

Paris Revisited

The last time I was in Paris was August 1971, almost 36 years ago. I met my friend Tom there who was on leave from the Peace Corps in Ghana. I arrived a few days ahead of him and checked into a cheap hotel on the Left Bank. The hotel was so cheap that the mattress resembled a relief map of Europe and the alps were imprinted on my back for days to come. I got to wander around the city and visited all the required sites: Notre Dame, the Louvre, and the Eiffel Tower. In the course of this, I somehow lost my passport and Tom had to vouch for me at the US embassy to restore my nationality. Later that night we celebrated at dinner. (Actually we celebrated at dinner every night.) Having a three day head start on using French I ordered for both of us. Unfortunately, the only word I recognized on the menu was the word for veal. So I ended up with veal cutlets. And, after a very long wait, he got veal brains. He has never forgiven me for this.

Another memorable event from this trip was my pathetic attempt to buy some good French wine. I didn't have much money, didn't speak French and knew nothing about wine, but was otherwise completely prepared. I went into a wine shop where almost everything was expensive, they definitely spoke French and knew everything there was to know about wine. I somehow managed to point to and buy a bottle in my price range and exited the shop with my precious purchase. Within 20 yards I was stopped by two older French men who had been deep in conversation, but broke that off to accost me (there is no other word for it). I can't remember another time before or since when I was stopped like that by someone not wearing a uniform. They began talking to me in French but quickly realized that I didn't understand. So they pointed to my new bottle of wine and said over and over "mort." which eventually dawned on me meant "death." They mimed the action of unscrewing the bottle cap and choking. I noticed for the first time that the bottle did not have a cork. Apparently I had purchased a bottle of wine so bad that local people felt obliged to stop me on the street to tell me that it would kill me. I left the unopened bottle in a door stoop. I'm sure some homeless person found it later and couldn't believe his luck, until he realized that it was vintage Chateau de Mort.

So I have some very fond memories of Paris. And I had a free day at the end of my recent UK trip where it was theoretically possible for me to go to Paris one night and come back the next. With encouragement from my friends Rob and Mike, I purchased a Eurostar ticket for much too much money, got a free room with points at a hotel on Rue St. Jaques and left promptly after my workshop on Thursday.

The Eurostar is a very fast train that goes under the English Channel and takes just a little over two and half hours from Waterloo station to Gare de Nord. I got a first class ticket, that included an advertised three-course meal. The surprise was that first class on the Eurostar is not as good as coach class on an airplane. I sat with three strangers in one of those terrible four facing seats. And my seat was facing backwards. It was cramped and awkward. The older couple next to me was white and rich. She was British. He was American. She was reading Bill Bryson. He was studying computer printouts of what appeared to be his considerable stock portfolio, making notes and looking like a modern day Marley. None of us made eye contact or spoke a word. The meal was good. It came with wine and champagne. The sun out the window was a perfect red circle falling behind the lush countryside. I endured.

At Gare de Nord, it took more than half an hour to clear the taxi line. And then the fun began. I drew a young taxi driver who didn't have the first clue where my hotel was. I figured "Marriott," "Rue St. Jacques." How hard could it be? We drove around Paris apparently at random for almost an hour. Whenever we stopped at a red light, he would get out his map book and page through it furiously. Then he would gun the engine out of the intersection as if he knew exactly where he was going, only to repeat the process at the next red light. I had an exact address (17 Boulevard St. Jacques) but he kept asking me where it was as if I was supposed to know. And each time I said I didn't know, he sighed and muttered with what seemed to be profound disappointment. At one point he pulled into the entrance to an alley presumably to check his maps for the hundredth time, but another car pulled in right behind blocking him. So he couldn't back out and had to go through this maze of small streets lined with restaurants and overflowing with people. It was like driving through New Orleans during Mardi Gras, an inch at a time. Then the car in front of us stopped completely, blocking the alley while people hauled luggage and what appeared to be live animals into a side doorway. We couldn't move and of course the meter was running. All this time, the driver had an earpiece and seemed to be talking with someone on his cell phone. You would think that person, whoever they were, might have been willing to look up the location of the hotel in question, or even, heaven forbid, call and get directions. Taxi drivers in other cities call their dispatchers for this kind of help. But no. It seems he was talking to a counseling service for lost taxi drivers that provided sympathy but not directions. We eventually got there by more or less pure luck. The meter read 24 euros and he agreed to take 20 for what should have been much less than half that. I decided to be gracious about it so he wouldn't hate Americans. Although at that point, I must admit to feeling much less generous toward the French.

This feeling was not helped by the hotel check in process. They couldn't find my "paperwork." They seemed to be using their computer system for the very first time. The first key they gave me didn't work. After a long return trip to the front desk, picking my way through a considerable assemblage of newly arrived Japanese tourists, the second key did. I was officially "in Paris."

