



I Left My Underpants in Ancient France

I love boats more than just about anything—even more than I love macaroni and cheese, but not quite not as much as I love my wife. So I guess that's where they sit, number two on my romance list. Not surprisingly, Heather and I parted with the family after Rome and headed to Venice for its waterborne lifestyle. We spent over half of our two-week trip budget in just twenty-four hours, but it was worth every penny. Aside from enjoying all the great shopping and a ridiculously ornate Venetian glass chandelier in our hotel room (it literally occupied the entire ceiling), we rode on four different kinds of boats and saw all kinds of others, including a rickety old skiff with an outboard motor, piled high with a mountain of DHL overnight packages. Conditions in my belly were still just developing at this point, so I didn't have terrible bathroom trouble there, but that all changed once we got to France.

We rented a car in Nice and meandered our way through Provence to meet up with my brother in Avignon a few days later. The three of us would later rejoin my folks in Barcelona at week's end. However, there was some confusion about meeting Phil at the train station as planned because he didn't appear to get off the TGV train from Rome like he was supposed to. We waited a while



and worried that for some reason his plans had changed. Our pre-arranged agreement was to communicate by email if such a thing were to happen. So Heather and I decided to split up. She would stay and wait for him while I went to town in search of an Internet café. I got directions and headed out to the parking lot.

There I encountered one of those stressful occasions in which situations that appear familiar are actually completely different in a new culture. I got in the rental car and made my way to the parking lot exit. As I would expect with a pay lot in the states, I drove to the exit gate to pay for my time and be on my way. Well, there was no attendant at the exit, instead just a vending machine of some sort, but it had no coin slot, and the paper feeder didn't match the size of any of the French bills I had accumulated. There were some instructions—but all in French, though I recognized the word “*sortie*” as exit which was an encouraging find. The rest of what I stood a chance of comprehending was all in symbolic pictures. After a lot of staring, turning my head sideways, diagramming the activities pictured, (and some honking from cars behind me in line), I realized that the three or four icons I was gazing at ostensibly were meant to be the international language for “Before leaving the train station, guess at your parking duration, pay money into a vending machine inside the station, and bring the dispensed ticket here to get out.” Brilliant. I was suddenly reminded of a college history professor who constantly chided the French throughout history. He would set up a dramatic story, which at some point would climax with something like “...and guess who was there to screw it all up? FRRRANCE!” He would growl loudly enough to wake sleeping students in adjacent classrooms.

For a moment I considered driving right through the gate in front of me. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw several cars waiting behind me. I checked the side mirrors and realized that we were all being funneled into this lane by curbs on both sides leading back at least three car lengths, penning us in. Turning back to the machine, scowling, I gave it “the finger,” thus communicating the international symbol for “Why not put the stupid payment machine out here instead of inside the train station?”

I looked in the mirror again, signaling to the guy behind me that he needed to back up and let me out. I put the car in reverse, hoping



the back-up lights would give him a clue. He honked, and I could see he was making international symbols of his own. I waved him back. He motioned behind him like he was stuck, making a point of showing his irritated expression. At this point, I finally tried to get out of the car so I could signal the drivers behind him that I am an American idiot who needs everybody to back up because I don't know their backward rules. Instead I got pinched in the door because it hit the machine and wouldn't open far enough to let me out. I writhed around for a few seconds until finally someone got the idea and the cars started backing out to let me finish embarrassing myself.

I parked again and went back inside the train station to buy a parking ticket. Actually I didn't mind it much at that point because my rear end was signaling that it was ready for a sortie of its own. I briefly wondered again why I was having all these urgent bathroom visits and took care of that need first, then found the parking ticket kiosk. I had no idea how much time to pay for, so I bought the most expensive option, which I assumed was an all day pass—it might have been a penny or a hundred bucks, I had no idea, the French money had only been in my pocket for a day or two, so I hadn't yet adapted to the conversion.

This time I successfully exited the parking lot and made my way to old town where I was told I could find Internet access. After a moderate hassle parking on the street and dealing with a parking meter, I logged on at a café and found no email from my brother. I sent him a message saying we would wait at the train station and check email every two hours until we heard something.

On my way back I encountered a less-than-delightful maze of one-way streets. Approaching the station I accidentally chose the wrong ramp and had to circle back. Finally I returned and searched the terminal for Heather. I found her sipping coffee with my brother in a pair of lounge chairs, drenched in morning sun streaming through the glass wall behind them. Contrary to my disposition at the time, they looked relaxed, almost bored. Then I heard the wonderful news. Turns out he was on the train after all, and she found him only a couple minutes after we split up. Yep, before I humiliated myself in the parking lot, before I came in for the bathroom and the



parking ticket, before I even went into town. Ugh. *Hopefully this day will get better*, I thought to myself. Well, it didn't.

Heather and Phil both studied French in high school, so as we headed for the parking lot, they bought the parking ticket this time—paying considerably less money than I did. On the way out of town we stopped at a suburban shopping center for some lunch. Because I visit hardware stores everywhere I travel, no matter what, we also stopped at the French version of Home Depot, where I couldn't resist buying some light fixtures to mail home (which I have yet to install, of course).

