(chapter 1)

Meet the Aborigines

When we arrived in Paris at the beginning of Jean-Benoît's fellowship, it was only the second time we had set foot in France. We were tourists, and at the outset we looked at France through the eyes of vacationers. Whenever we could squeeze some free time out of the jumble of immigration, housing, and banking predicaments that monopolized our first few months in Paris, we strolled the streets in awe. The city and its monuments seemed ancient beyond belief. We visited a park in the Latin Quarter that was the site of a Roman arena from the first century A.D. In the very place we were observing smartly dressed, well-behaved little French children chasing balls under the watchful gaze of their nannies, ten thousand citizens of the Roman Empire once watched gladiator combats. The idea made us giddy. Everywhere we went we saw remnants of a past we could hardly imagine. We scrutinized rows of fifteenth-century houses on the left bank whose facades still slanted backward according to medieval construction techniques. The proud owner of a restaurant next to the Paris city hall led us down to his basement to show us the building's thirteenth-century foundation.

But one of our most acute time-warp sensations came months later, after a hike along the Seine river that ended in La Roche Guyon, a small town built on a bend of the river twenty miles west of Paris. The founders of La Roche Guyon chose a spectacular location for their village, nestling

it between the river and a four hundred–foot cliff of white chalk. The more we looked around, the more La Roche Guyon impressed us with its historical layers. On the highest spur, right over the town of La Roche Guyon, there was a twelfth-century dungeon. At the base of the dungeon there was a Renaissance castle. In the cliff behind the castle, we saw the bunker where the German Marshal Erwin Rommel (1891–1944) defended Normandy against the Allies in World War II (the way he saw it, anyway). Then, as we walked across the town, we noticed several dozen houses dug straight into the cliff. The houses had neat French facades and Peugeots parked in front of them. We asked the nearby shopkeepers about them and were told that the houses were actually ancient cave dwellings, updated with modern amenities, and still inhabited.

Like many North Americans, who live on a slate wiped clean of history, we never got over the thrill of carrying out our modern lives among Roman ruins and medieval churches. Even though a lot of the monuments and structures we saw predated the founding of America, they were just part of people's daily lives in modern France. Sometimes we found them in completely unsuspecting places. East of La Rochelle, the utterly uninspiring city of Angoulême boasts nothing less than a Gothic city hall. In Provence, Avignon's massive Palace of the Popes, built in the fourteenth century, sits smack in the middle of the city's bustling downtown. To top off this effect of strange historical juxtapositions, we noticed that in many French cities, modern and ancient structures were built out of stone the same color as the gravel in the alleys. In other words, French cities looked like they had gradually grown out of the soil over the centuries, or in some cases, the millennia. Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral (the part they've cleaned, anyway) is the beige color of the city's native stone, and so is the Louvre, the Versailles palace, and even twentieth-century apartment buildings.

Later, this helped us make one of our first breakthroughs in understanding France: it is impossible to disassociate the past from the present. There is no clear line to divide ancient from modern in France, and what goes for architecture, goes for the people, too. As a society, they slowly grew out of the soil. It's as if they live in the past and the present at the same time. Yet it took us a while to figure out what that actually meant.

Our first impression of the French was that they were busy living modern lives. When we got to France, people were starting to moan about the troubles the new euro would cause them. Life didn't look that different from what we were used to in North America. People drove their Renaults to work and heated up frozen lasagna from *Picard* for supper. Even while we were starstruck by castles, churches, and dungeons, many things about the country struck us as incredibly modern. "Smart cards"—cards with microprocessor chips that carry personal information and an ID code—made modern commerce feel space age to us.

At the same time, there were moments when we felt like we were living in the past. Smart cards worked well in automated machines, but when we went to the bank in person, the clerks could not use them to access our accounts. We had to give them our name and account number (which we learned to carry around on a little slip of paper in our wallets). In restaurants, waiters tallied our bill and processed our payment with little remote-control microwave radios—very advanced technology. However, when we asked for the directions to the rest rooms, they sometimes showed us to an outdoor Turkish toilet, essentially a glorified hole in the ground.

