

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Alex Payne, Jess Field, and Pam Lorg

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Alex: What if you could fly business class to France, stay in a luxury hotel, and then spend a week cruising through Provence and Burgundy all without blowing your travel budget? Jess just returned from an incredible French river cruise with her mom, and points made the flights and pre-cruise stay possible. Today, she's sharing exactly how she booked it, what the cruise was really like, and whether she'd do it again.

Welcome to *Points Talk*®. We are three moms who've discovered how to leverage credit card welcome offers to get hundreds of thousands of dollars of travel expenses for nearly free. We've used credit card points and miles to take vacations to places like Hawaii, Paris, Greece, Maldives, Japan, and so much more. And the best part? We each still have 800 plus credit scores. Imagine being able to take the vacation of your dreams for nearly free. It's totally possible, and we're here to show you how.

Alex: Hey, I'm Alex.

Pam: And I'm Pam, Alex's mom.

Jess: And I'm Jess. Let's talk points.

Alex: All right. So Jess is here to talk all about her trip she just returned from. She went with her mom to France. I'm super excited to hear about this because I have only been to Paris, and Jess did not go to Paris this time. She went on a river cruise with her mom through Provence and Burgundy.

So Jess, tell us all about the trip. We want to hear how you got there, where you stayed before the cruise, how you used points. I know you didn't use points for the actual river cruise. It was a points-earning opportunity, but you did use points for your flights and your pre-cruise stay. So tell us first all about how you and your mom got there.

Jess: Okay, so to be fair, we did fly into Paris, but that just wasn't our final destination. We explored other parts of France that I have not been to. My mom had actually been there before I was born, but I had never been there. And so we flew from Houston to Paris. There is a direct flight on Air France. I had initially booked us on premium economy for 40,000 Air France miles, which is a

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

great deal. I think that's about as good as you can get on Air France premium economy. I was happy with that booking. I booked it soon after the schedule opened up.

And then, I think it was around March of this year, I got a Thrifty Traveler alert for wide-open availability on Air France business class, and the exact date that we were flying premium economy was available in business for 60,000 miles. I'm going to pay 20,000 more miles every day of the week to fly business class.

Alex: Yes.

Jess: Premium economy would have been fine, but for 20,000 miles, I was like, done, say no more. So it was 60,000 miles and \$246 each in taxes and fees. I will say that Air France normally charges a cancellation fee if you cancel and rebook. So in this situation, it was a matter of calling up Flying Blue, canceling the premium economy flight, and then rebooking on business. They would normally charge, I believe it's a \$75 cancellation fee per person, but there had been a slight schedule change. It wasn't anything big. I think it was an hour. The flight had changed an hour, and so they waived that cancellation fee.

Alex: Oh, that's so nice.

Jess: So yeah, so I was like, sweet. I was planning to ask about that, but they did it before I even had to ask about it. So that was really nice. So I was easily able to cancel and rebook that. And then we landed in Paris.

Alex: Well, I have a quick question for you. When you first booked that one flight for 40,000 miles, did you book a train stop along with it? Or no?

Jess: Yeah. So I did. I did. So I had originally—so Lyon is where the cruise was leaving from. So that was our final destination.

Pam: And how far is that from Paris? I have no idea where.

Jess: It's like a two-hour train ride.

Pam: Okay.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Jess: So I had when I had originally booked as premium economy, Air France does have this thing where for certain destinations, you can book your flight and your train in one booking. And it's like for the same amount of miles. And so I had booked us from Houston to Paris flight and then train from Paris to Lyon in one booking.

Alex: That's really cool.

Jess: So I put in Lyon as the destination instead of Paris in that example. When Thrifty Traveler sent out the email, I checked again because I was like, "Ooh, maybe I can get it all for 60,000," and I couldn't. It was only like Houston to Paris was 60,000. If I put Houston to Lyon, it was like a hundred and something thousand. So I was like, "No, that's not worth it." But definitely always check that out. Put the train station in for the destination that you're going to, if you're not just stopping in Paris, and see if that option pops up. I know it wasn't available for every single flight.

Alex: But that's a cool little trick. I would've...

Jess: It's worth checking.

Alex: Yeah, I never would've thought, "Oh, I can just book my train right along with my flight."

Jess: Yeah.

Alex: So that's cool.

Jess: So we arrived in Paris in the morning and then we had to get from the airport to Gard de Lyon train station. And so there's a few different options. You can take a train, but it was going to require us to switch, and I was like, I don't want to deal with lugging my suitcase on the train, having to transfer to a different one. Like, jet lag. You know, like, I just don't; I didn't want to deal with that.

Alex: Yeah. No, I don't blame you.

