France!
Two weeks of Gallic Adventure

Late last year I was invited to the University of Warwick to give a talk at a conference entitled “New Developments in MCMC”. MCMC stands for Markov chain Monte Carlo, and refers to a type of probabilistic algorithm developed more than 60 years ago during the Manhattan Project by Stanislaw Ulam. A friend of Ulam’s called it a Monte Carlo method based on Stanislaw’s love of the famed gambling location.

I saw the trip to Europe as an opportunity to visit France, which I had last seen about eight years ago during a workshop on MCMC methods aimed at graduate students. My Mom, Tamara Johnson, decided to join me for the trip. She flew out to Raleigh-Durham and together we boarded the redeye for Charles de Gaulle airport on August 7th.

Paris (August 8th)
The next morning we arrived and settled in at the easy to remember “Hotel Paris France”. A great hotel, only half a block from a Metro stop for our subway travel, and only two blocks from a stop for one of the on-and-off tourist buses that circle the city. Our first stop was the Montmartre area, where after the first of many baguette lunches we climbed the hill to the Basilica de Sacre Coeur.

The next stop on our tour bus was the Ile de la Cite, the island in the middle of the Seine from which Paris grew outward. Its most famous landmark: Notre Dame.
Notre Dame is everything you can hope for in a 13th century cathedral. Enormous stained glass windows and loads of candles lend ambiance to a surprisingly large interior. The lines were long to get in, but moved through quickly.

That night we took a boat tour of the Seine giving some spectacular views at sunset.

**August 9th**
The following day we headed off to Napoleon's tomb. It is located in a church adjacent to Les Invalides, a hospital built by Louis XIV to care for the wounded veterans of France's many wars. Today the church holds several tombs and Les Invalides holds a museum of warfare.
In the courtyard of Les Invalides a ceremony was going on. The band played while troops were inspected.

Rodin left a great number of sculptures, paintings, and drawings, to France upon his death, and the Rodin museum is the place to see them. Then to La Madeleine, the only church I’ve seen devoted to Mary Magdelene.
The day ended with a visit to the Arc d'Triomphe and dinner on the Champs d'Elysee.

August 10th
In 1992 Euro Disneyland opened its doors. Since then another park has opened, the name has changed to Disneyland Resort Paris, and supposedly the parks were retooled to attract more Europeans. To my eyes they are still more similar than different to the American parks.

Walt Disney Studios Park is roughly the same as MGM-studios, although they try to concentrate on European movies, such as The Lion, the Witch, and the
Back in Disneyland Park (akin to the Magic Kingdom in Orlando), there are the usual delightful rides. The picture above is of the Peter and Wolf miniature scene on one such ride.

*August 11th*
In the 18th century Paris was running out of graveyards. Their solution: use long abandoned quarries to store the bones of millions of the dead. The result is the catacombs.
of Paris, a spooky place where the walls are all bones.

From the depths of the catacombs we headed over to the tallest skyscraper in France—the Montparnasse Tower. The views from the 56th floor are wonderful. Of course a joke in Paris is that is this is the only place where you don't have to see the Montparnasse Tower on the skyline.

Museum time! The Louvre (housed in a former royal residence) has one of the largest collections in the world. The sheer amount of artifacts gives one pause, from the Code of Hammurabi to the Venus de Milo, with paintings and sculpture that run the gamut from ancient times up until the 19th century.
August 12th

Our last day in Paris dawned rainy. Fortunately we made it to the museum of the day: Arts et Metiers which is a wonderful museum of the history of science. Besides having the lab equipment of French scientists like Lavoisier, they had everything from stereo phonographs to my beloved Commodore 64 in the history of computing section. It's well organized, and fairly new so most of the audio and video guides to the exhibits are still working.
To top it off, the museum cafe is great!

Our final stop in Paris was the Pere Lachaise cemetery, the largest cemetery in Paris and final resting place for luminaries such as Proust and Moliere.

**Versailles August 13th**

At this point we bid au revoir to Paris and headed out to the airport to pick up a rental car. Before I left for the trip I'd played a computer game where directions were read in French and I had to find them on a map. This was fortunate, since although our car had a GPS system, the operating system and directions it read out were entirely in French. Soon the Palace of Versailles lay before us! I'd visited Versailles the last time I was in France, and the
advances in visitor technology were apparent. It used to be that every tour through places such as the chapel were guided tours. This time mp3 players were the norm. Even better, most had headphone jacks. Using earphones instead of holding up a speaker to the ear for several hours makes the visit much more pleasant.

Much of the palace has been recently restored, and this time I visited areas (such as the opera house) inaccessible before. The hall of mirrors remains a masterpiece.

