

Detour de France

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Extract

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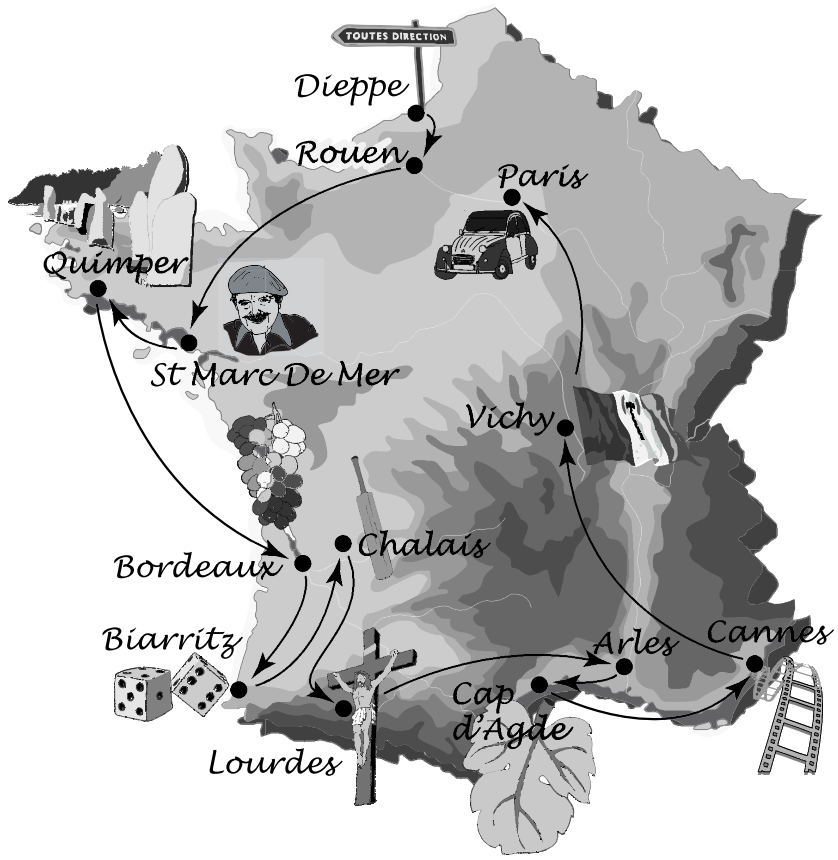


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Detour de France





Son et Lumière

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH France began when I was interfered with at the cinema.

It occurred at my local fleapit in Brighton during the summer holidays. I can't have been more than nine or ten at the time. I can't even recall the main feature, but the second film in the programme was a curious French movie with English subtitles I hadn't bargained for: *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*.

Set in a fictional seaside resort on France's Atlantic coast, this strange and beguiling comedy depicted the gently anarchic adventures of French comedian Jacques Tati's alter ego during one summer in the 1950s.

The real star of the film was the location itself: a small, sleepy resort, complete with sun, sea, sand, donkeys, laughing children and evening strolls along the prom. It could almost have been Brighton, if it weren't for the fact that it was hot, elegant, exotic, timeless, languid, and everyone in it spoke as if they'd bitten on a glue trap.

Midway through the picture, the cinema's only other occupant, a man in his forties with greasy hair who'd been sitting a few rows in front, squeezed between the seats, plonked himself down next to me and moved his right hand onto my left knee.

By the time he'd manoeuvred it onto the zip of my shorts (just

Detour de France

as Hulot commenced his famous game of ping-pong in the hotel lobby), I knew something was wrong. Yet, despite all my parents' dire warnings, so entranced had I become by the strange sunlit world that I couldn't bring myself to leave. I merely moved my seat and crossed my legs.

That had been my relationship with *la belle France* ever since. Fascination mixed with mild anxiety. Even now I can never talk to a Frenchman without feeling I'm being molested.



EVER SINCE KING Harold sent his army careering after William the Conqueror with the proviso, 'Mind where you shoot those arrows, you could have somebody's eye out,' England's relationship with that of our nearest neighbour has been all downhill.

You'd have thought that losing a kingdom but gaining a conqueror would have settled the issue: we'd take their foie gras, they'd take our fried bread, and we'd be one big happy family. But bad blood lingers and ever since 1066 we've been at each other's throats. From the Hundred Years War to Waterloo, from the European Union to the Eurovision Song Contest, we've remained the best of enemies.

