brick lines the buildings, but often have quite modern doors that clash with the feel. Offsetting the feel even more are what’s behind each door staring out; and scantily dressed. In case you didn’t know that you’re in the Red Light District, there are quite literally red lights that hang above the doors of these buildings; because, you know, you don’t wanna mistake a woman in a bra and thong seductively dancing and eyeballing you for a checkout girl at the local bakery. Though, to be fair, I didn’t go into any bakeries.

The skies are grey and I’m already glad Mike gave me the heads’ up to bring an umbrella. I have the coolest one, though Kellie’s (from the Van Gogh museum) is all white and quite unique. You never see an all white umbrella. Go ahead, think about it.

I decide not to buy the, “Cannabis Starter Kit”, even though it’s only 6 Euros. Mostly because I don’t smoke cannabis, but also because I can’t seem to keep a plant to save my life.

The city square is impressive. You stare at giant cathedrals that feel as old as time as your feet lay uneven on the cobblestone below you and the “clack-clack” sound of giant Clydesdale hooves march, pulling a buggy with old wooden wheels. Tourists are everywhere, as in any big city, despite the cold, gray weather. Littered throughout the square are street performers and I can’t quite put my finger on the “why” of some of these characters. Among them are: Darth Vader, a chubby Freddy Krueger, and the masked character from, “V For Vendetta”. Now, I’ll give the “V For Vendetta” guy a break. Pretty sure that movie didn’t take place in The Netherlands, but the city square has a European feel, and of course so did the movie, so: PASS with a “C+”. I feel he could’ve applied himself more, but it’s a passing grade, so he shouldn’t be too upset. Next up? Chubby Freddy Krueger. Thanks to dear friend Cecily Schaefer and the cheap store on the Warner Brothers lot, I picked up the, “Nightmare On Elm Street” box set (complete with 3D glasses) for like 25 bucks. Luckily for chubby Freddy, I haven’t made my way through all of them. And, while I can almost GUARANTEE that at no point is Freddy showing up in The Netherlands in these films, I still can’t be CERTAIN. Well played, chubby Freddy. Well played. So, you barely PASS with a “D”. Now. Darth Vader…

There’s a guy in the square with a straightjacket, whip, and a large trunk, certain to be filled with other silly items. This man woke up and planned to grab the attention of the tourists with a body mike, spot-on English, and a lackluster personality. I won’t wait around to see what he’ll do with the whip or straightjacket, but I’ll kind of wish that I did. We walk away and I tell myself that at least one of those things will end up on fire.

Kellie and Mike have been in Amsterdam already for a day or two and we have much to do, so it’s on to the next place…

The Hague, Netherlands.

We’re in a mini-van of some sort that I’ll have to try to explain at customs before my return to a man whose job seems to try and trip you up and get inaccuracies in your story. We travel to The Hague, Netherlands. It’s a gorgeous little town. We check into an extremely nice hotel. Let me say that again, because what I imagine you’re thinking is like, “The W Hotel” or some gorgeous chain that overcharges for their amazingly comfortable beds, modern slightly off-beat feel, and customer service that says, “We are important people here”. Those people would be washing dishes at this place. It’s “Hotel Des Indes” and Kellie assures me that were it not for the hotel points that she’s accumulated over the years we wouldn’t be stepping foot inside of this place. Jonny and I share a room. There are “his” and “hers” sinks in the bathroom. I’ll mentally claim the “his”, but I won’t tell him that.

We check in, explore the small town a bit and decide on a great little place for a beer and a bite before dinner. We get sliders that are fantastic and drink a couple of local beers. In a little bit, we go to a pretty nice dinner and I quickly start realizing how quickly the Euro can kick your American ass. On the bright side, I had thought that the exchange rate was much higher (closer to 2:1), but I discover that it’s in fact much lower than that. But, still, it hurts. I need to go to the bathroom and up a steep flight of stairs, as if to prepare me for what’s ahead in much of Europe’s buildings.

When Kellie and Mike decide to call it quits after a late(ish) dinner, Jonny and I decide to check out the night life. We ask the waitress where the cool bars are and find out there’s a cool area just a couple of blocks away. It’s a small square park, about a block long, with bars lining two of the four sides. Small bars. Nothing crazy. Just what the beer doctor ordered. We scope out a couple of places and try to find the least touristy one. It’s a cozy little spot, and of course we stick out. The bartender starts going on about how cool America (specifically Los Angeles) must be and how he’d like to visit there someday. I refrain from telling him that where he is has far more culture and beauty than the land of silicone. Kid needs to travel, right?

The beers overseas tend to have higher alcohol content, so it doesn’t take long before you’re thinking about your bed. And I, for one, am particularly excited about this one. It’s not a very late night, and it shouldn’t be; we’ve just landed this morning. Wait, am I only on DAY ONE?! So much more to write. Crud. Computer: FINISH this for me. CTRL/ALT: Finish. SHIFT Finish. …Crap.

