Columns

These travel options seem appealing (and delicious)

Memories and Musings

By Cheri Sims

For those of you who might be experiencing a bit of wanderlust how about a trip to Paris and London in June? Lake Land College in Mattoon just announced their plans to take a group of students and residents to the above mentioned European cities.

This link to the EF College Studies web site will give you the eight day tour itinerary.(https://www.efcollegestudytours.com/professors-trip/2485990ZH).

I have perused the schedule and it really looks exciting, I just wish I could accept the invitation. If you would like to speak to someone about the trip you can call Vice President of Student Services Valerie Lynch at 217-234-5250.

If I were to ever visit London I would want to take the Dickensian walking Tour offered by Dickens London Tours (https://www.dickenslondontours.co.uk/).

I have always been a Charles Dickens fan and have reports from friends that this particular tour is the most realistic of historic London tours. Long ago I figured I would never get to London so Hubby started our Department 56 Dickens Village houses collection and I am forever grateful.

I really enjoy displaying the village at Christmas but I did add a non Dickens house to the display just because I have always loved Kensington Palace. Hubby would have chosen Paris as his choice on the above mentioned tour, as an artist he always wanted to visit the Louvre National Museum and art gallery where the Mona Lisa is displayed and works by Albert Bierstadt a German American painter known for sweeping landscapes of the American west.

My cousin and her husband just spent a week in Cancun and upon their return they regaled me with the virtues of sun, sand and surf as well as many meals of seafood, steak and plantains. Their pictures were beautiful.

Other friends are jetting off to Hawaii over spring break and as much as I would like to plan a trip I am not much for sand between the toes. Another friend is leaving the beginnings of our spring weather in Illinois to fly to Alaska while another has decided that a ski trip in to Aspen is just what is needed for the post winter blahs.

Here again I don't think I would like to travel back into full blown winter with a trip to either Aspen or Alaska. It is all I can do to keep warm here at home.

I also have friends who just booked a food tour in New Orleans and this sounds like a trip I would really enjoy. The "Get Your Guide" website (https://www.getyourguide.com/) is where Pam and her husband found all the information on the tours and I enjoyed surfing this web site for a virtual tour.

I would really enjoy the French Quarter and food history walking tour which they are taking, as well as the Bourbon Street tour. I have always enjoyed architecture walking tours and my favorite in the U.S. was in Charleston, South Carolina.

Of course, my all time favorite is the old walled city Quebec City, Canada. Hubby had always wanted to tour the Tuscany area of Italy and he read many books on the subject including cook books. I thought this was hilarious since he had very little interest on cooking here at home.

We took many historic town tours and food tours as we traveled across the USA with some our favorites being Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia and Mystic Seaport, Connecticut , Eureka Springs, Arkansas and the entire Route One, Pacific Coast Highway in California and Oregon. I lump California and Oregon together because it seemed like we just went from one town to another for days and loved them all.

I would imagine food tours in Paris and London would be amazing. Having authentic baguettes, quiche and crepes in Paris or fish and chips and bangers and mash in London would be a real treat. I know the authentic Canadian French foods are to die for especially (you guessed it) Poutine (French fries smothered in gravy and cheese) and smoked meat sandwiches along with delicious French chocolate. My mouth is watering.

I have a number of friends who work in the tourism industry and they are hoping this will be a better year for travel. My friends who own my favorite hotel in Quebec City, the Chateau de la Terrasse, have expressed their dismay over the last two years of the lack of visitors to Canada and the fact that they have not been able to visit the USA. Oddly enough they have a condo in Florida and have not been able to make the trip due to the pandemic. We have a lot of fun discussing my fondness for Quebec City and they for their having second home in the USA.

I don't want to be a party pooper but I think I am not quite ready to spread my wings for travel. Three of my friends have returned from their trips with COVID and all stated they wore masks on their respective flights but most did not continue the process at their resorts or hotels.

For now I will cook and bake recipes from places I want to visit or have visited on past trips. We ate French Crepes every time we were in French Canada in Quebec City at the "Au Petit Coin Creperie' and at the creperie "Le Petite Chateau" attached to the Chateau Frontenac Hotel. At the "Le Petite Chateau" they drizzle a decadent chocolate sauce over the top of the berries and crepe and I would highly recommend that you add this step to the recipe below. I can not imagine crepes being any better than in these two establishments but perhaps they are in Paris.