Since we were there on a Sunday, the fountains were doing their show, which is always fun.
In addition to the main palace, Marie Antoinette’s estate now has tours as well, and includes a variety of cottages and buildings such as this mill. After leaving Versailles, we next traveled to the Loire Valley.

**Loire Valley August 14**

The Loire valley is known for the great number of chateaux that have been built over the centuries. We had time to visit two, the medieval Chambord, and the Renaissance Chenonceau.

The imposing Chambord was built as a hunting lodge by Francois I. It is known for the elegant double spiral staircase that runs through the center of the structure, linking the four wings together.
Chenonceau had a very different history. First given as a gift from Henri II to his mistress Diane de Poitiers in the 16th century, it has served as a home and summer retreat for a variety of women connected to the French royal line. Its tree lined entrance is very different from the powerful look projected by Versailles and Chambord as you enter. There are two large gardens on the grounds, as well as hedge maze.

**Normandy August 15th**

Normandy, with its rolling hills dotted with cows and farms is very picturesque, and the town of Bayeux where we spent the night is no exception. Of course, the town is most well known for having the Bayeux Tapestry, a 230 foot long embroidered cloth recounting the events of the Battle of Hastings. The museum is excellent, including a narration of events for those whose Latin is a little rusty.

Next stop was the beaches of Normandy, where Allied troops landed on the Continent during World War II.
The American Military Cemetery holds 9,387 graves of American troops in what seems like endless rows of headstones. It is situated on a cliff above the beaches where so many lost their lives.

After lunch with some Normandy cheese, we headed over to where a few German bunkers are left as well.

Mont Saint-Michel August 16th
The next day we headed to a famous monastery of Mont Saint-Michel. Built on a rock that became an island at
high tide, the fortress that was built around the monastery was never captured by the English during the Hundred Years War. The climb to the top is not for the faint-hearted, but affords great views of the countryside.

Carcassonne August 17th

The walled city of Carcassonne began as a Roman fort. Later a fortress was added followed by a curtain wall stretching around the length of the town. It is one of the few places that still has guided tours—at least if you want to see the ramparts with their views overlooking the town below. Because it was built on over the centuries, it is a mix of Roman, Renaissance, Gothic, and other styles.
The outer wall is impressive, and its easy to see why it was valuable as a fortress.

Of course, nowadays the inner fortress is used mainly for regulating the influx of tourists.

Monte-Carlo, Monaco  August 17th

Nice was our next stop, and it is only a few kilometers by train to the Principality of Monaco, the second smallest country in the world. Given the imposing mountains surrounding Monaco, it is not hard to see how it remained independent of the superpowers surrounding it for so long.
Aside from the balmy weather, and deep blue sea, Monaco also boats the best aquarium I've ever been in. Every tank boasted an amazing specimen of sea life, many of which I had never seen before.

Next we rode a tourist bus around the four quarters of Monaco: Monaco-Ville, La Condamine, Fontvieille, and Monte-Carlo. Although only a few kilometers across, the hills make bus travel a necessity in Monaco. Our next stop was the St. Nicholas Cathedral where all the rulers of Monaco and their spouses are buried, including Grace.
Kelly. Then we hiked up to the Palace of Monaco, the official residence of the Sovereign Prince.

One of the cities buses then whisked us over to Monte-Carlo, and the famous Casino.

It is a beautiful building, and the tuxedoed croupiers manning the Roulette tables were very skilled at their jobs, flinging 500 Euro chips around the table with precision and style.

**Nice August 18th**

The morning in Nice was devoted to seeing three spots in the Cimiez quarter. First a museum devoted to Matisse, then a museum devoted to the Roman ruins found in the
area, and finally a museum of works by Marc Chagall.

Our last stop was the small village of Villefranche-sur-Mer, which turned out to have far more to see and do than we realized. First up was a craft fair along the main street. They also have preserved the citadel that guarded the bay.

At lunch we sampled the Salade Nicoise and ran into a number of tourists visiting Villefranche from a cruise ship.
that we had seen earlier in the bay. Then it was time for one last tourist bus/train. This one was driven by a friendly older gentleman who took us to a great overlook of the city, as well as a nearby church.

**Coventry August 21st**

That was the end of our sightseeing. The next day we drove back to Paris and flew off on our separate ways. Mom returned home, and I headed off to my conference at Warwick. The second day of the conference was the day for the excursion, and a group of us traveled to the nearby Coughton Manor. Here the Throckmorton family managed to remain stanchly Catholic from the centuries of the Tudors onward, despite hiding members of the Gunpowder Plot.
Their gardens were lovely, and included a Rose Hedge Maze.

So that was my August in 2006!