The bed is amazing. We get up early, I brush my teeth in the “his” sink and we head downstairs to meet with Kellie and Mike in the pool. It’s got two sets of jets, so you can swim against it and get a workout. My loose-fitting bathing suit is telling me that maybe I shouldn’t try this. Of course, I do, though, and thankfully I didn’t give anyone an unwanted show. We have some amazing Japanese iced that Bryan Strang would kill for (didn’t get the name; sorry, Strang) then move on to the sauna. Eucalyptus (didn’t even need an auto-correct on that one; high-five mom) is in the dry hot air of this sauna. Pretty incredible. We don’t last long, of course. Now to the steam room. You’d use these things, too, shut up. I’m quickly realizing what the best way to wake up every morning is: rich.

We shower, head to breakfast and explore a small flea market that’s happening in the park in front of our hotel as it starts to rain a bit. I look for souvenirs for people; still nothing. Back in the van that doesn’t have a name, and on the road to…

Antwerp, Belgium.

The rain will continue, even though I try to tell myself that it can’t POSSIBLY be raining in another country, too. The clack-clack of hooves and wooden wheels on cobblestone can be heard again. Old buildings, churches, shops with the same shirts that read, “I Love Antwerp”. Not something I’m gonna buy for anyone, but I consider it. It’s a gorgeous little city, despite the rain. In fact, looking back, I’d say the rain even added to the charm. We enter The Cathedral of Our Lady, but decide not to pay the 7 or so Euro that it’d cost to go all the way in. Then, in a super touristy moment, we make the decision to hop on a horse and carriage ride of the city. It’s about 40 minutes, covers about 3 km, we’ve got our fries with mayo (note: the fries/mayo is quite popular everywhere we go; in fact, mayo in general is), and it has stopped raining. Perfect. We pay the salty-haired man who seems tired and is all business, hop aboard, and take off. Cue the rain again.

We were the only ones on the carriage, and while at first it was fun to sit on top, Jonny and I soon went down below to be dry. After all, it’s not like this guy giving us a ride was actually TELLING us anything about the city. I’ll take a picture of the horse’s butt from inside the carriage and laugh about this. Later, I’ll post it on Facebook and quietly high-five myself. Oh, me.

Goodbye, Antwerp. It’s time to go. It was quick, and I’ll nearly forget that I was even there. On to…

Brussels, Belgium.

The rain is slowing down as we get to our hotel. We check in, agree to meet up in the lobby after we get settled, and head out to dinner. We go to a restaurant called, “Le Cap”. Food was good, but nothing to write home about. On an appetizer dish were tiny little shrimp. Small. Like, just bigger than a maggot small. Like, giant maggot shrimp.

We have talked about staying in Brussels only for a night, and making our trip to Paris last a day longer. We all agree this is a good decision, and Kellie being Kellie, makes this happen. It’s a matter of phone calls, change of trains, etc…and worth it in the end. But before that, we talk to someone about where to go for good night life. The four of us are going to have some good Belgian beer in the coolest place in town. We’re directed towards a small street (read: alley) with bars that are all connected to one another. It’s a particularly young crowd and each place is pretty packed. Delirium is a local beer that I’ve had before, but never on draft, and certainly never this cheap. This shall be the beer of the night.

The four of us sit down in a bar that for some reason has a pirate theme, and our seats are barrels. I want to take out a deck of cards, and start a game with ridiculous things at stake. I don’t say this out loud, though. Around us are kids who can’t be a day older than 18, all drinking absinthe. I will avoid this while here. Kellie and Mike decide to leave, since it’s already late and they do all of the driving. Jonny and I hang out and hop around the different bars. While in one of them, two girls start talking to us, but the language barrier is absolutely exhausting. They are French. With (quite) broken English, one of them is immediately telling us about the bar we are in and how it has over two thousand beers. I smile, and (slightly) condescendingly say, “You mean two hundred?” I make her question her English and she squints for a moment then comes back with, “No. Two thousand”. She grabs a menu, opens it, and points to a small write-up on the bottom. Holy crap. This bar is in the Guinness Book Of World Records for most beers with over two…thousand. Her story adds up.

Jonny and I continue to move around, and watch for a while a band in one bar who is (poorly) rocking out to classic American rock. It’s not much better than karaoke, really, and while I would’ve felt bad for them, the people seemed to be really enjoying it. There is a moment where my heart skips a beat, wondering how awful ordinary karaoke must sound in Belgium.

In the morning, with a hangover like only foreign beer can offer, Jonny and I get up and head for food. We each get a club sandwich (with mayo) that has some funky smelling meat on it. I say nothing and force it down. Fries come with it. They have mayo. A salad also comes with it. That, too, has mayo. I eat what I can because I know that not only is train food awful, but I plan on sleeping on that train. And so, we meet up with Kellie and Mike, and make our way to the train to head to…

Paris, France.