French Crepes

Ingredients for the crepes

2 eggs
1/4 cup butter, melted
2 1/2 tbsp sugar
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup milk
1/8 cup water
1/2 tsp vanilla
tiny dash of salt

For the filling

1 cup heavy whipping cream
2-4 tbsp powdered sugar (to taste)
1/2 tsp vanilla extract
fresh strawberry slices

Instructions

For the Crepes

Whisk all the ingredients, except the flour, together. Add in the flour, a little bit at a time, whisking just until the flour has been mixed in.

Let the crepe batter rest for 10 minutes. Then, give the batter a quick whisk again before using.

Grease a non-stick, 6" skillet with unsalted butter and heat over medium heat. Pour about 2-3 tablespoons worth of batter into the pan and tip the pan from side to side to get the batter to spread out throughout the pan.

Cook each side of the crepe for 30 seconds before gently loosening up the edges with a large spatula. If it lifts, then the crepe is ready to be flipped. If it doesn't lift up very well, give it 10 to 15 more seconds and try again. Gently lift the crepe out of the pan, then flip over into the pan and cook the other side for another 10 to 15 seconds; remove to cool.

For the filling

Simply beat the heavy whipping cream with a hand mixer or stand mixer until soft peaks form. Add in the powdered sugar and vanilla, then beat until stiff peaks form.

Spread a layer of cream onto each crepe, add sliced strawberries, and then roll the crepe like you would a wrap. https://www.monpetitfour.com/french-crepe-recipe/.

Monday first day of Spring

In the night sky

By David Leake

This Friday, the planet Mercury reaches "superior conjunction," which just means, from our point of view, it passes behind the Sun. It will go from the morning sky into the evening sky. Though you can't see Mercury at this time, I mention it as Mercury is about to put on its best evening show for all of 2023. I'll tell you where to look in the upcoming weeks.

As we head into next week, we have the vernal equinox and the first day of spring on Monday. The Sun will be directly above Earth's equator at 4:24pm that day. In theory, we have an equal number of daylight and nighttime numbers but, due to the Earth's atmosphere refracting sunlight, that's not quite true. Still, let's celebrate spring!

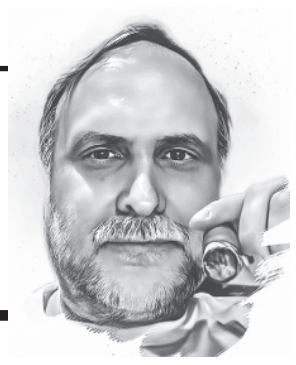
A thin crescent Moon is near the planet Saturn in the Sunday morning sky, though it's very low in the east-southeast near dawn. New Moon, where the Moon is between the Earth and the Sun, occurs Tuesday and we'll talk about it in the evening sky next week.

David Leake is retired Planetarium Director of Staerkel Planetarium at Parkland College and co-founder of the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society, Inc.

Why I 'amn't' very good at basketball or chess

Ramblin' Man

By David Porter



I'm having a linguistic conundrum. As someone who delves into the literary arts, it's not unusual to bump into anomalies, but some are more perplexing than others.

It started out as a ponderance of athleticism, and in particular, my athleticism, or, more specifically, my lack of athletic prowess. This is less perplexing.

I came across an old photo of my grade school basketball team. I'm in the photo, and I was a little surprised by how small I looked compared to my classmates. I know I've always been small, but I guess I didn't realize just how small I was. You don't feel small when you think big.

I noticed that I wasn't the only small guy on the team. There were guys who were smaller than me, and some of them were quite good athletes. It led me to think about why they were so much better in sports. What did they have that I didn't?

For the bigger guys, it's obvious. If you're a foot taller than everybody else and you can walk and chew gum at the same time, you're going to have a leg up in basketball.

But for us small guys, there's more to it. Speed and agility, of course, helps. But I think there are two things that separate the really good athletes from the not-so-good guys of the same size.

One is determination, which I didn't have. If you're interested in sports and want to get better, you put in the work. You get better.