Jess: So we could have taken a taxi. I actually hired a driver to pick us up at the airport and drive us to the train station. I probably should have just taken a taxi.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

I'm not going to recommend the driver that I hired because he ended up being late, and it was just a whole thing.

So if I could do it over again, I would have just taken a taxi directly from the airport and taken it to the train station. And then, like I said, it was a direct train. It's around two hours from Paris to Lyon. I booked us in business class on the train because it was only \$63 each in business class. I think it was like \$45 in the regular one, and I wanted to have the two seats with the table.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: So, \$63 each in business class on the train. So we got to Lyon and we stayed one night at the Intercontinental Lyon, but I booked two nights because it is an Edit property. And so in order to get the \$250 Edit credit, you have to book a stay of two nights or more. So I booked us two nights. We only stayed one, but it was really nice because we weren't boarding the boat until like 3:00 to 7:00 was the time, 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. the next day was the time that you could board the boat and check in. And so we got to stay the whole day at the hotel and not have to worry about leaving our bags at the front desk or checking out early, and what are we going to do until we can get on the boat type of thing.

So it actually ended up working out really nice. So we just left at like 4:30 p.m. or 4:00 p.m., and we didn't say anything. I didn't say, "Hey, I'm checking out early. We only stayed one night." I just pretended like everything's great, and it just checked out on its own the next day.

Pam: That is a great use. That's a great use of that because sometimes you're not going to stay two nights, and it's like, but you want to stay—you know, if you have Hyatt Globalist, you wouldn't have had a problem. You could have stayed till 4:00. But in this thing with it being an IHG hotel, that's a great way to get around that.

Jess: And I do think there is some late checkout capability with the Edit, but it's not like 4:00, 5:00, 6:00 p.m., you know.

Pam: I think it's more like 2. Yeah.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: Yeah. And I think with the Edit, it's not guaranteed. Whereas with Fine Hotels + Resorts®, I think it's guaranteed. I don't think it's guaranteed with the Edit.

Pam: I think so too.

Jess: So it ended up, I did the math and it ended up being way cheaper for us to book two nights through the Edit with the \$250 Edit credit and the \$250 Select Hotels credit. So we got, we booked two nights, got \$500 back, and it was just 22,000 Chase points. I used, it was Points Boost also, and it was Points Boost for two cents per point.

Alex: Oh, that's awesome.

Jess: It ended up being 22,000 Chase Ultimate Rewards® total for two nights. And then my mom paid me back for half of that. So we each paid 11,000 Chase points for this stay. And this was a beautiful hotel. If you're going to—I know Lyon is like kind of niche. Not a lot of people go there, but if you're going there, this is a great property. It used—it's beautiful. It's right on the water. It used to be a hospital, and it's just very has a lot of character.

And we got—so we got free breakfast with the Edit at the hotel, and then we also got a \$100 credit that we could spend. And so we had lunch at the hotel. They have, so they have a restaurant, and then they have like a bar and lounge, but they have food there too. And so we had lunch in their little lounge, and it's like this beautiful domed room. It used to be the chapel at the hospital.

Pam: Oh, wow.

Alex: That's really cool.

Jess: And so now it's like, now it's a bar and lounge. And so we had lunch there. I think our lunch came out to like \$108. And so we paid \$8 for our stay, basically. So if you're going to be in Lyon, this is a really great option on points. The room wasn't anything special. It was just two queen beds, but it was like, it was nice, it was quiet, excellent location. So highly recommend that.

Pam: Did you walk around Lyon at all?

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Jess: We did. So actually, as part of the cruise, they included a walking tour of Lyon, like that first day. So we boarded the boat, checked in, put our bags down, and then they included a walking tour of Lyon. So that kind of took the pressure off of us. When we got there, I was like, "Okay, we don't really have to see everything because we're going to see it all tomorrow on this walking tour."

Alex: Yeah, that's nice.

Jess: So we did walk around. We went and found dinner, but we went to bed at like 8:30 p.m. that first night because we were pretty spent. So that is how we got there, and that is where we stayed beforehand. And then flying home from France, we took a little bit of a roundabout way, okay?

So we flew from Lyon to Houston, but there were two stops along the way. And that is because I was researching flights, I found this what I think is a really great deal through United, but and it was business class for two of the, two of the flights, but I told my mom, I was like, "Okay, we can either fly like Paris to—" you know, "we can take the train back to Paris, we can fly Paris to Houston, but we'll be in economy. Like, I can't find any good premium or business class deals. Or we could have two stops and fly business." And my mom was like, "Two stops and fly business."

Pam: That's my girl.