Other mind-boggling customs left us scratching our heads as we were impatiently tapping our toes. Our baker individually wrapped every pastry she sold no matter how many people were waiting behind us to place their orders. Our dry cleaner meticulously (and slowly) wrapped each article in paper, gingerly, as if our shirts were *St-Honoré* cakes. At the grocery store in our neighborhood, people still paid by check, even for five-dollar purchases. We got the finishing touch when we rented our apartment and the rental agent handed us a set of oversize keys straight out of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Just what era do the French live in, anyway? we wondered.

We started to get the answer to this question nine months after our arrival, during a visit to the Périgord region, east of the city of Bordeaux. Périgord is the destination of choice for the world's gourmands. It's the land of *foie gras*, truffles, and duck *confit*. The area's most beautiful city, Sarlat, is a jewel of preservation with its narrow, winding, cobblestone streets, perfectly restored medieval houses, and stunning collage of Romanesque, Gothic, neoclassical, and Renaissance architecture. But

preservation is perhaps too strong a word. Until the 1960s, the residents of Sarlat actually *lived* in medieval conditions, with no electricity or running water. It was the Minister of Culture of the time, André Malraux, who saved them. In 1962 he created a law for the preservation of historical monuments and Sarlat, a twenty-year renovation project, was his several-hundred-million-dollar guinea pig.

There is no museum in Sarlat: Sarlat is the museum. Several houses in the city still have original roofs made of *lauze* (flat stones piled on top of one another). We arrived at the tail end of the tourist season and made the most amazing discovery of all: Sarlat is also a regular town, where regular people lead regular lives in spite of the historical splendor. Three steps out of the historical quarter we ran into the shiny facade of a Monoprix drugstore.

On the same trip, we visited the town of Les Eyzies, along the river Vézère, a tributary of the Dordogne. Once again, we confronted this clash of modern and ancient lives, except this time the history went much farther back. Les Eyzies is where archaeologists identified the first specimen of the Cro Magnon man of the Paleolithic age, a couple of ice ages ago. The term Cro Magnon is Occitan, one of the dialects spoken widely in southern France until one hundred years ago. Cro Magnon just means Mr. Magnon's Hole. Mr. Magnon was the nineteenth-century Frenchmen who owned the barn built over the rock shelter right where the first known Frenchman was discovered—he was buried there some twenty-two thousand years ago. There are dozens of other prehistoric sites along the river Vézère, including the cave paintings of Lascaux that are more than twenty thousand years old.

We were aware of France's ancient past before visiting Périgord, but we hadn't tried to fit space-age modernity and ancient civilizations into one frame. We didn't see a single picture, only a confused patchwork.

Then, all of a sudden, as the French would say, the mayonnaise took.

It occurred to us that the French are really the aborigines of France. The word aborigines is usually associated with primitive peoples now, but it really just means "original." The ancestors of the French go back several ice ages. They are not a people who, like North Americans, arrived in the midst of a primitive culture, erased it, and started over. They have always

been there. There was plenty of upheaval throughout French history, but no definitive break with the past. In America, the parallel would be something like this: the Indians won, not the cowboys, and the Aztecs went on to create a country that sent rockets into orbit and delivered the mail twice a day, but still celebrated human sacrifice on the stairs of pyramids.

For North Americans, the past and the present are two categories. We of the New World associate modernity with something novel that arrived on a ship and pushed aside every tradition that stood in its way so it could build something new. We may try to convince ourselves otherwise, but when we want to build something new, instinct tells us to first get rid of the old. In the relative wilderness that was North America even one hundred years ago, getting rid of the old was not even necessary most of the time.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the French have always glorified their past. On the contrary, they have tried to rid themselves of their past many times during their history. Cathedrals, châteaux, and entire cities in France have been razed during wars and invasions (or, in the case of Paris, because of a mix of hygienic necessity and grand urban ambitions). But the past was never erased, probably because there's just too much of it. Everything in France is built on layers of other things that existed before. The present in France is only a compromise between the past and the present.

