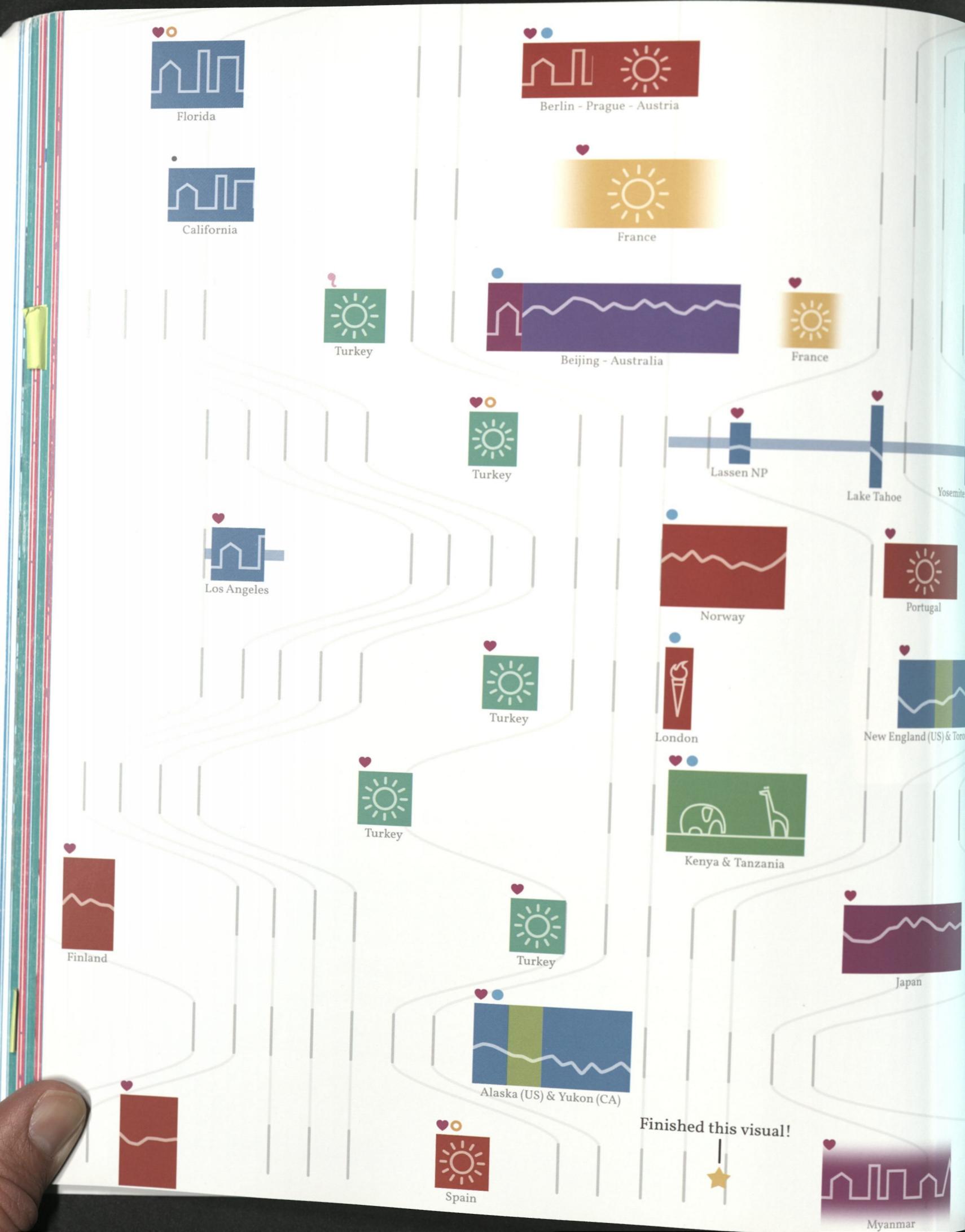


My Life in Vacations

NADIEH

For me, this topic became more about the data gathering aspects than the visual. I truly *love* being able to travel and see the wonders of our world and I'm extremely grateful that I have the opportunity to do so. I spend *hours upon hours* planning beforehand—searching for the most beautiful, unique, and amazing places to sleep—and I book them weeks in advance. (Vacations are really the only thing that I splurge on, and we all need something to splurge on right?) Even before I was old enough to plan my vacations, for the first 10 years of my life my parents took me along each summer in our cute caravan to enjoy the warm summers of France. The idea of mapping out my vacations (when, where, and with whom) was immediately fixed in my mind.



Data

Since it's (sadly) natural to forget things from your own childhood, I first needed to consult a reputable source to create the data for the first ±10 years of my life: my mother. She has the long-term memory of an elephant. It was quite fun to discuss distant memories from my childhood with her, and together we managed to get a good starting vacation list. I then went to my dad's place to browse through old vacation photos. It took me approximately 4–5 hours to sort all the photos my dad had by year and month (the printing month and year were thankfully written on the backs of most photos), and another four hours to cross-reference the vacation photos with the list my mom and I put together, and put them in a folder corresponding to year. And as an added bonus, this project has now resulted in a nicely sorted box of my childhood photos (Figure 3.1).