Jess: Yeah. Well, the nice thing too is it allowed us to leave, like we left Lyon that afternoon, and then we technically still got home that same day. Like if we had gone to Paris first, we would have had to stay the night in Paris before. And to me, there's a lot of convenience that comes from, like, you know, after a trip, I just want to get home. I don't want to go to take a train, go to another city, take a taxi to another hotel, unpack. You know, I was just like, "That sounds terrible."

So we did the very long travel day of two stops. So we flew, I booked this through United. Two of the legs were actually on Lufthansa, and then the final leg was on United. I booked this, okay, so you know how Ted has the United QuestSM card? So the card member pricing was 80,000 miles and \$220, which alone to me is a steal for like Lyon to Houston door-to-door business class. But he also had, like his 10,000-mile award flight discount from his Quest card that

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

you get every year on your anniversary. So it was just 150,000 United miles for both of us or 75,000 miles each, which I thought was a steal.

Alex: Yeah, that's great.

Jess: For what we got. So another plug, if you live in a United hub, you really need to have a United card that's not the GatewaySM card. And just a tip, I booked us all through Ted's account. He wasn't on the flight, but with flights, you can usually do that where you can book using your miles for someone else way more easier than hotels.

Pam: I'm glad you brought that up because we get that question a lot by people who think that they're tied to booking their own flights from their account, and it gets very confusing. But that is—yeah, I book my flights on my husband's, from my husband's account all the time. I'm using his points more than he is.

Jess: Yeah, so we booked both of these and we got his 10,000-mile award flight discount, and he doesn't even—he doesn't even know that's a perk. He wouldn't have used that on his own. So we flew Lyon to Munich on Lufthansa. That was business class, but it was just like the inter-European business class where it's economy, basically economy with the middle seat blocked. But this flight was only an hour, and they served us a full-on meal. I was like, I was like, the American airlines could never do this.

Alex: American airlines are like, "Oh, it's an hour flight. Sorry, guys. We don't have enough time to get you a drink of water."

Jess: You get, you get a bottle of water, that's it. So we flew Lyon to Munich, and then we flew Munich to Washington, D.C. on Lufthansa business class. This was such a nice flight. It was on their A380 and this was my mom's first time on a double-decker plane. So we were on the upper deck. She was like, "There's stairs on the plane. Like, this is amazing."

So I really—I know Lufthansa kind of gets mixed reviews. I thought it was great. We were on one of, we were on the A380, and we were in their newer business class, and so that probably makes a difference. I thought it was great. The service was phenomenal. I thought the food was good. So I have no complaints

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

about that flight. So that was Munich to Washington, D.C., and then we flew Washington, D.C. to Houston in United economy. And that was just a standard domestic United flight. We got home around midnight. So we were tired.

Pam: I got your Flighty information on my phone, and I'm going, "Oh my goodness, when is this girl getting off these flights? This is insane."

Jess: Yeah, it was a long day, but then when I woke up in my bed the next morning, I was like, "That was so worth it to be home and not—"

Alex: Yes, totally.

Jess: And not have to spend the night in Paris and still be traveling. And so it was great.

Alex: And did you use your Blacklane credit from your Citi Strata EliteSM to get home from the airport?

Jess: So originally, originally I had done that, and then it was one of those things where like our United flight was delayed, but we were still going to arrive early. Like you know how sometimes it takes off late but then you still arrive on time?

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: But I got a text on the flight from Blacklane that was like, "We noticed your flight's delayed. We've pushed your pickup to 1:35 a.m."

Alex: Oh dear.

Jess: And so I was like, I don't know if I just leave it, if they will account for that. Like I was texting Ted on the plane and I was like, "Okay, so how bad would it be if you picked us up at 12:30 from the airport because Blacklane is now telling me that they're going to pick us up at 1:30."

Alex: Oh, and that would be a nightmare to sit there for an hour.

Jess: And he was like, he was like, "Absolutely not. I will pick y'all up." So I canceled. You can cancel Blacklane up until an hour before pickup without penalty.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: Oh, nice. Yeah.

Jess: So I was like, I don't want to chance it. I want to be home. It feels like 7:00 a.m. to me, and I've been awake all day.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: So just a tip, keep an eye out for that. And I don't know what would have happened if I had just let it be, but I did not want to find out on this particular trip because I was exhausted.

Alex: Yeah, no, that totally makes sense. Want deeper dives beyond what we cover here? Points Talk premium gives you more detail, more strategy, and more insight. Subscribe now at pointstalk.supercast.com or through the show notes.

Pam: Okay, Jess. Now that we know how you got to France and where you stayed on points before the cruise started, give us the tea on the cruise itself.

Jess: All right. So this was a river cruise through France, like we've said, and it this was with Helene from Helene in Between and her husband Michael. They charter these boats and they host their own river cruises. I will say this was not sponsored. This was not hosted. I did not get any sort of discount. I paid for this with my own money, and I earned a sign-up bonus or two from paying for it. I have followed Helene forever. I went to her book tour last year when she came to Houston, and so I have always followed her.

