



## TOURIST TRAP

BY DAVID LOWE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that most English tourists, though eager to come and admire the beauty of France, are full of apprehension and trepidation about meeting the French. We are taught from a very early age that the French are rude (*mal élevé*). And not just rude, but impolite, disagreeable, ill-mannered, disrespectful, temperamental, arrogant, inconsiderate, petulant... especially towards English-speaking tourists.

For example, take the “Mr. Men” characters. We have Mr. Happy, Mr. Tickle, Mr. Chatterbox, Mr. Silly... and Mr. Rude. Well, in the English version of the “Monsieur Bonhomme” series, Mr. Rude has a French accent, associating rudeness with Frenchness in the minds of children. And Mr. Rude is not just discourteous, he’s physically misanthropic. He burps, farts, retches and is quite odious in every possible way and, as with the French, this sort of behaviour doesn’t make him happy. I actually think that Mr. Rude is even unhappier than Mr. Miserable.

I met a Mr. Rude the other day, when I was trying to get to the La Gaité Lyrique for an exhibition. Lost and late, I saw this man wearing a beret walking by. It seemed a safe bet to ask him the way. “*Excusez-moi. Je cherche La Gaité Lyrique,*” I said. The man gave me a withering look that combined hostility with infinite sadness. He then just walked on saying to himself, “*La Gaité, non, non.*”

On another occasion, I encountered a family of confused English tourists at the ticket machine of an underground car park, asking themselves how on earth they could get the machine to give them three metro tickets to take them to the Eiffel Tower. I’m sure a Mr. Rude had got them into this mess. They thought they were in the metro, but were, in fact, in an underground car park. It’s true that both are under the ground and both smell of a mixture of urine and air freshener. The anodyne loop of classical music, that aural Air Wick, must have confirmed them in

their mistake. Rapidly descending into panic because of the incomprehensibility of the machine’s demands (the only word they understood was “ticket”), they looked towards me for help. I’d just given a kick to the elevator door that had refused to open and they’d heard me exclaiming a good old Anglo-Saxon swear word. The sight of a hooligan vandalizing a door in a public place in English must have reassured them. It made them feel at home.

Should I help them, I asked myself? I’ve been living long enough in France to feel the temptation to send them to some lower level of the car park, warning them that the trains are not very frequent and that they shouldn’t be surprised to find a lot of cars parked on the platforms the French are extremely undisciplined. The metro rails reveal themselves as the train approaches – French technology. They wouldn’t meet many other travellers, as today was one of the many French public holidays. All credible to an Englishman.

I could have given them further tourist hints like trying the famous echo in the Bibliothèque Nationale reading room, or telling them that it’s traditional when boarding a bus in France to shake hands with every one of the passengers, or that spitting in France is socially acceptable and, in particular, spitting on Napoleon’s tomb is considered to bring good luck.

But overcome with pity – the little boy looked like a miniature Wayne Rooney, the father looked like a life-sized Wayne Rooney and the mother was a mixture of Amy Winehouse and the Queen – I gave them the directions to the nearest metro station. I did detect a note of mistrust however – they must have thought that an Englishman who speaks French can’t be that “reliable”, and they actually went the opposite way to the way I indicated.

They most probably spent the rest of the day wandering around the Porte de Versailles, wondering why the Chateau looked nothing like the photograph in their guide book.