Our primary destination was Carcassonne, an old city near the Spanish border whose fortifications date back to Roman times. It is a beautiful ancient city, all of which is old by our standards, but the really old part is the hilltop inner fortress, which is only accessible on foot. We spent a lovely afternoon exploring the stone walls and cobblestone pathways. We shopped and gazed at the architecture. While perusing the Basilica's cavernous interior, after eating something with a forgettable name (but an entirely memorable result), I felt the inklings of a bathroom call. Inklings quickly turned to pestering, and I suddenly had an emergency on my hands. Oh wow, it was bad. I signaled to Heather and Phil that I needed a bathroom, quick. We all looked around, there didn't appear to be anything inside the sanctuary. One of them asked a docent, "Le somethingorother merci..." who pointed us outside and up the pathway to a public restroom.

I hurried outside, but by the time I could see my destination I was pretty sure it was already too late. I scrambled up the street to some stone steps leading down into the bathroom. It had a Gothic arched doorway, and the floor was paved with large chunks of stone, worn in by the ages. Dark and cavernous like a dungeon, the only light inside streamed in through slits in the rock wall high above me. Some horribly out-of-place modular restroom wall dividers sectioned off a stall in the middle of the open room with urinals to the left, sinks to the right. I was really crowning by then, and as I entered the stall some gas escaped. Or so I thought, but it wasn't just gas, too wet for that. I didn't even have my pants down yet. **Crap!**

Inside the stall, much to my chagrin, I found a Turkish toilet. A Turkish toilet is less like a toilet and more like a hole in the floor.



I didn't even know they had them in France. *I was in Carcassonne after all, I reminded myself. Some of it was built during the Ottoman Empire; perhaps this bathroom still had some original fixtures.* The toilet was made of stone or clay and resembled a urinal, turned on its back and recessed in the floor. Apparently I was supposed to straddle this thing, balancing in a squat position with my pants around my ankles while trying not to fall over or soil myself. But it appeared as though I had already done that. It was also apparent that a previous visitor didn't like the toilet any more than I did and had decided not to use it. There was crap on the floor in the corner, literally. It smelled awful, though it also seemed perfectly fitting for the medieval context. I breathed through my mouth to minimize the stench.

I carefully took down my pants as quickly as I could, and before I even finished squatting the juice was flowing. This episode was rather painful, coming out in spasms, sort of like when you vomit. I was in a large stall; the walls were spaced wide enough that I could not reach them from the middle. As I crouched precariously with nothing in reach to aid my balance, I inspected my pants. My boxers had suffered damage, but I couldn't find any remnants elsewhere. I could see that it indeed was not just gas that snuck out; instead it was mostly blood with some other not-so-appealing substances mixed in. I turned to look at what I'd let out behind me, but couldn't make the contortion to bring it into view. I shuffled my feet and turned a bit to see that it was indeed bloody and yucky. *What does this mean?* I wondered quietly. I swallowed the panic, reassuring myself that I'd be home in a week, and if it hadn't stopped by then I would see a doctor. With the circulation cut off at my knees, my feet were going numb. Squatting is not a natural position for me. The last thing I needed was to fall backward into my own mess.

It seemed as though I was finished so I looked around for some toilet paper—and that's when my day really took a downhill turn. There wasn't any paper, but it wasn't because they had run out. Rather I saw absolutely no evidence of there ever having been toilet paper there, not even a dispenser. The history professor's voice echoed in my head, "*FRRRRANCE!*" Now this was not current-day France; there was no cute little butt-shower there either. Carcassonne was built long before the advent of Prissy-Pants France. I



don't know when the bidet was conceived, but if they never figured out the toilet paper thing, I guess I can't really blame them for its invention.

My knees were burning by then so I had to stand up. I could feel a couple drops of blood falling free as I raised up to a quasi-erect, bent-over position, keeping my knees bent slightly, ensuring some overhang to protect my clothes. I braced my hands on my knees and took a deep breath. It stunk. *What do I do now?* I puzzled. I had nothing but a postcard in my pocket. I looked down again at my underwear. Could they be revived? I pondered the situation for a long moment. My legs started trembling slightly from fatigue, telling me I needed to figure it out soon. Then it hit me. I could take my boxers off, use the unsoiled parts to clean myself up, and then throw them away. *Oh man. Oh man!* My heart sank in painful agony as I considered what I had to do. I am sure the look on my face reflected the disgusting situation I was in and the tragedy I was about to inflict upon myself.

Now hold that picture of my expression in your mind for a moment. This is the part in a movie where the screen freeze-frames on the protagonist's face while he is enduring some egregious hardship and making a bizarre expression. We get an extended look at that face while he narrates some back story that makes sense of what you are about to witness. We get snapshots of these past moments. In this case, he (I) says,

Now let me tell you something. I love my underwear. Maybe not as much as boats or my wife, but it's certainly up there with mac and cheese. And these weren't any old underwear, these were precious...irreplaceable.