From age 12, I started to keep journals from these trips, writing in whatever notebook I could find. By combining the journals and the ticket stubs of as many museums and tours I could find, I was able to pinpoint exactly where I had gone and when (Figure 3.2).

We got a digital camera in 2004 and I could use each photo's metadata to identify exactly when the photo was taken. I eventually ended up with a file containing all kinds of metadata about each of my vacations.

Fig.3.1
(a & b)

The different sorting stages of getting through my childhood photos.

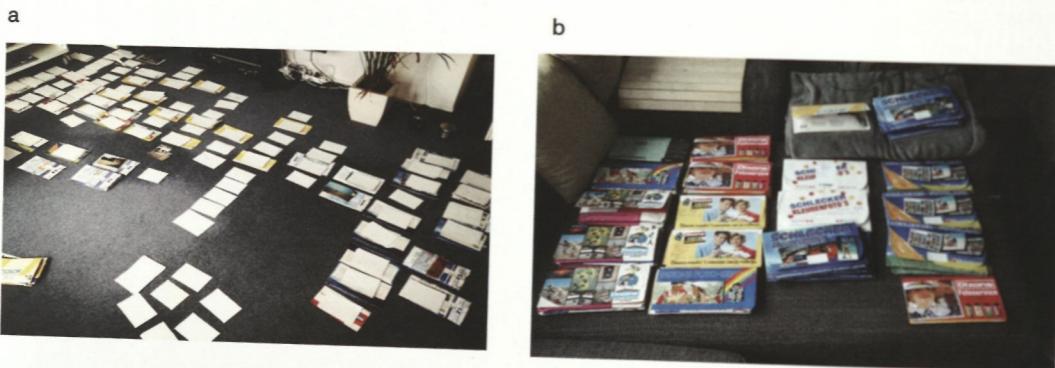


Fig.3.2

Part of my collection of travel diaries and journals which helped me find exact travel dates and destinations.



Yup, my pre-teens were still in the mostly analog world.

I included vacations where I didn't stay at home and that weren't business trips abroad.

↳ Manually Add New Variables to Your Data

As this was a project related to me personally, all of the variables had to be manually created. It took some effort to gather all of the information I needed, but it did provide me with a dataset that I was totally enthusiastic about representing visually!

Sketch

My idea this time was a very simple one. Each year since I've been born would be one row and the periods in which I went on vacation would be a colored rectangle and annotated. However, I wanted to play around with different kinds of annotations to make it easier to see trends; where I went, with whom, how we got there, what was the main purpose, things like that. The sketch in Figure 3.3 was my first attempt at creating these annotations.

Fig.3.3

A row per year with colored blocks during the periods that I was on vacation.