We stay at a Westin hotel across the street from The Louvre. Once settled, we agree to meet and head downstairs to a little garden area for a drink and small bite to eat. I slap on shorts and a t-shirt because it’s warm out and am ready in just minutes. I knock on Kellie’s door, she answers, eyes me up and down, and gives me, “Oh, we’re kinda dressing up.” Translation: “You’re NOT wearing that.” I change into something nice and the four of us head down. The prices are ridiculous and I ask for an iced tea. Kellie is the only one to order a cocktail, and I think it was like 20 Euro. The waiter will never bring me my iced tea, so water will do. It’s a quick sit-down because we want to go to The Louvre. We spend about 2 ½ hours there and really only get to see one wing of the museum. The place is massive. Every language from around the globe can be heard while walking through there, but what everyone is saying is pretty universal: “Where’s the Mona Lisa?” You don’t have to be an art-lover to really appreciate what’s inside The Louvre Museum. From giant, elaborate statues carved out of marble to double-sided paintings of David and Goliath fighting (where 2 paintings offer 2 opposite views of the same thing)…to the Mona Lisa.

Paris, like many other big cities, is somehow just more magical at night. Leaving The Louvre and thinking about dinner, we were able to grab some pretty amazing photos of the city all lit up. It wasn’t a late night, though, because we were going to get up early and start one of the biggest days we would have on the trip.

Running along the Seine River in Paris are plenty of boats perfect for both tourists and locals alike…ok, mostly tourists. We took a “hop on, hop off” boat that made plenty of stops along the river, and as long as you paid for a ticket for the day, you can get on/off any one of the many boats they had running. First stop? Notre Dame Cathedral.

We “hop off” the boat and head towards the cathedral. We have to cross a small bridge that is instantly a spectacle. Covering the bars that make up the intricate handrails of the bridge are locks. Like, padlocks. And there are THOUSANDS of them. Kellie tells me that it’s a tradition in Paris to put a lock on a bridge after you get married. Instantly, I wonder how many people have returned with lock cutters.

We wanted to go up to the bell tower of the cathedral. But it was a Saturday and the weather was beautiful, so the line was ridiculous. The facts about the building, I learned, were rather insane. For instance, building the thing took about 180 years from start to finish. You want more? Google it.

From there, we went and got lunch at a little restaurant not far away. I ordered a lunch special that was basically some sort of beef stew. More importantly, it came with a glass of red wine. Above all, the lunch was made especially wonderful thanks to some slimy, hair slicked, too-cool for school business looking guy sitting alone on his phone with a giant leaf stuck in his hair. Laughs were had. Photos taken.

After lunch, we decide to go to Kellie’s favorite part of Paris. If it were Los Angeles, it’d basically be Venice Beach. It’s artsy, relaxed, and has some amazing views of the city. We take a subway to get there, and upon emerging from the street, there’s a band playing on the sidewalk, as if to welcome us to the cool part of town. Then we climb steps; lots of steps. It’s exhausting, but it’s all in effort to reach this little marketplace area that’s littered with coffee and gift shops and restaurants. Seemingly the center of it all is this area where local artists have set up their easels and attempt to lure the wandering tourists into their chair for a portrait.

Kellie is lured. She sits and proceeds to get a wonderful sketch of her done. She insists that I should do the same for Ellen. I had told Kellie about a photo I took of Ellen inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. “You should use that picture”, she claims. She’s right. I go for it. There was a guy who’s art I liked a lot; minimalistic sketches that were beautiful. I’d go back to where he was, find out his price, and ask if he could do a sketch from a picture on an iPhone.

“Back in 10 minutes” in rough English is what the man had left behind on a small piece of paper attached to his artwork. The gentleman next to the empty chair tried convincing me to use him instead. I glanced at his work; no, thanks.

Twenty minutes go by, Kellie is still sitting motionless as her portrait is being done, and the man that I’m waiting for still hasn’t returned. “Maybe he’s getting coffee and enjoying a good sit”, I think to myself. After a couple of hours, I figure he’d sat down with a bottle or two of wine.

Daytime is fading fast and there are only so many cafes you can sit in before you go crazy. I pick up a handful of scarves to give as gifts. They are cheap, no doubt made in India, and will likely fall apart after the first wash. But, as I said, souvenirs are on my mind and I’m getting stressed about what to get for who; and equally worried about just how I’ll transport it because I only came with a carry-on and a backpack.

Down the flights of stairs we go, back on to the subway, and towards the Eiffel Tower. The idea, of course, is to get there as the sun is setting. And we do. And it’s beautiful. I start remembering the time in my life where I thought about doing some BASE (Building Antenna Span Earth) jumping and wonder just how quickly I’d get arrested if I were to jump off of the Eiffel. We get in line, pay, and start climbing the stairs. Roughly 1600 just to get to the 2nd level. Great idea after we’ve been walking most of the day.

