

# VERSAILLES BY WHEEL

— SAMPLE CHAPTER —

*Addison's Walk: An English Major's Travel Writing*

Fat Tire Bike Tours. Not exactly a name I'd want if I were a sexy red cycle.

With downtime to kill in France, my travel roommate Paige and I thought we might as well heed Robert Frost's advice and take the road less travelled—a road, in this case, streaked with cycle tread and oil stains. We plunked down a handful of euros in exchange for a day-long cardio adventure. Fat Tire Bike Tours was scheduled to lead our little ragamuffin family of amateur cyclists on an excursion around Versailles, which was just a short train ride outside the City of Light. Apparently, this company cornered the market on Parisian bike tours (a small market, I'm sure!), so we decided to trust the reviews, grab a shiny bike, and make a memory. But before doing that, we had to find the place. All we had was a crumpled sheet of printed directions with vague landmarks. And so we walked...

And walked. For two country 20-somethings, that morning on the streets of Paris felt bigger than a motorway to a Smart car. Not being fluent in French, except for the expected "bonjour", the language barrier proved to be something of an issue. We should have brought along Sara as a translator. But we only had a number of hours there, for heaven's sake, so how much French did we really need to know? Ducking into a local patisserie that flaunted displays of white powdered pastries, I tried out my quasi-Parisian accent on the cashier but sheepishly bailed after the first three words.

"Huh?" she said, which was easily translatable, even to a confused American.

It's like she could tell I was insecure.

Continuing down the street, with the sky-high metallic Tour de Eiffel on our left, I resurrected the tattered map from my pocket. Paige, our designated map-reader, tried to make sense of the bike shop's directions, while I strained my neck looking up at the multi-story hotels. Rue Edgar Faure—that's the road we wanted. Stumbling down block after block, we finally gave up and dialed the strange number on our sheet. That was an ordeal in itself. Phone numbers aren't supposed to have plus signs in them. It's unorthodox. After double-checking the number combination about 22 times, I finally punched it in, plus signs and all. A Fat Tire employee on the other end of the line answered, and the accent caught me off guard. It hadn't heard it in a long time, if ever, but her voice was strangely decipherable. It definitely wasn't French. I chatted for a minute then handed the phone over to Paige. As I gawked at the tall buildings, she said "Thank you", put away the phone, and scanned the panorama for landmarks.

"What accent was that, anyway?" I asked.

"Hers?"

"Yeah."

"That was American."

Wow. I guess the “Thank you” should have given that away.

The bike shop continued to play its game of hide and seek, and for all we sought, we could not find it. The bike company’s helpful advice over the phone had been:

“It’s *right* next to the Eiffel Tower.”

Well, we walked and we walked. We walked what seemed like the circumference of the city grid, and I threw up my hands.

“I don’t get it! It’s supposed to be *right next* to the Eiffel Tower.”

Paige unfolded the dirty map once again.

The Eiffel Tower serves as a metallic beacon to all who pass, coaxing the city in under its spell. But even as imposing as it was supposed to be, we couldn’t find it anywhere. How dumb is that? Around the corner we went again, the scent of freshly-baked bread to our right, a crumple of newspapers at our feet. Was it the *same* crumple of papers from the previous block? We couldn’t tell.

“Eeek!” I suddenly squeaked, like a church mouse.

There it was—a navy blue sign with green trim. The words were in French, but they elicited more happiness than we’d felt all week. Rue Edgar Faure. Sighing in relief, we spotted racks of shiny red bicycles and walked up to the entrance. *Ding, ding* went the silver bell on the door, as we engaged in the first human contact we’d had for quite some time.

“Howdy, folks!” waved a happy-go-lucky stud in the back of the store. Paige and I glanced over to see what young upstart was addressing us so cavalierly. It turned out he was the one leading our tour.

Meet Graham. Blonde haired and blue eyed, the kid, who was somewhere in his mid-20s, was working in Paris as a tour guide for the summer. He was pleasantly cocky and had a thick Texan accent. He also had the attention of every single lady in the group (except for me and Paige, of course; we were still on the hunt for Richard Armitage and his posse of Scottish brothers).

Speaking of our group, it was an eclectic bunch. There was an older Australian couple, Graham’s sweet aunt, a middle-aged woman, a handful of American girls who had a thing for blonde Texans, and us. All sporting gaudy backpacks and rain jackets, we picked out a pile of bikes and peddled into the congested streets of Paris.

That ride was a crazy 10-minute blur. Horns! Honks! Hard breathing! Graham shouted directions from the head of our single-file line, and my camera flashed constantly, as I snapped

shots of the Eiffel Tower while trying to steer one-handed. I don't remember much of anything while we were riding those bikes, besides feeling self-conscious and very much like a tourist.

Our first stop before catching the train to Versailles was the market. Since our excursion would last well past the lunch hour, we needed to stock up on lots of good French essentials. Graham let us loose to browse the brasseries and patisseries lining the streets to stuff our bags and bikes with food. One brasserie smelled like warm yeast and had braided loaves hanging from the ceiling like a kind of flaky wisteria. A sweets shop housed a decadent display of chocolate mousse-filled tarts with strawberries and candied walnuts. We could hardly handle the ardent perfume. Paige and I ducked inside a deli, bought a few slices of Brie cheese and the unhealthiest type of pastrami we could find, and strapped crunchy baguettes to the backs of our bikes with bungee cords. Obviously, I broke my 17-Euro-only pact.