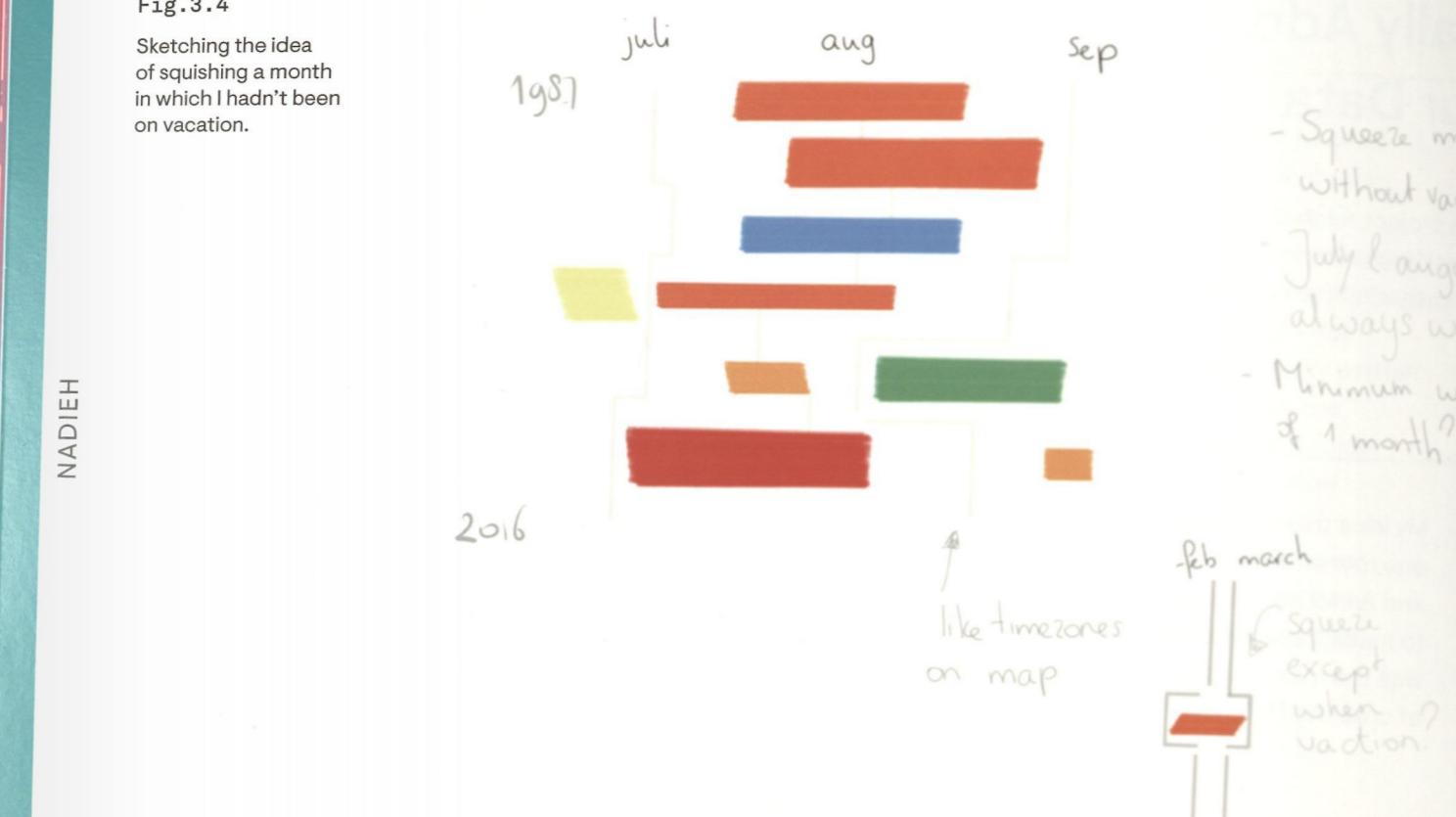


But I quickly realized that what I was sketching was a poor reflection of reality. There are 52 weeks in a year, and typically I'm on vacation during a maximum of five of those weeks—a lot! I know, but objectively it's less than 10% of a year. Therefore, if I were to create this visual, less than 1/10th of a row would be colored, translating to a visualization with a lot of white space and a few tiny colored blocks in between.

I started thinking of ways to give the vacation weeks more space and I was reminded of the way time zones run across the Earth: from North to South pole, and *not at all* in a straight line. Maybe I could also squeeze the months in which I wasn't on vacation in that year (Figure 3.4)? Yes, that would mean that the months wouldn't align perfectly anymore, making it pretty darn difficult to compare exact months across the years. But I was more interested in seeing trends between vacations than getting a perfect overview of the periods in which I was away.

Fig.3.4

Sketching the idea of squishing a month in which I hadn't been on vacation.



