Colonia Copia Felix Munatia, founded by the Romans in 43 BC on the site of a Gaulish hill-fort settlement, was soon to become known as Lugdunum. Strategically situated on the Fourvière heights west of the confluence of the Rhône and Saône, acting as a gate for trade between the Mediterranean South and Europe’s North, Lugdunum was deemed to become the most important city in north-western Europe 300 years after its foundation. The etymology of its name still remains contentious with two variants being in circulation – each being more flattering than the other. Dunon means hill fort in Gaulish, which was the predominant language of the region when conquered by the Romans, so much is certain. Lug could either refer to the Celtic word for light (Latin lux) which will make immediate sense to those having seen the Fourvière hill immersed in the gold and amber of the rising sun. An alternative derivation is that from the name of the Celtic god Lug, whose messenger is the crow (lugus) and who was associated with the cockerel – the ultimate symbol of France. So what better place would there be to do a language course and experience French culture than in France’s culinary capital Lyon?

Having been through a few years of French lessons in the German educational system, which taught me to excel in the peculiarities of French grammar but left me unable to buy a baguette, my girlfriend and I chose a language course with a high degree of oral components. The language school Lyon Bleu International seemed ideally suited as the group sizes were kept to a maximum of ten, six different competency levels allowed for a fine-graded teaching to the student’s needs. An emphasis on conversation and extending vocabulary in the classes sounded promising to qualify me to finally purchase the French staple diet on my own. The first morning of the course we were asked to arrive early and (please to be on time) to be assessed by one of the teachers and to be allocated to our level. Overtired from sleeping in during the past two months of the summer vacation, a bit anxious and overexcited like on our first day of primary school, we were all called in, one by one, into the teacher’s office. A few memorized phrases and the teacher’s praise on my grammar later I ended up in group three out of six. Not bad after my five year absenteeism from the French language, I reassured myself. The pride began to give way to a slight feeling of embarrassment when I found myself in my class next to an Italian girl who just finished her first year of French – a rather short period compared to my seven years in school.

The first week ran under the theme “Les sentiments” (thanks to the battle of Hastings, no translation is required). Every day brought about three hours of lessons plus an additional one and a half on Tuesday for “L’option culture” to acquaint us with the intricacies of French
gestures, kissing greetings and to keep us from dropping a clanger in the minefield of intercultural communication. Mondays and Fridays we worked on our vocabulary. The teaching methods were quite creative – we listened to the emotional outpourings of French songwriters, tried to intonate phrases with a particular sentiment (pure bliss for the Italians particularly when it came to “l’amour”, much less so for the Japanese) and all moved into a fictive apartment building to invent the wildest stories of liaisons and intrigues since Desperate Housewives. Wednesdays we had our “audiovisual and oral expression class”. It did what it said on the tin: watching a video of ‘Amélie’, checking our listening comprehension and chatting about the film. Tuesday and Thursday was grammar time; but it was not just about cramming rules! We quizzed each other about our yesterdays, retold films about time warped medieval knights in the different French past tenses and we asked ourselves, if we were a scent, what scent would we be?

It must have been a thoughtless utterance of an obscure, highly irregular past participle – a remains from high school; in any case the next Monday I found myself one level higher up far-off from my beloved class three. Nevertheless, I immediately felt at home with all the Italian and Japanese students around me as in my old group. The theme for the second week was “advertising”. You shouldn’t think that this topic was less fundamental and instructive than ‘Les sentiments’ since this was when I learned French words such as those for ‘dishonest’, ‘pretentious’ and ‘vicious’. For the enthusiasts who were still up for some more French after the lessons, there was plenty to do in Lyon Bleu. A theatre group met twice a week, there was a French cinema club, a quiz about France was organised regularly, wine tastings and an organised boat trip were on offer.

My girlfriend and me stayed in an old Lyonnaise apartment on the ‘presqu’île’, i.e. between Lyon’s two rivers. The proprietress was a retired teacher who escaped France’s perpetual summer heat waves by visiting friends in the North of the country. The flat was tastefully furnished and had a unique atmosphere with its creaky wooden planks, its nested rooms and a small ventilation door connecting the bathroom and the kitchen at the height of the 3 meter ceiling. The location was ideal; only a 15 minute walk to Lyon Bleu, a stone’s throw from countless boulangeries, pâtisseries and restaurants, the cinema, the main shopping street and the Fourvière hill but: the flat was on the fourth floor and don’t think that there was a lift in this old building.

Besides learning French, there is a lot to do in the home town of Saint-Exupéry and Paul Bocuse. There is, first of all, to mention the ‘Villa Lumière’ housing vast quantities of technical exhibits of the Lumière brothers who invented the cinema in 1895. The museum had surprises around every corner as the creative inventors were also involved in producing the first colour photographs from around the world, novel bandages for victims of the Great War and the first lenses for cataract patients. The time of the Second World War is the focus of the ‘Centre d’histoire de la résistance et de la déportation’. Not only is the mixture of original sources and summaries very well presented in a gloomy, darkly lit room creating a sombre atmosphere – the texts display a healthily critical attitude towards France’s own history during the reign of Marshall Pétain. Much less sombre is the Museum of Contemporary Art where Bettina Rheims photographed models welcomed us in all their barenaked glory. Well worth a visit is also the ‘Basilica Notre-Dame de Fourvière’ which, perched atop the Fourvière hill, visible from virtually anywhere in the city and splendidly lit in the evening, has somewhat become Lyon’s landmark. After St Marie had been so kind to protect Lyon from the plague, cholera and even the Prussians approaching the city during the Franco-Prussian war, Lyon’s Catholics agreed that it was time to build an appropriate place to worship their patron saint in 1872. The result is rather impressive despite its neobyzantine pomposity.
and standing on the towers you might even be able to glimpse the Mont Blanc but if not at least enjoy a superb 180° view of Lyon. Don’t be fooled by the rather modern looking angels along the facade of the basilica, they’ve resulted rather from a lack of resources to pay a sculpturist than artistic genius.

But how about the baguette? Had I eventually been able to broker the deal in the boulangerie? I have to say it did work rather well. So well, that after a chat with the baker, he had convinced me to try morning after morning new samples of his rich assortment of almond croissants, brioche aux pralines and tarte à la crème. Initiated into the art of French baking, we’d lost the last spark of resistance to fend off the sellers who ushered us into their patisseries to make us buy succès, petits fours and blue chocolate. As translating menus and conversing with the waiter also seemed not more than a minor obstacle after the weeks in France and the language course, we more than once ended up spending more than 4 hours wining and dining through the countless menus of the French cuisine.

Conclusion of the stay in France is that I feel much more comfortable speaking the language, extended my vocabulary particularly for words that are in fact commonly used and also learned a thing or two about French grammar. Even though all this came at the cost of a few extra kilos of bodyweight, it was a highly recommendable experience. Faites des échanges!