

### **Extract from Bill Bryson's 'Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe'**

In the morning I got up early and went for a long walk through the sleeping streets. I love to watch cities wake up, and Paris wakes up more abruptly, more startlingly, than any place I know. One minute you have the city to yourself: it's just you and a guy delivering crates of bread, and a couple of droning street-cleaning machines. (It might be worth noting here that Paris spends £58 a year a head on street-cleaning compared with £17 a head in London, which explains why Paris gleams and London is a toilet). Then all at once it's frantic: cars and buses swishing past in sudden abundance, cafés and kiosks opening, people flying out of Metro stations like flocks of startled birds, movement everywhere, thousands and thousands of pairs of hurrying legs.

By half-past eight Paris is a terrible place for walking. There's too much traffic. A blue haze of uncombusted diesel hangs over every boulevard. I know Baron Haussmann made Paris a grand place to look at, but the man had no concept of traffic flow. At the Arc de Triomphe alone thirteen roads come together. Can you imagine that? I mean to say, here you have a city with the world's most pathologically aggressive drivers – drivers who in other circumstances would be given injections of thiorazine from syringes the size of bicycle pumps and confined to their beds with leather straps – and you give them an open space where they can all try to go in any of thirteen directions at once. Is that asking for trouble or what?

It's interesting to note that the French have had this reputation for bad driving since long before the invention of the internal combustion engine. Even in the eighteenth century British travellers to Paris were remarking on what lunatic drivers the French were, on 'the astonishing speed with which the carriages and people moved through the streets... It was not an uncommon sight to see a child run over and probably killed.' I quote from *The Grand Tour* by Christopher Hibbert, a book whose great virtue is in pointing out that the peoples of Europe have for at least 300 years been living up to their stereotypes. As long ago as the sixteenth century, travellers were describing the Italians as voluble, unreliable and hopelessly corrupt, the Germans as gluttonous, the Swiss as irritatingly officious and tidy, the French as well, insufferably French.

You also constantly keep coming up against these monumental squares and open spaces that are all but impossible to cross on foot. My wife and I went to Paris on our honeymoon and foolishly tried to cross the Place de la Concorde without first leaving our names at the embassy.

Somehow she managed to get to the obelisk in the centre, but I was stranded in the midst of a circus maximus of killer automobiles, waving weakly to my dear spouse of two days and whimpering softly while hundreds and hundreds of little buff-coloured Renaults were bearing down on me with their drivers all wearing expressions like Jack Nicholson in *Batman*. It still happens now. At the Place de la Bastille, a vast open space dominated on its north-eastern side by a glossy new structure that I supposed to be the Paris branch of the Bradford and Bingley Building Society but which proved upon closer inspection to be the new Paris opera house, I spent three-quarters of an hour trying to get from the Rue de Lyon to the Rue de St. Antoine. The problem is that the pedestrian-crossing lights have been

designed with the clear purpose of leaving the foreign visitor confused, humiliated and, if all goes to plan, dead.

This is what happens: you arrive at a square to find all the traffic stopped, but the pedestrian light is red and you know that if you venture so much as a foot off the kerb all the cars will surge forward and turn you into a gooey crêpe. So you wait. After a minute, a blind person comes along and crosses the great cobbled plain without hesitating. Then a ninety-year old lady in a motorized wheelchair trundles past and wobbles across the cobbles to the other side of the square a quarter of a mile away.