Once on the 2nd floor, I make some phone calls. I call Ellen. She isn’t answering, and I hang up before her voice mail picks up; 99 cents/minute we’re talking here. I call my sister Lauren. I get her voice mail because I wasn’t quick enough to hang up. I leave her a message that is as close to a minute as I can get. Next up: mom. She and my dad are driving somewhere and they immediately throw me on speaker-phone. I explain to them where I am and what the call is costing me. I’m sure that we talk about something silly, but I quickly recap where I’ve been and how the day is going. I point out that I want to end the call as close to the end of whichever minute we’re on as possible, so as to get the most from the call and not get charged for another minute. “Ok, I’m gonna run. We’re at 2:45”, I tell them. “Love you’s” are exchanged and then “goodbye’s”. True to form, my mom needs to stick one more thing in there. “Take lots of pictures!” she blurts out. I remain on the line to hear this, costing me another 99 cents. Thank goodness, though, because I don’t think I would’ve remembered to take out my camera while in three different countries, visiting globally historic places.

The elevator to the top floor of the Eiffel Tower moves pretty fast. The line to the elevator does not. While in this absurdly long line, Kellie notices a LARGE group of people scurrying along past us, trying to smile as they skip ahead of tons of people. They’re older. Adults. Older adults. I glance back, confused by this twenty or so people rushing past and Kellie shoots a look at me like, “What the heck?” This doesn’t fly with her, and the second she realizes that these people are simply running up to cut way ahead into the line, she positions herself in a stance to prevent anymore of their group to do so, basically cutting off the tail of the group. When the woman smiles and lets out an, “Excuse me” in English that only someone who doesn’t understand the language can, Kellie returns with a solid, “No”. The others in the group stare, and smile. Not a nice smile, mind you, but the kind that says, “Ok. You have captured one of our own. We will plot our next move”. I stand by Kellie’s choice and make my position clear that, “none shall pass”. When a (big) man in front of me gestures to me, then to his stuck lady-friend behind Kellie, I bite back with, “No. You can go back there.” I look back to Kellie for reassurance, proud of my move. She returns an approving/encouraging look. So, we fight off the bad people and make our way to the top.

It’s high. Very high. Mike and his brother are scared out of their minds. I still wonder just how dangerous it’d be to jump off of it. We each pull out our cameras and try to take views of the now sparking city under the moonlight. From just above us, giant spotlights shine, moving around the city below us. I take a picture, capturing one of them, but because it’s dark out, the camera’s shutter stays open extra long, therein creating this spotlight to look wider than it is; like it’s an alien ship ready to life people from Earth. I keep this thought to myself. It’s quite windy and we’ve run out of places to point our cameras. Banding together, we form the same sort of line police on the way down, but have far fewer problems; though we were ready.

We start heading back in the direction of the hotel, but are in need of food. We have to move fast, because many places close their kitchens at 10. It’s my intention, as I talked with Kellie about it by now, to ask the hotel to print out the picture of Ellen at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It’s simple. I email it to the front desk, they open said email, and boom; 8 ½”x 11” that the artist can copy from.

After food and getting back to the hotel, things don’t go as smoothly. Jonny and I pay for an hour of internet. He takes about 40 minutes, and I jump on my computer to get this photo sorted out. Problem is the system doesn’t want to let me on. It’s recognizing that our code is being used on a different computer and decides to be difficult. I feel like a MacGuyver as the time ticks away while I try to figure it out. Delete history? Delete cache? Cut the red wire? What do I do?! It’s also late, so when I’m forced to call the front desk and they offer to send up a technician, I tell them that I’ll deal with it in the morning.

The sun arrives way too early, but my body is thankful for the “Heavenly Bed” that The Westin Hotels accommodate you with. The W Hotel bed in my apartment (“W”, as I affectionately, but not so originally refer to “her”) would be furious to know where I am. I shower up and try to beat Kellie and Mike to the lobby because we’re checking out today, but will see a bit of the city before we hop on a train to Belgium. The man at the desk gives me a free internet card. I run back upstairs, attach the photo to an email, and send it. This time, I run back down, ready to get my print. “We’re out of color ink”, he tells me with his French accent. It’s not the end of the world, as the sketch is in one color anyway.

We step outside. Rain. With the rain comes the realization that the artists won’t be out in the city square area today. Dammit. A backup plan will have to form. And soon. The clock and cities of this trip are quickly counting down.

We go to a nearby breakfast place where I eat maybe the best breakfast I had on the trip. Or anywhere…in a while, at least. It’s a sunny-side up egg sitting atop a grilled ham and cheese sandwich. “Croque Madame”. I imagine I will be making many of these. While eating, we reform our plan of attack, as getting another piece of art now seems impossible. Kellie brings up these underground catacombs that basically hold the remains of six million people. No coffins. Just bones, really. A quick train ride later, and we’re there; basically. The guidebook gave an interesting description on how to find the entrance. Come up from the subway. Look for a giant lion statue. If the lion were facing the exact opposite direction of the way it’s facing, that’ll point you to the entrance. Couldn’t have been a better description.

