

A Detrouter in France

By Musafir

In the U.S. I am labeled as an Asian-Indian-American whereas in France I was simply treated as an American. Despite the stereotypical impression about the French haughtiness, I was treated very nicely everywhere in France. Contrary to the popular belief here in America, the French are not preoccupied with abhorrence towards the land of liberty and opportunity. Instead I found them minding their own business – commuting to work, striking against the economic reforms, wining, dining, romancing, making business deals and worrying about the environment.

I very quickly discovered that the myth about the French hating the English speaking crowd was just that, a myth. Everyone I talked to in France made an effort to speak in English. Imagine a Frenchman asking for direction in Française to someone in Detroit. Most probably, we would shrug him off by saying, “Sorry, no Espagnol.”

On a Wednesday afternoon, I visited a restaurant in Castres in south-western France with a population of 61,760. Since it was neither the time for lunch nor dinner, the restaurant was meagerly staffed. A teenage girl named Claudia was attending the shop. She did not know a word of English. “Bonjour ! Êtes-vous seul?” (Good Day! Are you alone?), she asked.

Thinking that she mistook me for someone coming from Seoul, South Korea, I replied, “No, I am from America.”

“Oui, nous servons le food Américain (Yes, we serve American food),” she answered. I misunderstood her as saying “We do not serve to Americans.” All of a sudden, I was reminded of the common notion in America about the French hating us. For a moment I thought of suing her for discrimination, but I did not know any lawyers in France. I gave up that idea altogether after realizing that in France suing for absurdity may not be common. I also feared being thrown in jail. After all, according to the French law, one is guilty until proven innocent. I did not want to mess with France. After all, I don’t do that to Texas, anyway.

Frustrated, I walked back to my hotel next door. There I saw Marie at the desk, who spoke fluent English. When I narrated my story to her, she laughed and said, “There must be a misunderstanding. I know Claudia. She is a nice girl, but she does not understand English because she did not go to school.”

Knowing that I was hungry, Marie left her desk and walked with me to the restaurant where she interpreted the menu and ordered food for me. Claudia, the waitress was very embarrassed and said, “Désolé.” I told her to write it

down on a piece of paper. Helene later translated that in English that meant “Sorry.”

I visited another small French town called Albi. A two hour drive from Barcelona, Spain, Albi is a picturesque quaint little town where the old meets the new. Most of the people I met there could speak English. Albi can be called an ancient city of bricks. The Old Bridge (*Pont Vieux*) built in 1305 is still in use today after almost a millennium of existence. Among the monuments of the town is the Sainte Ce`cile cathedral claimed to be the world’s largest brick construction. There are more churches in Albi (and all over France) than there are worshippers. I visited a few magnificent cathedrals and was tempted to play hide and seek with other tourists.

I found some contrasts between the eating habits of the French and the Americans. Americans are big eaters whereas the French are slow eaters. Americans gulp food because they are always on the go; the French relish food in small portions and take hours to finish their dinner. The Americans drink gallons of coffee while eating supper. The French, on the other hand, sip bottles of wine and wrap up with a shot of coffee. While in Albi, I went to a restaurant for dinner. “Monsieur ! Que aimez-vous boire?” (Sir, what would you like to drink?), asked the waitress.

“Coffee,” I replied.

“Ainsi, aucun dîner?” (So, no dinner?), she answered and brought me a shot of coffee with the check.

It was very gratifying to find that the people of France not only knew Detroit, they treated Detroit with respect and pronounced it perfectly (better than the Detroiters themselves). A few years ago, my pocket was picked in Paris. I immediately went to the nearest police station to report the incident. I was fuming with anger and complained to the police officer about the disgusting welcome accorded to me by the French criminals. After listening to me patiently (police in France are not fearsome), the police officer asked me, “Where in America do you live?”

“Detroit,” I answered.

“Êtes-vous de Detroit, la ville de moteur?” was his spontaneous response.

For a moment I thought that he was saying, “Look who is talking?”

The police officer repeated himself in English, “Is not Detroit the Motor City?”

I could feel his admiration for my home town, Detroit. I don’t think that many in America have that.