She released the idea of these cruises, and I was immediately like, that sounds amazing. I've always wanted to do a river cruise. And so the thing that really got me thinking, she had she previously had just hosted cruises for the Christmas markets in, you know, Germany and so that had been on my radar, but they are usually—so her cruises are ages 21 and up and usually like when her Christmas cruises were going, it's like, I would want to bring my family on those and I can't.

And so my mom and I went to Switzerland last year for our mother-daughter trip. We have a podcast episode about that. It was a little rough for her just, you know, she's 76. She's now 77, but she was 76 at the time. It was a lot of hotel hopping. It was a lot of walking around, and it was just a little rough for her. So

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

when Helene announced these cruises where her whole thing was like, "You get on and you unpack once and we take you to all these places." I was like, this would be perfect for my mom.

And so I texted my mom, I was like, "Hey, there's these cruises. They're happening." Like she's doing a lot of spring and summer cruises now. It's not just the holidays. So I texted her and I was like, "Hey, she's doing this cruise through Provence and Burgundy. It looks really cool." And my mom was like, "Yes." Like within two minutes of me sending that text, my mom was like, "Yes, I'm on board."

So I will say her cruises are very popular. They sell out same day, like within an hour. Again, another reason why she doesn't need to host me. She doesn't need to sponsor me. Her cruises are going to sell out whether I talk about them or not. So they sell out, you know, the day they are announced. So I got on, she has a wait list that she emails about her cruises. I got on the wait list. I knew what time that booking was opening.

Alex: This is where Jess just thrives. Jess thrives.

Jess: This is where I thrive. I thrive on this kind of thing, okay? Like, hello, Ticketmaster. I got you. Like anything that's so—

Alex: Hamilton tickets, she got me.

Jess: Hamilton tickets, I got them. So I'm sitting at my computer and it's like the clock hits 10:00 and I'm like, book it. And so, yeah, so I don't I know that she's releasing more springtime cruises soon, but she will as long as like you're on her wait list, you'll always know the all the cruise details and when they go on sale before they actually go on sale. So you have all the knowledge you need to get in there and book it for yourself.

For this particular cruise, she opened up bookings in late July 2025 and then our cruise departed July 22nd, 2026. So it was just about a year right there, a year in advance that she released these cruise details. So I was on it.

And then how the cruises work. Like I said, it's ages 21 and up. So if you have kids, you've got to leave them at home for this one. The one we were on was

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

seven nights. I think most of hers are around a week. And then the really cool thing is the price you pay, it includes your room, your food, and your drink, and that includes alcohol. It includes gratuities for everyone, and it includes one excursion per day.

And so I think that for what I think the value is incredible for everything that you get. We did not have to tip anyone. We had our excursions included. They also have an optional paid excursion that you can add on each day. And they provided all the transportation for the excursions. And then about three months before the cruise is when they sent out the details of like registering for the excursions you wanted to register for.

So a lot of people did both excursions every day. We did not. I was like, I want at least a couple days where we're not go, go, go the entire day. Y'all know that I'm like that. So we had a couple where we did both. We had a couple where we had an excursion in the afternoon and we kind of had a chill morning to sleep in. So it was really nice.

So the only things we paid for other than the cruise itself was just travel insurance. I bought the travel insurance through Lisa, who has been on the podcast talking about travel insurance. I added on like the cruise add-on to it. Luckily, we didn't have to use it at all, but it's nice having the peace of mind that I had it just in case.

As far as boats go, we were on the Amadeus Provence. That's the name of the ship. And then there are three room choices. Again, I don't know this is going to differ by cruise. Like I'm only talking about the one I was on. I have a feeling it's similar for all of them. I cannot guarantee that the pricing I'm about to share is the pricing that's going to be on her next batch of cruises that she releases.

But for our sailing, there was a standard state room, which had a window, but you couldn't open it. So it was just a panoramic window. That room was \$3,799 per person. There was a panorama room which had the panoramic window that you could open. That was \$4,299 per person. And then there was the suite that had a little walkout balcony and a sitting area. That was \$5,199 per person. Again, for seven nights and considering that this includes all your food, alcoholic beverages, gratuities, and an excursion per day, I think it's a good deal.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: Literally includes everything. Like if you wanted to go and just get your flights, you wouldn't have to pay anything else.

Jess: Yeah.

Alex: Except getting to the cruise port.

Jess: You could totally just do the included excursion every day and not pay for any of the optional excursions, and you would still have a great time.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: And you can still get off the boat and just walk around. You know, you just wouldn't be—

Alex: Yeah, you could do your own, you could do your own thing. Yeah.