The rain must’ve encouraged to keep people inside; or underground, in this case. The line was quite long. Too long for us, since we had a train to catch later. We bury our head in maps and see what else is nearby. A cemetery. The above ground and coffins type. Marching on, umbrellas over our heads, we make our way there. No one seems to be inside, and we aren’t sure if it’s ok to “tour” through it, so Kellie asks the guard at the gate if he speaks English. With a simple “no” as his reply, Kellie leads us in, hoping it’ll be ok; and it is.

Oddly enough, the cemetery is a sad place. I’m thinking maybe because it’s raining? Oh, wait—no, I get it. The neat thing about this cemetery in particular is the number of families buried together; or in this case, NOT buried; everything is above ground. Giant tombstones and small housings with built in shrines are everywhere. We don’t stay long, but I’m glad to eventually see other people walking around. We head back to the hotel after a bit and grab our bags to leave. I sit for a minute, and turn on the television. The Simpsons are on. Or rather, “Les Simpson”. This makes me laugh.

It’s 9/11 today and though I don’t forget about it, I’m also not bombarded with the news, as I’m in Paris and moving around quite a bit. I do notice magazine with pictures of the World Trade Center on them, and though I can’t read the headline, I’ll often come up with my own. We leave the hotel and make it to the train station in Paris where we’ll be catching a ride back to Brussels to get the rental car we left in a garage. At the train station with time to spare, we get a bite and take a bathroom break. Everyone else goes and I stand with the food and bags. When they get back, I head off. I make my way down an escalator and toward a bathroom. The line is long, and, like many public bathrooms, it costs 1 Euro. “Screw that”, I think to myself, “I’ll wait a half hour and go on the train”. I about-face and start up the escalator. Time elapsed from leaving the group? Maybe a minute.

On my way up the escalator, I watch a girl get hit with a role of police caution tape, as the man who was supposed to catch this from above missed it. I think nothing of it; until I emerge back onto the main level. A couple of French policemen have started setting up a small perimeter it seems, and by circumstance I walk right into the middle of it. I’m pointed at by a man with a machine gun to leave in a different direction. “But my bags—My train—I’m right over there”, I mutter, confused at what’s going on. As I scurry past him, I notice that he’s protecting a LARGE BLACK DUFFEL UNATTENDED DUFFEL BAG that’s on the floor behind him. Awesome. Time check? Within the hour of the 10 year anniversary of 9/11. Perfect. Turns out, some guy just put it there while he went off to do whatever you do without carrying a huge bag. He probably paid the Euro to use the bathroom. Either way, he was escorted away for being stupid.

Once aboard, we all take out our electronic devices. Kellie, Mike, and I read, and Jonny is sifting through the mounds of photos he has taken. I take a short video from my phone of this moment, finding it funny that we’re all buried in our computers as the beautiful French countryside whizzes past us through the window. Though the ride is a couple of hours, it’s not bad; the seats are comfy. Kellie and I agree it’s stupid to upgrade to first class. We make it back to Brussels, grab the car, and are on to…

Bruges, Belgium.

When we’re first entering the city, I pull out my phone to try and get a look at a map of where we are exactly. My iPhone will automatically ask to join wireless networks and display them to me. This will happen constantly as you drive through a city and pass countless wireless networks. I couldn’t miss one that popped up, however, delicately named, “Fuck the USA”. I take a screen shot and will later post it on Twitter, assuring the world that at least one person in Bruges does not like us. Later, a local coffee house will see that message, and send one out to me, trying to get me to come and buy their coffee.

Part of my homework Kellie gave me before the trip was to watch the film, “In Bruges” with Colin Farrell. I did, and I loved it. Also? Got some insight to where I’d be staying. The place, like often mentioned in the movie, “is like a fucking fairy tale”. Because of some booking glitches, Jonny and I will be staying in one bed & breakfast, while Kellie and Mike in another, just a block away. I won’t end up seeing the inside of theirs, but ours is very cute. We have to walk up 5 flights of stairs to get to our room(s), but the place is adorable. I’ll decide later that if I ever make it back to Bruges (fingers crossed), that I’d like to stay in there again. Livia, the woman who runs our b&b is lovely. She talks a whole lot, but makes it clear she wants us to get out and explore. Assuring us that most of the food is sub-par and overpriced, she makes mention of one place that we simply must go. It’s called, “De Garre”. That’d be the name of the street, bar, and beer that she says we have to try. “They’ll only serve you three”, she tells us, warning us of how high the alcohol content is. “Silly lady”, I think to myself, “I’ll be fine”. Livia would later be right.

After we’re checked in and settled, it’s back to the usual routine: get food and explore the city. Kellie tells me that Bruges, not Brussels is the most tourist-visited city in Belgium. But you wouldn’t know it. The pace of everything there isn’t like a big city and there isn’t a dangerous street in town, no matter what hour of the night.