The next morning I had breakfast at the hotel's buffet, complete with every conceivable kind of food. Afterwards, I went down to the lobby, checked out of the hotel, and approached the concierge desk to check my bag for the day. Now you must understand that these people invented the concept of concierge, so you would think they'd have it down by now. What I learned from this experience is that no matter what question you ask in Paris you must be prepared to be met with puzzlement, sometimes touched with a dash of scorn and more than a little pity. The pity almost surely has to do with the fact that you are not French and never will be. How very sad. (Alors. Tres mal.) It makes you want nothing more than to belong. You are overcome with a deep desire to smoke unfiltered cigarettes and wear a beret. But alas it is not to be. (Que sera.) Here's a version of what happened with the "concierge.."

What is this? A bag? How unusual. You want me to keep this? A gift? No, of course, storage? Yes, this is a hotel and we store bags here... or so I have come to believe. I have also heard that we have tickets for this. Yes, here is one. Let's see, it has two halves. Should I tear it in half? Yes. Here, perhaps this half is yours. Would you like to have it? And for how long will we be keeping your bag? 5:00 PM. Yes, very good. We will put it right here on this luggage cart and completely forget about it. Who can be too concerned about luggage when there is so much more to life.

Thinking I would never see my bag again, I left for the subway station at Glaciere, three blocks away. After one transfer I exited to the wonderful confusion of St. Michel. My day in Paris had finally begun.

It is impossible to describe Paris with mere language, even, I suspect, French. It is simply the most lively, colorful, chaotic, wonderful city in the world. For all my great experiences in other cities, nothing quite compares to Paris. It is not just the excitement that goes with nearly being killed each time you cross the street. You somehow feel more alive there. The French have truly mastered the art of living. There is a sensuality about the city that is only partly about sex. Between the elaborate bigger than life architecture, the open public spaces, the artwork inside and outside museums and the food, my God the food, the whole city seems a barely restrained Bacchanalia.

I had been given a long list of possible activities, but decided to do only, and exactly, what I wanted. What I love to do is walk. And I walked almost all of the next 7 hours, with the exception of a very long leisurely lunch. I started out going past but not inside Notre Dame, then over the bridge into the maze of streets on the north side of the Seine, gradually working my way to the riverside entrance to the Louvre. Going through the arch I emerged into the biggest enclosed courtyard I have ever seen. I retreated to a bench in the far off shaded corner to study my map. The place was so large, I'm quite certain I could have stripped naked and attracted no attention. It was more like being on an open prairie made of cobblestone than inside the grounds of a museum.

Eventually I made my way through the main archway. The effect of emerging into the sunlit courtyard of the Louvre with its stunning glass pyramid and all of Paris laid out beyond can only be likened to stepping out of a spaceship onto a new world. Only in this case, no one is shooting at you or requiring your oversized robot to perform life saving surgery. From here the courtyard merges with the Jardin de Tuilleries and then the Champs Elysee and stretches for over two miles to the Arc de Triumph. In my humble view this is the most wonderful public space in the world.

What makes it special are its layers of complexity. Let me explain. Much of the complexity in the world is unordered, incomprehensible, sometimes overwhelming. But in the Tuilleries and Champs Elysee, there are human created layers of ordered complex space, each filled with something surprising and wonderful. You can walk near the center in the sunshine with great vistas before and after you. Or you can step into the shaded promenade between the first two rows of trees on either side. Or you can go into the next layer, the next promenade with its deeper shade and benches and the occasional open air restaurant. Or you can go still farther and find open stretches of lawn or sand surrounded by trees, or buildings with beguiling blends of old and new architecture and gardens landscaped within an inch of their lives. Everywhere there are places to sit. Layer upon layer so that one can go from grand sweeping views to a private encounter with the Spring's first roses in a matter of minutes. It's hard to imagine how you could ever get tired of this. And never did I feel crowded. I was surrounded by thousands of people and felt that I had as much privacy as I wished. It is for this kind of space that the words "promenade," "leisure," and perhaps "civilization" were created.

None of this is to mention the world (galaxy) class museums. And when you're ready to leave, you can dive back into the complex layers of city streets or walk along the river. I did the latter

on the lower path, under bridges, across the Ponts des Arts and back past the book sellers to St. Michel.

In the middle of this journey, I stopped for an almost two hour lunch under the trees, with beer and crepes and a good book. The waiter made me rethink the hypotheses I had formed from my earlier experiences with the taxi driver and the concierge. He was classically French movie star handsome, gracious and thoroughly efficient. So I was wrong. Next, I spent time in the Orangerie, a museum that I don't remember from last time. It contains two oval rooms of water lily murals by Monet. You could study these for decades and not see everything. Having tried painting, I wanted to deconstruct how he did this, so I could try it myself, but it is not possible. On the subterranean level is a sinful confectionary of more Monet, Cezanne, Renoir, Sisley, Modigliani, Picasso and many more.

In all I think I walked something like seven miles. I was limping when I got back to the Metro. Back to the hotel to pick up my bag which was quickly retrieved and completely in tact. Then to Gare de Nord, the Eurostar, less crowded this time, to Waterloo and back to my London hotel. On Thursday I had woken up in London and gone to bed in Paris. On Friday, I had woken up in Paris and gone to bed in London. On Saturday, I woke up in London and went to bed in Santa Fe. For all our complaining about the challenges of life, there are some times when the world feels like a pretty good place to live.

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