

# FRANCE

Par Lawrence Tàn JJR 69

Just like a dream fulfilled, I visited France the first time in the late 70s'. I spent most of my high school years in a French school. After years of studying their history, geography and literature, all the historical characters, events, and the names of the places seemed to strangely intimate to me even though I have never been there before in my life. Due to the war and financial reason, I had never thought that it would be possible for me to visit Europe. Versailles, le Louvre, l'Arc de Triomphe, la Seine, la Côte d'Azur and etc...You can imagine that the emotional impact was deep and the experience was quite educational.

I have been to France twice. The first trip we made was in the early 80's. The most recent trip was just two years ago. We stayed in Paris just for a few days, we spent most of our time on the Côte d'Azur, we took the TGV (high speed train) to Cagnes-Sur-Mer. From there we drove and visited all the neighboring towns from Monte-Carlo on one end to St Tropez on the other. Paris is a beautiful and romantic city. What impresses me the most is its sense of history, just like most of the cities in Europe. You can feel it from the layout of the cities to the buildings, each with very distinctive and solemn architecture, well ornate with intricate sculptures. The smaller streets are also lined with shades of the big trees. It reminds me of streets of Saigon like Tran Quy Cap and Phan Dinh Phung, to name a few. I remember Tran Quy Cap the most. I walked and rode my bicycle on that street to school for years. Actually, in Shanghai, to my surprise, there are a number of streets like that too. There are a few quarters built and occupied by the European until the country was liberated.



The food in Paris (and its vicinity) is of course excellent in general, but like any place that I have visited in the past, you have to have local friends to direct you to good restaurants for the kind of food that you are looking for and at reasonable prices. Looking down on to the city from the Eiffel Tower, it certainly revived in me some sense of the French history, after so many years of studying it in high school. The French Revolution, La Bastille, Le Louvre, Versailles and etc...Paris is a typical old European city without a lot of sky scrapers unlike in North America. In London, the city view from the top of the London-Eye and the scenery gave me a similar feeling to that from the Eiffel Tower, except that it is right next to the Thames.

The small boutiques, the cute family run restaurants and the popular coffee shops have their tables on the sidewalks everywhere. They were so inviting especially in the late afternoon, under the shades of the old big trees. I love the fresh baguettes and a whole variety of the cold cuts, with the french beurre, so delicious! I could just have all my breakfast like that for the entire trip until my wife had to suggest that we should try something else! Le jambon français, oh! it is so tasty, for a while I could not figure out why I could not find the same taste in the American ham. Then I realized it was the fatty white strip in the french jambon itself that made it so delicious, the thing that the American try to avoid the most... Just like those chunks of green onions soaked I hot oil for phở...I explained and showed it to one of my caucasian worker associates, he tasted it and

from then on, he had to have it every time he ate phở. The foie gras kind of melted in your mouth! But nowadays, we all realized that it is laden so much with cholesterol that you can feel it flowing reluctantly through your veins. The French pastries, les petit fours, are excellent. They are in byte size but yet they each look like a careful creation with good coordination of colors, choices of ingredients and design. Each with its very own distinct flavor, not like those found in Safeway or Giant, laden with tasteless cream and super high dose of concentrated sugar!



From the cultural interest, of course Paris has Le Louvre, a variety of castles, most notably the Versailles palace, the Tour Eiffel, Notre Dame, le Sacré-, the Arc de Triomphe and etc...To celebrate Year 2000, the Tour Eiffel was wired for a very flashy fireworks display worth seeing. When I was there, it started at certain hours in the evening and it must last for a minute or two. Very impressive, even though some French are complaining that it is a total waste of public funds and resources.

I like le Château de Vaux-Le-Vicomte in Fontainebleau the most. I visited this chateau during the early 80's. Perhaps that was the very first one that I had visited of its kind, it impressed me the most, especially with the history behind it. Because of its exquisite location in Fontainebleau, pretty much hidden from the public view, its beauty was indeed enhanced by its shy and mystic characters. Fouquet, the minister of Finance under Louis XIV owned Vaux-Le-Vicomte. In one of his hunting trip, the King was invited to stay there. Being there the first time, he was so impressed and perhaps jealous, he started to question how Fouquet could afford such a place. Fouquet was thrown in jail and he took the entire architectural staff and the artisans who built Vaux-Le-Vicomte to Paris to build Versailles. For me, Versailles is too overwhelming, too formal and more for official gatherings whereas I feel that Vaux-Le-Vicomte was built for an individual in search of inner peace.



And of course for tourists like us, we have to get on the bateau-mouche. In our first trip, my friend was a taxi driver in Paris. He took a day off and drove us around, got us on the bateau-mouche while he found a shady spot and took a nap, waiting for us. In the evening, he took us all to La Paille, an excellent Vietnamese family restaurant (I don't think they are in business any more). In the early 80's, it is very rare to be able to find a decent vietnamese restaurant in North America. So that was such a treat for us. As a side note, this good friend of ours passed away in Pnom Penh many years ago.