Immediately, we’re all taking tons of pictures. Not only is the sunlight just perfect, but the city itself is just gorgeous. More of the clack-clack of horses’ hooves on cobblestone. It’s around this point that I start going a little crazy with one of the filters on my phone’s camera. So we walk around and after much debate land on a place that looks quite touristy. Like much of Europe, they’ll speak English to you when they know you’re American. And at times, we must stick out like sore thumbs. The food isn’t bad, but it’s certainly nothing to write home about. We find ourselves, like many times before, waiting for a long time for the check; but this is a nice change of pace. We’ll sit for a while and chat, without phones or computers. Y’know, like we used to, all of 15 years ago. Even though we’re gonna hit the city hard tomorrow, Jonny and I decide to explore the nightlife.

There isn’t much. We’re not in the tourist season, it’s a Sunday night, and most of the bars close around 11. After walking around a bit, we come across a place that like it has some life. It did. Too much, in fact. It was a really young crowd, packed to the gills, and (European) house music was pumping through the place. It really felt out of place in this quaint little town, but I suppose even the quieter neighborhoods need one place where the youngsters can go to blow off steam. We’ve all seen the movie “Footloose” (original, not the remake), right?

So we go in for a bit, decide it’s not for us and venture off. Nearly back at the b&b, we come across a small group of people that are speaking English. They’re from all over, but I catch an Australian accent. We quickly befriend them and the guy insists we follow him to the cool spot of the night. And of course, he takes us right back to the place we left. Jonny and I humor him and go in, but find our moment to duck out not 10 minutes later. We make a second attempt to find the street/bar/beer “De Garre” that Livia had told us about. Even with a map and asking locals, we came up empty. Tonight will be, as it should have been, an early night.

The continental breakfast was better than most. Livia prepared bacon and eggs, sliced meats and cheeses, tea, and homemade apple juice. I had to be told what the juice was because I was so unfamiliar with the taste of actual apple juice. Jonny and I would run back up the five flights of stairs and get ready to hit the town with Kellie and Mike.

It’s off to the Bell Tower (as highlighted in, “In Bruges”). The tower overlooks the town square. We took the steep, narrow, spirally winding steps all the way to the top for a great view. It was windy, and occasionally, the bells would ring. Just cease conversations at this point, unless you don’t mind yelling. From there, it was on to do what we did best: Walk.

We went all over, stopping along the way in gift shops, cafes, etc. Once Kellie and I found a local chocolate shop, we needed to stop. This place smelled amazing. We proceeded to ask the girl behind the counter what her favorites were. She did not steer us wrong. We got an array of chocolates, and I snatched up a hot chocolate (read: warm, vanialla milk, with a piece of chocolate stuck onto the end of a spoon that you’re supposed to let melt in your cup while you stir). It was delightful. Kellie, Mike, and Jonny got coffees. Silly kids.

We continued to explore the town, walking beyond where most tourists were. Parks covered with swans, the rooftops of homes all looked the same and the air was brisk and clean. We hop on a boat ride before it gets dark, snatching up the last ride of the day. The low-riding boat sat about 20 and went through the canals of the city, passing under a number of tiny stone bridges, while tourists took pictures of us from above. He goes on to talk about the city, and was a pretty impressive guide; mostly because he’d translate all of which he originally said in English into French.

After a long day of picture taking and walking, we get some food in one of the giant two squares of the town. We sit outside and I stick my bag of gifts purchased (a Bruges football club scarf for my dad, and a couple of Bruges hats for my brothers) at my feet. It feels good to sit, and even better to eat. I get a spaghetti dish. Along the trip, I’ve tried to eat what I cannot get anywhere but where I am. At the moment, I about kill for this spaghetti Bolognese, though. Then it’s back to the hotel to recoup before we all head back out to find a spot to have a pint. There are a few places we want to hit, including a spot that has over 400 beers.

It’s our second/last night in Bruges and despite the efforts Jonny and I made to find De Garre, it seems as though this tiny gem of a bar will elude us. But thankfully, it doesn’t. I believe it was Mike who, with his camera finding the neatest nooks and crannies to snap a shot, peeked down an alley. Jonny immediately looked down the narrow opening and noticed a sign on the brick wall. “De Garre”, it read. This was our “street”. We have to go in.

It’s small. Tiny. Maybe 20 people could fit downstairs. We head upstairs, where maybe another 20 could fit. Most of the upstairs is empty, so we take a seat at a table. Later, it will get busy. We ask for the beer we came for and it’s delivered in gorgeous chalice-like glasses. It tastes great. Jonny orders us a meat and cheese plate. This will be a great night.

I can’t say what the meat smells like exactly and the waiter didn’t say what it was just yet. The cheeses were great and the salami on the plate went pretty fast. It’s made pretty clear right away that no one likes the “other” meat. There were two meats that I didn’t go near. I had one of them before and knew that I didn’t like it. And no one was touching the pink soggy stuff. Toothpicks could easily cut through it.