Finding good underwear is a painstaking and expensive process. It takes a few tries before you find the ones that will work for the long haul, then you go back and get more. Well the ones I wear now I had discovered about 8 years ago. They're simple cotton knit boxers, but instead of the bulky bunched-together elastic waistband common to most standard boxer shorts, these have some stretchy Lycra in the fabric, and the top edge is simply folded over and sewn down in a two-inch hem, making for a very low-profile and comfy waist. There's nothing else like it on the market. When I first found



them, I fell in love. I bought a sufficient supply and went on with life. At the time I was working on a nationwide publicity tour and lived on the road for nine months straight. When I returned home and readjusted to normal life, I went back to Penneys to stock up on my magic underwear. But I couldn't find it. I searched everywhere. Finally I asked a clerk where they were.

"Do you mean those Jockey Zone boxers?" She asked.

"Yes, those are the ones."

"Oh they were discontinued a couple months ago, we won't be getting any more."

"You mean discontinued by the manufacturer, or did you just stop carrying them?" I asked.

"No they stopped making them."

My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe my ears. Not again. It seems like every product I come to love inevitably gets discontinued. Friends and family make fun of me for how product-loyal I can be. I am the world's most harsh product critic, but when I find something that's perfect, I am a subscriber for life. When they discontinued my deodorant, I called the company and ordered a full case of it from their backstock. People said it wouldn't last, it would evaporate, but they were wrong. Last year I finished the last of it after rationing it out to myself for more than a decade. Yes I'm a freak. In fact, on this very trip to France I had rediscovered my old favorite shaving gel, which had been discontinued in the States, so I was thrilled to see it still available in Europe, and I bought more everyplace I saw it. My brother, who travels a lot, was still bringing it to me up to a couple years ago. But none of us can find it anymore, even overseas—on eBay. (I am nearly out now. If you have some or know where to get it, please send it to me care of the publisher. It's called Gillette Shaving Concentrate and comes in a silver oblong ribbed plastic bottle, SKU#50785896. I will reward you handsomely.)

I was furious. *That was the best underwear ever made, how could they stop making it?* I started breathing heavily. The clerk stared at me. My peripheral vision started going fuzzy, then dark. I could see only a blurry circle in front of me. I walked away from the counter. Turning down the maze of department store aisles, I navigated with foggy tunnel vision. When I got back to the car I had to take some deep breaths and calm myself down before driving home.



I guess it is sort of funny looking back, but I certainly wasn't amused at the time. Later I told a friend about it. She knew how much I loved my undies and understood the tragedy, but she laughed anyway. Fair enough, I always laughed at her because her family called underwear "chuds." Perhaps now you'll understand how angry I was when I found the waistband of one of these boxers in the backyard crap of my roommate's dog. It was bad enough being out there poop-scooping, but to find that the dog had shredded and eaten a pair of my priceless shorts added significant insult. In any case, the tragedy is now tempered by the fact that boxers are simply incompatible with inflammatory bowel disease for obvious practical reasons. Like it or not, I didn't need them any more.

So back to Carcassonne, the cameras are rolling again. There I stood in ancient France wearing irreplaceable underpants. The world's supply of these boxers was down to eleven, and I was preparing to obliterate nine percent of the stockpile in one fell swoop. Not to mention, on a long trip losing a pair of chuds has a significant impact on laundry planning. I hated to admit it to myself; I cringed at the thought, but I knew what I must do. Easier said than done, however.

As I mentioned earlier, there was already somebody else's scat on the floor, and who knows what else had been there. I was going to have to remove my shoes and extract my undies from my pants and legs without smearing anything on myself or dripping anything from my bum. I slowly pried each shoe off, standing on top of them. I held my boxers at mid-thigh spreading my knees enough to keep them taut and elevated, while carefully working my jeans off by stepping on each cuff with the other foot and wiggling my legs out. With the precision of that buzzing Operation game from my childhood, I raised each foot through the leg holes of my shorts without touching them on the way out. Somehow I succeeded in keeping myself clean throughout this delicate procedure. I meticulously wrapped and folded the boxers as I turned them into the world's most precious ass wipe. It pained me to treat them this way, but I had no choice. I set them on the floor and carefully re-dressed, being sure not to track nasty bathroom floor-ness onto my socks and into my shoes. I would have to finish the



day commando style. If nature were to make another emergency call I would be in big trouble. *Better not eat anything until we find our hotel*, I concluded.

I waited to be sure there was no one else in the bathroom and emerged from the stall with my tragedy in hand, heading straight for the trash can. I said goodbye to the yucky bundle, looking at it one more time before I let the spring-loaded cover close over the can. I washed my hands about seventeen times, double-checked my clothes for unwanted remnants, and headed back into the light.

Ascending from the dungeon, I found Heather and Phil sitting on a short section of stone wall chatting about something. I had been gone a long time. Heather gave me a concerned look, and Phil just sat there patiently, looking ready to move on. This would be the beginning of a very unusual relationship for them. Everywhere we went, from that point forward, the two of them would be left to entertain themselves while I ran for the toilet. We travel together a lot, so over the years I suspect they've had hundreds of these chats. I wonder what they talk about all that time, which of the world's problems they could solve while I'm in the can. They could probably write a book to describe their side of the adventures we share from opposite sides of bathroom walls.