

The Nature of the French

Decoding the mystery of French hiking symbols becomes a lesson in cultural priorities.

by ANNABEL SIMMS

I've enjoyed country walks for most of my life in England without ever worrying about getting lost. It was only when I started seriously exploring the countryside around Paris that getting lost became an all-too-familiar experience. My friend and I would follow a promising path that would end in barbed wire or a fence. Occasionally we did notice inconspicuous little red, white and yellow stripes painted at eye level on these paths and were puzzled by the ones in the form of an X. We assumed that they meant "Take this path," but following them invariably led to grief.

I eventually discovered that the stripes were a part of national system of markings put there by the Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre (FFRP), the French version of the American Hiking Society. A horizontal white stripe over a red one meant "Take this path," a white left or right arrow underneath meant that the path would soon fork left or right. Red and white stripes meant we were on a *sentier Grande Randonnée* (GR), one of the major footpaths crossing France. Red and yellow were for a *sentier Grande Randonnée de Pays* (GRP), a path crossing a department or region, and yellow meant that it was one of the *Promenades et Randonnées* (PR), a shorter circuit for local walkers. In every case, the X meant "Do not take this path."

I triumphantly put this information into my book about the Paris environs and started using it myself, with gratifying results. Once you become aware of these signs, you start noticing them everywhere, even in central Paris. Yes, some *randonnées* go right through cities and towns. I was amused to discover that a friend of mine who has lived in Paris for 20 years thought that they indicated an area where mobile phone reception was good. I smugly put her right, but we still had trouble with the signs. What should we make of a short slanting line through some of them? And in spite of our newfound knowledge, some were so discreet that we missed them altogether,



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some GR routes indicated on the maps were no longer in existence, and others existed beneath our feet but not on the map. Clearly, there was a time lag between the marking of a new route and its appearance on the IGN map. And how did these new routes get approved by the Institut Géographique National anyway?

How trails are blazed

So when I saw an FFRP brochure titled *Devenir Baliseur* (Become a Trail Blazer) I decided to find out by becoming a volunteer myself. Easier said than done. You had to join an accredited two-day course first, and it took 18 months to pin down the organizers to a date when a course would definitely be happening. Then I had to persuade them to charge me €16 rather than €92. The lower charge applied if I promised to use my skills only in the Seine-et-Marne department, where the course was held. In return I was

expected to maintain the signs on a 15-kilometer (9.3 mi) stretch of footpath in the department for life—unless, of course, I decided not to. So that was all right.

The course took place on the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau. The first morning was, *bien sûr*, devoted to theory. I discovered that the FFRP had started in 1946 and was run by volunteers who worked closely with local towns and landowners as well as government ministries to designate and maintain public footpaths across France. The organizational structure seemed incredibly complex. The first day ended with everyone cutting out a template of stiff plastic so that the signs we were to paint the next day would be mathematically uniform and precise. I nearly cut my thumb on mine and almost gave up. But the mystery of the slanting line through some of the signs was explained: they indicated a *diverticule* (another GR route branching off from

the main one). I decided not to do those, as cutting them out was even more of a challenge.

Aesthetics before practicality

On the second day we were split up into small groups and assigned different parts of the forest to practice on, accompanied by an experienced *baliseur*. We were each issued a square bucket containing a brand-new file, a wire brush, little paint pots and brushes, the famous template, pencils and a clean rag. Within five minutes we were in pleurably heated argument. Some were in favor of putting the distance to the next hiking station alongside our first sign, but others argued against it on the grounds of “discretion,” one of the principles we had been taught in the theory phase. These ordained that the signs be uniform but also aesthetic, helpful, discreet and respectful of the environment—in that order.

In reality, there are as many different ways of painting signs as there are different *baliseurs*. I was tickled that “aesthetic” came before “helpful” and argued passionately in favor of showing the distance. Overruled. A tall man in shorts called Christian nicknamed me “L’Angleterre” and never stopped teasing me about my English sloppiness in making my template the merest bit lopsided. As he painstakingly and good-naturedly painted over all my slightly wavy lines with his own geometrically perfect template, I retorted that he was typically French, obsessed with form over content. We had a lovely time cutting up each other’s countries, all the while enjoying the hard physical work of filing off tree bark, the convivial pleasure of painting on trees and stone, and the silence of the forest in the dappled morning light, far from Paris and the workaday world. Two walkers out early greeted us with appreciation when they saw what we were doing, and I felt a glow of altruistic satisfaction.

The most instructive episode came last, when a new sign needed to be painted. But where? On the tree with the softest bark, easiest for us, or the one nearest the trail, where it might actually be seen? No one wanted to attack the steely bark on the nearest one, but I knew from my own experience that a sign on the more remote tree might easily be overlooked. “Right,” I said, “I’ll do it.” I seized the file. Five minutes

After the training, I was expected to maintain the signs on a certain stretch of footpath for life—unless, of course, I decided not to.

later, having made almost no impression on the bark, I regretted my high-minded decision but refused to give up. Luckily Christian, the long-suffering perfectionist, appeared, having been delayed by painting a dead-straight line on the last sign. “Aha,” he said triumphantly, “*c’est L’Angleterre en difficulté?*,” and with French gallantry he took over and finished the job in 10 minutes.

I returned to Paris by train and métro with my bulky bucket of tools and my overnight bag, gratified to have decoded some of the mystery of the GR signs and proud in the knowledge that one useful mark in the Forest of Fontainebleau is forever England. Well, with a little help from France. ■

Annabel Simms is the author of *An Hour From Paris* (Pallas Athene). www.anhourfromparis.com

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The IGN series of *Topoguides* covers the whole of France. At around €7.50 each, they use a scale of 4 cm to 1 km and are the only maps to show all GR, GRP and PR footpaths. Streets and train stations are not identified, however, so you may also need the relevant transportation map, available at stations or online at www.sncf.fr, and a street map, available free from the local *mairie* or tourist office. The GR paths shown on the IGN maps are not always up-to-date, so don’t forget to bring a compass, too.

HOTEL

Les Fermes de Marie

Chemin de Riente Colline

Megève

04.50.93.03.10

Among relatively refined grownups, the romantic notion of throwing off the shackles of our well-appointed

lives to commune with nature for a week can seem much less, well, romantic than it once did. After all, with 50 weeks of slaving away, who needs bug bites and improvised food on vacation? But let’s keep it our little secret that the sophisticated Haute-Savoie hotels that pamper upscale skiers in winter, become gloriously peaceful getaways in summer. Easily the most fascinating of these is Les Fermes de Marie in Megève. Jocelyne and Jean-Louis Silbert literally reconstructed an Alpine village (within a village, of course), fitting out a series of authentic farmhouses on a two-acre park. And, of course, this is very, very privileged land, with awe-inspiring vistas in any season. A true aesthetic idealist, Jocelyne painstakingly created the interiors piece by piece, gathering antiques from around the region; the result is film-set gorgeous, fetchingly rustic but with none of the cloying tweezeness that plagues so many Alpine resorts. Oh, but best of all, after a day spent feeling as one with the birds, trees, fields and flowers, you can swap your inner Thoreau for your inner aristocrat and let yourself be extravagantly spoiled with exotic spa treatments and a decadent feast in one of the resort’s three illustrious restaurants. Isn’t nature grand?

Rooms from €250 half board; full-board rates available.

Ken Scrudato



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