Of course I try it. I have to, right? Once I bite into it, not only do I hit something VERY hard (read: my tooth would sooner crack than this thing gives way), but I immediately feel like I may vomit. “Wash it down with beer” is everyone’s laughing help. I try. Maybe some of it goes down, but I’ve still got some of it in my mouth. I wait and seize my opportunity to spit it out in the garbage behind the waiter’s service station.

“Head meat”. Of a pig. That’s what we’re later told it is called. Made sense. Jonny and I have 2 beers apiece and Kellie and Mike split a second. We’ve all got a sizeable buzz and decide it’s time to move on. With the intention of calling it quits, we walk by an Irish bar where we decide to have just one more. I order us a Magners, an Irish cider beer that tastes like apple juice and Sprite. It’s not long before this bar wears us out, Kellie and Mike first, soon followed by Jonny and me. On our way back, Jonny and I will stop at a little stationary wagon in the square that has late night food. Our bartender told us the burger to get. He was right and it was awesome. After that, we quietly make our way up the 5 flights of stairs.

Morning comes and it feels like I drank more than I did. I’m not in horrible shape, but I’m in no rush to get out of bed. But I need to; there’s more to do. We all head back out to the streets for one last bit of enjoyment of Bruges before we hit the road. The four of us walk again through the streets. I’ll miss this city the most. . Kellie and I insist that we will eat more chocolates. After coming across the same chocolate place as the day before, we decide to do just that. I get my hot chocolate, she her coffee (when will she learn?), and we get a bigger bag of chocolates we hadn’t yet tried. I’m mostly in charge of finishing leftover chocolate. I do.

Now it’s gift time. I know all the best chocolate that they have and will get 3 boxes (all the same) filled with the best of the best. The work I put into finding the best chocolate was difficult, but I’m glad I took on the job. I spend enough on chocolate to even get a free gift bag that will look like a purse while I carry it.

We check out of our respective b&b’s and it time to get moving. We’re on our way to dinner in…

Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

It’s a bit of a drive and we have dinner reservations at a place called, “De Kas”. Kellie claims it’s one of her favorite places to eat in the world. I’m excited, to say the least. The restaurant is actually inside of a greenhouse. Their menu? None. They only approach the table, as what you’d like to drink, and then if there’s anything you’re allergic to or strongly against having. They will then serve you a meal that comes in many courses, and is 100% from their property. The greenhouse, which the restaurant is just a doorway away from, will obviously supply the greens, etc. The giant park which the greenhouse sits on, I assume will supply the meats. The “menu” changes once a week and is never the same.

We order a bottle of wine and begin. Now, I could sit and try to describe each course of this meal, but I’d do it no justice whatsoever. Here’s a peak, though: For a starter, we had corn on the cob that sat atop a sauce made up of butter, thyme and orange juice. Later, we had duck. At the end, I had mint tea. Served in a beautiful glass tea pot was boiling hot water with giant sprigs of spearmint and peppermint. It was spectacular. Kellie’s favorite has now become mine.

Early in the morning, Kellie, Mike, and Jonny are getting on a plane to head back. I’ll be staying the night, plus another two, on my own, in Amsterdam. Kellie warned the bed and breakfast I booked for myself that I’d be arriving to check in on the late side. It’s about 11:30 when I get there and it’s not quite as nice as I’d imagined it. Still though, it’s a place to rest my head. “Goodbye’s” are shared, giant hugs exchanged. It was an amazing time with amazing people. A bar across the street from where I’m staying is jammin’. I shall forego it, as I am completely wiped out, tummy full of duck and other delectable foods.

I wake up and need to be a tourist, though I could easily sleep all day. I go down and eat my continental breakfast, which was not nearly as good as the one in Bruges, but it comes with a hard-boiled egg, so I’m happy. I’m back at my room and check the map I was given at check-in, to decide on a few places I need to see: The Anne Frank House, Van Gogh Museum, and Heineken Experience. I start to walk along the canals. I get a block and realize that I should’ve brought my umbrella. One quick stop back and I’m on my way.

The Van Gogh Museum. Figure I’ll hit the things that in order of importance. I walk the whole way there, see a ton of impressive art (note: I’m more careful to see and read everything there than I’ve been at other museums) and decide that if I’m going to see more of this city, I’m gonna ride one of these bicycles that everyone’s got.

I can’t exactly say who has the right of way when you’re riding one of these things, nor can I say that it isn’t a bit scary. Luckily, there are SO many people riding, it seems you’re always behind someone, so following suit just sort of becomes a thing. I’d also a few times just followed the general flow of bikes, not only to adhere to traffic laws, but in direction. This took me all over the city. With iPhone GPS in my pocket, I was never really worried about where I’d end up.

I end up on a small street far from where I started. Like the rest of the city, it’s packed with bars, cafes, and the occasional gift shop. I’m starting to get hungry, can’t decide on what I want, and keep a close eye on the time. I have another 2 hours to return the bike. What I want isn’t here. Or that’s what I tell myself when I’m so hungry and can’t decide what I want.