Jess: Yeah. The other nice thing is when you book it, you pay a deposit, and then there's four additional installments that you pay like throughout the year leading up to your cruise. And so it does make it easier to budget that money, you know, when you're not having to pay \$3,799 per person in one go. It's like, hey, let's, they break it up into four or five payments. And so I found that a lot more doable.

Alex: It does—I mean, you can let I don't know, maybe I'm jumping ahead here, but when you're—was it mostly like couples or girls trips or was there a mix? Because I look at this and I'm like, this would be a great girls trip. And then you're only having to pay for one person.

Jess: Exactly. So there were some couples on the trip. I would say it was like—and this is just me guessing. I have not asked Helene like, "Give me the data." I would say it was probably 80 to 85% women. There were lots of mother-daughters and lots of girls' groups. There were, like I said, there were some couples, but this is not... like Ted would have hated this cruise mostly because he doesn't drink and he doesn't like cheese. And which is so bizarre. Don't even get me started.

Alex: So this wouldn't be a good cruise for us then if we don't drink. Or would you still?

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Jess: No, I think you would be fine. I think you would be fine. But he, it was just a double whammy for him to like not be able to do any wine tastings and not be able to do any cheese tastings. That would be like, no, you can like my mom doesn't drink either and she was fine.

Pam: Yeah.

Jess: I drink—I mean, I got my money's worth in Diet Coke alone, okay? So and cappuccinos.

Alex: Hey, as long as they've got Diet Coke, Pam's good to go. Or Coke Zero.

Jess: Diet Cokes and cappuccinos, I got my money's worth. Okay? So there were also, you can go as a solo traveler, but they will pair you up with someone else. And so there were there were a good amount of solo travelers on the cruise. I would say if I had to guess, the average age was probably 45, which I feel like is much lower than your typical river cruise.

Alex: Yeah. Probably because Helene is younger. Like, so she attracts a younger audience. I would, yeah. I think she's about our age, right? She's a millennial.

Jess: I think she's around our age. Yeah. Yeah, she's a millennial. She's a millennial. So I thought, and then the other nice thing is there's a pool on board. Granted, it's a small pool, but there is a pool on board and they also had a Facebook group beforehand that everyone could join and people were setting up like, let's get dinner in Lyon, let's do this excursion together. And so that was kind of cool. You know, I mean, I didn't do that because you'll know I'm like introverted. As we were boarding the cruise, I was like, "Mom, you have to do all the talking to everyone. Like, you have to." We did end up making like some good friends on the cruise that we had dinner with every night. We went on, like, we planned our excursions together. And so that was kind of fun to have like people that we connected with.

Alex: I got another boat question for you though.

Jess: Yes.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: I'm assuming being a river cruise, it's not the ocean. It's pretty calm. So for those that are wondering, the people like me who worry about getting, getting a little motion, how is it?

Jess: You do not feel a single thing.

Alex: Perfect. That's what I was hoping to hear.

Jess: Sometimes, sometimes you can feel like vibration of the boat.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: But it is in no way like motion sickness movement. The other thing, I think you and Pam would actually really love these cruises. The other thing is a lot of the sailing is done at night while you're sleeping

Alex: Oh, nice.

Jess: So like they will leave at midnight and then they'll arrive somewhere at 7:00 a.m. And so it's like you're just in bed the entire time. For most of the time you're awake, the boat is docked. And so, but you, I mean, if you've done a—it is nothing like the Disney cruise you did.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: Like, I don't remember if you had any issues on there.

Alex: I think my Disney cruise, I was fine. I was I could feel it and I was like, ooh, like a little bit like feeling weird in the restaurants, but I think we had some rough, we had some rough days. And I survived, though. So I think I'd I would be totally fine. But I know people are going to, I know people are going to be wondering that.

Jess: No, that's a good point. No, you don't feel anything. I did not—like my mom was worried about that too. This was my mom's first cruise ever. Like she's never, she's never been on any sort of cruise.

Alex: Yeah.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Jess: And she was worried about it and like I brought Bonine for her, but she was like, she never needed anything. So I think two thumbs up on the motion sickness issue.

All right. So I'm just going to kind of go through like a day, like what a day aboard the ship was like. So like I said, on July 22nd, that's when we boarded the ship. We boarded around 4:00 p.m. We were able to go straight to our room. It's also a much smaller boat. I think there were around 130 passengers on our boat. Disney cruises, you're looking at between 2,000 and 4,000 people. So this is just a much smaller boat, smaller experience. We got on the boat, we checked in, and we went right to our room. You know, that doesn't happen on like the bigger cruise ships.