And so it is with the French themselves.

In 1830, while he was doing the research for his groundbreaking work *Democracy in America*, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by how new the New World was. "America is the only country where we can clearly see the point of departure," he wrote—which makes America more the exception than the rule. Tocqueville identified one of the fundamental differences in American and European thinking and culture and it still holds. Americans have no past, while Europeans are loaded down by ancient customs, habits, and prejudices that shape their behavior.

French history is so long and complicated that it's impossible to define when France actually became a country. We could recount a different version of France's origins for each chapter of this book and not repeat ourselves. There is no clear beginning. Depending on what point a historian wants to prove, it might have started with the Gaulish chief Vercingetorix

(72–46 B.C.) who resisted the Romans, or with Frankish King Clovis (466–511 A.D.) who first unified the country into a kingdom, or with Frankish emperor Charlemagne (742–814 A.D.) who created the first empire. Or with King Louis VI the Big (1108-37), who first consolidated the king's power in the Paris area. Or with any of their sixty-four kings—and that's not counting characters like Napoleon, Richelieu, and Charles de Gaulle, or institutions like the *Académie Française* of the *Conseil d'État*, all of which to some extent defined modern France.

So on one hand, it's impossible to say where France started. But on the other hand, there has never been a clear break between all these rulers and empires and the modern country of France. The French are their own native peoples.

The term aborigine, of course, does not designate a single ethnicity. There is no such thing as an "ethnic" French person. No matter how far back you trace the country's evolution, it's impossible to establish a shared ethnicity across France, and the nearer you get to the present, the more mixed it becomes. France is a hodgepodge. There were the Gauls (though nobody knows what they were), who adopted the Roman culture and language quite willingly. Saxon, Viking, Moorish, and English invaders came and went after that. Only centuries later did national identities start to emerge in Europe. The people you meet in France are really descendants of all the tribes and races that ever invaded France, and all the immigrants that ever flocked there from other countries.

In present-day France, one-third of the population has grandparents that were born outside of France. Waves of European immigration in France in the early twentieth century were quickly absorbed. After a generation or two, sometimes less, they took on the French spirit and became indistinguishable among citizens in speech, manners, or taste. One of France's greatest prime ministers, Mazarin, was Italian. Charles de Gaulle was Belgian. Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Three Musketeers*, was mulatto. At our home in Paris, no more than one-third of the plaques on the mailboxes had traditional old-stock French names. Most of the Ben Jelils, Ben Hammoudas, Johnsons, and Lopezes were no less French than the Ledoux, Sutras, and Nadeaus. And if they were, they wouldn't be for more than a

generation or two. It is not race, or a myth of common origin, that binds the French. The French are French because of the culture they share.

And that culture is a native one. This idea profoundly affected our way of thinking about them. It broke down an important division that we, as North Americans, spontaneously make about the modern and the old. We understood that when we tapped our toes at the bakery and sighed and rolled our eyes at the dry cleaners, the problem was us, not them. We were holding the French up to New World standards. The French are modern. But they're no more New World than the Japanese.

The typical traveler to Japan, China, or Africa is more open-minded than the typical traveler to France. The fascinating rites of the Chinese, Japanese, or Zulus may cause travelers considerable discomfort and inconvenience, but travelers in these countries tend to accept the obstacles stoically, reasoning (rightly) that things are just done differently in foreign cultures. For some reason, when it comes to the French, North Americans drop this reflex. We lodged dozens of North American friends and family members during our stay in Paris, and we saw this syndrome unfold over and over. When North Americans, or more broadly, "Anglo-Saxons," (in chapter 20 we explain what the French mean by this term) are faced with France's peculiar way of doing things, they do not reason that they are dealing with an ancient people who have their own way of doing things. Actually, they accuse the French of being inefficient, overly bureaucratic, unhygienic, and stuck in their ways. And they take it personally.