The French see themselves as nature's aristocrat. In cuisine, manners, the arts, fine wines, philosophy and, as if all that wasn't galling enough, now even in football, they've appropriated the mantle of true class, while England is fighting relegation, both sporting and cultural, in the Beazer Homes League Division II. The French ideal is represented by a piquant blend of Juliette Binoche, Coco Chanel and Arsène Wenger. Fighting for all that we hold dear in the English corner would be Ann Widdecombe, John McCririck and Mister Blobby.

The problem is how we choose to see each other. While we may have beaten them in the run-off to host the 2012 Olympics,

Detour de France

Boris Johnson's flag-waving at the closing ceremony in Beijing confirmed everything for which the Brits are known on the boulevards of Paris – knock-kneed, pasty, overweight and sartorially about as well turned out as the Mayor of London's splayed feet.

We, on the other hand, see them as proud, stuck-up, rude, impatient, humourless and bombastic.

They see themselves the same way, of course, but to them these are the things that make life worth living.

MY OWN VIEW of the French, I have to confess, was still stuck in the back row of that cinema and weighed down with years of caricature. I grew up knowing little more than that we'd helped them out in two world wars. Whenever France was mentioned in our house, my dad would stare darkly into his tea cup and murmur grimly, 'Nobody ever forgives you for doing them favours.' My elder brother Pete during his college years was briefly part of something called the 'Reconquer France for Britain' Society, although that turned out to be an excuse to go on day trips to Dieppe and get bladdered. Yet the prevailing antipathy chez Simkins towards all things French was at odds with my own flickering, Hulot-kissed memories.

Sadly, I never had a chance to decide for myself. I didn't have a French pen friend, I never went on a student exchange or skiing holiday, and I failed utterly to learn the language. Not that I didn't have the chance. Au contraire: I spent four years studying French at secondary school, but there were just too many other things to do in the back row of the classroom – sticking compasses into 'Lumper' Lawrence's right thigh or perfecting my Johnny Mathis impression to mention just two.

When I was allowed to give it up aged sixteen I had little more knowledge than the opening lines of '*Frère Jacques*', and that's the

Déjà View

way it stayed. I went straight from secondary school to drama school and to my first paid acting work, and the smell of garlic was no match for greasypaint. My wanderlust years slipped by without my noticing. Even into my twenties, my idea of a fabulous trip to foreign climes was playing Wishee Washee in *Aladdin*.

So the gap between the France of my imagination – dreamy, poetic and liltingly beautiful – and the image commonly depicted in English culture – aloof, snobbish, with a yard brush up their communal *derrière* – remained as wide as the Channel. I could whistle the theme tune from *Maigret*, but that apart, the strange, sunlit world I'd glimpsed all those years ago in the darkness of a provincial cinema remained a distant fantasy. Yet somewhere inside me I still dreamt occasionally about one day finding the France of Hulot.

And then I met Julia.

JULIA KNEW ABOUT France. Julia had been on student exchange visit to the French Alps as a teenager, and Julia had worked as a nanny on a yacht moored in Cannes harbour, spending her time having her toes sucked by Algerian cabin staff to Charles Trenet records and learning about fashion, style and romance.

She also learnt the language, becoming so fluent that on returning to England she'd financed her own way through drama school by working as an international telephonist in Holborn. Her French supervisors were apparently all vicious old dykes in tweed suits and monocles who required you to put your hand up to go to the toilet just so they could answer 'Wait!' while they stood about in corners gossiping with their compatriots about 'les anglaises'. But nonetheless, by the time she'd finished paying her way, Julia was as cosmopolitan as I was boiled beef and carrots.

We finally met in the less than cosmopolitan surroundings of

Detour de France

Harrogate Repertory Theatre. Part of the endless fascination of falling in love is discovering and sharing the other person's interests and obsessions, and I was only too glad to enlighten her at great length about mine: brass bands, county cricket, Gilbert and Sullivan memorabilia. Yet each time I tried to draw her on her early years in France, a country whose sights and sounds she seemed to know well and which I was desperate to sample, she remained enigmatically guarded.

France may be a great country, she explained, but she had no need to go back. Once upon a time she'd been dazzled by the chic and the coffee and the Gitanes, but working with the French back in London, away from the sights and sounds of their alluring environment, the more she'd steadily realised they were rude, arrogant, had no sense of humour and had to take a week off work or a suppository every time they so much as stood in a draught.

And there the matter might have rested. For the next twenty years or so we rarely spoke about the place or its inhabitants. Julia showed no inclination to return, and I certainly wasn't going there without her. In any case, there was always another play, another TV part, another job interview. What changed things for ever was my decision to celebrate Julia's fiftieth birthday by taking her to one of Paris's most historic restaurants.