The other thing is smarts. A smart small guy can defeat a big guy of average intelligence. A smart guy learns the plays, anticipates what his opponent will do and thinks ahead. So, clearly, I was at a disadvantage in many ways.

I got to thinking about chess, which is considered a sport but is all about the smarts. You don't have to be quick or agile or strong or tall to play chess. But you have to be smart.

I know almost nothing about chess, but that doesn't keep me from pretending that I do.

In chess, you have to be thinking several moves ahead. You have to know what your opponent is likely to do and how you will respond to all the variables.

You're not just thinking about the next three moves; you're thinking about all the possibilities within those three moves, so you're really thinking about a dozen different ways that the next several moves could turn out.

Further, you're not just thinking about what your opponent might do; you're strategizing about how to prompt your opponent to make the plays that you want him to make. You're playing offense and defense at the same time.

Obviously, a good chess player needs to be smart. Just as obvious is why I'm not a chess player.

Then it occurred to me that a lot of chess players lack other skill sets, like social acumen. Chess is a one-on-one sport that requires concentration and hours and hours of practice and thought. Socially astute guys are easily distracted.

So, I thought, OK, I'm not the smartest guy, but I do lack social skills so why am I not a chess player?

That's when I got distracted by a linguistic curiosity. There is no English contraction for "am not." Why not?

You've got your "aren't" and "weren't" and "isn't" and "haven't." Why don't we have an "amn't?"

"Ain't" is the closest thing we have to "amn't." It's a versatile contraction that can mean "am not" but also "is not," "have not" and "isn't it." But it lacks dignity.

When I was a kid, "ain't" wasn't even a legal word. It's one of those colloquial slang words that was so pervasive that old Mr. Webster just threw up his hands and said, "OK, we'll put it in the book." But he drew the line at "amn't."

Now, I realize that "amn't" doesn't save us any space in the manuscript. But neither does "doesn't" or "isn't" or "I'm" and some other contractions.

I think it's just hard to say. Try it out loud. It sounds like "amped." There's no P out D in "amn't," but the tongue doesn't know it.

In conclusion, you don't have to be socially agile to be easily distracted.

So I don't know what to do. I'm not tall or smart or quick or focused. I can't play basketball or chess. I amn't any kind of athlete.

I like it. I'm going to keep using it. We'll see if the word catches on, but I amn't going to hold my breath on that.

© Copyright 2023 by David Porter who can be reached at porter@ramblinman.us. Maybe I'll try tic tac toe, but I amn't too good at that, either.

Monkeys of the Midwest

Holding It All Together

By Amy McCollom

They're just like monkeys. They leap from tree to tree right over your head, they rob the birdfeeders of their bounty, and they perch on the smallest ledge to munch on morsels of food while their big eyes keep watch for danger. Squirrels! Squirrels! Everywhere!

I don't mind them, really. In fact, I feed the ones that come to my yard. There is one squirrel in particular that lives in the tree in my front yard, and I call him Harry. He comes down from his nest when I call for him now. Between our pets and the outside animals, we don't waste any of our leftovers. It makes me feel good to be able to feed the hungry, no matter who it is, man or beast.

While growing up, my dad hunted a lot and I have had my share of fried squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, and what have you. For those who haven't had it, think of dark turkey meat that's stringy, and add a funky twang of wildness that you can't identify. That's the taste of squirrel. Ketchup helps. Not my favorite meat, but you could live on it if you had to.

I like my squirrels better alive and scurrying around, wrestling for acorns, and leaping from tree branches. Just sit quietly and watch them for a while; it's a three-ring circus in your own front yard!

Perhaps you are like some of my friends and family who do not find squirrels as fun and fascinating as I do. Perhaps you even think they are horrible pests that dig up your flowers and rob your garden of its produce. It's unfortunate that your relationship with squirrels is a negative one.

There are many tactics to keep squirrels away from flower beds and out of gardens that I have found online. Gardeners and flower lovers recommend mixing coffee grounds in and on top of the soil around plants, as squirrels don't like strong scents. Others have suggested doing the same with vinegar, white pepper, lemon peels, Pine Sol, and Windex. Other suggestions for gardens consist of raised beds and hoop fences to keep out not only squirrels, but also rabbits and other animals.

See MONKEYS on page 3