

Have your say



This month:
Ain (01)

Interviews: Simon Watkinson

Is France becoming the land of the bland?

BRITISH writer Peter Millar explained in a recent Daily Mail article how his love affair with rural France had turned sour.

He said he had reluctantly decided to sell his second home in the Dordogne after seeing the area gradually drained of its character. Small local shops and once-thriving markets had made way for bland out-of-town retail parks and faceless hypermarkets.

We asked locals in the Pays de Gex commune in the east France department of the Ain whether they thought their country was losing its character and individuality at the hands of the global retail giants

France is inevitably changing, but I think we all need to take a stance to preserve values and standards, whether material, moral or spiritual.

René Mabillard 60, Mayor of Pougny



Society in France has always been divided: one half takes an interest in world affairs; the other half is just not bothered. With globalisation, this has become more pronounced.

In my youth, we just had the village shop and there was not much choice. Now the chain stores can offer so much more choice, but their business practices are harmful to farmers. I used to work for a multi-national whose philosophy was: think global, act local. France has not fully embraced this concept and is in a rut now.

If we do not soon grasp the available opportunities, it will be catastrophic.

Carole B. 30, French teacher



You only have to look at France's rich cultural diversity and the regions with their gastronomic differences to conclude that France is not becoming bland. Even chain stores offer cosmetics and fashionable, chic products.

However, France's individuality in international relations, especially its arrogance in continually trying to prove that it has a crucial role to play on the world stage, makes it unpopular.

Michael Konstantinou 38, engineer



No, I do not really think that France is becoming more bland. To find stability in a world that is

experiencing a media and communications revolution, we must return to the values of our childhood years.

By shopping at a huge chain store or even online, and not walking to the local delicatessen or farm shop, we are missing out.

The smaller shops have a loyal customer base, who need to know the origins and production methods of the merchandise.

It's just human nature to moan

AS A reader of Connexion and a resident of France for the last ten years, I have, like Jacqueline Terry (September Letters) been irritated by criticising or patronising statements some people make about France in newspapers.

I have found myself thinking "why are you here if you don't like it?" and feel depressed by features where people still want things like British sausages (when the French ones are so much better), Heinz baked beans and tomato ketchup.

Just so that Mrs Terry knows that there are those of us who endeavour to be different, my husband and I never watch British television. We both speak French fluently (we are translators). We read French newspapers and contemporary novels (in fact we even read French translations of some English novels), we go to see French films, attend the theatre and watch actors with strong regional accents (and understand them). We know

more French television personalities, actors and sportspeople than their counterparts in England. We listen to Francis Cabrel, Laurent Voulzy, Jean-Jacques Goldman, Garou, Eddy Mitchell, George Brassens, and Vanessa Paradis.

We eat only French produce and do not have frequent visits to England to stock up on British things. When friends ask us what we would like that is British when they come to stay, we find it hard now to think of anything that we really miss and generally say "nothing" because we really do have all we need here.

We have lots of French friends and actually avoid British people because we have always found that you can soon find yourself in a vicious circle of strictly Brit dinner parties and you no longer feel that you living are in France at all.

We are very happy to be here, loving everything French (OK, apart from the bureaucracy) and nothing could ever



drag us back to the life we had in England.

So, yes, like Mrs Terry, we get fed up with whingeing - but we read Connexion because it is full of extremely useful articles and if there is one thing that living in France has taught us, it is there is no one who moans quite so much about the bureaucracy and France in general than our

intelligent and questioning French friends. It is always harder when the criticism comes from outside because it appears disrespectful.

Perhaps it is not. It is only human nature, after all, to find fault with governments and share problems. Mrs Terry, rest assured - we love France. S. RUSHTON Gard

Jérôme Werner 35, corporate pilot



I would say that France's image is changing, but I am not sure yet whether this is for better or worse. French

towns and cities have not been so badly affected - there is no comparison with a city like Moscow, for example, which is definitely succumbing to chain stores much faster.

