

## Travels in the South of France

*Stendhal*

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In the spring of 1838 Stendhal was traveling. He seems to have been always traveling with an extensive familiarity not only with France and Italy but also with Switzerland and Germany. While traveling he kept a diary and wrote down notes with the intention of having them polished and published. A few years later Stendhal died from a stroke and he never got around to finish the matter. What remains is first a kind of travel story, with many gaps and repetitions; secondly an appendix of additional notes. The latter are somewhat garbled and perfunctory, and obviously only make sense to the author himself, no doubt intended to jog his memory and ignite further chains of associations. Almost a hundred years later the scattered notes were published in France, and in the early 1970's an English translation followed.

The very unfinished form of the manuscript lends it a freshness and authenticity it might not otherwise have had. It gives a window, not only as to the quotidian aspects of traveling almost a century and three quarters ago, but also as to the writing techniques of the author. Obviously he made notes in pencil during his transportations, which were later rewritten in more permanent form by ink when time and circumstances allowed. He jots down what comes to his mind, sometimes repeatedly. As to details he leaves some of those blank to be filled out at his leisure when having the resources of research available. In particular the short notices to himself collected in an appendix are of great interest to a fellow travel writer, perhaps not so much for what they say, because they say very little, but as a confirmation that similar techniques of note-taking evolve in parallel over distance and time.

Stendhal is traveling as a tourist while this not yet was a mass phenomenon, yet were coming in vogue. So what interests the reader may not necessarily be the same things that interest Stendhal. What a contemporary of his takes for granted a future reader needs instruction on. Thus what turns out to be gems are mostly those things that may have slipped by the author, and which very well may have been weeded out at a final polishing. What we are looking for in a travelog is immediacy.

Stendhal spends much time to describe the architectural details of churches he visits. This might be of less interest to us, because the churches remain to be inspected. Anyway his emphasis on architecture is revealing, because after all what should the mind feast on when visiting a new city for a few days? You need some kind of mission. And in fact the tradition is by now firmly established in the tourist industry, judging from the contents of travel guides. More interesting are the display of his various opinions. He dislikes elms, finds them ugly, instead he repeatedly extolls the beauty of plane trees and wishes that more chestnuts would be planted, because those trees are more beautiful and become verdant early in the spring. As to pines, and I presume that he refers to the standard northern pines not to those whose canopies form huge umbrellas and are to be found all over Italy, he simply considers them the ugliest trees imaginable. Walking in the cities he

is disturbed by the sharp pointed stones that form the pavements of sidewalks which make it hard to walk upon, unless the interstices are filled up with sand, and he dreams about them being asphalted.

How does Stendhal travel? By stage-coach, omnibus (in cities), and steamboats, those which are plying rivers with paddle wheels. One would like to know more about what this entails, but of course those things were too well-known to merit mention. In addition there is a reference to a 'tilbury' which turns out to be a two-wheeled cabriolet seating two drawn by a horse and invented in England in the early 19th century. While there are several references to a barouche, which turns out to be far more elaborate, namely a four-wheeler seating four passengers, two and two facing each other, with a box seat in front for the driver (and possible assistants?), and drawn by a pair of horses. Clearly a barouche offered a far more luxurious way of traveling than a stage coach and was consequently also far more expensive. All of this strikes us now as quite romantic. Railways were however coming into view and later that year, according to the appendix, Stendhal traveled on rails in Belgium. In southern France this was not yet available, but a railroad was being built to Bordeaux and Stendhal muses whether this will actually make business sense.

Why travel? Stendhal's avowed intention is to see the beautiful, be it scenery, architecture or art. But the beautiful is in scant supply. He remarks that he experiences the keenest sorrow on seeing something ugly, and this induces scorn, which is a torture for him to experience. And, as he addresses the knowledgeable reader, in France in 1838 it is exceedingly difficult not being bored to death by scorn. Travel also involves logistics. The discomfort of weather and transportation. At least in the beginning of his trip in the West it is raining a lot with the one downpour after the other pelting him. And if it is not raining, the sun gives him a sunburn and he peels skin the day after. (Those indeed are the delightful details which speak across centuries.). He often arrives at his destination at ungodly hours, and has to find lodging and food without being ripped-off, something which no doubt was much harder at the time than it would be now. Another concern of his is to find a decent coffee-house, where he can have his demitasse with milk, or a hot cup of water to make his tea (the latter turns out to be very hard to achieve, service is usually slow and the water is at best luke-warm, only once is he graced with truly scalding water), sit down and smoke a cigar and look at the papers, which usually are several days out of date. He prefers not to engage in conversation, but is more eager, (as a true novelist?) to listen in on others, or simply to meditate. The latter he prefers to do during journeys, and he looks back with some regret on his younger days, when reveries on love gave him such delight. An innocent delight that the cynical experience of succeeding years no longer admits to.

