

LIFE IN PARIS: THE REAL THING

Excerpts

By Jeanne Feldman,
an American in Paris



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INTRODUCTION: WHY FRANCE?

Why am I still here? I have been here sixteen years, and I would be the first to tell you it's been rough at times. As an American, I had an idealized vision of "life in France" that proved, in the end, to be superficial. It simply did not contain or explain some of the hard realities that I encountered. Despite that, there's obviously something that has been keeping me here. It's that "something" that I would like to share with you....

What follows is a series of articles on life in France showing how I had to expand my vision of life to include "another way of doing things." It's about real life, where you have to make your own way by integrating into the culture that's there.

1: MY APARTMENT

A MOUSE IN THE HOUSE (ER, APARTMENT)

Living in Paris is supposed to be glamorous and sensual. I suppose it is. But has anybody ever told you about the mice?

My apartment faces a rooftop lawn and garden, which I love. As a matter of fact, my apartment is set so far down into the lawn that you when you climb out my window you're right there. There are no doors that open onto this space--only apartment windows like mine facing the hidden inner courtyard. The lawn and garden are peaceful and calm, just like being in the countryside.

The lawn is lovely, the garden is lovely, the surrounding bushes and trees are lovely. What is not so lovely are the mice who live in this lawn and can climb right into your apartment through the window (the French do not believe in window screens, -- there aren't any).

Actually this was my second mouse. The first one I managed to kill by putting out poisoned wheat grains (ugh). The apartment manager came into my apartment the next day to check on a leak, pulled out the board that covers the bottom of my tub and, voilà, one dead mouse. He was quickly thrown down the garbage chute ("vide ordures").

Now, let me tell you about mouse number two....

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THE SIX-YEAR LEAK

Yesterday I took my first shower in my newly repaired bathroom. Ah, what luxury! The day before, two workmen had put the final touches to repairs on the ceilings in both my bathroom and the adjacent closet. These were necessary because of water damage caused by a leak – a six-year leak.

When I moved into my current apartment in Paris in 1997, I noticed that the bathroom and closet ceiling paint was flaking a bit. My new landlord told me that this was caused by a leak in the bathroom above mine, but that it had been fixed. She even hired a team of Polish workmen to scrape, re-plaster and repaint. (Since my landlord at that time was Polish, she used what I call the "Polish connection", a network of undocumented Polish workers who were paid under the table.) We had a special arrangement for the lease, so she paid for the work. You would think that was that. But no, this is Paris where simple things like a leak in the ceiling become sagas. Let us continue....

CAT ON A COOL GREEN ROOF

The lawn and rose garden just outside my apartment is a haven for birds in the concrete jungle, and I love it. I've already had a mouse visitor. Now it was time for a cat.

I had just opened my curtains in the morning after a rainy night. Suddenly I noticed a moving shape among the plants just outside my window. A cat. There used to be several cats that roamed the lawn, hunting the birds, but I hadn't seen one in ages. It noticed me, of course, and came towards me, with the closed window between us. I could see that it wanted to come in – it was obvious that it had been locked out all night, and just wanted a bit of shelter. So, I opened my window, and in it jumped. I have to admit I was wary....

2: MY NEIGHBORHOOD

THE 'HOOD HAS A HEART

One of the joys of living in Paris is its village atmosphere. Each neighborhood has its own distinct character, its own rhythm and unique personality, So living in Paris feels "small" because you get to know people in your neighborhood. And at the same time, there is a fabulous transportation system that can easily zip you "out". Let me introduce

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you to "the 'hood" where I've been living since 1999. The eastern and western borders are the huge rail accesses gouged out of the Parisian earth, which lead to the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord further south. The northern border is the Rue des Roses and the southern border is the Rue Riquet. The Metro stop is Marx Dormoy.

I cannot tell a lie – it has a terrible reputation....

Let me take you on a short walking tour of my neighborhood.

Climb up the steps of the Metro Marx Dormoy exit. Before continuing straight ahead, turn around and look to your left in front of Temple des Affaires. No, no! It's not a Jewish synagogue. It's "a place devoted to a special or exalted purpose" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary): in this case, good deals. Officially it's called a bazaar. I call this type of store a "we sell everything" store. In front of said "temple" you will probably see our neighborhood schizophrenic. You can see him pacing back and forth, muttering to himself in what sounds to me like Arabic but could also be his own made up language. He's always there – pacing back and forth. I've never seen him do more than that. Notice also that the street is practically boiling with people. (Poor neighborhood, people gotta walk)....