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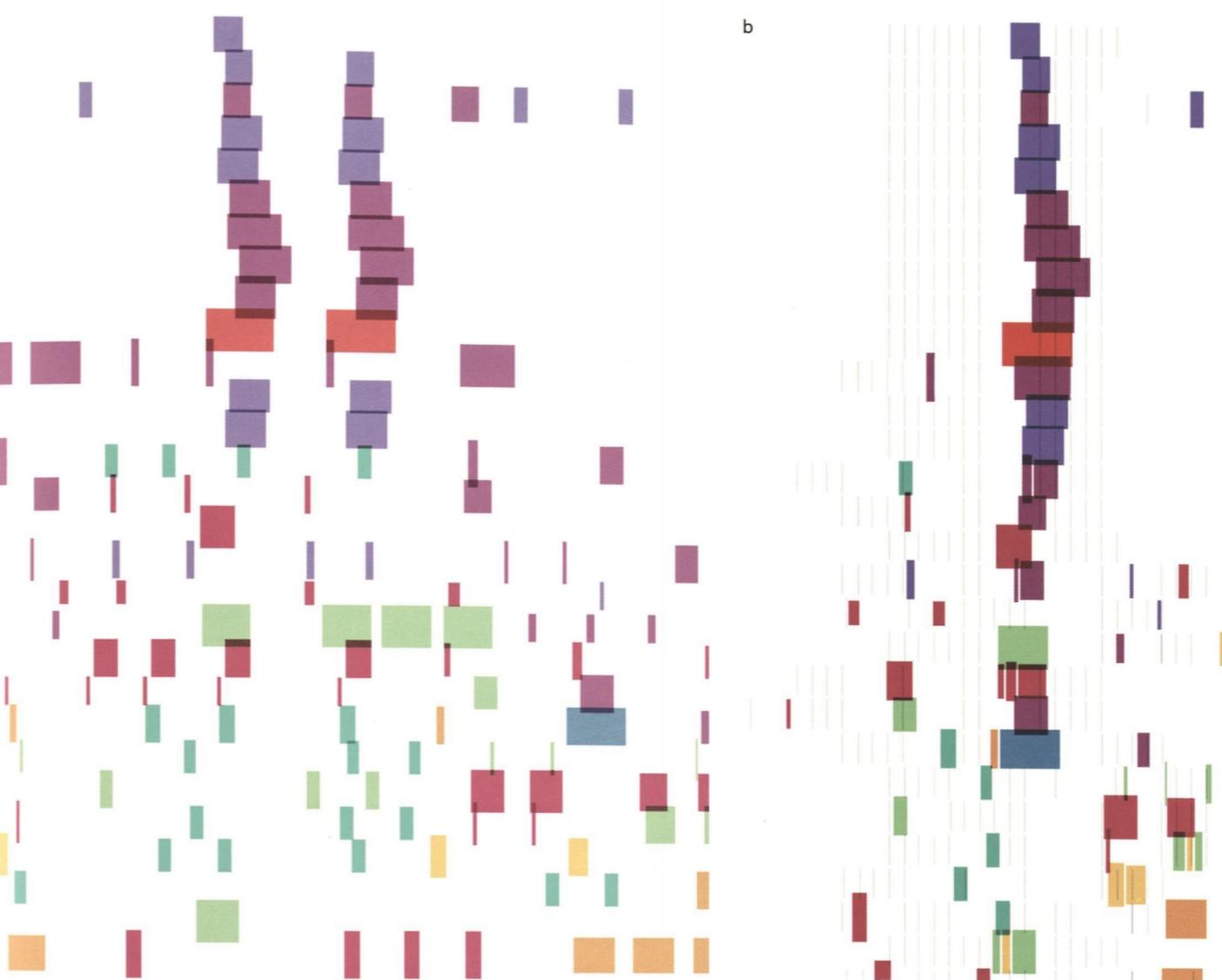
Sketch to Discover and Remove Thinking Errors

Starting off your visualizations with a simple paper-and-pen sketch can help you spot whether your idea will actually work with your dataset and allow you to iterate quickly. By sketching out my simple design of colored blocks per row I could quickly assess that my initial idea wouldn't represent the data in a good way visually. Furthermore, sketching also helped me to come up with the new approach of squishing some months.

Code

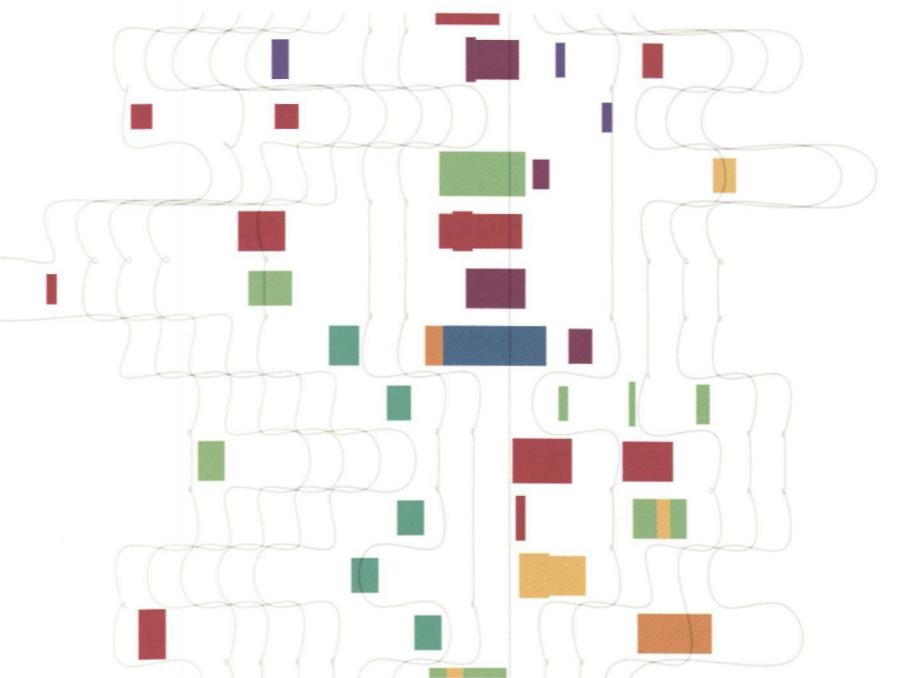
Even though the idea was simple in theory, the data collection and execution required more time in practice, with a lot of custom code. The first step was getting those vacation rectangles in the right location. Due to the introduction of the "squeezed months" concept, and centering the year around August (my typical vacation month), it took me at least 30 iterations before I had the math and loops in my code working correctly (Figure 3.5).

Connecting all the months by a line was less trivial than I expected. It took many iterations before I was happy with the curving of the lines in between the years. (The one in Figure 3.6, although not useful, was definitely my favorite.)