Well, if you have not seen Paris, it is worth being there, at least once. Otherwise it would be just like any other big cities with its annoying traffic and impatient people. I like Southern Coast of France, the Côte d'Azur much better. The people are friendlier. The scenery is absolutely stunning, so poetic, especially up and down Cannes and Nice. No wonder they were such inspirations for the French painters; I mean the real ones, not those found in Montmartre, they are such rip-offs. Most of them are hustlers; they argue and fight for a spot, advertised with wonderful portraits made by somebody else, and charge you exorbitant prices for portraits that make you look like one of those morphed figures in Conan O'brien's show. And like in any big cities, beware of the pickpockets, but it seems like those in Paris had been in some kind of formal training who had their art perfected. They work by themselves, as a pair or threesome, very well coordinated. The 13ème arrondissement (District 13) has the worst reputation of muggers and purse snatchers where my friend's mom was a victim and to this day, she is still scared going down there.



I did not take the bateau-mouche during the last trip, so I don't know if those signs that we had seen during our first trip are still there. They were the wall graffiti in many places along the Seine, I had the impressions they were written for the foreigners who live there: "La France est pour les Français" (France is for the French (only)). Paris in a way is like New York City, a big busy and interesting place, and if you drive, it is almost always very hard to find a parking spot. Like any big city, people seem to be always in a hurry and very impatient with you, especially when you do not speak French with a correct accent. A friend of mine, Vietnamese, grew up in Paris, a math teacher in high school, was looking for an apartment, saw an ad on a local newspaper, "chambre à louer, Français seulement!" (Room for rent, French only!). Fortunately, in America, these kinds of things are illegal (1). He went there, rang the door bell, a lady came out, and after my friend told her that he is looking to rent a room and saw her ad. She stopped for a moment then said: didn't I say in the ad for French only? He replied: 'But I am French!' She then said that was not what she had in mind and slammed the door! In a way, the older generation still more or less lives in their colonial days where they

brought in a lot of foreigners such as Chinese, Africans and Arabs to for the manual labor intensive jobs. America had their share too. Most if not all low income labor are performed by foreigners.

All the museums and public restrooms are not free, so it is always better to have a bunch of coins with you if you tourists plan to walk all day out in the streets. They even charge you in the department stores. I guess that is the way to offset the cost to keep the places clean. At St Tropez, in one of those open marinas, I had never seen so many multi-million dollars yachts all in the same place like that. Their colors were mostly from Europe, I remembered seeing one flying a U.S. color. A lot of them have either a helipad or even include a helicopter on it. Across the streets from there were an entire street of cafes with outdoor tables under large shades. In a number of larger cities along the Côte d'Azur, the streets are equipped with those capsules equivalent to our portable toilets. These are the 'silver bullets' where you can drop a few coins there to get the door to open, do your things inside, and as soon as you close the door behind you, it starts a self cleaning cycle! The trick is not to get stuck in there in the wrong cycle! And if you do get caught there for any reason, you just have to go and change and get wiser the next time. In America, somebody is going to get sued! Being a pessimist as I am, I am afraid because the high cost is built in to everything, sooner or later, we will lose the economic war and then comes the real war to resolve the economic issues!



I think you must get used to the place where you live, in Paris and probably in Europe, they all have siesta time, where all the shops are closed for a few hours. May be it is not as inconvenient as in some city such as Riyadh, Saudi Arabia where they close the door to all business a few times a day for prayers. I got stuck in a Safeway in Riyadh a few times for not reading the newspaper before going out to the store. They would lock all the entrances, turn down most of the lights, the workers will go to a praying place where everybody unfold their personal mats if they are not provided by the workplace and pray on their knees. For us, we would walk around in the aisles and entertain ourselves by reading the product labels. Each time it would last around 15 minutes. They normally publish those praying times (5 times a day) on the local newspapers.

Traffic in Paris is terrible to say the least; I would not drive in Paris. I swear, some of the drivers seem to be on their suicide missions, playing chicken all the times. I am damn sure that some of them have migrated to New York! The only drivers in the world who are crazier than those in Paris are in China. There, as in Taiwan, they have no concept of lanes. People would drive down all the lanes of a two way streets and only squeeze back in to the right hand lane(s) when there are cars showing up and coming down the opposite directions. They like to drive fast, cutting people off whenever they can and play chicken, scaring the life out of me. I really like to see a translated copy of their DMV Driver's Guide equivalent! Back in Paris, a friend of mine who has a local business there, told me that when he hires a driver for his company, he would take the candidate out to the Arc de Triomphe and watch him from the curb maneuver his car in and out of that traffic around the Circle a few times. He will hire the guy if he survives!

Shopping is normally very expensive, especially for the woman luxury stuffs such as the more popular brand like Louis Vuitton. They mentioned about Benlux for tax free stuff which save you some money. But I think they are all overpriced. Louis Vuitton sets up a global database to track their customers worldwide and only allows them to buy two items per year maximum. They do this to prevent people from speculating their goods which have happened in a lot of places, especially in Asia. I know this because the girls had to borrow my passport to buy them, because I am a virgin customer and have no records in their database! I would not believe it if I did not see by my own eyes; People would line up in front of a Louis Vuitton boutique in Nice for a long time to get to buy their quota of two hand bags! I hate to go to places like that. The attitudes of those sales clerks there are just bad. And again, you could have bought them from Vintimille, across the border into Italy from Monte Carlo, or in Hong Kong for much less! You would not be able to tell the difference. But you can get into trouble getting back in the US if you get caught with them. But then again, that has not stopped the girls! Well, anyway, my information might not be as current as yours, but I think the trip to Europe is well worth it, especially when the American dollars are strong!

2003 - Lawrence Tân

(1) NDLR: c'est illégal en France également