

I Hate Paris in the Morning

By Ginger Henry-Kuenzel ©2003

New York to Munich via Paris...
and then back again

Okay, so here's the deal. You get off the plane in Paris, and since this is France, they still have it in for the Americans. Or maybe it's just me. I looked on the screen for my flight to Munich, but of course it wasn't listed. So (now remember, it's 2:30 am on my watch, though for the bright-eyed bushy tailed citizens of Paris who have already had their 6 cups of strong café and 3/4 of a pack of unfiltered French cigarettes, it's 8:30 am). I shuffled over to a gate agent and asked in English (I know they hate it when tourons try to speak French and can't do it properly) where the flight to Munich departs from.

He rolled his eyes up in his head as if I had asked something obvious like where the Eiffel Tower is located and replied snippily, "Terminal D."

Okay, that much I could understand even though he replied in French. However, when I looked at the signs, they all said "Terminal A, B, F, C, E." Seems as though they can't even alphabetize. And anyway, where's D?

I asked another friendly official-looking soul. She pointed toward the sign (where the D was missing). Since there was an arrow pointing down the stairs and she had pointed to that arrow, I thought I might as well follow that. Okay, so now I'm in a hallway with nothing in it except a locked door to the outside, with a guard standing guard. I asked him how to get to terminal D.

"Boos," (which means, in French, bus) he said, pointing to the street. The boos finally arrived and he then allowed me to go out the door. However, the sign on the boos said "Terminal A, B, F, C, E." Do you think we're establishing a pattern here?

I asked the guard, "What about terminal D?" He pointed at the boos and said again, "Boos," as if I hadn't understood him the first time.

"But does it go to Terminal D?" I asked. By now it was already later in the day, and I was more wide awake. After all, it was 2:45 am.

"Yes, Terminal B," he replied, giving me the old let's-roll-our-eyes-back-in-our-head routine which I was now beginning to understand was how the French communicate with Americans.

"No, Terminal D," I said.

"Terminal B," he said. Well, not wanting to reignite an Anglo-American war, I decided to just let it rest.

Climbing aboard the bus, I asked a fellow passenger if he knew whether or not the boos stopped at Terminal D. He was a seasoned explorer apparently, had already done the Ferdinand Magellan thing at this airport and knew his way around. And, most importantly, he didn't roll his eyes when I asked. Oh, I'm falling in love. After all, it is Paris, and this guy actually was treating me like a human being. Fulfilling those two requirements was enough for me.

He told me to get off at Terminal B (aha, so that's what the guard meant) and walk from there to terminal D. Strangely enough, terminal D is apparently not between C and E, but next to B.

Once I disembarked at terminal B, I was again clueless about where to go. I think by now you're probably gotten the big picture that I'm not a fan of French airports. It was getting really late in the day (3 am) and I was ready for my first cup of café. When in France... So I ordered a café au lait et un croissant, si vous plait, feeling very proud of my limited French vocabulary. And, oh my God, the waiter actually understood me and brought me what I had ordered. Fortified and with an overabundance of misplaced confidence, I set out again to discover Terminal D. After all, by now I had learned to pronounce Terminal with the accent on the last syllable and to say 'D' with a French accent. I was suddenly feeling quite at home in the Paris airport. Hey, life moves fast these days, so you have to take advantage of the one and half hours you spend in a country. As you may suspect, I did finally find Terminal D, but then it was another challenge to find out which gate the flight to Munich was going to depart from. It appeared to be one of life's unsolved mysteries until the very last minute. Nobody ever said the French were well organized. But at least it wasn't Italy. In fact, did you know that if you're ever in Italy and looking for a flight to Munich, you'll never find it? You'll have to look for the flight to Monaco, which is what the Italians call Munich. I'm not sure what they call the 'real' Monaco, and I wonder how many people have ended up in Munich when they thought they were going to the French Riviera.

So now it's on to Munich where I know from experience that there are more people working in that airport who speak English than there are at JFK airport. In the meantime, I am secretly praying that my brother-in-law's conviction that DELTA is actually an acronym for Don't Expect Luggage to Arrive will not hold true on this trip.

Unfortunately, the French have not yet mastered the art of maneuvering their planes up to the terminal, so passengers have to take a boos from the terminal out to the plane, which happened to be about a 15 minute ride away.

And now, as I sit on the plane, I have a question. I'm looking out the window, and I see a warning painted on the wing: "Ne pas marcher a l'exterieur de l'encadrement." Does this really warn passengers that they shouldn't march around on the exterior of the plane? I wouldn't dream of it.

Note: After my stay in Munich I of course had to return to New York via Paris. Here's the rundown on that trip...

I've now on my way back to gay Paree. I'm pretty certain that if the French tourist office had any idea of the connotation of that phrase, the virile French monsieurs would be outraged. Fortunately, however, since Parisians are extremely proud of the fact that they don't speak or understand one word of English, the term "gay Paree" remains.