It's obvious I really appreciate living in Paris and, as far as I'm concerned, the 'hood really does have a heart. So does France. Imagine living in a country where, once, on the morning all news radio, the main news item was (roughly translated):

"Wearing black masks and hoods, armed gunmen broke into the town hall of Saint Denis where they are now holding twelve local politicians hostage, including the mayor. They are threatening to kill everyone, unless their demands are met."

Just what were these demands?

Soccer tickets.

It seems that the Stade de France was sold out for a very important game, and, well, the poor guys were desperate.

Vive la France.

THE SWIMMING POOL

One of the distinctions of Paris is its system of municipal swimming pools. I happen to live within walking distance of one, the Piscine Hébert. It's clean and well maintained, but there is one thing. Some months ago, a French bureaucrat ("fonctionnaire") decided to make the showers in our pool "mixte" i.e. men and women using the same showers! Furthermore, the showers in our pool are completely open – basically a bunch of showerheads stuck in the ceiling of a big room with drains. No shower curtains, no doors. I did finally manage to get the "scoop" on what really happened. It appears that local fundamentalist Muslims were demanding that men and women not only have separate showers, but that they swim on separate days of the week. The pool administration, instead of merely holding its ground ("We'll keep it like it is, thank you."), decided to "one-up" the fundamentalists. "Oh yeah? Well from now on, we'll have mixed men and women's showers – Nah, nah, neh, nah, nah!" (I do believe that most of the pool administration is masculine.)...

THE HAIRCUT

It was time for a haircut. When I first arrived in Paris, I felt I had to take advantage of the best of everything. I often ended up traveling long distances to find that special coiffeur. After a few years, I'd simply had it with slogging around in the Metro. I made the decision to simplify my life by finding services in my very own neighborhood. I began to check out the local hair salons. But it was hard going, as many coiffeurs are around 17 years old (ok, ok, early 20's but they look 17), and they are scared of thick hair. You see, I have the "Feldman" hair. Thick and coarse. One "17-year-old" hairdresser thinned my hair so much that even though I received complements on the cut, I felt bald – because it was thinned so much. I guess thick hair must be controlled by thinning it into thin hair.

Finally, I thought I had found the very best coiffure in Paris – the owner of a very chic salon on the Rue Faubourg Saint Honoré. Although he thinned my hair, it wasn't too much, and he gave me a great haircut. Unfortunately, he didn't like me.

MOMO AND THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Although not everyone in France is a friend, you still have to enter into some kind of relationship to get past the poker face stage. Once you've established your network, daily life can become rather pleasant indeed. Which is why I enjoy living in the 'hood.

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Since life in France is also about the romance of the ordinary, this includes flirting, which in France is an art. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "to flirt" as "to behave amorously without serious intent". I would agree with that. "It is behavior that is enjoyable in itself with no specific object." I would agree with that too. So I flirt in France. This is pretty good for the girl voted the "most intellectual" of her graduating high school class in New Jersey. I flirt with the guy who sells cheese in the covered market. And I flirted with Momo....

3: OUTSIDE MY NEIGHBORHOOD

SATURDAY MORNING IN THE WAREHOUSE

The highlight of the day was definitely when I pulled off my top in the middle of the warehouse and stood there in my bra and pants. My French friend Evelyne held my bag, purse and glasses. There were a few guys around, but I didn't care. Neither did they.

In fact, the above incident occurred quite within the normal course of events - at the bi-annual Bensimon private warehouse sale! Bensimon is a French ready-to-wear designer fashion brand with sober, clean-lined designs made out of the highest quality fabric.

I was not alone in stripping off my top (or bottom) to try something on in the huge, ugly warehouse, containing aisles and aisles of Bensimon clothes and a few mirrors. But in no way was there ever going to be a changing room. Ergo, if you wanted to try something on, "just do it in the aisle," so to speak. When I look at the knit tops in my closet now, they are almost all Bensimon, bought over the past years (at the bi-annual private warehouse sales, of course!), and I wear one Bensimon item, almost every day. You can find out more about Bensimon in my E-Book on Shopping, including how to find the only discount outlet for this brand in the Paris area.

