

Love affair with France

I'm just back from two weeks in France, gravely overweight and facing an onrushing flood of bills. It was all worthwhile, even if I have to live on boiled rice and mineral water for the next two months. France is simply glorious.

One cannot help but compare France to North America. First, some things that France lacks:

● **Feminism:** France is the most feminine place on earth. But in Paris, you don't see our North American executivettes bustling about, all serious-faced, in pinstriped suits and those silly silk ties. Non. French women have no desire at all to look like men or do male jobs.

They are wonderfully sexy, triumphant females revelling in their chic, beauty and charm. They cook superb meals and raise civilized children. Sour-faced frumpette feminists are unseen and, even better, unheard in France.

● **Cholesterolaphobia** (fear of fat): We wretched North Americans have been absolutely terrorized into believing that animal fats — those are the things that make food taste good — will kill you dead. Nowadays, eating butter or cheese ranks just below mainlining heroin. Two bites of brie and you are a goner. In France, everyone eats huge amounts of rich butter, exquisite cheese, creme fraiche, double creme and, incredibly, they live!

● **Nicotphobia** (fear of smoking): I found myself walking down the rue Nicot in Paris, named after the man who introduced tobacco, and hence nicotine, to France. Everyone in France smokes like a chimney. As a former smoker, I look on this wild abandon with deep envy. Ask for a non-smoking section in a restaurant and you will be put in the cellar. Sensible Frenchmen know everyone has to die and they would rather do so with a cigarette and glass of wine in their hands.

● **Quiche and Perrier:** The French do not often eat quiche and hardly ever drink Perrier. These

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are pansy foods for North Americans who have the same fear of calories as they do of herpes. Frenchmen eat meat, fish, veggies, cheese and soul-destroying pastries.

When they drink water, it's usually Evian, Vittel or my favorite, Vichy. Frenchmen can do all of this, stay reasonably slim, and not die of fat-shock because they eat balanced diets of fresh foods. They use butter and olive oil, not the ghastly petrospreads favored in North America.

Now, for some of the things that France has:

● **Scenery:** I spent most of my recent trip driving through Normandy, Brittany, the Dordogne and Languedoc. The latter two bear special mention. The Dordogne — south of Limoges — is an area of ethereal beauty. Dotted with forts, medieval villages, forests and deep valleys, the region is one of the world's most gorgeous places. Each turn of the road brings a new wonder, each kilometre stunning loveliness.

To the south, the limestone plateaux of the Dordogne region give way to the forested hills and plains of Languedoc, France's largest wine-producing region and the home of Roquefort cheese. Here also is the medieval walled city of Carcassonne, truly one of the marvels of our planet. Perfectly preserved, majestic, it is the quintessential dream castle, a must-see once in a lifetime.

● **Chic:** Why can't other nations seem to capture that ineffable look of effortless fashion, casualness and grace that so distinguishes the smart urban French? Even France's peasants, fat, red-faced from too much wine and eaux de vie, have a wonderful style about them. Here you do not see fat-bottomed women in double-knit pants or such sartorial monstrosities as rhinestoned glasses or ski parkas. Of course, the French have been working on being chic for centuries while lesser nations were running around in goatskins.

● **Crankiness:** Anyone who has been to France knows the French are cranky. The reason has to do with their terrible traffic — cars, there, are like black flies; from dealing with rude, surly bureaucrats that run everthing in France; and from having to support and deal with wives, children, in-laws and then having to support and service your mistresses.

Also, the French absolutely hate to speak English. For them, trying to speak our tongue is like having a red-hot pile attack. It causes the French deep pain and, because few can handle English without sounding like Inspector Clouseau, even deeper shame. Speak French in France and a lot of crankiness disappears, replaced by great civility or even kindness — particularly if you are a belle femme.

After 35 years of visiting France I still find her, like a passionate mistress, fascinating, filled with new adventures and surprises, comforting, irritating and impossible to live without.

Punch



"This is going to be tricky—I cannot, ethically, defend a man I know to be guilty. On the other hand, unless you tell me where you buried the loot, I don't know whether you can afford me."