Back on the bike and I’m off. I head back to the direction of where I rented the bike, figuring it’ll be easier that way. Chinese food. Don’t judge me. I don’t eat much, but it’s fried, so it fills me up. I have a beer and enjoy the view of the canal and some time to sit and reflect. So far, it’s been a great trip.

I return the bike and head back the hotel. Blindsided by exhaustion, I fall asleep with my laptop on top of me. A little while later, I’m up and remember the bar across the street. I’m sort of off the beaten path, so I figure it’ll be more of a locals’ scene. It is. Sort of.

I sit alone, against the wall and slowly go through a few beers. It’s a nice spot and the bartender is constantly picking songs to play from their fancy computer behind the bar. Great music, but I wonder why she can’t just commit to making a playlist. This’ll be a fun bar to come to again tomorrow night. It is, after all, just across the street. I end the night before it’s too late. I know that I want to wake up and do more tomorrow.

I wake up early but don’t move too quickly. I eat the less-than-great continental breakfast and get showered up. I find a bike rental place that’s closer and has cooler looking bikes. “BlackBike” is the name of the company and they’re only a couple of blocks away. I get set up and out the door quicker, too. Returning it later won’t be quite as fast. I think that some of the people there must’ve hit up some brownies for lunch.

I’m on the bike and moving once again. Like the day before, I’m all over town, but this time I have a destination: The Anne Frank House. There’s a line, but it’s not terrible. People move slowly through, as you can imagine, reading all that there is. Like most kids who went to public school, I read enough on Anne Frank to know the story. To know it pretty well, even. But of course, going through this house gives you way more than you ever read about, accompanied with that feeling of being inside the very walls you read about.

I follow the masses that slowly make their way up each flight of stairs, reading and watching everything along the way. Then you turn a corner and are in a small room with the infamous bookshelf. It’s propped open, as people file into it. It’s kind of a lot to process; the idea that a girl and her family built, then sought safety behind a bookshelf façade so that people wouldn’t KILL THEM because of their race. A chilling feeling to walk through. The last thing you see before you leave are the letters and diaries she kept. “No flash photography” is printed next to all of it, as to preserve the pages. Only, when you look closer, there’s fine print saying that to further protect the original works, all of the originals have been removed…what we are looking at are replicas. Ah, well. The bookshelf was real. I think.

I’m back on the bike and exploring more, this time more comfortable with the streets and basic riding laws. I’m sticking close to the canals, mostly because the streets are cooler, but also because that’s where some of the really cool cafes and eateries are. I end up at a place just a few doors down from where I’ll soon have to return the bike. It’s a British place where they’re offering a burger, fries, and salad for 8.50 Euro. The salad turns out to be mainly the greens intended for the burger, but it was still a good deal.

The faint, “Whoah!” from the other side of the canal made me look up. I sat outside, and once again had chosen a place to eat along the canal so I could enjoy the view and people watch. The “Whoah” from across the water came from a man who was falling into the canal. I was near going into rescue mode (read: superhero mode) until I realized he was just fine. For some reason, he swam across the canal to get out. Once I realized he was ok, I needed to hide my laughter, so buried my face in my phone.

I return the bike just a few doors down and walk back to the hotel. It’ll be the same as last night. Exhaustion will hit me and I’ll fall asleep for a short while. Later, I’ll head to the same bar across the street. Time flies as different people approach me. The first, a scuba-diver from England. Before long, he’s buying me beers. Along comes a girl who is there with an office party. She’s their supervisor and wants to buy me and the Englishman beers. I’ve made no attempt to start conversation with anyone, so this is new and weird to me. The “American alone in a bar” must have some sort of appeal. The night gets late and it’s time to walk back across the street. I pat my back the whole 50 steps back, proud that I chose such a close place.

I won’t go to sleep. In just a few hours, I’ll be heading out, and on my journey home. I hop on the computer, talk to my brother, and pack. I take a trolly-like train to an actual train to the airport. With no sleep, I talk to the man at customs at the gate. They ask questions like, “Why were you here?”, etc. They really try hard to trip you up. I must’ve answered the question, “What kind of car did you drive around in?” 4 times. Maybe because much of the trip was planned for me and I traveled so many places, he thought I was lying, but it was a good 3-4 minutes (and consulting with another woman about me) before they let me on the plane; I fall asleep almost immediately.

I wake up about an hour later. We have not taken off. Something ridiculous is getting fixed, like a hole in the gas tank. I go back to sleep and find out later in the 10 hour flight that I’m going to be missing my connection in Houston by a solid hour. Even if it was close, I would have probably missed it anyway. I had to go through security a couple of times, and eventually was made to choose: Check my bag, throw away or mail to myself the two wine bottle openers I bought in Paris.

I mail them to myself. It’s cheapest. Just under $13. I find out that I only have to wait an hour until the next flight I’ve been booked on. It’s during this time that it all sets in. I’m heading back to the regular life. “Back to the grind” as the norms would say. But it was a blast. Life experience through travel and adventure. And I anxiously look forward for the next one.