With globalisation and its effects, more emphasis on Europe and less sovereignty - how many French voices do the 15,000 lobbyists in Brussels actually represent? - we may think that France is losing its individuality, but in the end, that is what the French voted for.

Jo Stroudinsky 53, housewife



I would reply yes and no to this question.

The problem of the world becoming smaller due to communication and travel improvements has inevitably heralded change - more choice, but at the cost of product standardisation.

More choice is good, but massive industrialisation has its drawbacks. I see two trends in the supermarkets. You can buy the same products everywhere, which inevitably reduces a country's individuality. However, demand for, and interest in, home-made crafts and organic products, preferably grown locally to avoid transport costs and pollution and to support the local farmers, is now increasing.



No need to panic about language

REGARDING R.T.'s letter in the family pages of September's Connexion (about her language concerns as her daughter was about to start school), I was in the same position as she is.

I came to live in France in 1988 with a three-year-old, 20-month-old and three-month-old. Paul, three, started in the local *maternelle* and I used to dread anyone saying more than *bonjour* to me.

Quickly I learned to respond to *ça va?* and I found that plenty of smiles and nods from the other mothers got me over the shyness. I carried a dictionary and at the worst pointed to the word I thought I had said and we would all have a laugh.

Her little girl will, I am sure, get on with her new friends and report back their names. Life here in France is really wonderful in spite of all the bureaucratic problems. The health service is superb, schooling from *maternelle* to university is superb. As for the people, if you are friendly and interested in them, it is reciprocal. I wish her luck. BEATRICE JONES Pas-de-Calais

Is UK town the evil twin?

LE PUY-EN-VELAY (Haute-Loire) hosts a spectacular event every year called the Fêtes Renaissance du Roi de l'Oiseau [the latest one was last month].

It is a great attraction to which people come from all over Europe, including Le Puy's twin towns - except the English one.

This three-day event, culminating in the grand parade on the Sunday afternoon seems to involve virtually the whole population. Shops, cafes, parks and squares take on a medieval look and many people, old and young, dress up. Street theatre and other entertainments are to be seen throughout the event even in the most unlikely back streets.

Having attended for several years, I have never seen any participation from Tonbridge and Malling council, Kent, and I was told by a Le Puy Councillor that "the English say they can't afford it."

Small towns in Spain, Italy and Germany can. What does that say about the attitude of one of the most affluent districts in the UK towards France? Are they incompetent in manage their finances, insensitive to the concept of twinning or can they just not be bothered?

I feel indignant at being associated with such an attitude through my nationality.

Perhaps I should sign myself *Dégoûté des Puits de Pont Tun*.

TERRY BURKE
By email

A spokeswoman for Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council said Le Puy did not usually invite them to attend this event. They had planned to attend another event in May this year, but were unable to, not because of budget constraints, but because the mayor and twinning committee chairman were unavailable.

She said: "The then mayor did attend the Fêtes Renaissance in 2005 which was the 20th anniversary, which may be why we were invited on that occasion."

Central services director Julie Beilby said twinning was "certainly not disregarded" by the borough. "We have been in communication with Le Puy through the years and this year handled various requests from organisations within our borough to establish links including a theatre company wishing to include the history of Le Puy in a play to be put on at Tonbridge Castle and a request from a newly formed youth group looking for pen pals with a view to exchanges."

"There have also been requests from Le Puy with which we have assisted."

The FSA is powerless or useless

MR BLEVINS cannot be serious when he suggests [Avoiding the Cowboys, August edition] that the UK's Financial Services Authority (FSA) is considered one of the best regulatory authorities in the world.

The Northern Rock debacle springs to mind, as does the tripartite system of buck passing non-regulation created by Gordon Brown.

If the FSA is the best in the world, I dread to

think how ineffectual the others must be.

The FSA has not even got the courage, or maybe the power, to limit the excessive bonuses and risk-taking of the banks in the aftermath of the banking debacle. At the time, they sat on their metaphorical hands when the banking system was heading for self destruction.

KEITH HOWLETT
By email

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