We tried this aborigine concept out on a number of our French friends to see how it would go over. It didn't go over. They thought we were equating France to an underdeveloped nation. But aboriginal doesn't actually mean underdeveloped, backward, or primitive. As we noted earlier, it means original, the first ones there.

What our French friends didn't understand was that we chose the word "aboriginal" to show humility, something North Americans are hard-pressed to remember when they're faced with French bureaucracy, "rude" service, or "arrogant" behavior. Everyone admires Paris's cathedrals, cobbled streets, monuments, statues, and gold-plated obelisks, yet the more we examined the country, spoke to the French, and read their magazines and

newspapers, the more it became obvious to us that the people were as ancient as their castles. French culture is a Noah's ark of atavisms, customs, temperaments, and attitudes that took shape over dozens of centuries of history. And when you look closely at the facts of everyday life in France, the intricate links between past and present rise to the surface. This chapter only touches on these links, but it is a theme that recurs in almost every topic we discuss in this book. There are always reasons things work the way they do in France, whether you look at France through a political, sociological, anthropological, or other lens. France is a modern country, but new technologies are adapted to old mentalities and the old mentalities endure. Why would it be otherwise?

Despite what North Americans and Anglo-Saxons think, there's really no contradiction between being resolutely modern and ferociously archaic at the same time. The French are the proof that it can work. The French invented the metric system, the Civil Code, high-speed trains, and the Concorde. But they also relish traditions, native and borrowed. They still produce blue cheese like Roquefort according to a technique that dates from Roman times and play medieval Italian card games like Tarot. Napoleon modernized contractual law and created the Civil Code, which is now used by most European countries. Yet French criminal law still applies principles that date back to the Inquisition. At the same time as President Charles de Gaulle (1944–46, 1958–69) was creating French astronautics, he was so old-fashioned that he refused to answer a telephone and toyed with the idea of reestablishing the monarchy. Traces of the past are evident in everyday language. When the French speak of ministries of war, diplomacy, finance, and the interior, they refer to these as the *regalian* ("the king's") powers.

But the real lessons about how the past and the present coexist are there in the day-to-day life of the country. A week or so before our departure from Montreal, a French friend in Montreal congratulated us for choosing our dates so wisely. We didn't know it when we left, but mid-January to mid-February is the period of *Les Soldes* (The Sales) in France. For a month, almost all the stores throughout the country put their merchandise on sale. Theoretically, we could have furnished our apartment for

a song. (In reality, we were too busy weeding through bureaucratic problems that month to go shopping, and we felt like we were stuck in the middle of a permanent Boxing Day sale.)

Les Soldes is not a custom. The police set the dates and supervise the sales across the country: stores are only allowed to have sales from mid-January to mid-February and from mid-June to mid-July. To hold a sale outside that period, merchants have to obtain special approval from the police. The rest of the year, small shops and big retailers can't so much as offer a rebate without facing the wrath of the law.

We decided to look into this "tradition" and learned that it dates back to practices of the merchants' guilds in the Middle Ages. At that time, guilds had two functions: they settled disputes among tradesmen of one town and protected the tradesmen against competition from other towns. Guilds set the standards for quality and pricing—they made rules along the lines of "bread can't contain more than 10 percent sand" (thankfully standards have evolved). Guilds guaranteed social protection to their members and, starting in the thirteenth century, even managed their members' retirement funds. But if individuals failed to abide by the rules set by the guild, a medieval cop known as the Provost broke their legs. Provosts evolved into police officers (though many French would dispute the claim that they evolved at all), but the system of policing prices and sales continues in the form of *Les Soldes*. And the practice or regulating sales predates the discovery of America by at least three hundred years.