We dropped our bags off, we unpacked. Like I said, the really nice thing is you unpack once. And so we literally unpacked our entire suitcase, put our suitcases away under the bed, and then we were good to go for the entire week. There was that walking tour of Lyon at 5:00 p.m. that day that was included. And then each night they would leave a little paper, like brochure, in your room that had the plan for the next day. So like, what time breakfast was, what time lunch was, what time dinner was, what the excursions were, like little fun facts about the area that we were going to be in. And so every night after dinner, we got one of those in our in our state room.

Breakfast was always buffet, but they did have eggs to order. You could get eggs Benedict, fried eggs, omelet. You could get like pancakes and waffles, I think. You know, like the stuff that most hotels have made to order. You could get made-to-order there. Lunch, they had a couple of different options. So you could either do like a sit-down four-course lunch in their restaurant, or they had what they called an express lunch, which was basically just a buffet of the same food in the lounge area. So if you just wanted to, like, grab something quickly and go, you could do that. If you wanted to have a seated lunch, you know, where they bring out one course at a time, you could do that too.

Alex: What did you guys usually do?

Jess: We usually did the sit-down one just because, yeah. I kind of, I kind of like—

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: So were your activities—

Jess: I really liked the wait, I really liked the wait staff. And so it was like we would always go to our little section, and we had the same server, Sean, and he would help us. And so, you know, that was part of the experience was interacting with him.

Alex: So were your activities later in the day then? Like so you'd have breakfast—

Jess: There was one in the morning and one in the afternoon. And so the one in the morning was always like, you always had time to have breakfast and then go on the activity and then have lunch when you get back.

Alex: Okay.

Jess: The lunches were usually later. Like lunch was, lunch would start at like 1:00.

Alex: Oh, okay.

Jess: So it was kind of like the excursions were from like 9:00 to noon or 9:00 to 12:30, and then lunch would start at 1:00.

Alex: Gotcha.

Pam: I have a question. So you're talking, I'm probably jumping ahead too. So you're saying that you're all going on these excursions. Well, there's a hundred of you. Are you divided up into different groups so you're not going with a hundred people?

Jess: Yeah. So they divided us into—everyone got like these you got to choose the color strip that you wanted. So everyone was broken up by color, and what we ended up doing is like once we made those friends, we would all just get, go and like take the same color so that we were together.

Pam: Okay. Okay.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Jess: And so everyone was broken up by if there was usually four different groups, depending on the excursion and how full it was. But I feel like typically there were four different groups and then we got on a bus. And so it was like each group was on their own bus. And I think they also alternated, like, the order that the buses went in. So like not everyone, not all 100 people were going to like the same spot at once. It was like one bus would start here, one bus, you know, they kind of alternated the routes, I think.

Alex: That's smart.

Jess: And then dinner was like a sit-down five-course meal every night. The only thing was like sometimes dinner, I feel like ran long. I feel like that's the case.

Alex: It's just Europe too.

Jess: When I've done Disney cruises, I have the same feeling. Like it's just the—you know, it's like dinner would start at 7:30 or 8:00 and then we wouldn't be done until like 10:00. And I'm like, I'm ready to go to bed. And then some of these people, they would always have like a DJ or live music, and people would go up and like dance and drink. And I was like, y'all are crazy. I'm going to bed. Like, I am, we've been out all day. I'm so tired.

So, but they also had a cheese buffet every night at dinner, which again, Ted would have hated. But it was really cool. They had like this guy standing there and you could go up and choose the kind of cheese and like crackers and fruit you wanted. So I don't know. I thought the food was overall really good, like better than I would expect from a boat, you know? So I thought the food was great.

The service, like I said, was great. We loved our little waiter that we tried to get every single day at lunch and dinner. My mom was like taking selfies with him on the last day. She was like, I have to remember Sean. She was taking pictures with him. So, so it was fun.

And then as far as excursions go, I think that's the last thing I'm going to cover is like I said, every day there's an option, there's an included excursion that's just included with your cruise fare, and then you could add on an additional

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

excursion if you wanted to. And so, like I said, we did a mix. Some days we did the, some days we did only the included excursion. Some days we did only the paid excursion because I was like, and the included one like doesn't sound that great to me.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: I will say if you do both every single day, I could see getting really tired. Like, that's it's just long days if you do, you know, 9:00 to 12:00 and then you come back from lunch and then you're gone like 2:00 to 7:00 every single day for seven days in a row. I just think that would be a little bit tiring. But hey, some people want to just do everything. So more power to you.

They had, they did have like a masseuse on board, and so I got a massage one day. That was really nice. Like while everyone else was out on their excursion, my mom and I stayed, I got a massage, I read my book on the top deck. And so there were time, it's kind of you, it's, it's you, it's what you make of it basically. You know, if you want to have like a go, go, go, do two excursions every day, be gone from sunrise to sunset, you can totally do that. If you want to do like we did where you're like mixing in more busy days with more down days, you could do that. If you want to just get on the boat and not do anything and go to the pool and read your book, you can do that too. So, yeah, you can, it's just whatever you make of it.

