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France**

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France



Shunned
by Americans,
it's still the center
of the civilized world.

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Politics are fleeting, but France is forever

While Americans stay away, they're missing the center of romance, cuisine and culture

BY TERRY BOYD
Stars and Stripes

I've been to the middle of nowhere. At least I think I have.

The middle of nowhere is everywhere — less a place than an uneasy sensation that you've gone too far to ever make it back to indoor plumbing and refrigerated beer.

It's far easier to pinpoint the center of the civilized world.

Paris.
Not to sound like author Dan Brown, but the locus of Western civilization is the sculpture gardens of the Louvre, some theoretical point between the lower ground floor of the Richelieu Wing, and the lower ground floor of the Denon Wing.

Here in this revived palace — where the king was kicked out and the people invited in — is assembled the works of sculptors who magically captured in stone the most human themes of love, lust, wisdom, piety, loyalty, betrayal, slavery, brute force and, ultimately, the triumph of law and justice.

Perfectly spaced and naturally lit through a glass ceiling in the world's most civilized building, the effect is euphoric. Surrounding the sculpture gardens are

man's most important works from the first sparks of civilization in Mesopotamia to the "Mona Lisa." And surrounding the Louvre is a city that contains, by my count, 9,63 extraordinary experiences per block, from the Monets at the Musée Marmottan to tea at the Paris Mosque to the hookers along Saint-Denis.

And Paris is just the beginning. France must have 20 intriguing cities, from Strasbourg on the east to Brest on the west, not to mention Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc, and its lowest moral standards, in Saint Tropez.



Terry Boyd

Americans are ignoring it all. Across France, the number of American tourists has dropped about 30 percent between 2003, the start of the Iraq war, and 2004, according to French Tourism Ministry figures.

Jeanne Mauban and her husband, Phillippe, own Ferme de Vert Sainte-Père, a working horse farm and gîte about 45 minutes northeast of Paris. Before Sept. 11, 2001, Americans made up at least 20 percent of her guests, Jeanne told me this spring. Now, she gets hardly any Americans, though her guest book in her elegant common room is filled with raves from English, Belgian, French, Swiss and even Japanese guests.

Americans also have gone missing 300 miles south in the Franche-Comté region, near the border with Germany and Switzerland.

In a typical year, she might host 30 to 50 Americans, said Astrid Elbert, who runs Les Montanjus, a bed-and-breakfast on a slope above the little town of Etuefont.

"This year, not one!" she said in a late September phone call.

A hundred miles away at his chateau in Villersexel, Baron Jean-Pierre Potet wonders what's going on: "Would we let these little oranges end 230 years of friendship?"

Is it politics? *Qui peut dire?* Certainly the French cannot say. After all, it's tough for them to ask Americans why they're not coming if there aren't any around. The "Freedom Fries" xenophobia and the pouring of good Bordeaux into the gutters before the war in Iraq didn't help.

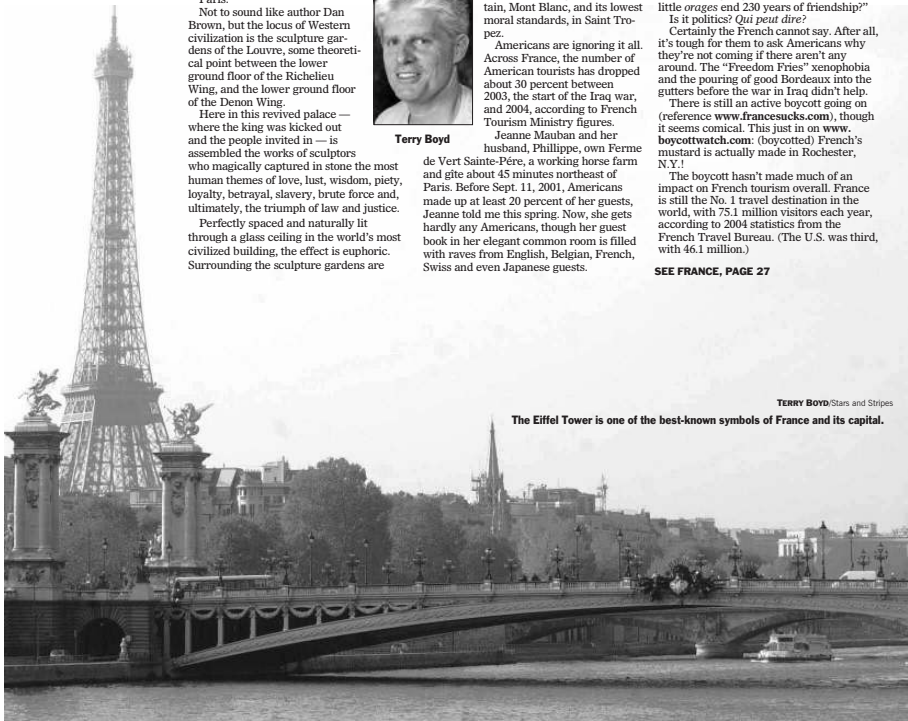
There is still an active boycott going on (reference www.francesucks.com), though it seems comical. This just in on www.boycottwatch.com: (boycotted) French's mustard is actually made in Rochester, N.Y.

The boycott hasn't made much of an impact on French tourism overall. France is still the No. 1 travel destination in the world, with 75.1 million visitors each year, according to 2004 statistics from the French Travel Bureau. (The U.S. was third, with 46.1 million.)

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TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes

The Eiffel Tower is one of the best-known symbols of France and its capital.





PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes

At dusk, an illuminated Eiffel Tower shines like a beacon in Paris. More than 5 million people have visited the monument since the beginning of the year.

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You can still occasionally pick out Americans in the lines for the elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower, and at Disneyland Resort Paris. But since the war in Iraq started in March 2003, Americans have gone from a significant portion of visitors in France to being so rare they're almost a novelty outside Disneyland.

In France last year, Americans made up one of the smallest percentages of visitors, eighth on the list of nationalities at only 3.5 percent. The ones who do visit seem intent on making up for the rest, with Americans accounting for a 12.6 percent of French tourism revenue, the second largest percentage behind Brits.

Politics don't change the fact that France is the world's ultra-civilizing experience. Fashion starts on the streets of Paris' chic arrondissements, then ripples out to Milan, New York and Tokyo. So does cuisine. As good as they are, California's vineyards never quite match the magnificence of Petrus, Chateau Margaux or Chateau Neuf des Papes. For what you'd pay for a night at the Red Roof Inn with a view of the interstate, you can stay at a real castle or a chateau nearly anywhere in France, from the Loire Valley to the Pyrenees.

Red Staters can't wait to tell me "the French were mean to me" stories. Pierre at the bistro corrected my high school French. Madam at the boutique made fun of my sweat pants. Thierry, the sommelier, tried to intimidate me when I ordered wine.

It happens, but I'm always ready with an anecdote antidote:

The Parisians in the Metro who rushed to help us with our luggage and our then-20-month-old daughter, Lucy. The people who offered to give up their seats



It sometimes seems that too much visual stimulation makes it impossible to relax in Paris, but this young man proves it's possible. He grabbed a nap in the Tuilleries garden outside the Louvre during a rare sunny February day. The question is, does the surreal advertising campaign/art display from the Christian Lacroix haute couture studio intrude into his dreams?

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PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes

For the cost of a stay at the Red Roof Inn, you can get a cavernous room at a real chateau in Villersexel, near Mulhouse. Here, Dr. Kris Bryant, an American pediatrician and epidemiologist, shares a moment with her son, Jefferson.



A chateau that dated to the time of Louis XIV used to be at this exact location in Villersexel. It burned in the 19th century, but Baron Jean-Pierre Potet's grandfather built a scale replica of the original. The eccentric Potet operated it as a bed-and-breakfast.



Above: The cafes and bistros of France are giving way to chain restaurants. But in Belfort, a small town near the borders with France and Switzerland, the old ways are still in vogue. Here, two gentlemen seem introspective as they warm up with espressos on a cold winter afternoon.



At right: The towering turrets of Carcassonne date to medieval times. But what's inside is modern France's most touristy trap, attracting about 3 million people each year.

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to my wife and 2-year-old daughter, Lale, as we rode the bus from the Eiffel Tower to Ile de St. Louis. The man who walked blocks to make certain we found our way through Marais. The guy at the little restaurant along a river near Besançon who served the best steaks and table wine, and who told us proudly about all his American friends who had somehow stumbled on his little place. They owner of the fabulous cave in Bassanel who spilled Minervinos on my wife and friend Kris Bryant because they were his giddy from the wine.

The Pasquier family in Paris, who made our stay a family affair, with good food, wine and conversation late into the night, then worked up elaborate itineraries. Metro instructions and suggestions the next morning for each day's trip into the city.

Astrid and Daniel Elbert, who presented my daughters with gifts on Easter morning.

Then there is the eccentric Baron Jean-Pierre Potet, who acted like he'd

forgotten about my fax — written in my best French — reserving rooms at his chateau near Meaux two years ago. When he told us rather brusquely that he was booked up, I waved a copy of the fax and said, in colloquial French, "Yo, dude, you're kidding, right?"

Intrigued by a French-speaking American, he took to calling me "The Big Spy," and my friend Oscar Bryant III, "the Little Spy." He gave our families rooms the size of large apartments, then took us on the grand tour of his chateau the next day, complete with a peek at his family treasures and a narrative about his uncle in the Resistance who died fighting the Nazis.

There are other places that are contenders for the center of the civilized world. Rome, though it has too many men wearing "wife beaters" for my tastes. Luxembourg, a postage-stamp of a nation alternating with Switzerland for the title of "world's highest per-capita income," has perfectly harnessed capitalism to provide comfortable lives for even the humblest of its 400,000 people. But it is a "fussy little country," as my wife, Cheryl, says: a groomed poodle of a place, where too few men wear wife beaters.

The Scandinavian countries are beacons of civility in an increasingly anarchic world, but lack *joie de vivre*. You could make a pitch for Britain. But with its rigid class structure topped by queens, dukes and viscounts and other residue of empire, I say, "Non, merci."

I will concede this much: It's true that because of its contrary politics, no country tries the patience of those who love it more than France. The irony is that Jacques Chirac, Europe's most conservative leader, detests President Bush, who is allied with Tony Blair, Europe's most liberal.

As for French haters, what's really motivating them is a burning conviction there's nothing worth seeing outside the United States. Believe it or not, there are a lot of Europeans, even French, who'd agree that the States are tops. But no one ever enriched his life by making his world smaller. And they've conveniently forgotten how France has improved almost everything good about America, from the food we eat to the English we speak.

Am I a snob and a Francophile? No, worse. A romantic. A traveler whose view is closer to cinematic fantasy than naked reality; my memories of France selective, and heavily edited.

But you know what? I don't remember Rick ever telling Elsa, "We'll always have Cleveland."

E-mail Terry Boyd at: boyd@mail.estrp.es.osd.mil.