



Travelogue

Sweet-Sour Memories of Paris

Dr Jagdish Batra*, Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University Delhi-NCR

Life is a mixed bag of happy and not-so-happy experiences. So, when you look for a pleasant and enjoyable visit abroad, it need not necessarily be all fun and joy. My recent visit to Paris conforms to this philosophical notion. Fed on the school lessons about the cleanest city in the world and the romantic movies of yore like ‘An Evening in Paris’ and ‘Cancan’ filmed in France, one entered the French capital with a lot of excitement and expectation. Paris is still a leading capital city that sets the trend for many in the world in matters of fashion and gourmet.

Travelling from the airport the hotel in Paris, I could see the buildings – some lowly in ordinary neighbourhoods, others multi-storeyed following the same pattern of windows, balconies and a pot-shaped structure in the corner on the top – probably a water tank. That looked rather incongruous. I was here to attend an academic conference and on the sidelines, see a bit of France too. The academic paper presentations and discussions over, we set out to explore Paris. Most of the delegates had chosen to stay around the venue of the conference and I was lucky to have got a room in the economy hotel that doubled as a hostel for young people of all ages – junior school children included.

It was pleasant to have such a company in this sprawling set-up, but then there was a problem. I had been accommodated in a room on the second floor around a furlong away from the reception and there was no lift in that block. It was the month of June and as I dragged my heavy suitcase to the room, I discovered it was rather hot and there was no cooling arrangement in the room. While rest of the Europe is learning to cope with the summer heat (it’s no longer the cool Europe of yesteryears!), this economy-class hotel had air-conditioning only for heating purpose. I went up to the receptionist – a genial young man. He expressed regrets but then quickly thought of a solution. He went in and brought out a small table fan, and so I was to spend the days with the help of this fan!

Anyway, we were here to see the beauty of Paris. As we stepped out, we found the back alley in which this hotel was situated, was all dug up for some sort of maintenance. What kind of maintenance – I won’t ever know, for there was no worker. Only fibre glass boards cordoning off various pits with chalk markings on the road. All these days, there was not to be any further change in this scene. I learnt that the staff of the subway had been regularly going on strike for two days-a-week. This digging would be visible wherever we went in Paris or away from it in some other city/town!

The visit to the famed Eiffel Tower is a must for any tourist in Paris. It is surely a magnificent structure though personally speaking, I am not awed by it and the dunderhead that I am, find it only a bloated version of electric transmission tower! I won’t therefore give any statistics or engineer Gustave Eiffel’s profile, etc. What matters more is the real time human experience. Well, I had the company of a co-delegate at the conference, a professor from Tanzania. We took the metro train to the nearby station Bir Haikem. The noon-time heat was almost unbearable. To our ill-luck, the area near the tower was cordoned off at many places. Digging again! White dust flew around that landmark -- white because Paris is built on limestone rocks. “It should be white dust in France, as it is dark in India,” was the somewhat racist remark from a friend! The cruise on the Seine river with



the glimpses of other landmarks including Notre Dame, Palace de la Concorde, and the several statues on the corners of the bridges was the only saving grace that day.

The next day, we thought of moving out of Paris, because to compare a big city with a small city, though a suburb, has its own charm. A trip to the suburb of Rouen – the city of the legendary Joan of Arc who enthused the French forces to gain victory over the English saying that God had told her to fight to take back her home, which was then under English rule during the Hundred Years' War. Many quick military victories made her famous in 1430, though she was declared a heretic by the clergy and burnt at stake. We had some appalling details of the 18th century Paris from the guide travelling with us. Particularly nauseating was her description of toilet habits. People would throw shit from first floor houses on to the street below as the open drains flowed freely.