So a few examples of some of the included excursions, like I said, the walking tour of Lyon that first day, we went to a chateau, there was a wine tasting. Again, if you don't drink wine, it's still cool to like walk around and explore the grounds and they had like water, I think they had sparkling water for people who didn't drink. We went to a lavender farm, which was really cool. We got to see like how they make, grow, and harvest the lavender. We went to the Grand Canyon of Urine. Urine? I don't know if we should leave that in or not.

Pam: Oh, that's so hilarious, Jess.

Jess: We went to the Grand Canyon of Europe, Ardesh Gorge. And this is also where we saw that the like Europe's largest natural arch. I think I sent y'all a

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

picture of it, and it was really pretty. So that was one of the included excursions. We did a walking tour of Avignon, which was really cool. I love walking tours.

Alex: I do too.

Jess: Like I love just like wandering the streets, hearing about the history, seeing the buildings. I love that stuff. So we did a lot of walking tours.

Alex: Was it what was the temperature like? Like was it comfortable for these? Because that's my thing sometimes with walking tours. I'm like, oh, but it's so hot.

Jess: Yeah. It was like, it was one of those things where it was like not cold in the mornings, but it was like in the 60s in the mornings.

Alex: Okay.

Jess: And then by the afternoon, it was probably in like the 80s, like the mid 80s.

Alex: Oh, that's not too bad. Oh, nice.

Jess: It wasn't terrible. I mean, it was like if you were in direct sun, it was definitely a little toasty.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: But I try a lot of these places had like indoor, they were indoor, outdoor. Yeah. Or I just stayed in the shade and I was fine.

Alex: Nice.

Jess: So a couple of examples of paid excursions. We went to Château de Cormatin. I don't know if I pronounced that right, but that's how it's spelled. It reminded me of Versailles, obviously a smaller scale, but it was this chateau, it had an actual moat around it, like the manicured gardens, like Versailles has, these lavish bedrooms that we walked in and out of and saw. This one was \$99 each. So I feel like \$99 was average for how much these paid excursions cost. So that's per person.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

There was a full day trip to Annecy and the Alps. This was one of my favorite days. Annecy was so cute. We had a guided walking tour of Annecy and then we had lunch on our own. And so my mom and I and one of the couples that we became friends with, we went and got fondue at a restaurant in Annecy and then they took us to this farm and we we got a cheese tasting experience and we got to see like the cows and how they milk them and how they make the cheese and like the whole process of it and then we got to taste the cheese. And so that was really cool. This was one of my favorite days. This one was \$149, but it was we left at 8:45, and we got back at 7:00. So this was like a true... we were gone all day long.

Alex: That actually seems like a really good price for that.

Jess: It's really reasonable. Yeah, for everything that we got. And then another one that was also \$99 was we got to go to an olive orchard and we got to see how they grow the olives, how they make the olive oil, and then we got to have an olive oil tasting at the end. That one was \$99 also.

So just really cool experiences that like, I think it would be hard, I would have never found these on my own. You know, like I feel like Helene and Michael do really great research into the different excursion options. And it was so nice to have everything planned for us. Like, I didn't have to be the one doing planning the excursions. You know, like everything was already done for us. I literally signed us up. I mean, getting a spot is the hardest part, you know? Like I signed us up for the cruise, I got us a room, and then everything else was done for us. And so that was really nice.

I think one downside of just cruises in general is you feel like, oh, I wish I had more time here. I think that is just a common theme. Like even though all, even though the full day—

Alex: You get like a taste of each little stop. And you're like, oh, but I want more.

Jess: Yeah. Like when we went to Annecy, I was like, oh, I could spend all, like I wish we could spend all day here. That's just one of the, you know, like that's just, that just comes with cruising.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

Alex: Well, what's really cool is you get to see a bunch of places and then you're like, "Okay, I'm coming back to this place. I love this. I need to like come and stay here for a few days or something."

Jess: Yeah. And it was, and it's, it's like we this is not a trip logistically that would have been doable if we were like flying in and driving to all these places. Like my mom and I just wouldn't...

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: ...drive to all these places, find this farm, like find the, you know, we just wouldn't... find this olive orchard. Like it just wouldn't have happened, you know?

Alex: Yeah. Yeah, that sounds really incredible. And I can just, I can't, we can't overstate how nice it is after, you know, you plan a lot of trips. We all plan a lot of trips. You're doing the logistics, you're managing the points, you're managing our itinerary, where we're going, what we're doing each day, especially when you're traveling with your whole family, it's a lot of work. And so to just show up, I can't imagine how nice that was to be like, "I'm going to Europe and I don't have to plan anything. This is a first."

