



## Parlez-vous Français?

By DAVE BARRY

Cartoon by Jeff MacNelly

This summer, for my vacation, I went to Paris, France. I went there to follow in the footsteps of such great writers as Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller and "F." Scott Fitzgerald, all of whom, for the record, are currently dead.

I blame the Parisian drivers. Paris has only one vacant parking space, which is currently under heavy police guard in the Louvre museum. This means that thousands of frustrated motorists have been driving around the city since the reign of King Maurice XVII looking for a

space, and the way they relieve their frustrations is by aiming at pedestrians, whom they will follow onto the sidewalk if necessary. Often the only way to escape them is to duck into one of Paris' historic cathedrals, which fortunately are located about every 25 feet (or 7.83 meters).

Nevertheless it's very pleasant to walk around Paris and feel -- as so many Americans feel when they're in that incredibly beautiful city -- fat. Because the fact is that we Americans look like enormous sneaker-wearing beef cattle compared to the Parisians, who tend to be very slim, with an average body weight of 38 pounds (83.13 liters). It's odd that the French appear to be in such good shape, because the major activity in Paris, aside from trying to run over pedestrians, is sitting around in cafés for days at a time looking French.

Sometimes we Americans try to blend in to the café scene, but the French immediately spot us as impostors, because we cannot pronounce the Secret French Code letter, which is "r." They have learned to say "r" in a certain secret way that sounds as though they are trying to dislodge a live eel from their esophagus. It is virtually impossible for a non-French person to make this sound; this is how the Parisian café waiters figure out that you are an American, even if you are attempting to pass as French:

WAITER: Bonjour. Je suspecte que vous êtes Américain. ("Good day. I suspect that you are American.")

YOU: Mais je ne porte pas les Nikes! ("But I am not wearing the sneakers!")

WAITER: Au quais, monsieur pantalons intelligents, prononcez le mot "Rouen." ("OK, Mr. Smarty Pants, pronounce the word 'Rouen.'")

YOU: Woon. ("Woon.")

WAITER: Si vous êtes Français, je suis l'Homme de la Batte. ("If you are French, I am Batman.")

The other sure-fire way to tell the difference between French people and Americans in a café is that the French are all smoking, whereas the Americans are all trying to figure out how much to tip. The tourist guidebooks are vague about tipping: They tell you that a service charge is USUALLY included in your bill, but it is not ALWAYS included, and even if it IS included, it is not necessarily TOTALLY included. On top of that, to convert from French money to American, you have to divide by six, and I have yet to meet anybody who can do this.

And so while the French are lounging and smoking and writing novels, we Americans spend our café time darting nervous glances at the bill, which is often just a piece of paper with a lone, mysterious, not-divisible-by-six number scrawled on it such as "83." We almost always end up overtipping, because we're afraid that otherwise the waiter will make us say another "R" word. I frankly don't know how the French handle tipping, because in my two weeks in Paris I never saw a French person actually leave a café.

Not that I am being critical. As a professional journalist, I like the idea of a society where it is considered an acceptable occupation to basically sit around and drink. In fact, I liked almost everything about Paris. The city is gorgeous, the food is wonderful, and they have these really swoopy high-tech public pay toilets on the streets that look as though, if you went into one, you might get beamed up to the Mother Ship. Also Paris has a terrific subway system, Le Métro (literally, "The Metro"). I always felt safe and comfortable in the Métro, although one time, when I was waiting for a train, the loudspeaker made an announcement in French, which was repeated in English, and I swear this was the whole thing: "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. Robbers are in the station. Thank you." None of the Parisians seemed the least bit alarmed, and nobody robbed me, which was a good thing, because I would have had no idea how much to tip.

I have run out of space here, but in next week's column I will tell you about some of the famous tourist attractions of Paris, such as the L'Arc D. Triomphe, Notre Dame, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, etc. So until next week, as the French say, "Au revoir." (Literally, "Woon.")

