

EDITORIAL

Japanese and the 'Paris syndrome'

How many victims does it take to make a syndrome? According to a French newspaper, a dozen a year will do. In the case of a trend it has dubbed "Paris syndrome," that would be the 12 or so Japanese tourists a year who are said to be so disenchanted by their encounter with the fabled French capital that they end up needing psychiatric treatment.

"Fragile travelers can lose their bearings," a Paris psychologist told the newspaper, *Journal du Dimanche*, "When the idea they have of a country meets the reality of what they discover, it can provoke a crisis."

Now, we appreciate a new syndrome as much as the next person, but obviously more has been lost in translation here than the experiences of a few disoriented visitors from the Orient. Why, for instance, did the authors of the original study, which was published in a French medical journal in 2004, single out Japanese as particularly likely to find Paris a letdown? Not just your everyday disappointment, either, but a jolt big enough to send some of them over the edge.

And why Paris? The City of Light hardly has a monopoly on darkness. New York or Mexico City can be so scary they probably have psychiatrists on hand for tourists who *don't* start acting paranoid.

There are, to be sure, a couple of grains of truth lurking in the *Journal du Dimanche's* sensationalized account of what was no doubt a sober scholarly study. For one thing, the grand old city on the Seine does indeed come as a rude shock to many visitors.

People arrive with their heads full of romantic notions, expecting -- well, all kinds of things. Some yearn to see the exotic, over-the-top Paris of Marie Antoinette. Some pine for a whiff of between-the-wars Paris, when Ernest Hemingway or Gertrude Stein or James Joyce might have been found lingering in the smoke-hazed cafes. A few think of postwar Paris, full of the faux-working-class glamour

of Sartre and Camus, the city that inspired Kenzaburo Oe and Shusaku Endo.

There's cinematic Paris, all cobblestones, sunlit river and shadowy bridges. There's gourmet Paris, brimming with elegant restaurants. And, not least, Paris the fashion capital, home of fabulous department stores and such gods of the well-turned-out Japanese "office lady" as Louis Vuitton and Hermes. It's a city of dreams.

It's also a city of dashed expectations. Not just because those expectations are too high, or that it rains the weekend you're there, or that your hotel is drab and overpriced, or that your baguette is hard, your cafe au lait lukewarm, and the crowds in the the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore are suggestive of Shibuya on a weekend. Such disappointments are universal.

The real problem with Paris is that it is full of Parisians, who -- let's be honest -- never met a visitor they didn't heartily wish were someplace else. You can't really be said to have experienced discourtesy until it has been doled out to you by a master of the art: a hoity-toity Parisian on his or her home turf.

Japanese, meanwhile, can fairly claim to have written the book on politeness. That isn't to say foreigners are always treated well in Japan. They are not. But there are places here -- especially the hotels, stores and restaurants where travelers are most likely to be found -- where the culture of service and attention is so ingrained that Parisian-style coldness would be unthinkable.

The Journal du Dimanche talked to one Frenchman who helps Japanese families living in France and pinpointed the difference as a big problem. "In Japanese shops, the customer is king," he said, "whereas here assistants hardly look at them."

Upsetting, yes. But traumatizing? Not really. Even if Paris does send a handful of fragile Japanese travelers to the doctor, it seems a stretch to label their affliction a syndrome. Fragile travelers of all nationalities lose their emotional bearings constantly, wherever they go, often starting at their home airport. That's pretty much the definition of a fragile traveler. We know people who get discombobulated traveling to the next prefecture on a holiday weekend. Is that a syndrome, too?

Perhaps it's time to nominate an even more alarming malady, the syndrome syndrome, characterized by the urge to identify new pathologies whether they exist or not.

Meanwhile, the psychiatrist's couch should remain a last resort. As the irreverent British columnist A.A. Gill remarked last week, if Fear and Loathing of Paris really is a bona fide new medical condition, there's a ready cure available. It's called Rome. Travelers, take note.

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