

VIVE LA FRANCE!
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The French, they say—if you listen to most tourists back from a visit to Paris—are rude, unpleasant, anti-American and out to take you for all they can get. They don't like tourists. Well, perhaps, but without even going abroad, you can get the same treatment in New York City.

Nevertheless, we spent the first two weeks of November touring Southern France and found the roads uncrowded, the countryside beautiful and the weather (fortunately) crisp and sunshiny. We even experienced that perverse natural phenomenon, *Le Mistral*—the cold, blustery wind out of the northeast that sweeps down the Rhone Valley toward the Mediterranean for one, three, six, nine or twelve days at a time, according to its whim. We are also happy to report that even in the larger cities like Cannes, Nice, Arles and Avignon, the French were not only most gracious and pleasant, but extraordinarily helpful.

When we drove into Nimes, "*La Rome Française*," to search out its ancient ruins, we parked the car on a small, shaded street just above the Gardens of the Fountain. On getting out, we carefully locked all the doors and then discovered that the only car key was still hanging in the ignition switch.

This is always a frustrating and exasperating experience at best, but in a foreign country and faced with the usual language barrier, it becomes more so. Borderline panic soon sets in. Wives, particularly, once the initial hysteria subsides, tend to become accusatory, antagonistic and belligerent. They will insist that you do something.

As it turned out, the street was deserted except for a few empty, parked cars and one small florist van in the process of making a delivery. So, hesitantly, and in halting high school French, we approached the deliveryman. "*Pardon, monsieur. Nous avons fermé les portes de l'automobile, et le clef. . .*"

He nodded. "*Ça va. Dans l'interieur.*" Just as if he knew that all touring Americans always lock keys in cars.

He checked the doors and peered into the windows to confirm the predicament, then, after pondering a while, spotted an old gendarme strolling leisurely through the open square below us. "We will go to the gendarme with our problem," he said (in French) and indicated that we should follow.

Feeling very helpless and foolish, we waited while the deliveryman explained at length to the ancient gendarme the latest American folly and all that had transpired. We were told to wait, that he would be back in ten or fifteen minutes; and with that the old one took off, still at a leisurely walk, across the open square, past the fountains and gardens, and disappeared uphill into some trees toward the streets above the park. The friendly delivery man went on about his business of delivering potted plants, and we used

the time first, to visit the nearby ruins of Diana's Temple, and then to seek out the nearest public toilette. (These are an institution in all French cities, and there are graded charges according to the function relieved.)

Fifteen minutes later we were back at the car. The old gendarme was there, along with four younger men and the delivery van man. By this time, too, six more spectators had assembled and several neighbors in apartments across the street were peering from their balconies.

One of the men, dark complexioned and handsome, and apparently an expert in such affairs, had brought his tools with him. He jimmed open the door just a trifle, carefully padding the metal so as not to chip the paint, inserted a long, stout wire, looped at the end and bent to just the right angle, through the rubber insulation between door and frame, maneuvered it deftly down onto the lock button, pulled up, and *Voila!* It took about thirty seconds.

The spectators cheered. The old gendarme grinned. He nudged us slyly in the ribs, winked, and, pointing to the manipulator, said, "Alphonse Capone!"

We expressed our gratitude several times and, in addition, tried to pay for the services rendered or at least tip someone. No one would accept a sou. It was their pleasure.

Vive la France!

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