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JBN-13
EUROPE/RUSSIA

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Hiking, Part 1 In the Land of the French

PARIS, France

April, 2000

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

Between the first and the second drafts of this newsletter, I went for a hike in the French Alps with a friend, François Digonnet, who had rented a chalet in *le Grand-Bornand*. We were returning by another path when we found ourselves in the middle of a herd of ibexes, a type of wild mountain goat. This was not quite by chance: François had spotted the beige silhouettes of the sturdy goat grazing on a patch of grass two kilometers away. We approached them by walking in knee-deep snow against the wind along a spur over the pass. The shaggy animals probably sensed that we meant no harm because they let us come close enough to almost touch them.

I must have looked as silly as those tourists who come to Montreal seemingly to spend rolls of film on squirrels. François was actually surprised that I would be so excited.

"Don't you have wildlife in Canada?"

"It hides in the bush."

The truth of the matter was that my excitement was partly professional. This herd of ibexes in the middle of the French Alps seemed like the illustration I had been looking for to describe the geography of a country that is both a garden and a desert.

A good survey of France could not be done without walking the country, and I took to the task with great enthusiasm. It all began very simply in March 1999, shortly after our arrival. My wife Julie and I were alone in Paris, hardly knowing anyone, when Julie's younger sister, living in Brussels, delivered a nine-pound girl. Since I was to be left alone for two weeks, I decided it was time to join some kind of club. Hiking was the best choice for a solitary writer. It's gregarious; it's cheap; and it's away from the miasma of Paris. I made a few phone calls and found *le Touring Club*, which offered a good mix of day hikes and longer hikes, in addition to skiing and snowshoeing — even camelback riding in Mauritania.

Hiking turned out to be the best way to observe the physical and human diversity of France. Geography is a pet topic of mine because there is much more to it than mountains and plains. It is often assumed that the mentality of the British was shaped by their insularity. Couldn't France itself have made the French French? In this case, the way the French perceive the world is in fact rooted into their own geography. There are not many books that talk about this, possibly because not many writers like to do the legwork.

France is France because of a particular geography that makes it an entirely

different sort of country, physically speaking. Contrary to nearly all other countries of our hemisphere of comparable size, the north of France is more temperate than the south, where you find the snow. This patch of land, slightly smaller than Texas, enjoys about the same climate — even though Paris sits more North than Quebec City, and Bordeaux is at the latitude of the Quebec-Vermont border! It owes its mild climate and generous land not only to the Gulf Stream's warmth, but also to the absence of mountain ranges to the West. Rainwater is spread evenly on the territory and the oceanic climate, regulated by two seas and one ocean, suffers few continental weather swings. Another difference with Texas is geographic diversity: Texas lacks the eternal snow of Alaska, the volcanoes of Washington, the Badlands of Dakota, the fishing shores of Maine, the chaparrals of California, the quiet of an interior sea — all features of France. Above all, Texas lacks the French, who were shaped by this land and who have shaped it in return.



From left to right, an ibex, and my friend Jean-François Dignonnet, a Stéphanois of St-Étienne (east of Lyon) by birth, a Parisian by obligation and himself a two-legged mountain goat by avocation.

I knew I was off to a good start with *le Touring Club* when I got to their wacky office to register as member. The club is housed in a barge in the Champs Élysées harbor — there is such a thing, next to Place de la Concorde — at number 9. The office is right below the waterline, like the Club's finances. The deck affords one of the best views of the *Assemblée nationale*, the French parliament. As I later learned, this particular quay is also the landing spot for the Finance Minister of France, as he arrives by high-speed patrol boat from his Bercy office on the East Side. The Coast Guard is the best and safest way to move a Finance Minister across town when he must answer the call of the President, the Prime Minister or the *Assemblée nationale*.

Le Touring Club, which numbers about 400 members, turned out to be a remarkable microcosm of French society. I met one deputy *Préfet*, one advisor to the mayor of Paris, one administrator of the PTT, one survivor of the Holocaust, one man who escaped from Communist Romania, four accountants, five engineers, one Breton nurse who did not speak French before the age of six, another nurse who is a single mother and who is struggling to keep her hospital open, one beauty-salon owner married to a retired film producer — among others. People showed me the colleges where they taught. Others have taken me to the opening of ballot boxes on election night.