Fig.3.5
(a & b)

Two iterations of getting the vacation rectangles in the correct horizontal location.

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TRAVEL

Fig.3.6

Some wonky results for the month dividing lines.

Next up were the shapes inside the vacations representing the purpose of my travels, such as “culture” or “nature.” I was trying to go for easy-to-decipher patterns that would be understandable without referring to the legend. After trying out a few different techniques I found it easiest to create a small line chart or icon on top of each rectangle. For example, the pattern on top of “nature” vacations is nothing more than a randomly drawn line. It’s different for each rectangle and on each refresh. The house-like pattern for my “cultural” vacations always uses the same setup of lines until it reaches the end of the rectangle. The “sun” and “snow” icons were made from basic shapes, a bit of trigonometry, and a for-loop. However, the “Mickey Mouse,” “Olympic torch,” and “safari animal” icons were too complex to make with code. I made them in Adobe Illustrator, saved the tiny SVGs, and loaded them onto their respective rectangles.

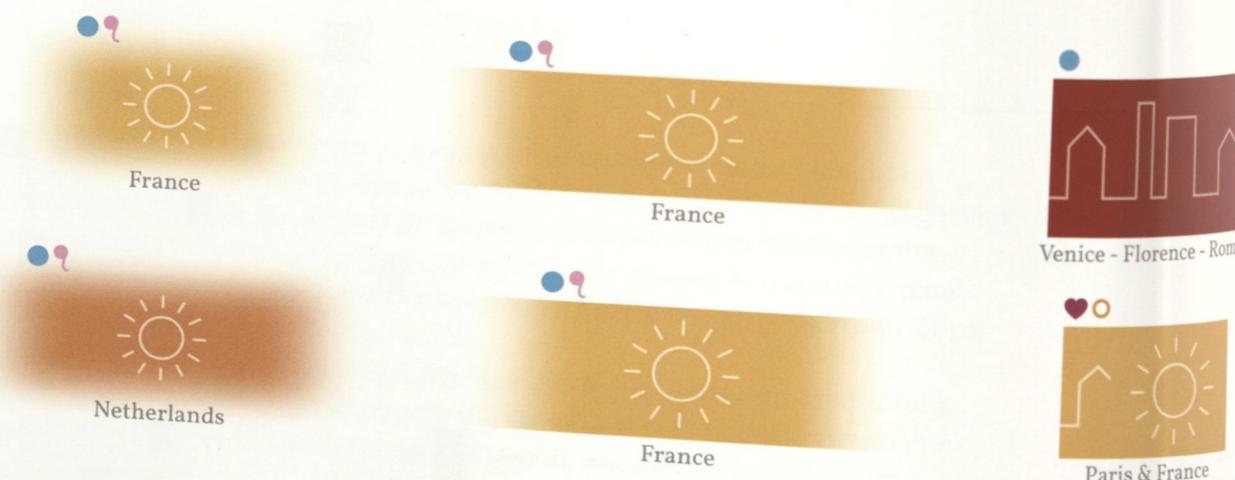
Fig. 3.7
The different types of vacation patterns and icons inside the rectangles and people icons on top of the rectangles.



Moving on to the annotation of “who I was with” on top of each rectangle, the final icons are actually pretty similar to my first sketch: my boyfriend is represented by a heart, my dad is a blue circle, and my mom a pink small circle with a downward swoosh. Since this entire visual is already very personal, I didn’t mind the exact icons relating to something that only I would understand.

Initially, I was using a gradient for the vacations I didn’t have exact dates for in order to fade the ends out a bit. However, I wasn’t sure what to use for vacations where I couldn’t remember how much I enjoyed it, being too young at the time. The problem is that you can only apply one gradient to an SVG element. That’s until I read one of Shirley’s write-ups again and she talks about the motion blur filter, and I was like: of course, I wrote a whole tutorial on that—how could I forget! So I replaced the gradient with the blur filter. The nice thing is that you can set it up to blur in either horizontal, vertical, or both directions. I did find that the vacations in my early youth, where both the duration and enjoyment are blurred, are a bit like vague spots (Figure 3.8), but then Shirley said that this was a nice metaphor to how I remember them, just blurry pieces (or nothing at all), which is absolutely true indeed.

Fig. 3.8
The different types of blurry filters applied to the vacation rectangles to denote either an unknown start and end date, not remembering how much I enjoyed the vacation, or both.



I made the pattern of lines for the “culture” vacations long enough to fit the longest rectangle.