Occasionally he writes down how much he spends. The basic unit is the franc, which despite the decimal reforms of the French Revolution, is subdivided as the old livres, into twenty sous. A room at a hotel may cost a franc or a franc and a half, dinner is usually a bit more expensive, with the expense of a good bottle of wine being a substantial part thereof. Sometimes the meals are excellent, sometimes not to his taste at all. However, travel is very expensive, to go from one city to another may set you back five to ten times as much as a hotel room. It is hard to compare costs, and Stendhal must have been reasonably well-off to be able to afford to stay on the road months at the time, yet one surmises that

lodging would be comparatively cheaper than it is for the modern traveler, food definitely dearer, and transportation almost prohibitive.

We find Stendhal in Bordeaux, the city to which he returns many times after local excursions, including one across the Spanish border. He announces that Bordeaux is the most beautiful city in France. He has however a lot of advice of an aesthetic kind to give to the local magistrates. He remarks not only on the funny French accent, which takes some time to get used to, but also that Italian is so widely spoken, or at least much of the French only becomes comprehensible if you think of it as Italian. During his very brief visit to Spain (no border formalities are reported on, but the presence of Spanish soldiers is duly noted) he remarks that he knows enough Spanish to read the papers, but when he is trying to speak Spanish he is so intent upon what he wants to say that he forgets the words.

Close to Bordeaux is the castle, replete with a succession of moats, that was the home of Montesquieu. He pays a pilgrimage and is shown around by a servant girl. She does not know very much and is impatient, and he muses that the present owners really should hire a real guide, the cost of which could be covered by admission charges. We here see the beginnings of a tourist trade, but it is still a long way before the advent of gift shops. He finds the bedroom rather depressing, because there is no mirror; the sight of the library is far more exciting and he would like to linger. The visit gives him an excuse for digressions, and he reports some anecdotes about the great man, his absent-mindedness (inherited by his son) and his disregard for his immediate family he tended to neglect. Other digressions that Stendhal allows himself is the history of the Bordeaux region in particular its connections to the English monarchy. Had the travel book been finished one suspects that more of those edifying excursions would be present, after all those are of the kind that always can be inserted afterwards, and form no integral part of the travel proper.

From Bordeaux he goes east, skimming the Pyrenees, being disappointed at the lack of a proper mountainous landscape, I guess they simply do not measure up to what he is used to in Grenoble. He stops at Pau, spends time at Toulouse, where he twice speaks of the great geometer Fermat as one of the two great sons. His next major destination is Marseille, which he terms the prettiest city in France. Here he has some business connections and can knowledgeably report on the pleasant lives of traders. How they set up a house with their wife and family, which they only see during mealtime, the rest of the day being devoted to some minor work in the morning, some dutiful visit to the exchange in the afternoon, and the rest of the day spending time in coffee-houses with business associates, and in the evening staying at the club. Often they keep a young beautiful mistress, whom they manage to see for a few hours during their extended leisure, and who being bored may offer services to other men or at least keep lovers closer to their ages. The wives on the other hand must lead exceedingly boring lives (but what would be the alternative?).

In Marseille he visits the art museum. It is formed like a 'T' and badly lit. The choice of paintings is not the best, and they are hung too high on the walls, and in the wrong order. He worries which are originals or which are mere reproductions. Raphael comes in for praise, as does Poussin and Serre. One of the paintings he singles out as bad is the one of the Swedish king to be, Gustavus Vasa rousing the peasants of Dalecarlia to make a revolt against the Danish King. In fact he spends many pages noting his impressions on

the paintings in the museum. And of course as a traveler you tend to spend a lot of time in Art museums, whether you like art or not; and Stendhal is well-known to have been a connoisseur not only of art, but especially of music. His travel also leads him to attend musical performances, especially singing, which he reports on partly with rancor partly with grudging appreciation.

Then there are a few visits to Toulon and a side trip to Grasse and Cannes which takes almost twenty-four hours to reach, although they are not so distant. He is charmed by Grasse, reminding him almost of Genova, except that it does not lie by the sea. The town stinks in spite of its perfume factories. And then the travel report fades away, although Stendhal is not through with traveling, as the appendix reveals. He will go to Basel and Bern, speak about the Germans and their lack of courage to disregard details in the interest of clarity. The English, incidentally, are always conscious of rank and complain that things are not like they are back home. From Switzerland he would go north to Strasbourg fretting about getting information on how to cross the river Rhine to Kehl and the confusing timetables (German penchant for irrelevant detail). Eventually he would go to Holland and Belgium.

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