However, the scenery *en route* to Rouen was enchanting with rolling hills lining the broad road. At Rouen, saw an old cathedral built from 11th to 15th cent. Dedicated to Joan of Arc belonging to this city, the tower in which she was imprisoned and the square where she was burnt at stake are preserved here. A rather aged female guide, whose voice could be heard only to the first ring, bored us with unnecessary details spoken in somewhat corrupted English with a 'ha' inserted too often.

The small town of Rouen was again dug up at places. We ate a frugal lunch of what was advertised as 'kebab wrap' but had actually layers of thin meat sheets. What troubled us here was the lack of public conveniences. After much time spent walking up and down the roads and enquiring from the local people (few would understand English, of course) yielded nothing and we had to get relief only on a stopover at a highway motel on way back!

A pleasant experience was the visit to Giverny. How even the home of a celebrated artist can be turned into a tourist spot is something that we need to learn from Europe and America. The renowned painter Claude Monet's home at Giverny, around an hour drive from Paris was a treat. It's an ordinary home which has been kept intact with the old furniture, kitchen pots, drawing room carpet, sofa, etc. in place. Long queue of tourists waited for some half an hour to enter the house. The ticket was moderately priced at \$15 per person. Opposite it is a beautiful garden which was the favourite haunt of the painter. Landscaped the Japanese way, it has a great variety of flowery shrubs, plants and trees.

The third day was devoted to the famed palace of Versailles, which was the abode of French kings for around a hundred years prior to the French Revolution of 1789. Even though, here too, we had to wait in the queue in almost sweltering heat for more than an hour since the ticketing staff had gone on a flash strike! Of course, along with the subway staff, the airport staff too had been on strike sometime ago. I only prayed I could get my flight on time! The things seemed to be headed towards another French Revolution, a miniature of which was recently seen in the 'Yellow Shirts' protest. The 'strike culture', if it can be called so, seems to be deeply entrenched in France.

The palace is well kept and gives the feel of the French royalty of yore. The audio guide on the phone made it easy to mark which room or hall existed for what purpose. So, there were the bedrooms for various members of the royal family, the state consultation rooms where war strategies were discussed. A dining room was rather interesting as the king's chair and table faced some 12 seats placed in semi-circular manner at a distance. We learnt that these chairs were meant for the commoners who could see the king eat and would comment in whispers about how the taste of a dish would be or how the king would like it or not!



The driver of the bus by which we had arrived, was a young female who, on return journey, took the bus through narrow zig-zag lanes overlooking private houses. It could not be the normal route, I asked the bus conductor. “No,” he said, “its just to avoid toll tax, you see.” That reminded us of my country.

Another surprise was on the way, literally, when this water bottle seller had exhausted his stock and was going to replenish it. Right in the middle of the road running along the boundary of the palace, he lifted a main-hole cover, and to our horror, got a crate of bottles tucked under the cover. That was indeed nauseating enough though it afforded a unique photo opportunity which some of us did seize upon.

After this, we drove to the Montmartre church where after climbing so many stairs in the blazing afternoon sun were rewarded with a panoramic view of the city of Paris. As we returned from there, we were in for a shock again. A friend of ours, who had not accompanied us but had gone all alone surfing the bylanes had been trapped by some conmen and deprived of a hefty amount! We suggested filing a complaint with the police but then the local people were sceptical of the French police taking any action! That seemed somewhat common to what we find here, but the charm of Paris had waned by now.

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Bionote



Dr. Jagdish Batra, currently Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University, Delhi-NCR, is an author, literary critic and political commentator. Positions held earlier by him are: Professor and Dean (Languages), O.P. Jindal Global University, Principal and HOD (English) in different colleges. He has some four decades of teaching and research experience and has guided 50 research scholars. His areas of specialization are Indian English Fiction and Culture Studies on which he has presented papers at and chaired many international conferences in India,

Europe and South-East Asia. Recipient of several awards and a former Rotary Study Exchange Scholar to USA, Prof. Batra has published ten books, 70+ research papers and a large number of general articles.

Email: drjagdishbatra@gmail.com