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## An Aesthetically Challenged American in Paris (Part II)

By DAVE BARRY

Cartoon by Jeff MacNelly

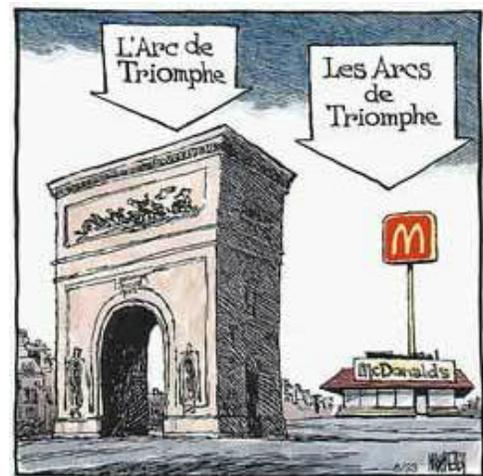
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Today I'll be concluding my two-part series on Paris, France. In writing this series, my goal, as a journalist, is to provide you with enough information about this beautiful and culturally important city so that I can claim my summer vacation trip there as a tax deduction.

My topic in Part Two is the historic tourist attractions of Paris. The Parisians have been building historic attractions for more than 1,500 years as part of a coordinated effort to kill whatever tourists manage to escape the drivers. The key is stairs. Most tourist attractions, such as L'Arc de Triomphe (literally, "The Lark of Triumph") and the Hunchback of Notre Dame Cathedral, have some kind of lookout point at the top that you, the tourist, are encouraged to climb to via a dark and scary medieval stone staircase containing at least 5,789 steps and the skeletons of previous tourists (you can tell which skeletons are American, because they're wearing sneakers). If you make it to the top, you are rewarded with a sweeping panoramic view of dark spots before your eyes caused by lack of oxygen. Meanwhile, down at street level, the Parisians are smoking cigarettes and remarking, in French, "Some of them are still alive! We must build more medieval steps!"

Of course the tallest monument in Paris is the Eiffel Tower, named for the visionary engineer who designed it, Fred Tower. The good news is, there are elevators to the top. The bad news is, pretty much the entire tourist population of Europe is up there taking flash pictures of itself. There are so many people crowded into the smallish observation area that you get the feeling, crazy as it seems, that the whole darned Eiffel Tower is going to topple over. Ha ha! In fact this has happened only twice since 1991.

Paris also has many excellent art museums, the most famous being the Louvre (pronounced "Woon"). If you plan to visit it, you should allow yourself plenty of time to see everything -- say, four years -- because the Louvre is the size of Connecticut, only with more stairs. The museum contains 30,000 pieces of painting and sculpture, and as you walk past these incredible works of art, depicting humanity through the centuries, you cannot help but be struck, as millions of people have been struck before you, by the fact that for a whole lot of those centuries, humanity was stark naked. To judge from the Louvre, until about 1900, everybody on Earth -- men, women, children, gods, goddesses,



horses -- basically just stood around all the time without a stitch of clothing on. There's one gigantic painting of a bunch of warriors getting ready to go into battle, and all they're wearing is swords. You expect to see a comics-style speech balloon coming out of the lead warrior's mouth, saying, "Fight hard, men! If we win the war, we can afford pants!"

I think the reason why the Mona Lisa is so famous is that she's just about the only artistic subject in the Louvre who's wearing clothes. On any given day, every tourist in Europe who is not on top of the Eiffel Tower is gathered in front of the Mona Lisa, who gazes out at the crowd with the enigmatic expression of a person who is pondering the timeless question: "How come they keep taking flash photographs, even though the signs specifically prohibit this?"

I enjoyed the art museums, but for me the most moving cultural experience I had in Paris was -- and you may call me a big fat stupid low-rent American pig if you wish -- visiting a gourmet food store called Fauchon (pronounced "Woon"), which contains two-thirds of the world's calorie supply. In the great art museums, I eventually reached a saturation point and found myself walking right past brilliant masterpiece paintings by Van Gogh, Renoir, Matisse, LeRoy Neiman, etc., without even glancing at them; whereas after a lengthy period of browsing in Fauchon, I was still enthusiastically remarking, with genuine artistic appreciation: "Whoa! Check out THESE éclairs!"

In conclusion, I would say that Paris is the most beautiful city in the world, and its inhabitants have an amazing sense of "savoir-faire," which means, literally, "knowing how to extinguish a fire." I say this because one Sunday afternoon I was in a crowded café when smoke started billowing from a cabinet into which waiters had been stuffing trash. It was a semi-scary situation; I stood up and gestured toward the smoke in an alarmed American manner, but the French diners paid no attention. In a moment, a waiter appeared carrying some food; he noted the smoke, served the food, went away, then returned to douse the fire with, I swear, a bottle of mineral water. And you just know it was the correct kind of mineral water for that kind of fire. So the meal ended up being very pleasant. It was also -- I state this for the benefit of the Internal Revenue Service -- quite expensive.

