Paris Slide Show
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April 28, 1988

BOSTON GLOBE

The obligatory city scene. Look at the faces in this crowd: their expressions are impassive or impassant. Unhappy people hurrying home with their long, crisp loaves of bread. They rush past each other, striding fearlessly between the small, darting cars, not pausing to look around, never seeing. I don’t know why. However, they are not rude to a tourist who makes an effort to speak their language. (Let us be frank, though. It is a crude effort. By now my flush of self-congratulation is gone; some hydraulic contraption has lifted my standards and I want to be able to speak well.) I can conduct conversations without fumbling with the guidebook or humiliating myself, but my syntax and vocabulary are barely passable. There is a scant millimeter of difference between, say, “deux heures” [2:00] and “douze heures” [12:00], and I am a long way from negotiating the pronunciations with the required delicacy. I suspect a lot of Americans end up missing engagements for ten hours. I have been led to expect world-class rudeness from Parisians, and I find instead standard-grade urban briskness. There is a certain elegance here that occasionally borders on hauteur but people are surely willing to give directions. Shopkeepers are particularly cheerful, singing out words, eager to please. The workers exude a modus of self-confidence. Almost no one is fat, incidentally.

Another city scene: the area called Montparnasse. Lots of sex stores, but they are interspersed with respectable clothing shops and cafes, so the soaneon is diluted. It is 5:45 on the afternoon commuter post stand. Notice the small postcard Eiffel Tower.

The Eiffel Tower. The legs are too far apart, suggesting a woman trying to urinate standing up. There is a restaurant or giftshop in each of the four feet, which are actually more than 100 meters apart. The golden buttefly is useless for small talk. It is M. Eiffel, who appears, rather curiously, without irises. (The buses are continuously disgorging tourists, but no one is paying any attention to the sculpture.) I think I took a close-up of one of the legs.

Yah. Here is it. Does the color surprise you? I didn’t expect this metallic brown, like brackish water. Of course it’s the intricacy of the construction that’s truly remarkable. Thousands of tiny bars: crisscrossing diagonals, parallel lines with small perpendicular connections that are then connected by even smaller segments. It looks like the doodling of someone on speed.

This is an outdoor marketplace again. They stretch their feet still attached. Just behind them are calf muscles. Maybe this explains why the people don’t smile.

Marketplace again. This is no Kodachrome hyperbole. The tomatoes really are that red and luscious. Cherries fit for a still-life. And cucumbers of such dimensions as to make a woman blush. I can’t get this on film, but one day I sat next to a middle-aged woman on a train; her husband sat opposite her. She and I struck up a conversation and I asked where she lived. Just as she named the town, her husband lifted his hand ever so slightly. She understood and stopped talking to me. On another occasion I was chatting with my host, Jean, about a certain woman whom I said I would see again. He waved a couple of fingers: “Ah, well! We shall see, then. Who knows what could happen?” His fingers said. In some cultures hands are never used; in others, they are always in constant use. They are used sparingly but with breathtaking eloquence.

McDonald’s. In Paris, for God’s sake. I walked in here for the same reason one slows down on the highway to stare at an automobile accident. I don’t know whether I was more sickened to hear people speaking French (indicating that residents would choose this over the indigenous cuisine) or English (indicating that American tourists are so desperately nostalgic for the worst of their home that they would choose this even here). This particular McDonald’s is in the Latin Quarter. There’s a Burger King nearby. Worse: local variations on the same fast-food theme have sprung up everywhere. The only thing worse than the insulting gaudiness of American pop culture is the fact that it is so successful. Americans appear to have more than half the average income up through the middle class, but it is spent foolishly on bad taste in food.

There may be a law. Somehow I expect the French to be more sensible than us.

Well, you can’t blame a fellow for wanting to see a movie in France, can you? They show commercials first instead of coming attractions — visually clever, sprightly commercials but still commercials. The film I saw in this theatre was Paul Newman’s new...