Twenty minutes later, a train chugged up to a platform in Versailles, and we unloaded the bikes. The Australians, merry couple that they were, joked about having sampled too much cheese to be able to carry the bikes down.

"Al-roit, Jack..." the wife laughed drunkenly to her husband, "you tyke theece thin' down for me. I'm as clumsy as a wallaby in a willow tree."

Okay, maybe she didn't actually say that. But it was something similarly charming, and I don't have a very good memory.

From the point when we hoisted our rumps onto the bicycle seat and on, the afternoon sped by like spokes on a wheel. I'm not sure how familiar the majority of the human population is with Versailles, but at least a casual acquaintance is necessary. It's a lovely piece of our planet.

After peddling through a majestic arbor of trees, a two-minute surprise shower forced us to look for shelter. Billowy groves by King Louis IV's Grand Chateau served as our momentary umbrella. Touring Versailles by bicycle was a novelty. The ride was saturated with lore of Marie Antoinette and her royal circle. The Petite Trianon, which belonged to Antoinette, was my personal favorite site. It was painted a light shade of rose, complementing the surrounding acreage of vibrant gardens. Daisy petals the color of pink lipstick yawned and stretched out in the midday sun.

At noon, we stacked the cycles on the edge of the Grand Canal and spread our picnic lunch over the grass. Biking burns calories you didn't know you had, and even with the rich blue waterway as our backdrop, there was only one thing on our minds—food. We devoured a chocolate chip pastry, salami, cold peaches, and Brie and watched Graham's harem form an intimate circle by the waterside. Graham was a great tour guide, obviously very knowledgeable in French history. I'm sure he loved it too; spouting stories and collecting girlfriends isn't a bad way to spend a summer for a guy.

The afternoon wore on, and suddenly Graham, who had been taking the lead again, stopped in his tracks and confided in the rest of us.

“Hey guys, we have a problem,” he announced, once our group found its way back outside to unstrap the napping bikes. “Nancy’s missing.” Missing? My first thought was, *Who’s Nancy?* Then I remembered hearing her name in the train car and realized she was the middle-aged lady standing alone. Unlike the rest of our band, she didn’t have a travel buddy, and her sudden disappearance caused me to wonder if she had found one.

“What do we do now, hun?” inquired Graham’s aunt, who had obviously volunteered to be the token mother figure on this trip. She’d already asked her nephew if he was wearing enough sunscreen. Graham answered patiently.

“Well, we’d better retrace our steps first. You guys stay here for a sec, and I’ll bike back to the Grand Chateau.”

She wasn’t there, so our group biked around Versailles for what seemed like hours, then rested on shady benches while Graham racked his brain for Plan B. I don’t think there *is* such a thing as Plan B when it comes to Fat Tire protocol on losing clients. I think that’s what you’d call “getting fired.”

“It’s getting late, guys. I’ll need to send ya’ll back (his Texan accent sounded especially cute when he got concerned), so let’s head to the train station.”

We boarded the engine to return to Paris, and Graham stayed behind to search. Trying to feign sympathy along with our newly adopted Australian grandparents, Paige and I realized we’d missed our one chance to visit the Louvre. Our one chance! With two tickets to the museum in my fanny pack, and the sun now setting, we did the only logical thing at that point. We offered them the Aussies. They’d booked a hotel to stay an extra day in Paris and could cash the tickets in tomorrow. It stung a little, especially considering how many Euros they’d cost, but we did our good deed for the day, and that was that. As they say in France (and everywhere else for that matter): it is what it is. Or *c’est la vie*.

Ten minutes later, Graham poked his head into our train car and announced that our missing lady had been stung by a bee. Or so the story goes. She’d soon grown disoriented and very lost. *Are you serious?* First I thought Graham was putting us on. *Stung by a bee? What kind of soporific bees did they have in Paris, anyway?* Nancy shouldn’t have suffered from disorientation as much as she should have suffered from a swelled finger. But then I realized that Graham’s baby blue eyes were in earnest.

“She was *stung*...” he said, trying to keep a straight face, “by a bee.”

Not about to be left behind in a foreign city, I guess Nancy had taken matters into her own hands and tracked down a train leaving for Paris and was now on her way back, alone. As my Aussie grandparents would put it, "Quite the resourceful little sheila!" Or something like that.

Once we sighed in relief and stopped worrying about bee-lady, the rest of the trip back was a rousing one. The perk of having a Texan for a tour guide is that 1) you don't have to worry about speaking *en Français* and 2) you finish off your day on the streets with a robust "Yee-haw!" on the count of three. We tourists drew more than our share of attention, peddling under the beige bridges at an impressive volume and yelling like a bunch of drunks. I'm pretty sure there was a line of tourists snapping pictures.

That night, back on the Eurostar, I sat by the window and tried to nap. Despite my exhaustion, the only things able to fall asleep were my arms. A few weeks after resuming normal life, an email appeared in our inboxes. It was a chummy letter from the Aussies, thanking us for our generosity with an attached photo of them standing in front of the Mona Lisa. I sighed. Replying to the email, I sent it into the rugged void of the outback and glanced at my postcard of the Louvre. The world was still a beautiful place, but it was a little bittersweet right then.

In the end, our bike tour was a crazy way to kill a few extra hours in France. But it was a much better choice than sitting on the steps of the Paris Opera House, playing Scrabble. And by the way, watch out for Versailles bees, guys. You never know when they'll strike.