Even more important than the instrumental purpose of the club for my fellowship, I made true friends and so did my wife Julie, who goes swimming regularly with Christine, one of my four accountants. As I write this, my only regret is that I won't be able to pay tribute to all

of them, but be reassured: those who don't find a place in these pages will find room in the next, if they haven't already been introduced to the reader. I had so much to say that I had to split the topic between two newsletters: this one on the French interior, and the next on the frontier.

* * *

For my very first outing with the club in March 1999, I chose to do a 25-kilometer hike across the forest of Fontainebleau, south of Paris. The castle of Fontainebleau built by François I and Henri IV is the town's main feature, but the forest all around is the jewel in the crown, so to say. Twice as big as Paris, the forest of Fontainebleau is a splendid playground for the Parisians. It used to be the hunting domain of the kings. The hilly landscape is composed of piles of boulders and sand dunes covered with pine trees. Being unsuited to agriculture, the forest became the domain of deer, boars, hunters and hikers — who roam freely

The rendezvous point was the Gare de Lyon station. About 20 people showed up that Sunday morning. The first person to pay any attention to me was Bernadette. This lively retiree introduced me to everyone around. I was already accustomed to kissing strangers up to four times on the cheeks, but I was much surprised to see they introduced themselves with their sole first name and insisted on the familiar form for you, *tu* — no matter the age or the social condition. Bernadette, for instance, is a physiotherapist whose full name is Bernadette De Mangeon — but she is Bernadette to all, the one and only.

We jumped into the suburban train and Jean-François Delage sat right in front of me. This tall man of 44 has the physique you would expect from an ex-rugby player. He was not

even seated before he was discussing with Bernadette the drinks they carried — he had a bottle of Bergerac wine from his hometown of Bergerac, near Bordeaux, and a flask of spirits. “My fortifier!” as he would say.

Jean-François and I hit it off right from the start, and we ended up conversing for a few hours as we walked that day. He was remarkably informed about topics on which I had already written or was planning to write. It was only later that I learned that I had befriended a graduate of ÉNA, for *École Nationale d’Administration* (National School of Public Administration) — the breeding ground of all top-ranking civil servants. As one of the rising stars of France’s State administration, Jean-François knows all the ins and outs of the system and he turned out to be one of my best guide to understanding the system — although as a hiker he cannot tell north from south. He is the one who told me that my family name actually means Christmas in the dialect of Occitan — the old tongue in the area where he comes from.

