

## PARISIAN BUS DRIVER

by James Collins

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In 1981, my company sent me to Paris to visit with customers. The marketing manager I was supposed to meet with was robbed in Naples, Italy, and all of his papers had been stolen. Since he was a British citizen, he was not allowed back into Paris until he got through many bureaucratic procedures, which the French love.

Once I learned about his predicament, I decided to take advantage of being in Paris and do some sightseeing. First, I got a map. Then I talked to the concierge at the hotel. I planned to stay with the buses, as I would get a much better view of the city rather than traveling on their subway. I then got a copy of the bus lines, which I was able to overlap on the map, and learned how to travel around the city. For the first few hours, I was doing quite well and had a very enjoyable time. I managed to take many pictures and started to feel comfortable about the city

According to my map if I went to Luxembourg square I could transfer to a bus which would take me back to the banks of the Seine near the 'Ile de Cite' and Notre Dame. From there I could walk up the Champs Elysées and observe all the shops. I was on a bus coming from Napoleon's tomb heading towards Luxembourg square and chatted with the bus driver. My French is atrocious. However, he was very helpful and by using the map and writing words on a pad, we were able to communicate. He indicated I should take the 32 bus and he handed me a transfer and told me that I did not have to pay money, if I use the transfer. We got to Luxembourg square which is a massive circle with about 10 bus lines connecting at this interchange. The bus driver got out of the bus, pointed across to a series of buses, and indicated that the bus I wanted stopped there. I thanked him and started across the square.

I got to the location where the bus pulled in and viewed the sign that indicated this was where the 32 bus started. I waited patiently. A few other potential riders arrived and the bus pulled up. I let everyone on first because I wanted to speak with the driver and knowing my French was so poor communication could be a problem. I first introduced myself as an American in my broken French. I immediately noticed the bus driver tense up and I could tell he did not like me. If you grow up as a kid on the streets in the Bronx, you immediately learn how to read people and to know when they are not a friend. I had no idea why he was antagonistic as we never met before but all I wanted was some information. In my halting French, I gave him three locations indicating that was where I wanted to go.

"Ile de Cite?"

He responded with a shrug and threw his hands up on either side at shoulder level indicating he did not know anything about it.

"La Seine?"

Again the Parisian shrug.

"Notre Dame?"

Again, the Parisian shrug and he pointed to the door as if I should leave. I could read maps. I knew where I was, and I knew where I wanted to go. The very kind previous driver had indicated this was the correct bus. He was a friend and this one was not. I shook my head no! Then I walked to the back of the bus.

The bus pulled out, wound through various sections of Paris, which were primarily residential. I shot pictures out the window. After about 15 minutes, I recognize the Sorbonne,

which I had visited earlier that day. I knew where I was and I knew I was close to my destination. Just ahead were the three landmarks that I had asked him about at the beginning of the trip. He shrugged indicating he did not know anything about them or where they were. I was not about to let him get off this easy.

As we pulled up on the bridge over the Seine, I walked up to the front of the bus to the driver. The passengers on the bus started muttering as I pushed by. I later learned that the Paris bus rules are such that you get on at the front and you must get off at the back. I did not know about this rule and would not have followed it anyway. I was pissed.

The bus driver started with some command in French, which I assumed indicated I should go to the back. I was on a mission and I had to be up front. In my broken French and in a loud voice I took front stage.

“Regarde La seine!” As I pointed to the river to my right and below me. The bus went quiet.

“Regarde Ile de Cite!” Again, I added the gestures and raised the level of my voice. When a 6’2” American weighing over 200 pounds fills the front of a bus like a football full back and starts raising his voice people back off.

“Regarde Notre Dame!” This time I pointed up out the window at the edifice on my right. The bus driver was busy looking for the Gendarmes.

I ended my soliloquy with one of the few words I thought I knew in French, “ Stupido!” and I finished my gestures by pointing directly at the bus driver. I then departed the bus and started on my way back to my hotel.

Later that night I spoke to the concierge and related my tale of the nasty French bus driver. I told him I knew this person disliked me but I could not figure why.

“He’s a communist and he knew you were an American. He wanted to use his displeasure to make things difficult for you.”

“How do you know he is a communist?”

“In Paris almost all the bus drivers and train conductors are communists and belong to a communist union. If you look out the window, you will see that all of the buildings in Paris are only about four stories high. In the distance, you will see some 16 to 20--story buildings in a cluster. The communist unions own these and they have all their people living there. All the bus drivers reside in those facilities.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, the Communist Party was in disarray in all the countries of Europe. When my wife and I went back to France and stayed in Paris in 2001, we you another one of the encountered no problems with the bus drivers or the train drivers. Apparently, the unions also changed the color of their flags.

**THE END**