

France 2005; Rich and Cheryll examine the myths and stereotypes about France and the French

We flew from Detroit to Paris and then spent three days in the French Capital. We strolled the Champs Elysses, climbed the Eiffel Tower, and marveled at the Palace of Versailles. The opulent palace reminded Rich of the line from "The History of the World Part I" that "It's good to be the King." We also visited the Musee de Orsay and the Louvre. We pondered the Mona Lisa and elbowed our way through the crowds to Venus de Milo. Rich quietly told Cheryll that he thought there were hundreds of better sculptures here. A woman in front of us piped up that she was thinking the exact same thing. Could it be that the expert opinions about which art is the most important are all hogwash? Of course, Rich also thinks that Picasso was a hack.

The next French stereotype to be studied was that all French people are rude. But we found most to be quite polite and helpful. The traffic was bad, but there was little horn blowing. People would stop at the crosswalks for us. Good directions were provided in decent English and with a smile.

It was a five-hour train ride from Paris to Nice which we used as a base to explore Monaco and Cannes on the French Riviera. The weather was pleasant with temperatures in the fifties and only a few days of rain in two weeks. The scenery was incredible, but it was crowded, even in the off-season. Then again, people-watching is part of the reason to visit. This was fashion central and we investigated the stereotype of the complicated French fashions. Actually, we found them to be quite simple. There are three rules;

Rule # 1; There is no color but black.

Rule # 2; Black is the only color.

Rule # 3; Non-black accessories may only be used sparingly.

Seriously, we decided that we could never fit in; unless, of course, Cheryll gets a fur coat, a small dog and a facelift.

The real money was in Monaco. We strolled the port and checked out the mega-yachts. We tried to get into the main casino, but it would have cost \$48 just to walk onto the gaming floor and, in order to fit in, Rich needed a tux, and Cheryll should have been falling out of a tight cocktail dress. Monaco is a one-square-mile attempt to fix everything that is wrong with France. There is no income tax, no homelessness, no litter, and no graffiti. People pick up after their dogs. It would be great to be able to afford to live there.

We spent Christmas Eve in the medieval town of Arles. Our hotel was near the ancient Roman amphitheater, but the gladiators were apparently taking the holiday off. We sipped French wine and had pastry for dinner along the Rhone River near where Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear after a fight with Paul Gauguin. We'd also like to take on the myth about French cooking being so wonderful. Just kidding, it is heavenly, and we enjoyed all of the food. We just couldn't explain it very well. The sauces were especially delicious.

That evening, we were told that there would be a parade outside the cathedral. We envisioned the French all being Catholic and expected some nativity event. No way. It was like Cirque de Soleil. There were eight guys dressed up in giant inflatable snowman outfits dancing on stilts in the square; so much for the devoted Catholic stereotype.

The next day was spent in Avignon. Our room was a tiny loft in a 17th century mansion. Avignon was the seat of the popes in the 14th century and they left quite a palace which towers over the city.

Next, we picked up a Peugeot rental car. Driving, and especially parking, is not fun in France. Most cars seem to bear scrapes and dings from contact with a wide assortment of things. We had hoped that ours would be similarly initiated, but it was brand new, and without a scratch. It made me nervous to drive the narrow streets and park in the tiny spaces where the attitude is that bumpers are made for bumping. In a refreshing show of loyalty to the French auto industry, most cars on the French roads were Renaults or Peugeots, even though I consider them to be very mediocre.

We drove across the border into Spain and on to Barcelona. Most residents of Barcelona prefer to consider themselves not Spaniards, but rather residents of the autonomous region of Catalonia. They have their own language, Catalan, and would prefer to be independent of Spanish control. They are much less fashion conscious than the French. Rich fit in because he can speak broken Spanish just as well as most Catalonians. We visited the Sagrada Familia church which is the city's number one tourist attraction. The ornate building has been under construction for 150 years and there are about 15 more years to go. We also toured several museums and a castle. Happy hour was spent sipping sangria and munching olives near the beach on the Mediterranean Sea. There was one scary moment when Cheryll smelled smoke on the subway. Recall the recent train bombings in Madrid and London. Someone pulled the alarm and everyone ran for the exit. It turned out to be an electrical problem and we continued after a short delay. But it was an hour before Cheryll's heart rate returned to normal.

We next drove north through the countryside. We stopped at an incredible castle in Cardona which has been turned into a Parador, or upscale hotel. It's now possible to spend the night inside the ancient walls. We also stopped in the beguiling town of Solsona. They have a quaint annual custom where they tie a rope around an unfortunate donkey's neck and hoist it into the bell tower of the church. The donkey inevitably loses control of its bodily functions onto the cheering throng below. It's considered good luck to be sprayed and even better to be defecated upon. Alas, the animal activists have ruined this charming tradition, and today the donkey is a dummy which merely sprays water.

Andorra is a tiny country, high in the Pyrenees Mountains, on the border between Catalonia (or dare we say Spain) and France. It's supposed to be a skiing destination, and we expected the stereotypical tiny country, loaded with charm and rich in history. Nope, shopping is the number one pastime. Andorra is not part of the European Union and does not charge sales tax. There are as many hotel rooms as residents. There is a perpetual traffic jam of Europeans, loading up on electronics, perfume, cheap booze and cigarettes. The scenery is quite nice if you ignore the

endless shopping centers. We were left to appreciate being Americans, because, even without taxes, most prices were still higher than those in the USA. We counted it as our 102nd country, but we were anxious to leave after one day.

We put on our finest black clothes and crossed a snowy mountain pass back into France. New Year's Eve was spent in the town of Carcassonne. Our hotel room had a small terrace with an unbelievable view of the thousand-year-old city walls. We strolled the narrow cobblestone streets within the walled city. You have not had French onion soup until you've had French onion soup in Carcassonne. At midnight we popped a bottle of Champagne and toasted the start of 2006.

A month earlier, we had been alarmed by news reports that there had been race riots with the burning of hundreds of cars in France. We envisioned a tense situation of race relations stretched to the limit, riot police and curfews. We imagined a scene out of *Les Misérables* where the underclass builds a barricade out of the hulks of burned out rental cars. I rented our car for a week for \$280, but they wanted an extra \$420 for the optional insurance which I had declined. Could this all be greed, or is the risk really that high? During our walk back to our hotel from the New Year's celebration, there were some drunks shooting fireworks at cars in the parking lot. Fortunately, ours was around a corner and out of the line of fire. We later read that 425 cars were torched that evening in France. Apparently this is not surprising, because, according to the *European Wall Street Journal*, 100 cars are set ablaze on any typical weekend evening. Could it be that the "race riots" were just an excuse for pyromania and vandalism which has been going on for a long time?

We dropped off our undamaged car, breathed a sigh of relief at having avoided the car-be-cues, and flew from Toulouse to Paris, and then home to Detroit. Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport is the worst airport we've ever had the misfortune to experience. It took 45 minutes of hustling to get from one Air France gate to the next. Last year, we had to change terminals and it took an hour and a half. The Air France personnel were inept and screwed up our reservation in both directions, and we'll avoid that airline in the future. Northern France deserves another trip, but we'll probably fly a different airline, skip the driving and take the trains.

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