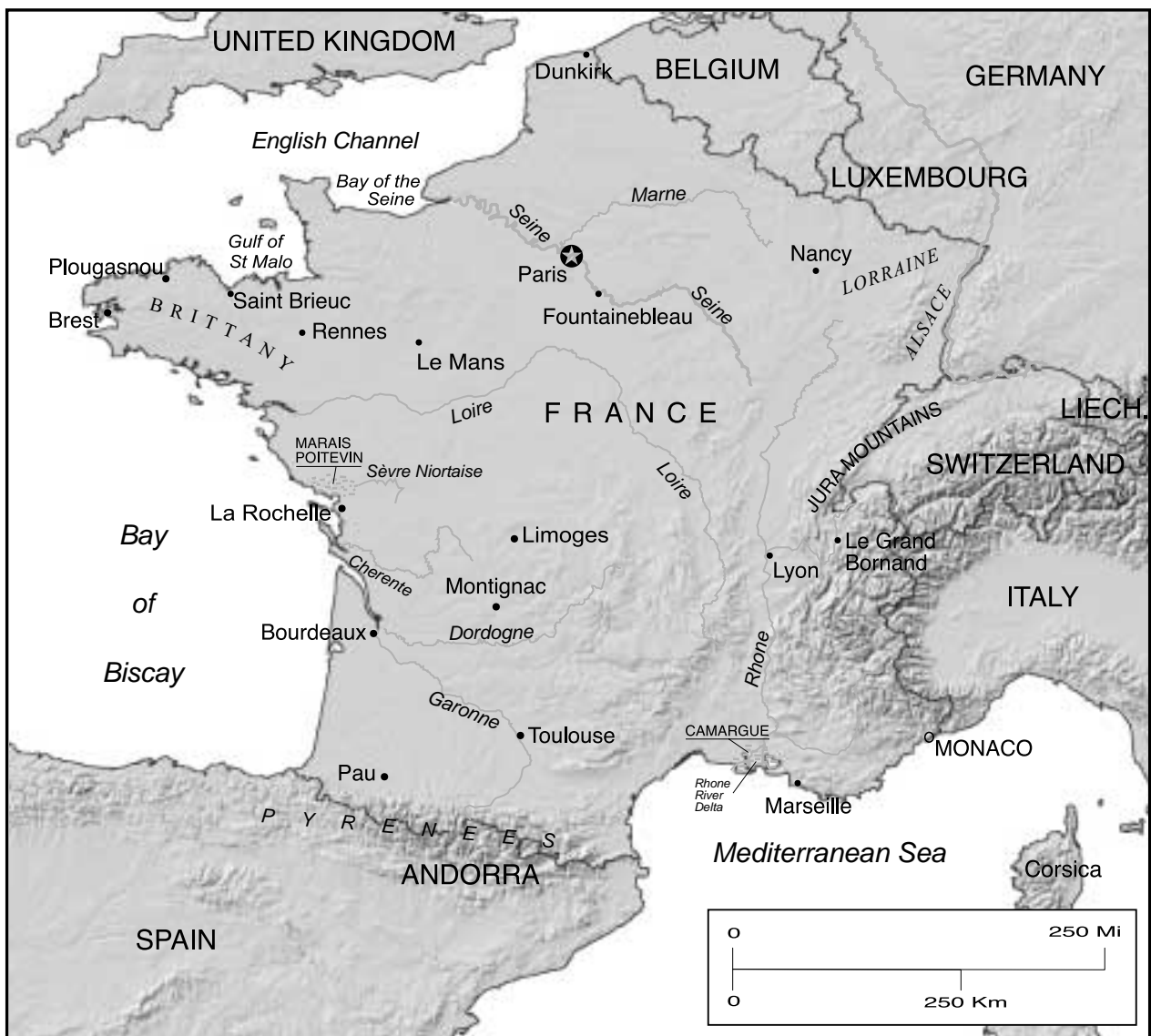
There are two species of outdoors people: Hedonists and Spartans. Spartans usually have nothing better to do

than discipline themselves, and they love this. They don’t like drinking, even water, because it forces stops. They eat standing and never unlace their shoes. They don’t want to have a siesta after lunch. They carry as little as possible and borrow as much as they can. By sitting with Bernadette and Jean-François, I had unwittingly sided with the camp of the Hedonists. Jean-François is a militant Hedonist, which doesn’t mean he lacks spirit. A couple of months later, during a one-day, 40-km walk, I saw him quicken the pace and push everyone to go faster all morning so that we would get 20 more minutes to eat lunch and have a nap. You can hear his motto every time a cork is being pulled out of a bottle:

“On n’est pas là pour se faire chier!”

This unique expression means that he does not want to give himself a pain in the arse, or sweat his guts off, or be a fucking bore to himself — excuse his French.

The group quickly accepted me and I got into those long, bubbly conversations the French enjoy so much. At the beginning, when I spoke, conversations tended to





The one with the beard, Jean-Marie Fasciaux, is another priest of Hedonism. At 53, he recently became a grandfather, and he celebrated this by bringing a canteen of black-currant liquor, two bottles of white wine and a dozen plastic glasses, which is what you need to make Kir — although glasses are the least necessary item.

quiet or stop. People listened. Some loved the accent; others could not quite make out what I said. Sometimes I just made a faux pas, like saying no to a glass of wine the first day.

“Take the glass!” ordered Jean-François with his deputy-Préfet voice.

“My life is full of sacrifice!” said I. And “Salud!”

Most of the time, the conversation is just a rolling fire of abrupt changes called *coq à l’âne* (literally, going from rooster to donkey). For beginning strangers, the secret for success consists of throwing the best punch lines and retreating. Long discourses are tolerated only if you really have something to say, or if you are very witty.

