

## A Paris à la Grèc

*An English gentleman and a bus running late*

January 1977

Under exchange controls operating in the UK in 1977, you could take only £300 from the country at any one time, a boon for the budget, “no frills” travel industry. By far the least frilly way to get to the Continent was to take the bus: an adult return fare to Paris, for example, could be had for £11; children travelled free of charge. That was cheap, even in those days.

Late on the morning of 12 January<sup>1</sup>, a bus left the Wimpy Hamburger<sup>2</sup> Bar opposite Kings Cross Station on Euston Road in London. In it was a more or less random collection of passengers bound for Athens and various stops along the way. They were in the charge of a crew of three very cheerful, young, apparently monoglot, Greek men. Its first scheduled stop, at about 7.30 that evening, was at a hotel in rue Victor Massé near Pigalle in Paris, to set down a young woman and her five-year-old daughter.



Their preparation for the three-day trip had included a booking for two nights at the hotel in rue Victor Massé, some sandwiches and 200 francs in cash. Eager to taste life beyond Australia, they were getting a real *plat du jour* - though more figuratively than literally, as it turned out.

The Greeks’ preparation featured an enormous bag of pistachios and a ghetto-blasters with plenty of Greek music to dance to. By contrast, they judged that booking a slot on the Channel ferry would be at best a frill too far and at worst a clear sign of weakness: intrepid travellers would naturally relish the added adventure and sheer unpredictability of shivering in a bus for a couple of hours to wait for a ferry.

It was early evening when the *tabac* in Calais was reached and coffee and hot chocolate - but alas no sustaining food, could be obtained; the sandwiches having long since been consumed. The *tabac* smelled of warmth, real coffee and Gauloises, an ambiance to be conserved *à tout prix*, though disappointingly hard to find these days. Outside the *tabac*, several centimetres of snow coated most things.

At 1.30 in the morning, the bus stopped and the Greeks extracted from the bus’ hold a small suitcase, placing it on the side of a little square at the intersection of four or so narrow streets. Following the second oil shock, the City of Light had turned most of them off at midnight, and in the gloom, neither rue Massé, nor any hotel could clearly be seen - certainly no hotel with lights on. And of course, without a light to read them, maps aren’t very useful. Neither is knowing where the hotel is, unless you know where you are in relation to it.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, it was cold. **Of course** it was cold!

<sup>2</sup> “I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today.”

About 150 metres away was a boulevard, lit like a sort of oasis. But while either the young woman, the little girl or the suitcase could be moved easily enough, moving all three at once was much harder. Ophelia was, and still is, a rational, calm and cheerful individual: she sat down on the curb and sobbed quietly.

Among the Athens-bound passengers, was a very charming, tall Englishman called Robin, probably in his early thirties<sup>3</sup>. A true Gentleman, he was scandalised that the Greeks would leave a young woman and small child on the street of a foreign city, cold, hungry and tired, with nowhere obvious to stop. He insisted that the bus wait until he returned with a taxi to take them to a clean, inexpensive hotel for the night. Only when he had done so, did he allow the Greeks to resume the journey to Athens.

Politely enduring the school-girl French<sup>4</sup>, the taxi-driver headed for the thirteenth arrondissement, where a delightful family of Sikhs welcomed them to their tiny, charming, hotel. They showed them to a pretty little room on the third floor, decorated with dainty floral wallpaper and curtains, and furnished with a double bed, a table and two wooden chairs. It had a tiny bathroom, equipped with a wash-basin, shower and bidet: the lavatory was across the corridor. The tariff was 54 francs, including a breakfast of bread and butter with (real) coffee or chocolate and orange juice. Another sensation to be preserved for eternity is one's first taste of freshly-baked baguette in a cosy dining room on a cold January morning.

The Sikhs helped their guests find the hotel in rue Victor Massé and gave directions to get there: Line Six to Nation, then Line Two to Pigalle. It was in one of the (too narrow for the bus) streets that gave off the square where the bus had stopped, unknowable in the post-midnight darkness.

One's first trip on the Paris Metro is another memory to treasure, especially when part of it is over-ground. The *accueil* at the hotel in rue Victor Massé was no less kind than the taxi driver or the Sikhs; even declining payment for the missed night.

Overall, Paris lived up to her grand promise: the rose windows of Notre Dame seemed somehow surreal compared to the poorly reproduced photos Australians had been accustomed to seeing. And when Ophelia comes to Paris to see her mother, now a *riveraine* of sixteen years, she makes a point of re-living that part of the visit by re-sampling the unforgettable hot-dogs *parisiens*, *soupe gratinée* and *chocolat chaud*.

And the bus trip back to London was, well, mostly uneventful: this lot of Greeks had gone and booked a spot on the ferry.

But in an important sense, this tale of three disorganised young Greek men, a bus running late and the inconvenience it caused does not end with a safe return to London. After nearly four decades, it will reach a satisfactory conclusion only when warm thanks are somehow communicated to Robin, the Gentleman, to tell him that his kindness has never been forgotten.

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<sup>3</sup> He taught ancient history at a university, having spent some time at Queensland University.

<sup>4</sup> Thereby de-bunking the cherished cliché of Parisian rudeness and hostility to foreigners.