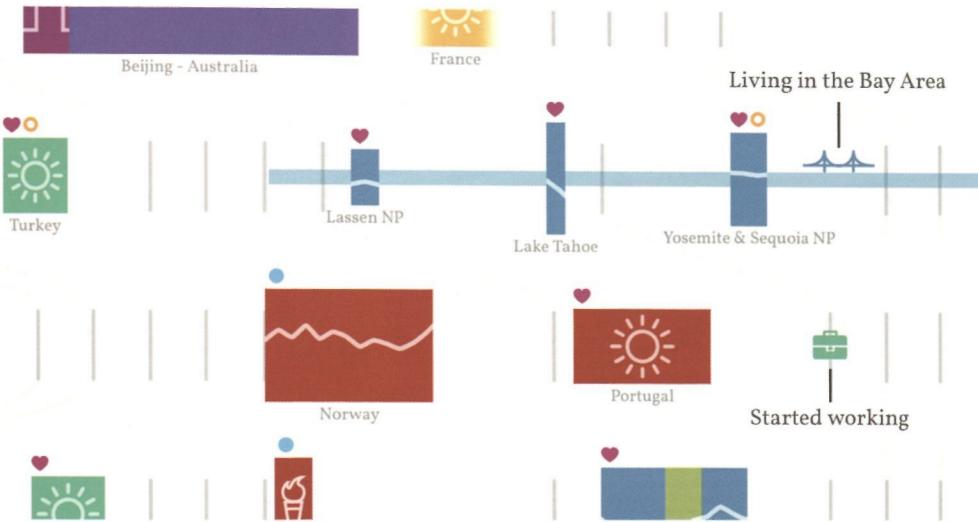
The final visual touch, apart from a legend, were the textual and icon-based annotations along the sides to explain the visual and a few major life events (Figure 3.9). Due to all of these custom touches—such as the icons, the patterns, the legend, the annotations to help people understand my life through vacations more—I finally came to the point where this project had more lines of code than my previous project about the Olympics. Not such a simple project after all! (╥﹏╥)

I kept the interactions to a minimum, limiting it to help the viewer understand the most difficult aspect of the viz: differentiating between months, due to all the squeezing going on. There’s only a small hover that highlights the same month throughout the years in light grey.

In the end the final visual became quite long, a bit like those long-form infographic monsters that were all the rage a few years ago. But it also reminds me a bit of a children’s book; simple with bright colors, easy icons, and a bit of text every now and then.

Fig. 3.9

Two of the small icon-based annotations that I added to the visual to denote the big events in my life: doing an exchange at the University of California Berkeley and living in the Bay Area, and starting to work after graduating.



Reflections

With the amount of code and hours that this project still required, I wonder if I should’ve gone for a more complicated sketch/idea that would’ve looked more visually appealing (but would still take the same amount of time). By comparison, this one just looks simple. But as Shirley stated in her previous project, we wouldn’t be super proud of every visual we created during *Data Sketches*. I really wanted to try out this idea where you got a more general sense of time rather than seeing time as fixed, and give the vacations themselves more room to exist. I’ll leave it up to you to decide if that was a good choice in the end.

What I do like is that I’ve never made a visual with such personal data before. So maybe it’s not that interesting visually for other people to look at, but for me personally it has a special place in my heart. (^ ³^)ノ°°°○