Conversation is not all *badinage* (banter) by any means, and I have heard a lot about hospital closure, child raising, Europe, the Arabs, retirement, social programs, schooling, the university, the Americans, the military service, and so on. The club has become my best window on French life. No topic is sacred: the use of Turkish toi-

front of the splendid Gare de Lyon, under the sun. They were very enthusiastic about having found another pillar of Hedonism, and I, to have met good friends. They promised to lobby the club to let me join the already-overbooked weekend hike scheduled for the beginning of May.

“Let me handle this, Jean Benoît,” said Bernadette. “All you have to do is be there next weekend.”

* * *

For my second hike with the club, we were supposed to start from a subway station in a suburb of Paris and walk “Up the river Marne” — the theme of our outing. Unfortunately, I missed our rendezvous by 15 minutes, and I began walking upstream like a big boy, with the purpose of finding my group. Soon, I came across a bunch of campers — in fact, squatters — who told me that a dozen people dressed in all sorts of colors had walked by ten minutes before. I was on the right track. However, I did not know that my people changed riverbank at every other bridge. It took me about an hour to realize that

lets and the insulational and privacy usefulness of closing your home shutters were hotly debated. Of course, from a purely sociological perspective, the workplace would probably be a more authentic observation ground than a hiking club. But I am not a sociologist, and the office atmosphere would never be this relaxed.¹

Our Fontainebleau hike ended, as they all do, at a watering hole — this one next to the train station in Bois-le-Roi. Predictably, the Spartans rushed into the train to get home quickly, but the Hedonist half of our group stayed behind to enjoy the prize — a *demi* (250 ml. glass) of beer or, even better, two *demis*. The train eventually took us where all French trains take people, to Paris. Bernadette, Jean-François and I finished this splendid day at the table of another watering hole in

¹ The big running gag in the club at present is the Saga of the club’s founder’s heart. Several decades ago, the founder of *le Touring Club* had the immodesty to donate his heart to the club. At the time, the club was one of the most influential outdoors organizations in France. It had a huge building to itself. The tides turned, however. Nowadays, the club can afford only one room in the hull of that barge on the Seine river, and the formalin jar containing the relic occupies one drawer too many. Nobody remembers who the president was, except his successors, who transmit the name from generation to generation, amid general indifference. The club’s executive considered a variety of solutions to rid themselves of the jar — like dumping the heart in the Seine; like feeding it to the seagulls on deck; or like sending it to British cattle-raisers to turn it into cow feed. Finally, they decided to look for a foster host and have found a descendant residing inside an urn at Père-Lachaise cemetery — a good lead at long last, but the search is still on. Hiking is good for the heart if you keep your heart for yourself.

I was not behind them anymore, but ahead. When I found a red and white marker, like those they usually follow, I just sat on the wooden bridge and waited for them. I did well to persevere. Hedonists were in the majority: six out of 13 people had brought a bottle of wine — red.

Ever since that incident, my friend Jean-François has been calling me the Moose Hunter. Finding them was no big achievement, but it amazed my friends that I did it without map or guidance. In general, North Americans tend to be those big, natural people who can find the right direction by instinct, like migratory birds. Although he comes from *le Sud-Ouest* (the Southwest), Jean-François would not know exactly where *le Sud-Ouest* is, with respect to Paris (it's southwestwards).

At first, I thought the French were spatially impaired; now I know they use a different compass.

For the French, north and south and east and west do not mean a direction: they mean places. Whenever they speak of the East, they uniformly refer to Alsace and Lorraine — even people in Marseille, for whom Alsace and Lorraine are straight north. Marseille, in fact, has no east: it's only got an Italian side. When Julie and I went to Marseille in April 1999, we attended a rap-rai-World Beat festival called *Festival des suds* (literally: festival of the souths) — because there is more than one south, as we all know. If we continue our Tour de France, we keep going west and arrive at the city of Toulouse. In Toulouse, the North refers to anything north of the Loire River, 500 kilometers away. But slightly more toward the Atlantic, in the town of Pau, the North is exactly 30 kilometers away.

The reason for this conception is the diversity of perspective: there are people everywhere. In Paris, you can-

not say that Montreuil is east of Paris, since it's west of Nancy — Nancy is "the East," being in Lorraine, remember! And never tell a taxi driver to take you north, as I did in the first week I was there: he wanted to drive me to Dunkirk. The expression "Go West, young man" is untranslatable. In French, it would be something like, "Go to Brest via Le Mans, Rennes and Saint-Brieuc." It has its own poetry.

