

We need a driving lesson from the French

French drivers are a lot more considerate than their British counterparts, argues Anthony Peregrine

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Anthony Peregrine 16 Jul 2014

We are in that season when like wildebeest seeking whatever it is that wildebeest seek, the whole of France takes to the road, migrating. Or, as we say in English, “going on holiday”. This is essentially a north-to-south movement and particularly dense on weekends in July and early August when, as sewerage pipes in winter, motorways may solidify.

France takes a certain odd pride in this. Radio and TV beam excited reports about “260 kilometres of bottlenecks across the country”. The implication is that no other nation comes close. In traffic overload, France is a world-beater. Meanwhile, survivors bring back tales of four hours to get through Lyon, or “10 days to Bordeaux, and we’re still not there!” I myself was caught last week near Narbonne when, to amplify an already intense flow of vehicles, two damned fools crashed into each other, causing their cars to catch fire. As we learned later, no-one was injured (though minor limb breakages would have been salutary for those responsible). Traffic, blocked from Lisbon to Ljubljana, remained stationary for three hours, then edged forward. I judged my progress by comparison with a Polish tourist coach on the inside lane, and bitterly regretted having given up smoking. A packet of fags truly comes into its own in a major traffic jam.

I ultimately got through, as France does every year. There is, though, no doubt that the summer snarl-ups fuel British suspicions that French roads are at best bonkers, at worst fatal. People talk of driving on the other side of the Channel as of going up the Limpopo with rod and gun. This is over-reacting. Granted, French motoring used to require a certain amount of concentration, to avoid 2CVs piloted by plastered peasants or souped-up Simcas, their drivers exercising the hard-won *liberté* to cut swathes through cities, crack into plane trees and otherwise thin out the population.

But that was then. These days radars, on-the-spot-fines and drink-driving laws tougher than Britain’s have calmed most French auto-maniacs. Casualty figures have tumbled while, strange to say, civility has improved. In fact, the most extreme car-borne rudeness I’ve recently experienced came on a trip back to Britain, as I tackled Reading in a hire car. I didn’t know the place, so approached it hesitantly - as good a way to approach Reading as any other. I sought my way slowly. This had a catastrophic effect on native drivers. They hooted, they gesticulated, they shouted, they came right up to my back bumper and then overtook millimetres from my elbow, gesticulating some more. Their faces were livid. I was shocked. “This is the Thames Valley,” I cried. “Behave yourselves!” The effects were meagre. My assailants just seemed very, very angry, and thrilled to have found a target. I’d say it was the result of living in Reading, except that I’ve experienced similar in Bath and Swansea. Perhaps I automatically cause offence - or perhaps French road life really is now more civil than British. This may be against the natural order of things - but, well, I haven’t received the slightest obscene gesture for ages when motoring in France. In truth, I have found driving over here far more agreeable than in Britain - and, as you surge across the Channel over coming days and weeks, I’m sure you will, too. All you have to remember is to stick to the right, keep to speed limits and not get pie-eyed. The rest is pleasure, as in:

* Compared to British roads, and bar the summer transhumance on a few motorways, French roads are empty. On the English M4 recently, I was never out of traffic. On the A75 motorway over the Massif Central, you’re never in it. Even in August, you may be rolling almost alone across the Cantal and Lozère counties, wondering what happened to everyone else. This is bracing (the more so that the route takes you over the Millau Viaduct, so

encouraging you to fly). And minor roads may whisk you back to better times, when only tractors and cows impeded progress.

* Talking of motorways, you'll tell me you have to pay tolls and I'll tell you that that gets me out of paying a road fund licence (long ago scrapped in France), and so I'll hear no more about it. Meanwhile, French service stations are admirable. On main summer holiday routes, they lay on supervised kids' activities - trampolining, climbing walls, tennis, judo and much else besides. Restaurants and cafés are ok, too. At the self-service counter, look out for the cooked ham, carved before your very eyes. The dish seems to be a motorway fashion right now. It's more-ish. If you don't want to spend much, the "Croq'Malin" sign ensures a two course meal in the restaurant for €8/£6.60 or, from the shop, a sandwich, sweet and drink for €5/£4.16 (croqmalin.fr). The scheme runs through to September 1. Meanwhile, service station public toilets are probably the cleanest in the country. Some have little timetables by the door, telling you who last cleaned the premises, and when. If conditions are good, I generally append a line ("Bravo, Marie-Jo. An example to us all!")

* French roads have had their idiosyncracies. Prime among them has been the priorité-à-droite system, which gave priority to drivers arriving from the right, even from smaller streets or roads. This has died out at roundabouts (which now work like normal ones; once you're on the roundabout, you have priority) and was disappearing everywhere else - until recently, when, like so many fine European folk customs (yodelling, speaking Flemish, dancing the tarantella), it has made a come-back, notably in villages and towns. It operates in our village and, astonishingly, works a treat in traffic-calming terms. Knowing that, if you're hit by the oldest jalousy coming from the meanest street on the right, you're wrong and he's right - this both concentrates the mind and lightens the right foot.

* The other idiosyncrasy concerns gendarmes. Unlike British police, who travel around looking for misdemeanours, gendarmes gather by the side of the road in clumps, waiting for misdemeanours to come to them. This has the inestimable advantage that oncoming motorists will alert you to the uniformed presence by flashing their lights. It's illegal but appreciable. Should you nevertheless be called over, you will find that French law officers are usually not the power-crazed b*****s of popular legend. For a start, they are unfailingly polite. And sometimes affable. A little while ago, and after a particularly successful lunch, I was astonished to get through a random breathalyser test in a village deserted except for gendarmes. "I'd no idea I'd drunk so little," I told them, perhaps unwisely. "You must be Belgian," they said, before waving me on with cheery smiles.



'Gendarmes wait for misdemeanours to come to them' (Photo: Getty)

* If pulled over for some minor misdemeanor, one thing that sometimes works, especially in northern France, is to mention you are visiting the region because your grandad fought here during the war. This is particularly effective if it's true.

* Other people you might spot by the side of the road - at the exits to towns or even in quite remote rural areas - are skimpily-clad ladies smoking heavily. They provide road-side services not widely available in Britain. Probably best to ignore them if you're motoring en famille.



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