In architecture and urban planning, remnants of the past shape the present in ways that might even surprise a lot of French. Strolling along the swanky avenue Deaumesnil one afternoon, we popped into a boutique where a Paris map from the 1730s had caught our eye. At the time the map was drawn, Paris was about a quarter of its present size, but the future boundaries of the modern city were visible in the ring of farmland and hunting domains around the city. The present-day *Place de l'Étoile*—where the *Arc de Triomphe* stands—is visible on the map. In 1730 it was in the middle of a forest. Up until that moment we had assumed that *places*, where streets converge in roundabouts, were the result of the city-wide renovations that transformed Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Clearly it wasn't so. The *Place de l'Étoile* existed before it was absorbed by Paris. As it turns out, many roundabouts in Paris are vestiges of an old hunting custom. Hunters used to clear crossroads of forest paths in order to be able to spot animals when they came out of the bush. By increasing the number of paths that converged on crossroads, hunters increased their chances of spotting game. When the city encroached on these hunting grounds, it simply absorbed the crossroads that were already there (along with the names, apparently).

The French, like the rest of the world, have only held onto their history when it suited their needs or adhered to the fashions of a given time. Notre Dame Cathedral was used as a saltpeter plant during the French Revolution. It had fallen into such neglect by the middle of the nineteenth century that authorities considered demolishing it and using the stones to build bridges. Determined to save the decaying monument, French author Victor Hugo wrote the novel *Notre Dame de Paris* in the hopes of getting French authorities to take an interest in it (it worked). Likewise, we now gaze at Gothic architecture in admiration. But at the time of Louis XIV, it was regarded as passé and torn down wherever people could afford to replace it.

The French have an old expression: *un passé qui ne passe pas* (a past that doesn't pass), which denotes the ambiguous relationship they have with their own history. It is not always easy to live with the weight of ancient traditions, and at times, France has been shaken with very violent attempts to get rid of them. The French Revolution is a good example. Some innovations introduced during the revolution, like the decimal calendar, never took root. But others, like the *préfet*, the administrative head of the French departments, still endure. France has been through other violent ruptures, like the period of 1870 to 1900, when the State waged a battle against the Catholic Church, to the point of forbidding convents and religious orders in 1901. Between 1936 and 1945 French society was subject to extremely violent tensions that resulted in a new constitution and mass nationalization of industry. France at the turn of the third millennium is the sum of what was preserved and what was discarded throughout the country, for as many reasons as there are French men and women.

By calling French culture "native" we aren't suggesting it is permanent or unchanging. We're just calling attention to the fact that old mentalities persist within new customs. The globalizers of the world would do well to remember this.

On Halloween of 1999, sitting in a café overlooking the port of Honfleur, in Normandy, we had this thought as we watched a bizarre exercise of cultural cross-fertilization unfold before our eyes. Halloween is only a few years old in France. It's not an easy custom to adapt, partly because French urban structures don't lend themselves well to trick or treating. Kids would need to know the four-number *digicode* of many buildings just to get through the door to ring doorbells, and there aren't many front porches for people to decorate. In Honfleur, local authorities found a way to surmount these logistical obstacles. They organized a Halloween parade so local children could trick or treat *en masse* in the cafés and shops along the port.

People, of course, draw on the models they already have—Halloween in Honfleur looked and sounded more like a labor strike than the traditional children's ritual we were accustomed to. The Honfleur children marched in a crowd between police cruisers, their little fists raised, chanting, "We want candies! We want candies!" And what did they do as they proceeded along the port? They actually stormed all the restaurants and boutiques in their path ordering merchants to hand over the goods. We were stunned to see this hostile pack of rampaging ghosts and ghouls (they were having fun, though) but even more surprised to see the grown-up French going along with it.

But when we thought about it, it made sense. Begging for candy—even pretend begging—isn't very noble, especially in a country where there's no tradition of philanthropy. People draw on the models they have. Demanding candy via a legally recognized, police-escorted *manifestation* made more sense to the French, even when they were just having fun.

So much for trying to teach an old country new tricks.

Dear Diane,
Thanks so much for your thoughtful questions and gracious interview. Hope you enjoy France next year and that our book will help de-mystify the French. Enjoy! All the best
Julie

Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong

Dear Diane,

(why we love france, but not the french)

Thanks for allowing us to explain but more importantly to meet & know you.

Jean-Benoît

Jean-Benoît Nadeau
& Julie Barlow

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