I cannot, of course, depart Munich without a brief commentary on Germany. First the positive stuff. The subway system is a dream come true. Even though they no longer run on time (a few years ago, you could literally set your watch by the comings and goings of the trains and subways), they do have an electronic screen in the subway stations that lists all the subways which are going to arrive within the next 10 minutes (which means a list of about 10 subways), what time they are supposed to arrive and how many minutes delay they have. And I mean to tell you that if the sign says that the subway scheduled for 7:43 will arrive 3 minutes late, then you can be absolutely certain that it will arrive at 7:46, not a minute later. It's amazing. Last week, when I was waiting with our customers for our tour bus to pick us up at the hotel, one of our guests grew worried that we wouldn't have enough time for the tour since the bus was not yet there. I looked at my watch. "But it's only 8:58," I said. "I'm sure he'll be here in a minute – excuse me, I mean 2 minutes." And promptly at 9 am the bus pulled up, not a minute earlier, and not a minute later.

It's ever so hard to leave the luxury of my room at Munich's Four Seasons Hotel. How will I ever cope with my closet-sized apartment in New York? Actually, I did realize that I'm apparently not really cut out to be a guest at the Four Seasons. For instance, this morning when I came downstairs with all my luggage and got off the elevator, I realized that I was going to have to go down five steps to get to the reception desk to check out. Now, you might ask, why would a hotel put steps between the elevator and the reception desk? Because it looks elegant. They're marble. Obviously, most people leave their luggage in their room and let the porter bring it down. But moi here decided to drag it all down to the lobby herself. I imagined them whispering discreetly behind hands held up to their mouths, "Oh my God. She's actually carrying her own luggage." And, since my days of luxury were abruptly ending, there was also no car service waiting to whisk me away to the airport. Which meant I had to drag my own luggage to the subway station and get it down to the subterranean tracks.

So, now on the plane, I'm listening to the stewardess telling us that "Smoking in the toilets is not allowed." Not a pretty picture, so I trust that everyone will obey her command. The Europeans are very explicit in their wording. Whereas we say "Ladies Room" or "Rest Room" or "Wash Room", they tell it like it is. They are "going to the toilet" and if you happen to ask where the "bathroom" is in someone's home, they will immediately bring out a bath towel, assuming that you want to take a bath. (In many homes, the 'bath' room is separate from the 'toilet' room). And speaking of bathrooms, the Germans are probably one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world. And yet they haven't managed to figure out how to design a shower door so that the water doesn't spray all over the floor. For some reason, they feel that half a door (i.e. half the length of the tub) is plenty. Of course, they do give you plenty of towels and bathmats to wipe up all the puddles on the floor, so I assume that I was not the only one who had problems keeping all the water *inside* the tub.

Europeans most definitely have a different attitude toward sexuality than we prudish Americans do. In my hotel room in Nuremberg, there was a card on the nightstand showing a man and a woman ... I won't go into detail, but suffice it to say that the card was to let you know that for a mere 25 euros, you could select channel 13 and watch a porno flick. And this was a Sheraton. Do you think they remove those cards when families with kids check in? I doubt it.

Now, on the plane, I'm perusing the International Herald Tribune. My eye is drawn to a picture on the front page. It's an advertising poster with a photo of the backside of a Daisy May type of woman, looking at the camera over her shoulder, and pulling down her short shorts to reveal her thong, or as the article informs us this is called in France – her string. Across the poster are the words (in French). "I'm a virgin. Are you?" The headline is "Parisians' Knickers in a Knot". Reading the article, I learned that the Paris department store Galeries Lafayette is opening a new 28,000 square foot lingerie shop and, to celebrate, is offering half-hour striptease courses this Saturday so that "women can familiarize themselves with the art of revealing their new lingerie." Among the offerings in the new lingerie department: a string that comes in a see-through plastic ball that can be worn around one's neck. This would be about the only way you would ever get *me* to wear a string, I thought to myself.

Of course the feminists are protesting, asking "Is this a store I can feel comfortable shopping in with my grandmother?" Personally, I'm asking, "Is this a store I can feel comfortable shopping in... period?" Paul Delaoutre, President of Galeries Lafayette had a quick response. "Seduction is important to our clientele. Your American stores are often so banal." I say – let's hear it for banality. And let's hope that this is one fashion trend that Macy's doesn't pick up on.

The article goes on to give us the all-important statistics. French females last year spent 18 percent of their clothing budget on lingerie. And a recent poll concluded that 87 percent of French men and women believe that lingerie is – and always was – an important part of life. I apparently don't have my priorities straight since lingerie would just never make my top 20 list. I also learned more details about the wording on the poster – "I'm a virgin. Are you?" The company defends its ad, pointing out that the French word "vierge" also means Virgo, and the poster is referring to the astrological sign. Yeah, right. And Madonna was no doubt referring to cotton fabric with her hit song "Material Girl."