Jess: Well, one of my least favorite things in the entire world, and I think a lot of moms are going to relate to this, is the every night, "What's for dinner? What are we having for dinner?" And I'm like, for them to just tell me like, "Dinner's at this time. Show up. We'll bring you five courses and then you can have a cheese buffet." I'm like, this is a mother's dream. Like this is...

Alex: No, it's true. It's like...

Jess: I was like, I don't want to go back home to my, to my...

Alex: It's there's just a lot of that mental labor that comes with a trip that you don't plan on. And that is the what are we going to eat for all of our meals? We got to get to this place. We've got to, you know, plan this day. And that's just so nice. That's why I love vacations where you just go somewhere and it's just figured out for you.

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

You know, like when we went to the Maldives, and this is an extremely different type of trip, but that was one of the things Mitch and I liked so much about it is the decision, there was no decision fatigue because we didn't have to make any decisions. It's like, there's three different places to choose to eat, choose one, you know? So, I think that's awesome.

Jess: So my decision was like, which entree am I going to order? And if I wanted to, I could have ordered both.

Alex: You know, or you're like, which of these amazing really cool excursions or which of these activities do I feel like doing today? Yeah, but I don't have to go research what the things are. It's just like, here's my choices. Okay, great. I can decide between those. So, would you take another river cruise?

Jess: With Helene and Michael, absolutely. Now that I have seen like how well it's done, how nice the ship was, how good the food was, everything that's included.

Alex: Yeah.

Jess: I would 100%—

Alex: Where else do they go? Like what were some of the other options when you were planning yours? Or when you booked yours?

Jess: So the other options were in France. There was like a Paris and Normandy one, I think it was. The other options were in France, but they're releasing more cruises. By the time this episode is out, they may have already released them. And I think, I mean, I don't know for sure, but Helene is definitely hinting at like the Netherlands or Belgium in her stories. And so I have a like she's done a lot of pictures with like tulips, like the tulip fields. And so I'm guessing they're releasing more for next year in that area. So I love that they're expanding, you know, their destinations and everything. And my mom was already like, we need we have to go on the one to the Netherlands.

Alex: Well, and for people who don't know Helene, it's like she's been a travel blogger for as long as travel bloggers have been around. Like she's an OG. They've lived in Europe multiple times for extended periods of times. Like she

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

knows Europe. So I would 100% trust her planning and recommendations and all of that with this sort of thing.

Jess: Yeah. No, it would be so fun with like a girls trip, or I mean, my mom's not going to let me go with anyone but her, but we could do like a mom-daughter trip, the four of us.

Pam: Yes. So, so for all the fan girls of Helene, how often did you see her on the trip?

Jess: I saw her every, I mean, I saw her every day. She was on, she was on some of our excursions with us. Other days she was in different groups. I feel like they do a really good job trying to make their rounds and like make sure that they interact with everyone. She and Michael sat with us our last night at dinner. I tried to kind of, you know, give the other people space to swarm them.

Alex: To do their fangirling.

Pam: Right.

Jess: Yeah, like I tried to not do the fangirl thing, but yeah, no, she was she was all they were always around. I could have interacted with her more if I wanted to. I was just trying to give her a little bit of space. But yeah, like she was on the excursions that she was on with us, like we would take pictures together. She would chat with us during they had like cocktail hours every night. She would like come chat with us during that. So they were always around. They were great.

Pam: I just wanted to add a little caveat there, you guys. If you run into us, you don't have to give us space. You can say hi to us, especially for the old lady who loves to say hi to people. We constantly get people that say, "Oh, I think I saw so and so, but I was too afraid to go up and say hi." And stuff. So even though Jess is saying she was trying not to do this with Helene, you can do it with us.

Alex: Yes. It'll make Pam's day. Like truly, it'll make her day.

Jess: No, my favorite is when someone is like, "I think I saw you, but I was too nervous to say hi." And then I have to think back, and I'm like, "Oh gosh, what

Ep #196: France River Cruise: Jess's Mother-Daughter Trip

was I doing? Was I like yelling at my kid? Or was I like having a meltdown? Like what?"

Pam: Right. Totally.

Alex: Oh, so funny. It's so true.

Pam: Well, Jess used points to turn an already special mother-daughter river cruise into an even more memorable trip with business class flights to and from France and a beautiful pre-cruise stay in Lyon. It's a great reminder that points can help you spend less on getting there so you can spend more on the experiences that matter most.

If today's episode inspired you, and it did me, share it with your mom, daughter, or favorite travel partner and start finding your own adventure. Thanks so much for listening to us.

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