

## Paris Syndrome

by Lucy Sieger

When visitors soar into Paris with expectations higher than the Eiffel Tower, sometimes there's no place to go but down. Just ask the dozens of Japanese tourists who succumb each year to Paris Syndrome—a catch-all term for psychological breakdowns of varying severity—because for them, the City of Light turns out to be the City of Fright. To be less melodramatic, the city simply falls short of its romantic, *Midnight in Paris* ideal. Symptoms range from panicked calls to the Japanese Embassy to brief hospital stays to medical evacuations back home.

Being someone who probably tried to crawl back inside my mother's cozy, familiar womb, I can relate. But despite my anxious nature, I've developed a love of travel, especially travel to Paris. While I've never succumbed to Paris Syndrome, my four extended stays have taught me to be mindful of the city's stresses as well as its beauty.

Most startling is the poverty. The most luxurious city in the world swarms with the downtrodden. Roma gypsies live in dilapidated shantytowns on the outskirts of Paris and commute into affluent central Paris on the metro, alongside chic office workers. There, they spend their days sitting on dirty curbs or filthy mattresses, begging. Sometimes, you'll see entire families, the children playing with discarded newspaper flyers. One elderly lady roams the Pont du Carrousel near the Louvre—she's there every year—rattling her cup for change. She's permanently bent over at a 90-degree angle, pleading an indecipherable moan. I always give her money, and she never looks up.

And then there's terrorism. Three days after I arrived in March 2016, ISIS operatives hit the Brussels airport and subway, killing 35. Paris, already on high alert after 130 died in the attacks of November 2015, grew rigid with tension. Many tourists who had not already cancelled their vacations bailed, leaving a few brave Brits to take advantage of cheap Chunnel fares and discounted hotel rates. My husband skyped from home, making me promise not to take the Metro, and the hotel night clerk told me the precaution was wise. Soldiers in fatigues, machine guns at the ready, strolled the streets in unpredictable knots. On Palm Sunday, militia flanked parishioners gathered outside the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Another day, Le Bon Marche, the chic Left Bank department store, was under heavy guard. A threat? A random rotation? Who knew.

Even under more relaxed circumstances, Paris jostles with humanity. Those idyllic, misty photographs of the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame? They were either taken at 6:00 in the morning, or they airbrushed out the hordes of tourists and incessant, honking traffic. Most people who work in central Paris cannot afford to actually live there, so rush hours are a chaotic jumble of devouring crowds. When returning to my hotel or apartment, I often found myself touching my arms and legs, as if to confirm I'd escaped unscathed.

So when a taxicab almost runs me over; or a young homeless man sits on the street with his dog, who happens to be nursing a litter of puppies; or a well-dressed little Parisian

girl, clutching her mother's hand, turns to stare at her bedraggled Roma counterpart huddled with her own mother on a mattress, I've learned to self-medicate.

No, not with wine. (I save that for the nine-hour flights to and from France.) Instead, I turn to my favorite guidebook: *Quiet Paris* by Siobhan Wall. The book's premise is that Paris can be exhilarating but exhausting, and it's worth exploring the slower, more contemplative side of the city. Thanks to *Quiet Paris*, I've attended Quaker meetings, meditated in tiny gardens that would fit in my carry on, visited out of the way snippets of museums, prayed in ancient churches that are *not* Notre Dame but are just as stunning, relaxed in discreet day spas, and more. Just flipping through the book, with its hushed black-and-white photography, calms me down. I don't think *Quiet Paris* is translated into Japanese, and that's a shame. Because when Paris deviates from the *Amelie* and *Midnight in Paris* fantasies, I know where to recharge. And I've learned how to deal with Paris in the same way the French deal with life.

Like most Latins, the French are not afraid of strong emotions, from the euphoric to the tragic. Theirs is a culture in which smiling all the time is considered vapid, and brooding over coffee is a national pastime. It's one quirky reason why I love France. Unlike the United States, where Ivy League universities offer courses in happiness and positive psychology abounds, you're *not supposed* to be joyful all the time. For someone prone to melancholic introspection, that is profoundly validating.

*Quiet Paris* is the one book that travels with me every time. It's a dispensation to reflect and ruminate, a manual for recovering from the cacophony of emotions that Paris evokes. I'm determined to work my way through every garden, church, library—and yes, every spa. When I seek refuge in those blissful sanctuaries, I breathe deeply and remember. It's okay that life is not always beautiful. Neither are cities. Neither is Paris. And only by embracing the darkness can I truly know the City of Light.