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# French exchange 'tres bien'

By KATE GILDERDALE  
I loved it; it was a great experience. That's how 18-year-old Kim Saunders described the

two weeks she spent in southern France as one of 24 students on an exchange from Stouffville District Secondary School.

Her enthusiasm was echoed by fellow travellers. Jenny Pritzker, 17, admits she didn't want to go at first.

"I was missing so much school and I was worried about flying. I didn't know if they'd like me." She soon discovered her fears were groundless. They were just great. I met all the family and friends and had a fantastic time."

Some things were a little different, though. "You had to get used to having no shower curtain when you had a shower," she grinned. "They drive really fast and they're not into fitness the way we are." As for television censorship, "they didn't look twice at nude ladies on commercials; things like that didn't bother them at all."

Seventeen-year-old Brenda Hachey stayed in a 300-year-old house. "It was older than our country. They were a wealthy family and had every comfort. They lived in the middle of town in a three-and-a-half-storey mansion which had an enclosed garden with tulips, a fish pond and lilacs. When you opened up the shutters you could smell the lilacs. It was beautiful."

The students were fascinated to discover real shutters that actually opened and closed. "It was great when you woke up in the morning and opened them and let

the sun in," Jenny recalled. Brenda's family took her on a picnic by the Mediterranean. "We went into the mountains and explored humongous caves and climbed 394 steps. We seemed to count steps wherever we went," she said. Another thing they noticed was how old and beautiful many of the buildings were.

They all agreed the food was good, although they got a bit tired of chocolate, which appeared on everything from croissants to cereals.

"I'm surprised their teeth weren't all rotted out," commented Jenny. Smoking isn't regarded as a social evil either. "People smoked everywhere, in the subways and restaurants," she recalled. "There were no public awareness programs."

Tracy Blackwell, 17, found people helpful and patient when she was speaking French to them. "They knew I wasn't French, so they spoke slowly to me." She found her exchange family didn't watch as much television as Canadians. "They didn't do much homework either. TV commercials there are really funny."

They all noticed that most of the popular music has English lyrics and the French were big disco fans. "They listen to groups like the Bee Gees," said Brenda. "They're really behind in musical tastes." The French students had some trouble with the Canadians when they spoke English. "They're taught to speak it with an English accent."

The schools were "freezing" because they'd turned off the heat to save energy," noted Tracy. Most found the schools they visited old-fashioned and drab, but 15-year-old Mike Reed was impressed with the one he attended, which had just been built.

His hosts made him feel at home. "They knew when my birthday was and they had a party for me. We had a cake and they gave me a present." He loved the scenery. "It's really picturesque; the grass was so green compared with here."

Michelle Barker's family enjoyed maple syrup with their pancakes, but instead of pouring it on top, they drank it, a habit the students found most peculiar. The students observed that few families drank pop, but many drank water or wine, and even the children were allowed some wine.

The best part of Michelle's holiday was visiting the cafes and discos. "We went out late at night; evenings there started at 11 o'clock."

When she went on day trips she could hardly keep her eyes open. They had to get used to eating late too, many families have their evening meal at around 9:30 at night.

Dogs and cats roam loose everywhere. "Even in the best restaurants, they wander in while you're eating," said Brenda.

Despite drawbacks like the rather primitive plumbing in public washrooms and the blithe disregard for healthy living exhibited by the French, the students found their hosts kind, helpful and welcoming.

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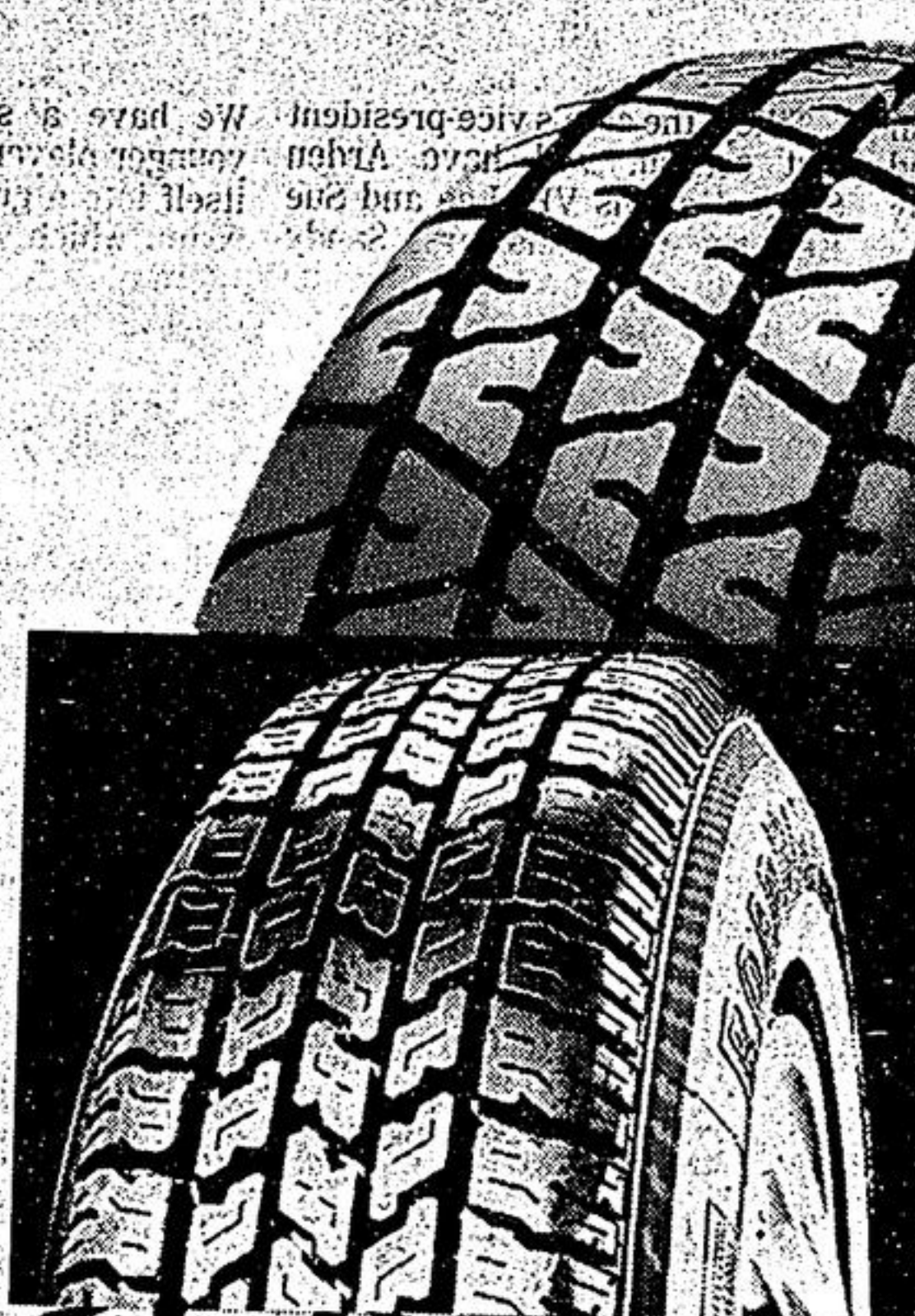
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