My Life in Vacations

↳ Vacations.VisualCinnamon.com

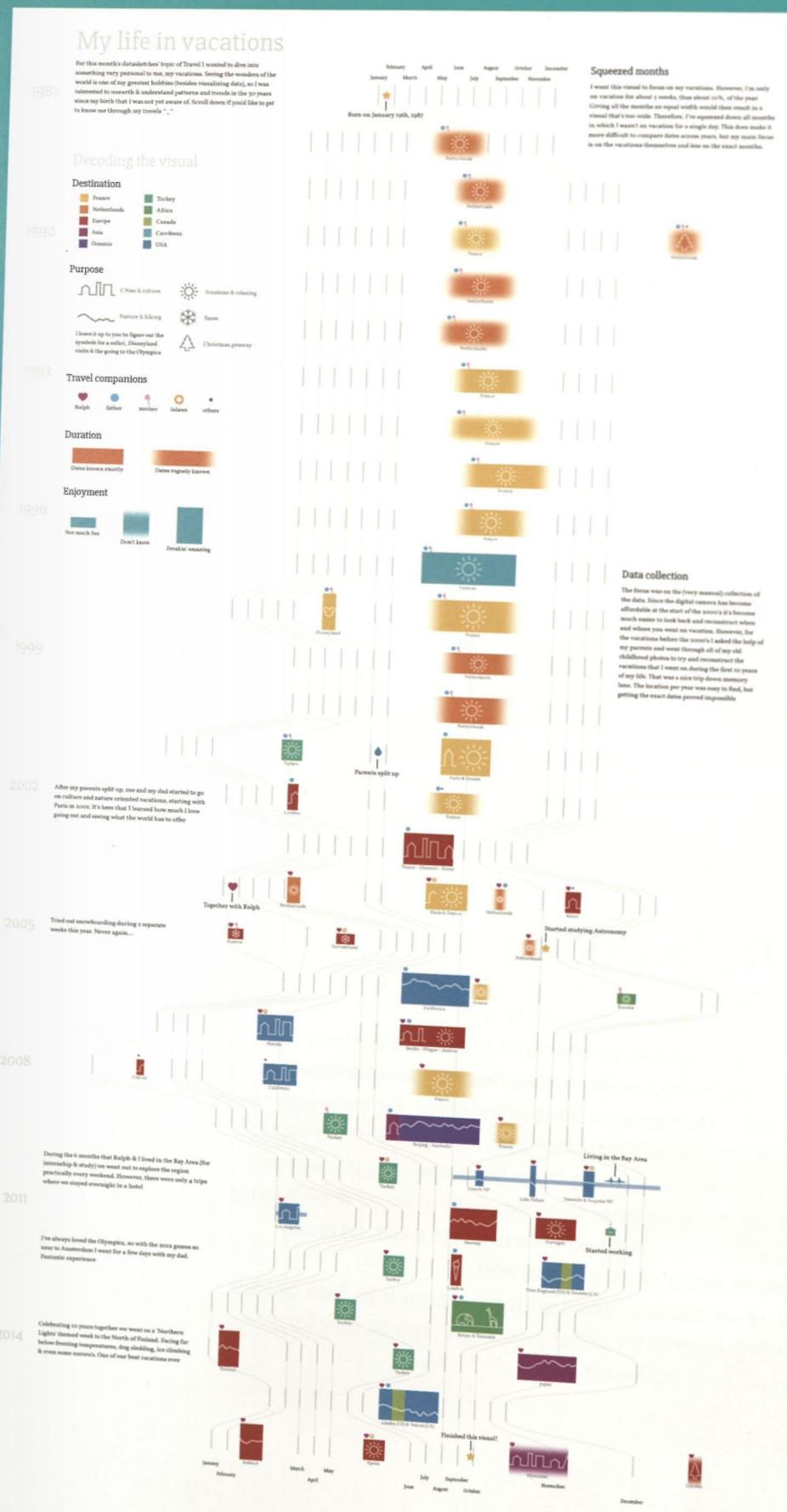


Fig.3.10
On a hover, the same month
is highlighted across all years
with a grey area



Fig. 3.11
Zooming in on a section
generally between June
and September, from 200
and 2013.