Once, I heard a friend refer to her summer home in Plougasnou.

"Where is that?" I asked.

The straight answer would have been 100 km west of Rennes, but this is all Greek to the French. Rather, she said:

"It's in Brittany."

"Where about?"

"Between *le Trégor* and the Coast of Armor."

You must know French geography to function in this system, but French kids do learn by heart all the names and numbers of all 95 French *départements* at school with the help of parents, who quiz them incessantly during road trips. The big prop is that all license plates end with department numbers — they go from 01 to 95 in alphabetical order. The department number of Paris, 75, has become the coded term for Parisians throughout France.

One consequence is that they absolutely love maps: the famous *calendrier de la Poste* (the postal calendar) you find in every household contains more maps than actual

Daniel (Georges Émile) Roux, left foreground, in front of an unidentified castle. Daniel is a technical advisor to the mayor of Paris for parks and cemeteries, but a true bon-vivant who knows jokes dirty enough to make his patrons laugh.



calendars. The maps we use for hiking are fantastically precise: the entire country is mapped at a scale of 1:25,000. Only the Swiss have maps this precise. They show the smallest shed — even trees in the middle of open fields!

Last January, we were hiking North of Paris and I asked:

“Paul, what’s this in the field?”

He looks on the map.

“Ventilation shaft.”

“What for? The Maginot line?”

“No. Mushroom bed.”

“Really?”

It seems that many mushroom beds are planted in manure in underground quarries, and the ventilator lets out the methane. Otherwise, kaboom! This started a new conversation, and someone invited me to come and pick wild mushrooms with him next fall.

* * *

The club members have been remarkably tolerant of having a fellow among them whose purpose is to observe and take notes. But then the fellow repays them by being a good-natured butt of ridicule at times.

One such instance occurred at the occasion of the famous weekend hike in which I owed my participation to Bernadette’s successful lobbying. It consisted of a two-day, 65-kilometer tour of the Fontainebleau forest. Having learned that we were supposed to sleep in a refuge, I loaded up with a sleeping bag, a mattress, a camp stove, fuel, plates, utensils and a hatchet. As it turned out, the refuge was not one of those door-less, loose-planked shelters that are the North American standard. Rather, it was a stone house of three stories in the middle of a village. It had a vaulted basement, three fireplaces, a kitchen with four gas stoves and enough plates, forks and knives to feed 100 guests.

The difference between the French concept of outdoors and the North American is mostly logistics. There always seems to be a refuge where you want one. Last March, in the Alps, one refuge keeper served a six-course meal, featuring rabbit and red cabbage with anchovies. What qualified it as a refuge was the fact that everyone ate the same thing and slept in the same room. The night before, we had slept in a more rustic refuge without toilets and running water. The outhouse was a hundred yards away over a cliff, and we had to scoop water from the lake. The next morning, one irritated guest exclaimed that such rustic installations were in-

conceivable in the 21st century. Compared to North American campsites, French rusticity is a quantum leap.

Another vital element in French logistics is the train. Hiking in France has given me a very good understanding of what well-organized public transport can be. The small-town train stop is an important part of the local culture. We meet in train stations, chat in the train — no sweat, no worry, no traffic jam. By any standard, the network is extremely efficient. From Lyon, I once embarked a TGV train of 20 cars containing 150 passengers each on two levels — the equivalent of 10 big airplanes. TGV stands for *Train à Grande Vitesse* (high-speed train): it raced across the countryside at 300 km per hour and the conductor apologized for being two minutes late. By comparison, North America is the Third World of public transport, and I measure my words.

* * *

“Why do you bother with the outdoors in France when you’ve got the Rockies?”

I’ve heard this line so many times from so many people that it would be unfair to attribute it to a single



Parisians strongly defended the river Marne in 1914 in part because they did not want the guinguettes to fall prey to the Teutons. They are small riverside restaurants that serve fried fish, mainly, and that Renoir celebrated in paintings.

person. Naturally, they don't realize that the distance between Montreal and the Rockies is that of Paris and Stalingrad. Getting to the Rockies involves two days of driving, half of which are through a trench of black spruce and the other across a sea of barley and rye. During most hikes in France, we are certain to walk across one village, at least. The few trails there are in northern North America try to avoid the little human occupation there is.

