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Service non compris: a tale of two cities

Success has many fathers, so, as British Cycling's best road cyclists hunted down a second consecutive maillot jaune in the Tour de France, Mick Owen offered to take a paternity test and joined the throng of Brits going abroad.

The London terminus of the Eurostar cross-channel rail link tells you as much as you want to know about the good people of the south east of England: they like a queue, they are punctiliously polite and their worst nightmare seems to be a WH Smith's with no copies of the London Times to purvey. Their newspapers, their manners and their patrician accents, honed in grammar and public schools in what they doubtless still conceive of as the Home Counties, are all part of a carapace designed to protect and distance the travelling middle class as they head towards France, where, as any schoolboy knows, the waiters are rude, everyone has BO and the toilets are execrable.

According to Wikipedia, Saint Pancras was a Roman martyr whose name, rather confusingly, is Greek and means "the one that holds everything". The station that carries his name certainly holds a great many things behind the glass walls of its arcade of shops but at 6.30 am on a sunny Saturday in July their various cornucopia are off limits to the travelling public as they "open at seven, mate" and, ever careful of the rules, we must be checked in by then for our departure at 0735 hours; with "we" being every English man, woman and child joining the exodus to Paris to see Chris Froome add a second Tour de France win to Team Sky's palmares.

At least that is the assumption. With Froome's victory imminent, the fact that it is the 100th Tour and Mark Cavendish pursuing he outside chance of a fifth consecutive final stage win, the shuffling throng could be travelling en masse to witness and celebrate any or all of the above but appearances suggest otherwise. Are the two octogenarians in the charge of their pensioner son really going to bag a metre of barrier on the Place de la Concorde at 9am the following morning? Is the woman with a copy of *The Lady* in her arms actually going to join her Scandinavian cousin at Norwegian Corner? And if this is a British sporting crusade, where is the lager and the loutish behaviour?

The truth – and it is a truth which becomes ever more apparent as the weekend progresses – is that the Tour de France, while very important to some people, hardly wrinkles the forehead of La Grande Dame of world cities. Paris swallows the Tour and its folderol whole and barely belches. That a Jewish man from Toronto, a backpacking Australian and a rather nice couple from Godalming all professed ignorance of le grand boucle at one stop or another on our trip also puts into perspective the fetid excitement prevalent in some quarters. Parisians do sang froid like Scotsmen do fiscal prudence but it is still a surprise to find nary a poster nor a billboard mentioning, let alone reveling in, cycling's equivalent of a new Pope. Le Tour is big news; just not round here.

One reason for this, of course, could be that the French are not doing so well. Since the Festina scandal, which saw a leading French team thrown out of the 1998 Tour and almost all its riders arrested on drugs charges, French riders and teams have failed to make the impact to which they had become accustomed. France has done much to clean

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up the sport, which is one reason why cynical riders now live and train in Spain, but cannot seem to grow a champion. In this the 100th running of the ridiculously demanding race the French have only recorded one stage win and seen would-be polka dot jersey winner Pierre Rolland – having the prize for best climber – a prize much prized by the French – ripped from his shoulders, metaphorically, on the last competitive stage. Sports newspaper L'Equipe mourned the state of French cycling but with the headline "Sky, le monster froid" tried to imply that at least their countrymen had not sold their collective soul to the gods of efficiency and order as is the case with the British model.

Another explanation for the lack of interest shown in the two-wheeled hoopla could well be that, as a nation, the French have other things on their mind. On the Monday after the Sunday before, as the hordes of English spectators were making their way back north, Le Figaro, a far more august organ than L'Equipe, reported violence in one of the capital's banlieues. The riots, which went on for two nights, were sparked by a police identity check of a veiled Muslim woman and were accompanied by accusations of "heavy-handedness" and "provocation" by the police and of Islamophobia from government.

In the rather more tranquil arrondissement of Bastille, where your correspondent was billeted, another form of segregation was evident with benches, shop doorways and simple stretches of pavement being used by what we have learned to call "rough sleepers". Doubtless all the world's big cities, bar those scoured by totalitarian states or the Olympic movement, have people sleeping on their streets but in Paris there are whole families dossing down together. One early-morning stroll in search of a patisserie saw office workers stepping round an Asian woman and her small child sleeping as soundly as if sharing a double bed somewhere far quieter, cleaner and safer. Other than the two drunk or drugged teenagers slumped against a telephone box, there were no white faces among the ranks of the down and outs.

Paris is a multicultural city, made so by a nation that went toe to toe with Great Britain around the globe with empires as the prize. Being on the European mainland and without La Manche to guard them, and also being a more liberal and egalitarian society, the French population is far more racially mixed than our own but no less fractured or fractious. Given the temperature – both political and climatic – it is surprising that the bike race so many had gone to see managed to remain unaffected. With only an easily vaulted metal fence between crowds and cyclists, and most often not even that, the race must surely offer a point of protest to match Emily Davison's when she tried to pin her suffragette ribbon to the king's racehorse but this year only Mark Cavendish suffered the indignity of direct action and that was over an esoteric difference of opinion relating to the rules of the sprint finish.

Perhaps, contrary to the presumed opinion of the British man on the Eurostar train, the French are just too mannerly to spoil an event that means and has meant so much to so many. Certainly the three different people who gave up their seats on the Metro (an underground system light years cleaner and more pleasant to use than its London equivalent) to one or other of our ageing and demonstrably tiring party over the weekend showed a courtesy and consideration notable by its absence in our own fair land.

Given that the only poor service received throughout our trip was at the Bree Louise,,a public house just outside Euston Station which also recorded the least salubrious toilet we visited, perhaps it is time to reconsider our collective view of the French in general and Parisians in particular. This correspondent will definitely be submitting a request to revisit the French capital again, just to be sure.

Mick Owen is the managing editor of *The Leisure Review* and an enthusiastic observer, if determinedly reluctant rider of, bikes. Consequently he will be leading one of the shorter rides during The Leisure Review's 2014 Festival of the Bike that will be welcoming the return of the Tour de France to the UK.

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