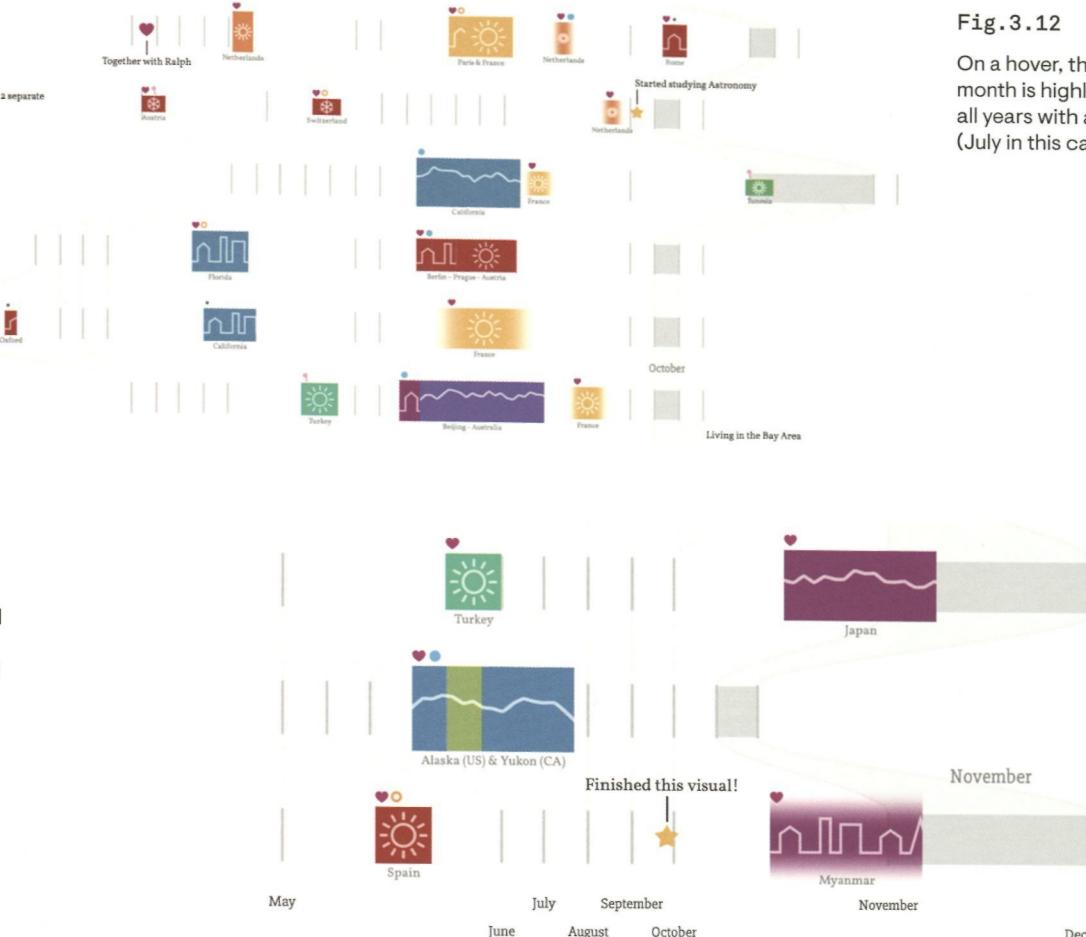


Fig. 3

I had two vacations planned for the month after finishing this video, and therefore didn't know how much I would enjoy them.

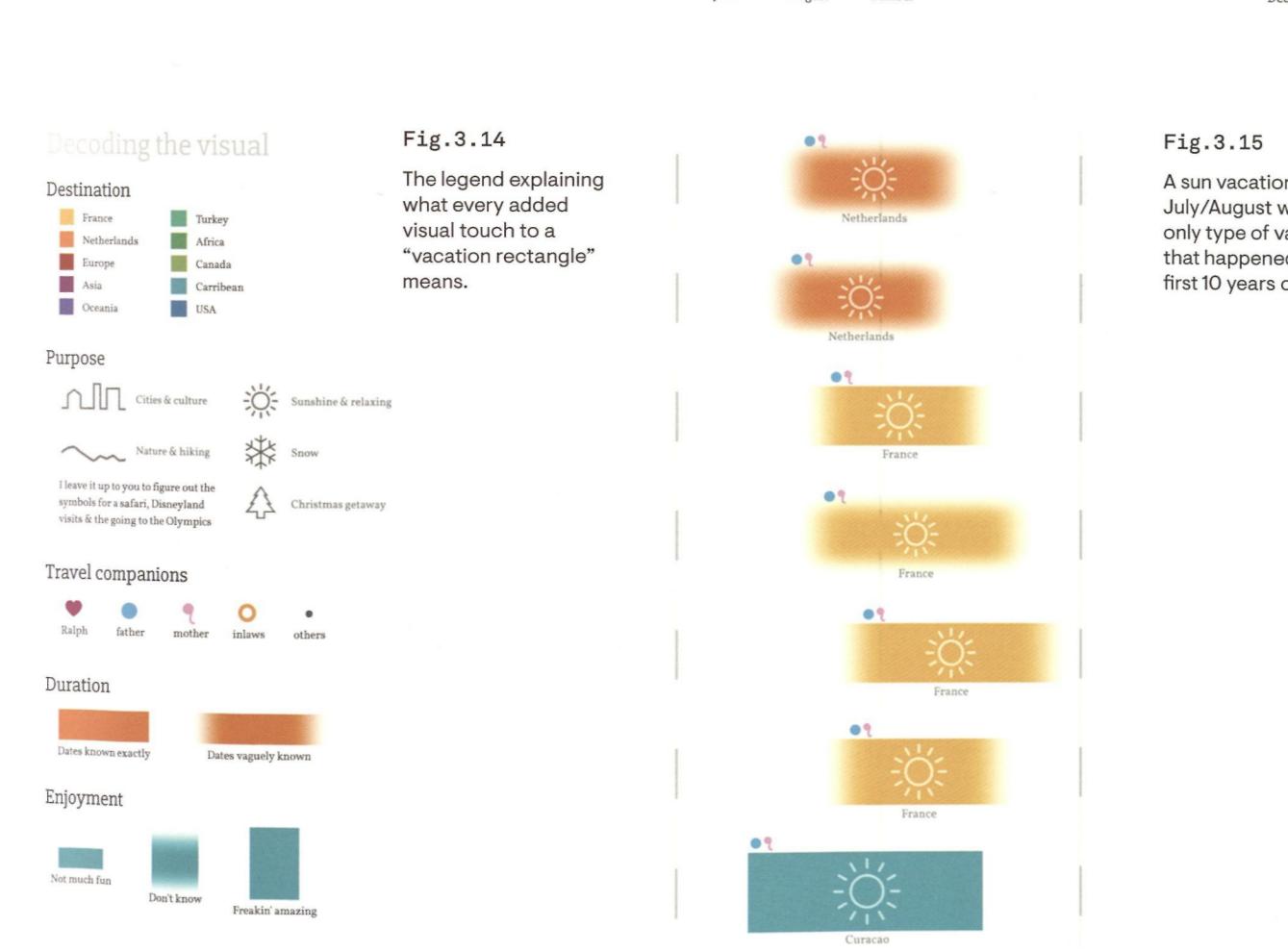


Fig.3.12

On a hover, the same month is highlighted across all years with a grey area (July in this case).