La Coupole is world-famous for its food (*fricassée de poulet, glacé aux fruits rouge*), its clientele (Hemingway, Picasso) and the legendary hauteur and savoir faire of its waiters. The trip was a surprise and thus something of a gamble: but at La Coupole, I reckoned, we'd share good food and drink in elegant, formal surroundings, sophisticated, suave and expensive. If all went well it would silence once and for all these accumulated prejudices of hers, and reignite her original passion for the country, and, by implication, for me as well.

Déjà View

Upon being frogmarched onto Eurostar at 6 a.m. on her one day off, Julia, still knackered from an eight-show week, burst into tears. She said she'd now have to spend her one day off communicating with sneering restaurant staff, a prospect she didn't much relish on her fiftieth and that she was damned if she was going to give poncey Parisian waiters the pleasure of answering her French in disdainful English. I maintained she was being paranoid and xenophobic, and that ordering the meal was the least she could do considering I'd spent nearly two hundred quid getting her there.

And so it was a few hours later that she summoned across the waiter. In all our years together, I'd never heard Julia speak French, and I was looking forward to it.

Julia: Excusez-moi, je pense que nous sommes prêts pour la commande maintenant. Je voudrais commencer par un croustillant de jambon, suivi d'une fricassée de poulet. Mon mari prendra la même chose. Pour boire, nous prendrons une bouteille de rouge maison mais nous voudrions aussi une bouteille d'eau minérale, et ce serait bien si nous pouvions avoir du pain et du beurre en attendant d'être servis...

Waiter: Certainly, madam. Sparkling or still?

It's funny how stress can cause you to do the silliest things. I suppose the thunderous look on Julia's face made me panic. All I know is the next moment I was telling the waiter it was my wife's birthday and could he guess how old she was?

Waiter: I have no idea... Sixty? Sixty-two?

WE GOT THROUGH it. Just. But one thing was obvious. If I was to separate French fact from French fiction, I was going to have to do it alone.

In truth, there was another reason for my eventual decision to

Detour de France

take a trip there. Julia was at least correct about one thing: I was becoming stuck in a rut. Middle-aged, middle class and middle England, I was approaching that time of life when you find yourself dwelling on the things you haven't done rather than those you have. Even my obsession with acting wasn't lighting my fire as it once had. Playing detectives and unsuspecting husbands in other people's TV series had its charms – God knows it's better than working for a living – but if I was going to fulfil some of my long-cherished ambitions before arthritis and memory loss set in, time was running out. Only recently a woman had given up her seat for me on the tube: that can do a lot of harm to a man's dignity.

For many of my dreams it was already too late. I'd never be a Hollywood star, I'd never duet with Dolly Parton and I'd never open the batting for England. But discovering France was still within my compass. Not for ever, but maybe for two or three long summer months, just enough to give me a semblance of a continental education and sharpen up my sartorial act. In any case, actors of a certain vintage are never short of 'down time' in which to enjoy such an adventure: with luck, my agent might not even notice I'd gone.

Curiously, Julia was in favour of my idea. For twenty years she'd been complaining of my Little England outlook, and had quietly longed for me to develop an appreciation of the finer things in life: i.e., her. Nothing radical, just a few simple changes would have made all the difference in her eyes – perhaps to take command of a menu and know which wine to order, to wear clothes beyond M&S weekend casuals, and to make love to her without it seeming like I was trying to fix the starter motor on an Austin Allegro. Perhaps to throw off some of that familiarity and dullness that starts to grow over us all at a certain point in life,

Déjà View

threatening to choke what we once were or might have been. Perhaps just my wanting to go offered up a certain unexpected, continental, reckless, free-thinking aspect that Julia warmed to.

And now I warmed to it too.

With the purchase of some maps and guides and the application of a soupçon of internet research, the trip slowly took shape. I began to see myself as the modern-day equivalent of those English gentlemen in centuries past who set out on the Grand Tour of the continent in search of cultural and spiritual self-improvement. What was good enough for the likes of Boswell, Byron, Wordsworth and Smollett could surely be of benefit to a middle-aged Simkins too.

I had decided to depart in classic fashion by boat (in my case, the Newhaven–Dieppe ferry), and once on the other side, to travel round as my nose took me: with nobody to answer to, no preconceptions and, crucially, no vocabulary. With an appropriate flourish, I promised to complete my odyssey by rendezvousing with Ju back at La Coupole. And this time, I'd order the meal myself: a prospect even she described as 'unmissable'.

On the eve of the trip Julia and I shared an early bird special at our local Strada and toasted my departure. Less than twenty-four hours from now I'd be sailing and there'd be no going back. But by now Julia's warmth had been frozen with dread. A rite of passage was all very well, she explained, but I was armed with virtually no contacts, no itinerary and only four words of French, and she was terrified of the scrapes I might get into. It wasn't too late to pull out. I had nothing to prove, and could stay at home and watch TV without feeling any sense of shame. She'd even let me watch the cricket on Sky if I wanted. Finally she confessed she was going to miss me.