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## Coffee, tea or dried wood chips?

By DAVE BARRY  
Cartoon by Jeff MacNelly



I was getting ready to board an early American Airlines flight out of Miami, and they announced that it was going to be "bistro service." "Please pick up your 'bistro' meal from the cart as you board the plane," they told us.

I honestly wasn't sure what "bistro" meant, but it sounded French, which I thought was a good sign. French food is pretty tasty, except for the snails, which I do not believe the French actually eat. I believe the French sit around their restaurants pretending to eat out of empty snail shells and making French sounds of enjoyment such as "Yumme!" (literally, "Yum!"). But when foreign tourists order this "delicacy," the waiters bring them shells that still contain actual

unretouched snails, which the tourists eat, causing the French people to duck under their tables and laugh until red wine spurts from their nostrils.

But other than that, French food is pretty good. So I had high hopes when, on my way to the plane, I stopped at the cart and picked up a paper sack containing my "bistro" meal. I was hungry, because I had not eaten breakfast,

because I had arrived at the airport one hour early so that, in accordance with airline procedures, I could stand around.

When the plane took off, I opened my “bistro” sack. Here are the items it contained: (1) a container of yogurt, (2) a “breakfast bar” made from compressed dried wood chips, and (3) the greenest, coldest, hardest banana I have ever touched in my life. If I’d had a mallet, I could have pounded it straight into a vampire’s heart.

So I didn’t eat the banana. Needless to say I also didn’t eat the yogurt. My guess is, nobody ever eats the yogurt; at the end of the flight, the airline people just collect all the unused yogurts and put them back into “bistro” sacks for the next flight. There are containers of airline yogurt still in circulation that originally crossed the Atlantic with Charles Lindbergh.

I did eat the “breakfast bar,” because if you’re hungry enough, you will eat wood chips. (That’s why beavers do it. There is no way they would gnaw on trees if they ever found out about pizza delivery.)

Anyway, the flight was scheduled to go directly to Houston, so finally, after navigating around the sky for a several hours, we landed in: New Orleans. The pilot said there was fog in Houston. No doubt it was manufactured by the Fog Generator, which every modern airport maintains right next to the Banana Freezer.

They didn’t let the passengers off the plane in New Orleans, possibly for fear that we would run away. So we just sat there for an hour or so, rustling our “bistro meal” sacks and listening to our stomachs grumble. Here’s how bad it got: A woman across the aisle from me finally broke down and ate her yogurt. I bet this really messed up the accounting when the airline food personnel got ready to re-sack the yogurt for the next flight (“Hey! There’s one missing!”).

Anyway, we finally took off again and landed in Houston, where we dropped to our knees and gratefully licked crumbs off the terminal floor. So the story ended happily, except for the nagging question that remained stuck in my mind: Why did the airline call it “bistro service?” When I got home, I looked up “bistro.” According to my dictionary, it’s a French word meaning “a small wine shop or restaurant where wine is served.” The image it conjures up is of a cozy little place on a picturesque little street in Paris, with candle-lit tables for two occupied by lovers kissing, drinking wine, enjoying French food and laughing at snail-eating tourists. Somehow, the airline decided to use this word, of all the words in the world, to describe what was served on my flight.

Why? The answer is: marketing. At some point, American Airlines went to its Marketing Department and said, “We’re going to stop serving real food to people, and we need a good name for it.” Marketing people love this kind of challenge. Their motto is: “When life hands you lemons, lie.” And so they held a brainstorming session, probably at a nice French restaurant, and finally, after a lot of wine, they came up with “bistro service,” which sounds a LOT better, from a marketing standpoint, than “a sack of inedible objects.”

Giving things ridiculous names is a key marketing tactic. That’s why the gambling industry, when it became concerned that people might think it had something to do with gambling, changed its name to the “gaming” industry, as if people go to Las Vegas to play Capture the Flag.

But I think “bistro service” is even better. It may be the best marketing concept I have seen since back in the 1970s, when McDonald’s, which does not wait on your table, does not cook your food to order, and does not clear your table, came up with the with the slogan “We Do It All For You.”

With this kind of marketing ingenuity, there is no telling how far we can go. Perhaps some day, when we board our airplane, we will each pick up a box of dirt; this will be called “haute cuisine service.” We will take the box without complaining because we are consumers, and our motto is “moo.”