"If you sleep in a tent, which you are likely to do, you have to hang your food in a tree to hide it from raccoons and bears."

That makes them laugh every time — until they really think about it.

Their incapacity to conceive nothingness is all the more surprising, considering the fact that the French had their own Far West called the Sahara, with its own Custer-like figures and Little-Big-Horn-like battles. Even today, members of the club regularly tell of their 15-day hikes in the hinterland of Tunisia and Morocco. But as I listen, it becomes obvious that there always happens to be a refuge, a cook, a guide — and a camel to carry the load. There is *someone*, you see. In Quebec, there are as many caribou as there are people in Montreal, but the caribou were never domesticated like reindeers — for lack of Laplanders, most likely. The quiet is great fun until your skidoo starts sinking in the middle of Ah! Ah! Lake (it exists) and you have to eat spruce gum to fight scurvy because the rescue hydroplane did not see your smoke signals.

"But you must love Quebec. You've got so much space."

These discussions made me realize the fascination that IMMENSITY and SPACE exert on the French. This is a recurrent theme in all conversations. It's all the more surprising, given that the few times they had a lot of space to themselves, they pulled out. Take America. The *voyageurs* had scouted most of it when Louis XV decided to write off New France in 1763. They did it in Algeria exactly 199 years later. They were, in fact, the rolling stones of colonialism.

Even today, you encounter wild Frenchmen all over the world doing the Paris-Dakar car rally or the Antarctica Round-the-Pole solo sailing race. One man in my club, Paul Rivière, a retired mechanic, likes nothing better than Jeep rallies in Libya. It consists of getting 20 people into 10 vehicles and burning petrol in the desert of Cyrenaica.

It is possible that this rolling-stone fantasy is left over from the age of chivalric prowess; maybe it is an odd means of appropriating space. For a long time I thought it was a kind of neo-colonialism, until I realized that *le Tour de France* is just a domestic version of this: a celebration of immensity. France is all that much bigger if you tour by bicycle. But the point

is that, even in France, there is much to celebrate.

* * *

One day in June, I was trailing behind during a hike in the Chevreuse valley, southwest of Paris (toward Chartres, in French directionese) when my friends suddenly changed course and jumped into the bushes like a cloud of locusts. By the time I arrived they had nearly emptied a tree of pinto cherries. Pinto, yes — yellow and red. In June, the French countryside is rife with cherry trees of all types. After the cherries, it's the strawberries, then the raspberries, then the blackberries, then the peaches, then the plums, then the apples, and then the nuts. I discovered the significance of the term winter harvest when I saw people pluck leeks out of the field in January. Weather is mild enough to sow wheat in November. This is very exotic for a Canadian, for whom the word *mirabelle* evokes a controversial Montreal airport named Mirabel, not the plum that produces famously good jams and spirits. Meanwhile, Canadians don't even make an aperitif out of their own maple syrup, for crying out loud! The French know how to make something out of anything. Jean-François's favorite "fortifier," *le génépi*, is in fact a liquor made from a rare medicinal plant growing in barely accessible pastures of the Alps. Hence the German say: *Leben wie Gott in Frankreich* — Happy, like God in France.

Not all things encountered are a godsend, however. Until May and June of last year, I had no idea of what *les orties* (nettles) exactly were. To me, *les orties* was just a literary image for something supremely unpleasant. My friends could not believe their eyes when they saw me, in shorts, walking straight into a patch of nettle. As soon as I stepped in, the stinging started. Apparently, I was jumping into the air as if I was on fire — and I was. Rashes appeared instantly on my legs, and I could feel every beat of my heart in my skin. All summer I kept walking into *les orties*. The experience had two great benefits: I am no longer alienated from all my great cultural references, and I can tell a nascent *ortie* a mile away.

"Damn mosquitoes!"