But by now I'd got the bit between my teeth. I was looking

Detour de France

forward to pitting my wits against whatever *le continent* could throw at me. If all went well our next meal at La Coupole in a few months' time would taste sweet indeed.

'Well, for Christ's sake, take care,' she concluded. 'You're so parochial. One moment some bloke will be offering you a lift into the next town, and the next thing you know he'll be taking you up the Languedoc.'



Wrack and Rouen

THERE WERE HUNDREDS of ways the trip might have been cancelled at the last minute.

I might have lost the tickets, or been offered a job, or discovered my ten-year passport was out of date. There might be a wildcat strike on the Trans-Manche ferries, or at the very least my taxi to Victoria station might not have turned up – a hundred ways in which my own personal marathon might have ended by the starter gun of fate misfiring and shooting me in the thigh. But I'd thought of everything. It was the morning of my departure and all that remained was to fetch my suitcase from the top of the wardrobe and pack in time for my taxi at noon. And then Julia leaned into the lining and picked something out of the interior.

'What's this?' she said.

It was a particular voice she only uses when I'm in deep shit, the clear, crisp tone of a primary school teacher who has discovered a scurrilous message being written by the naughtiest boy in the class and is bent on reading it out in a cadence of withering contempt.

She was holding a cardboard label. The incriminating tag was off an exotic brand of brassiere, or possibly a pair of panties. 'Decadence,' she read out. 'Luxury lingerie for the discerning lover.' She looked from the label to me. 'Why is this in your suitcase?'

Detour de France

‘Um...’

‘For whom have you been buying ladies’ silk underwear?’

‘Er...’

‘Where is the garment now?’

Her voice made it plain there were only two possible answers. Either I must refer her to the buttocks of a woman with whom I’d been sharing secret trysts in a Travelodge at Scratchwood services, or I could lift the floorboards and show her the extensive catalogue of feminine garments for my secret life as Pauline.

I hadn’t the faintest idea how the label had got there, yet in the space of ten seconds, both the trip and my manhood were hanging by a thread.

For the next twenty minutes I blathered, stumbled and pontificated, while she increasingly resembled Inspector Morse interviewing a habitual criminal. By the time I replied, ‘I’ve never seen it before, you’ve got to believe me,’ I was even beginning to sound like one.

Eventually she lapsed into a tearful acquiescence, while I stared bleakly at my packing. She insisted I must go. I insisted I couldn’t. She insisted I should have thought of that before I started buying pants for some huge-arsed tart in Potters Bar. As precious minutes ticked by, I found myself conjuring up increasingly improbable scenarios to explain the discovery. Perhaps I’d gathered the label up off someone else’s present at Christmas? Perhaps it was off a costume in the wardrobe department during a recent filming gig. Perhaps –

A ring on the doorbell heralded the arrival of Zephyr Cars. Our goodbyes were short and brittle. I stared bleakly at her taut figure on the pavement from the back of the minicab as it pulled away.

Wrack and Rouen

Seamus, my driver for the journey, wanted to know if I was off on holiday and where I was going to. On hearing France, he waxed lyrical about a holiday he'd recently had there with his grandchildren, and assured me if the rest of the country was like EuroDisney I was in for a grand time. Yet I scarcely listened. All I could think of was my farewell to Julia. Trevor Howard must have felt like this while he waited for his train in *Brief Encounter*, but at least his reputation was still intact.

Thirty minutes later and just as we were pulling into the station, my mobile rang. 'It's me,' she said simply. 'I've remembered where it came from.'

'You what?'

'You're off the hook. I remembered where it came from. I borrowed the suitcase at Easter for Jenny's hen party...'

A faint recollection of her going on a boozy hen weekend to Birmingham with an old schoolfriend of hers swam into my mind.

'I think I bought her something with those labels on from Ann Summers. I've no idea if the firm was called Decadence but for now you're no longer a dead man.'

'So you're happy for me to go?'

'Give me a call when you arrive in Dieppe. Don't drink too much, lay off the crisps, don't talk to strange women, and remember your solemn promise not to smoke. Bye.'

Seamus was peering at me in his driving mirror. 'Good news, is it?' he asked.

'The best.'

'Ah that's grand,' he smiled, displaying a row of chipped teeth. 'Never depart on a quarrel is what my mam used to tell me. Will you be celebratin' now?'

'I will,' I replied, reaching into my jacket pocket. 'I'm going to have a small cigar...'