

Comments on EMAG 2011

by Jeffrey Watson Dawson

In August, I attended the European Mensa Annual Gathering (EMAG) in Paris. As a French speaker, this was an event I did not want to miss. However, people who spoke only English would have been fine too. I won't try to summarize the event, but will just give a few personal observations.

The main venue was the headquarters for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Administration (UNESCO), a huge complex. The building we were in had plenty of room. We had rooms on different floors--nice, comfortable, interesting rooms, with the mics and trappings required for interpreters and international meetings. The building is a maze worth exploring, with plenty of artwork. On the seventh floor is a cafeteria. The cafeteria food is varied and excellent. The first day I was eating lunch at the cafeteria, I looked out the window and saw a wonderful view of *la Tour Eiffel*. On another day I found myself by chance seated at a table in the cafeteria with ExCom members of Mensa International. One ExCom member asked me how the gathering was, explaining that they were spending all their time in meetings so would not know.

I stayed one-and-a-half miles from UNESCO, which allowed me to take a nice walk each morning and afternoon through the streets of the Montparnasse district, which has a timeless, chic, laid-back atmosphere. The nearby, world-famous *Jardin du Luxembourg* is an oasis of peace to walk, jog, play tennis, read, or simply marvel at beauty. It was far from crowded, too.

One evening, I ate a *salade nicoise* at a tiny, inexpensive, narrow restaurant that jutted out onto the sidewalk. Taking a seat, I looked back at the extremely small kitchen about ten feet behind me and wondered if I should even be eating there. But I've never had a better meal than the salad and thin bread served with it. This is usually the case at such Parisian restaurants, which span the gamut of all nationalities and cuisines.

At EMAG I met people who tried to convince me to attend the annual gathering in Germany, a yearly gathering in the French alps with Mensa France, the next EMAG in Sweden (2012), and the first Asian Mensa Annual Gathering. As always happens in Mensa, the friendliness of the people and camaraderie were the best part of the gathering.

A member of Mensa France runs a chain of Flemish restaurants in Paris. One night I went to an icebreaker where there were about 150 of us in a room in the restaurant, servers serving up anything wanted from the bar, and an endless flow of some pizza-like food of various types. It was the only meal where I ate way too much.

After the meal, we met up by a bridge over the Seine river, where we waited to take a late-night cruise on the Seine. A member of Mensa was our tour guide on the large boat, with open sides and see-through top. From a "window" seat, up and down the Seine, and around the two large islands in the center of Paris, I got a stunning view. Who knew that parties were going on all around the Seine at midnight in Paris? Julius Caesar liked one of



Above: Part of the UNESCO complex

the islands when he visited and decided to found Paris in 52 BC, although tribes were living there thousands of years before.

The vice president of Mensa France is an inventor who gave a remarkable talk, complete with mechanical gadgets he handed to the audience and asked questions about and videos of his inventions.

A professional hypnotist gave a presentation and hypnotized some people as demonstrations.

I received a German lesson from a German language teacher attending EMAG. (Say "ee" and "oo" at the same time.) He said he was staying 50 meters from UNESCO with his girlfriend, in a VW camping van that has a 50 hp diesel engine (that gets good mileage). He said they were staying a month in Paris. "Did you know," he asked, "that parking is free in August everywhere in Paris?"

Before most of the presentations, the question was asked whether the audience wanted the talk in French, in English, or both. Often, a translator would translate the speaker's words either from French or English. For days I thought the translators were Mensans, but when I asked one, she told me that she was a professional translator. I enjoyed listening to both languages when this happened, and although the translators did a good job, noticed that sometimes a translator does not get everything. I asked a translator if she was using shorthand, and she said that during training each translator develops her own set of notation to keep track of what was said.

Mensa France did a fine job overall. Their enthusiasm and desire to do a good job always showed through, in spite of a few organizational issues.

From my perspective, EMAG was wonderful. I am glad I did not miss it. Also, though this was my fifth trip to Paris, it was the first time I did not want to leave.

"*Fin de vacance?*" the lady at the hotel desk asked.

"*Oui,*" I said, "*mais trop tôt.*"