One day of summer, as we were crossing a marshy area, I was surprised to hear them complain about insects and mosquitoes. Nobody likes mosquitoes, but they seemed terrified by the few there were. The fact is that the French are phobic about winged insects that do not produce honey. Historically, it's perfectly explainable: Until the Middle Ages, malaria was endemic in France until major works drained most wetlands, which are still regarded as unhealthy. Unlike the Germans, the French are no big Gaïa-lovers, and they actually love the wild insofar as it remains far. Close to home, they like it tamed and drained. This might have to do with the fact that France was mostly agricultural until WWII.

France is at once a country that is fully tamed and

wild. This makes it very difficult to characterize. The hand of man is obvious everywhere you look. And yet you often find yourself in places where there is nobody. It is in fact much less dense than most neighboring countries. The Dutch, the Germans, the British and the Belgians come to the land of the French to find the wild. And the 1.5 million French hunters are particularly aware of this as well.

Nowadays, the French lead a predominantly urban life, but they remain profoundly *terriens*. This untranslatable term refers to the attraction and the love of the land. The newsletter on *terroir* (JBN-4) dealt with the content of the land. But you've got to be *terrien* to love your own *terroir*. In fact, most aspects of French society can be rooted to this deep disposition of mind — be it the relationship of the French to food, or to others, and even to Europe.

Their roots grow deep in the land. France is the only modern country that glorifies its peasantry, and whose peasants are insulted if you call them “farmers” or “producers.” One of the few calendars in the *calendrier de la poste* is an astronomic calendar that gives the hour at which the sun rises and sets (and the moon also) — this is of absolutely no use to most Frenchmen, but they love discussing it. In the immediate suburbs of Paris, you fre-

someone explained the construction was just an old *lavoir* (communal washing place). Many people remember their great aunts using such facilities a couple of decades ago. Not far from there, 30 miles away from the City of Light, we walked across a ford for cars — the bridge was for pedestrians only.

The hand of man is visible everywhere, but it is obviously an old hand and people are in no hurry to change things. Most old farm buildings around Paris date back 400 years. They have a square, closed yard, and a dove-cote tops the entrance gate. “Pigeons were a main dish of the aristocracy in olden days!” explained Charles Vantard, a retired sheet-metal worker with a tremendous Parisian accent, who was thrilled, one day, to have me taste his pig-ear salad — crunchy stuff.

* * *

The French themselves are as divided as their tastes, plant life and geography. President Charles de Gaulle (1943-46, 1958-69) used to say that you could not possibly run a country that had 246 sorts of cheese — but he really meant 246 sorts of French. There are 36,000 communes in France, four times as many as in Germany and the U.K. They do think small is beautiful.

These communes, with their impossible names, are a ceaseless source of fun — but the names of their dwellers are even better. My friend Bernadette, who was born in Fontainebleau, is a *Bellifontaine*. Wine amateurs will be glad to learn that people from Beaujeu are *Beaujolais* and the *Castelpapals* live in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The inhabitants of St-Émilion, go by the name of *Pigouilles*! When I first met Ann, a day-care worker and specialist in sassy jokes, she said:

“I’m a Limousine!”

My Limo friend meant that she’s from Limoges. François, with whom I walked through a herd of ibexes in the Alps, is a *Spinassien* like all those living in Épinay-sur-Seine, near Paris — although he’s by birth a *Stéphanois* of Saint-Étienne. The *Dionisiliens*, the *Balnocataranchais* and the *Castrogontériens* come from Île-Saint-Denis, Choranche-les-Bains and Château-Gonthier. You’ve got to appreciate

their Star-Trekkish quality. France is a world in itself. *Que dis-je? A Universe!*

My wife Julie cannot hike as much as she wants because of a bad knee, but we manage some outings nonetheless. One of them was a canoe trip in the *Marais Poitevin* (the swamps east of Poitiers) in September 1999. These are in fact a series of canals in a vast lowland of 20 square kilometers at the mouth of a river going by the abominable name of *la Sèvre Niortaise*, just north of La Rochelle



This is not a remake of the Hunchback of Notre-Dame but simply what we look like when it gets wet and dirty.

quently hear the cry of the rooster. Last weekend I was in Toulouse, visiting friends who live in the perfectly suburban town of Tournefeuille. Their backdoor neighbor used half an acre of good suburban real estate to raise free-ranging poultry, male and female. And this bothered absolutely no one.

