Winter in Paris was not what we expected. We thought that it would be cold, at least during January and February, and we imagined that we would spend cold gray days wandering around museums or department stores in order to escape the freezing temperatures that would chase us off the streets.

Barging legends, Bill and Francis, who have wintered in the Arsenal, told us how they shopped for supplies during the dead of winter without having to spend more than a few minutes out in the cold. Having learned over the years to trust their advice, we made a trial run in the fall, taking line #1 at the Bastille to La Defense, where there is an underground shopping mall. We went back once, but only because we wanted to shop there. We never needed to return because of the cold, and were able to shop all winter in comfort on rue Saint-Antoine, where we had the pleasure of getting to know our local merchants.

Since Paris is North, and Roanne is South, we never dreamed that this winter would be so full of California blue sky days, that it would be warm enough for us to walk happily along the streets of Paris making new discoveries around every corner, or that we would be able to join our port neighbors for pot luck dinners out on the quay without having to eat wearing hats and gloves.

In Roanne, our winter habits during January and February were more closely associated with those of hibernating bears. We were used to settling in during the coldest months, spending days cuddled up with blankets and good books, our slippers suspended in mid air as our recliners were in the full back position. During short cold days and longer, colder nights, we occasionally watched movies in the evening with our next door barge neighbors Karen and Barry, who would run over for dinner and a movie wearing their comfy clothes, and carrying their fuzzy, warm slippers in a bag along with a bottle of wine and a treat for dessert.

We knew that winter in Paris would be different than winter in Roanne, but we never realized that any winter could come and go so quickly. We found ourselves in the fast lane for the first time in years, and we loved the pace. The only books that we read this winter were for homework assignments, and chairs and slippers only happened at the end of long and interesting days. We met people from all over the world, and we found that Paris is a friendlier city than we would have thought. Our friends from Roanne came to visit, but with the mild climate this year, we all left our slippers in the closet and spent most of our time outside under blue Paris skies.
Life at the port was not what we expected either. Because most of our barge neighbors are French and work in Paris, we did not anticipate having a social life here in the port. But we did. There were pot lucks, for one of which we were told to bring a dish, and a poem or a song that was about food. We selected simple verses by Ogden Nash, being a bit timid and not knowing what to expect from our neighbors, while Karen and Barry, our Roanne neighbors from barge “Eleanor”, who were staying with us, were more daring and wrote a song and a limerick respectively. The weather was amazingly mild, and under the clear evening sky, the good food and wine inspired some great poetry readings and songs.

On what happened to be one of the few rainy days of the winter, we joined our port neighbors in an assembly line set up under a tent in front of the Capitainerie to bottle our own Château Bastille. Twenty five people working together, when not talking or taking a break to eat something fresh off the barbecue, filled, corked, and labeled 700 bottles of wine. It was an all day operation that finished with dinner in the Yacht Club, where together we managed to empty a few of the freshly filled bottles.
The last weekend in March, we participated in the "Carnaval Vénitien de Paris", an event created by one of our French neighbors. Eight years ago, Michelle Santi organized the first carnival, using her artistic talent and passion to create fabulous costumes and masks. Michelle and her group of dedicated volunteers continue creating new costumes, and the event, which has grown over the years, now attracts people who travel to Paris with their own costumes from other cities in France and from other countries in Europe. On Sunday they estimated that 15,000-20,000 people came to our port to enjoy the carnival and to take photos of the beautiful costumes.

The work started for us in early March, when back in our port "club house" using the tables as a work space, Michelle gave a group of us very specific instructions on how to cut the material that would eventually cover the mooring posts in order to give them a Venetian appearance. She handed us rulers and scissors, and left the room after telling us that every measurement had to be exactly right before we started cutting. We measured and re-measured and no one dared cut into the material for a long time. We all decided to work on the same project together, so that blame would be shared if we made a mistake. She clearly wanted everything to be perfect, and we did not want to disappoint.

Michelle had a vision of what she wanted, and we were there to bring that vision to life. She amazed everyone when she placed a piece of yellow fabric on a work table, and guided us along step by step, as we changed it into a larger version of the Venetian flag that she used as the model. It took a few days and many hands working together, but in the end it was a beautiful Venetian Flag. Our group became known as the contingent international as we were English, Danish and American neighbors working together to make the decorations for the carnival.

Saturday morning everyone was on duty early setting up tents that would be used as dressing rooms for the visiting costumed foreigners, and decorating the port. That afternoon some of the volunteers dressed in costumes, others helped out with security or helped costumed people on and off of the boats that cruised around the port. Saturday was a gray day with some drizzle that chased the costumed people under the tents. The day went by quickly and we all stayed up late on Saturday night enjoying a dinner dance at the restaurant here in the port that Michelle organized for everyone participating in the carnival. Sunday was a beautiful spring day that brought huge crowds to the port, and our English neighbors David and Jackie, who were not working on the event, helped us by taking most of the photographs in the loop below.

Saturday night at the party, we learned that there is a carnival circuit in Europe, and that groups of costume loving people travel from one carnival to another just to dress up, put on their masks and have fun. This is something that you might think is strange before you experience dressing up and being part of a carnival. Once you are inside the costume, you understand their motives. Looking out at the crowd from behind your mask, you see nothing but paparazzi snapping photos, asking you for just one more pose, and you get a small sense of what it must be like to be famous. While it is a little disturbing at first, you soon settled into the role of being a star. Everyone loves you and wants to have their picture taken with you. Crowds part, just to stand by and let you pass, and photographers beg you to stand here or there in order to get a perfect picture. People are amazed by your beauty, and before long you are feeling right at home with your newly found fame. You begin flirting with small children and old folks, and everyone smiles at you. Friends are surprised when you find them in the crowd and speak to them by name, and because you are a star you get to take them on a boat ride with you, something that is not open to "the public". While posing for photos with your fellow costumed friends, you speak to each other from behind your masks, wondering what life will be like when you have to return back to the reality of being just another person in the port. You worry that this may be a difficult adjustment, but knowing that the carnival is not over and that you still have time left to be special, you continue to enjoy the rest of the day, and flirt often with your own husband as he is holding back the crowds and helping you step into a gondola for another spin around the port. The crowds grow as the day goes on, and opera singers serenade from a cruising barge. You might think that you are dreaming, but you are not. You are living in Michelle's imagination, and you find it a lovely place to be. You understand now why people love to dress up at carnivals.

Late Sunday evening, uncostumed and back in the real world, we helped Vicki and Lee, English neighbors who were the real movers and shakers of the contingent international, take down the decorations. We finished just before dark, and too tired to cook, we dragged ourselves up the stairs, and out to the Bastille to settle into our favorite café, where we enjoyed our meal while Parisians and tourists strolled passed.

Paris est trop cool!!