My friend Evelyne and I consider these private sales to be a bi-annual religious pilgrimage.

DRAME ON AUTOBUS 31

There is a lot of concern now in France about "*l'insécurité*".

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When I first moved in Paris, I never heard of anyone being attacked. I will admit that there always has been, and still is, a lot of thievery here -- it's better to have a purse with flaps and to keep track of your luggage and packages placed on the ground. In fact, I never leave my purse on the ground anymore after having one stolen that way in 1991. But violence was never an issue.

It seems to me there are some big problems coming down the road from the *banlieus* where the disaffected kids of immigrants live in housing projects called *HLM's* in a kind of nightmare setting. I've seen some of them, and they are just as bad as described. I've also heard stories about what it's like to live in those neighborhoods and suffer the type of violence and aggression most Americans associate with the inner city. On the one hand, these kids were raised in France; they know that they have rights, but are discriminated against in a really blatant way. You'd be mad too. I certainly hope that the new French government will work to end the discrimination against and the isolation of these outlying communities, or the problem will only get worse. "*A voir*," as they say.

But sometimes Paris is still Paris and small miracles take place when you least expect them....

LA MONTAGNE SAINTE-GENEVIÈVE

November 1 and 11 are holidays in France. November is not as good as May, but after all, in May you get up to 4 paid holidays. It's not a sure thing since the Catholic holidays related to Easter are, in the end, tied to the Jewish lunar calendar. So the date changes from year to year. But in May you've got at least May 1, May 8 and Ascension. Pentecost sometimes falls in May, sometimes in early June. I'm not complaining.

This November 11, I had planned to do a walking tour that had been written up in my weekly arts and television guide, *Télérama*. I call *Télérama* an "only in France" publication. By this I mean it's an ultra left-wing socialist, ultra progressive television guide, published by the Catholic Press (it's hard to imagine the Catholic Church in the U.S. ever publishing a magazine with art photos displaying nude female breasts), that basically tells you why you should not watch television. It's an institution and *très intello*. I "religiously" follow the film reviews and by now have learned to decipher the codes. "This is an American, superficial, overly sentimental film" ("Wow, this sounds wonderful, funny and sincere."). Or, "what an insightful study of the dark psychology of a tortured soul" ("Good Lord, you couldn't pay me to see this artsy fartsy pretentious film."). I subscribe to *Télérama* and eagerly await each issue.

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At any rate, I wanted to follow their guided tour of the 5th arrondissement, covering an area with history dating from Roman through Medieval times. It was written in true French for the French style. What this means is that the bare essentials are given, but "you're supposed to know" all the background and/or fill in all the gaps yourself. Thank goodness I have a detailed map of Paris - one of those booklet things that has one or two pages for each arrondissement and is for sale at any Monoprix in Paris. Using that, I assiduously read the tour and added in the missing details and directions....

BIO

I had always dreamed of living in France (for no logical reason). Finally, after giving up hope of ever achieving this dream, I was offered a job in Paris, giving me the opportunity to live and work in France for a minimum of five years. I must say that the move from Los Angeles to Paris was the easiest move I have ever made in a series of "big moves" throughout my life. I grew up in New Jersey and moved to Michigan and then to Northern California to go to university. After that I moved to Southern California where I worked in non-fiction video distribution.

After the move to France, once the honeymoon period was over, it was tough. I had to learn how to deal with a completely different way of life and ways of thinking. In fact, I had never felt so uprooted in my life. I learned that the process of putting down roots in "foreign" soil definitely does not take place overnight, but I had to do it or give up my dream. In the end, I found that I was rather well-equipped to handle this challenge because I had always lived several cultures – my parents were both born in Austria, so I had always felt a bit "European" in America. It was only after living in France that I discovered how "American" I was! I am happy to say that sixteen years later, I am still living and working in France.

Since I am now in between two cultures, I can put that experience to use for others. I discovered that you really have to develop the ability to step back and examine the most basic values of your life. Values that you thought were universal turn out to be cultural. It's only once you begin to see from another vantage point that that you can take advantage of living and experiencing two different cultures.

It still constantly amazes me how even all the "little things" are different in France!

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