One day, as we hiked, we picnicked near a shallow rectangular pool with a roof over it. I thought it was either a well or a waterhole for horses of the nobility until



During weekends, in the canals of the Marais Poitevin, peasants put seats in their cow-boats to take Parisians around.

(toward Nantes, as they say). There are a few roads and some bridges, but most patches of grazing land are accessible only by flat-bottom cow-boats on which you can fit one cow at a time. You have to see the peasants push their boat with long sticks along the canals. The water is green with algae. We even saw a water snake.

As we paddled our canoe, I could not help being bewildered at a way of life from another age — raising cattle in swamps! My impression was very similar to one I experienced in 1992 when we met gypsies in the Camargue, in the delta of the Rhone river, where the French raise a famous breed of white horses and bulls for the *corrida* (bullfight). Seven years later, I had again the same feeling in Les Eyzies, just south of Limoges. This was where archeologists first unearthed the Cro-Magnon man. In Occitan, the term simply means Magnon's Hole. As it turns out, Monsieur Magnon had simply set his farm precisely where one of the first Frenchmen dwelled 220 centuries before. This was not by chance. As we walked, we saw someone who used the rock shelter as a carport.

The actual significance of this dawned on me a couple of months later in the Jura Mountains, near the Swiss border. Julie and I were doing cross-country skiing and admiring the perfect balance between the climate, the architecture and the diet. What struck me was that the locals are the true natives of Europe — not native in the sense that they were born there, but native in the sense of being the aborigines, or the autochthons.

You have to go back to the great central myth of America to get the point: Indians live unperturbed; White man arrives; fires into the crowd; no more Indian; White man wins. North Americans see modernity as something exogenous, from the outside: it came with sails and gun-

powder and fed on itself. The native, in our point of view, is something that grows out of the soil. Incidentally, it's not by chance that all great environmental causes were fought using natives in the forefront. Tell an American, a Canadian, an Australian or a New Zealander that he is a native and your interlocutor will reply that he is native to the place, and that maybe his grandmother was a native, but he certainly isn't. Most people do not like the term "native" because it is associated with ways that are traditional, if not downright primitive. But really, "aborigine" or "autochthon" describes what existed before colonization.

Vocabulary is lacking to describe what Europeans are that North Americans are not. They are native to the continent. Europe was never colonized, instead it colonized, which means that some left and became something else, but most stayed and kept on being what they were — or evolved in their own way. For that matter, France is pretty much like the rest of the world. Ten years ago, in Mexico, I contemplated Mayan paintings at Cacaxtla, in the State of Puebla. The site, the furthest ever reached by the Mayans, was in fact a mound made of seven layers of civilization, all oblivious to the preceding ones. On top stood a Catholic church. In England, a couple of years ago, archeologists found a skeleton that was 8,000 years old. For the heck of it, they tried to match the skeleton's DNA with that of the locals, and they found one relative, a schoolteacher. As he put it himself, the family did not move around much.

Not many people would agree that you could be from the greatest colonizing civilization in the world and yet be an aborigine yourself. This idea is alien to our thinking because we have very long espoused modernity and discarded traditions. Yet when you see

a lot of the geography of a country in a relatively brief period, this becomes the most obvious feature of Europe: Europeans are truly modern *and* very ancient at the same time. To understand Europe, and to come to terms with our own impatience with the French — and with others, for that matter! — we do have to come to terms with precisely this: they are their own native population.

This produces very peculiar reflexes and reactions. For instance, at the same time that he modernized France and launched the French space program, de Gaulle toyed with the idea of reinstalling the monarchy. Consider the peculiar French relation to food, to the land, to money, to one another, to America, to Europe, to technology, to democracy. It is possible to be resolutely modern and ferociously archaic at the same time: that's why we love them — and hate them. □



A house in the Périgord, not far from Les Eyzies, home of the Cro-Magnon man (les Eyzies, not the house). Things don't change much, really.

Author: Nadeau, Jean Benoît
 Title: ICWA Letters-Europe/Russia
 ISSN: 1083-4273
 Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial
 Language: English
 Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: Sub-Saharan Africa;
 East Asia; South Asia,
 Mideast/ North Africa;
 The Americas

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4273**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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