

The Old-timer 'et France l'aujourd'hui

Ladies and gentlemen, I never visited France before. I hadn't had too many expectations when it comes to the dog show there since we'd planned to stay overnight in the Novotel Suite near Paris, which was closest to the exhibition area anyway. An average hotel, with breakfast available, but -sadly- no restaurant. We thought it would be better to divide the journey into stages so on our way we made a stop for the night near Bielefeld in Germany. Apart from our Dupa we also had a Welsh Corgi something, called Dollar. He travelled with his own cage. We were supposed to deliver him to his Irish owner at the show. We hadn't booked a hotel so we spent two hours looking for a room. Eventually we found a room: 2nd floor, openwork staircase, which made our bitch a bit shy. Dollar, on the other hand, wasn't in the least affected either by the staircase or by the change in the Swiss Frank exchange rate. There's nothing to tell except for the chef inquiring if I wanted another beer ("*naechste piwo*") since there was a group of Polish businessmen staying at the hotel. On TV, there was a women soccer game on, a quarter or semi-final of the world championships, I don't remember. But I do remember that the Germans won. The noise from the restaurant downstairs was very audible each time somebody scored a goal.

Breakfast was 'ganz gut' apart from coffee. Even though it was freshly made, it must have been either ground or purchased a long time ago. Let's go! We drove through Germany, Belgium (with extraordinarily dirty restrooms) and then France. The landscape was the same as it was all the way from Poland. So was the weather: rain, a bit of sunshine, and then the rain again. I guess it's what makes you feel a Euaropean – it all starts looking alike no matter where you go. A few stops, first to pee and then for a drink (to keep the balance) and off we go! At last we made it near Paris and started looking for our hotel. The area around Charles de Gaulle Airport consists mainly of hotels of various sort. And that's pretty much it. Apparently somebody had a brilliant idea to send all those milksops (like us) far away from the city. The neighbourhood doesn't encourage you to take a walk – it's simply a passenger repository, where people travelling via Paris are shoved to stay the night, pay and ...leave. At a first glance the hotel looked decent. Wrong! After checking-in (bear in mind that you have to pay 20 days prior to your actual arrival) , we were given a card that opens everything. To use an elevator you have to insert it into a detector. First time we got inside without the dogs, only our luggage. So, card into the detector, press '5' (it's our floor), the lift moves, reaches level '2' and it stops. The door didn't open, we're starting to sweat. The elevator starts moving without any intervention from us, reaches the reception level. The door opens, we see people standing in front of the open door wishing to get inside but our luggage is taking up the whole space. The door closes, I get scared and almost shit my pants but the card works properly this time and the elevator takes us all the way to level '5'. I sigh with relief. Now we have to find our room. The hotel was built as a rectangle with an inner atrium and our room, accidentally, couldn't have been situated any farther from the elevators. No matter which way we turned, they were just as far. Thanks a lot (or rather 'merci') for taking our dogs into consideration before assigning the room. We

reach the door only to find out that the doorhandle requires a card as well. We're educated people after all, and we know how these things work. 'Merde!' I insert the card and nothing happens! I do it again- same thing. I try once more but this time I do it slowly, thinking it might actually work that way.... and nothing. I'm starting to sweat again. I examine the card carefully from both sides. It looks pretty threadbare. A boy smiles at me from it and I'm pretty pissed. There is no information on the card as to how to use it properly. I got creative and tried inserting it in several different ways. None of them worked. I double-checked the number on the door – everything seemed fine there. Sweating but brave I turn my steps to the reception desk – luckily for me and the hotel I don't have to use the card to go down to level '1'. I inform the guy there what happened saying that the card is most likely 'kaputt'. He assures me my problem can be easily solved and inserts my card into a reader of some kind and says that everything is OK. I get back in the elevator, and feel relieved seeing I'm not alone there and that I don't have to use my card to go up. I exit on level '5' and meet Beata who's still waiting at the door. Proud of myself I insert the card into the slot and ... nothing. Again ... and again – still nothing. I feel like Maria Walewska (the guy from the reception is the Napoleon), and sweating even more I go down to the reception again. I'm trying to keep calm. A gentleman from the reception (Napoleon) says he'll call a technician to my room. I go back but ... this time I'm alone in the elevator. I have to use my card to set it in motion. So I insert it in the slot, press '5' and I land on 2nd floor and the door won't open. After a short while the elevator takes me down to the reception level. I'm drenched with sweat. After a third try I can see a green light and I finally reach 5th floor. I get off, in the corridor I can see the technician heading towards my room. I'm happy!!! We meet at the door where Beata has been waiting patiently all this time. The technician takes the card from me, inserts it in the doorhandle ... and the door opens. I put up my collar to hide my obtrusive red neck.

We enter the room. I don't trust my luck so I ask Beata to stay inside and I venture outside to find my doorhandle's G spot using my card. After three attempts I gently knock on the door for Beata to let me in. Now she decides she'll have a go and check if it works. She opens it the first time. My turn. 30 seconds and I knock on the door again. When I cooled off and the clothes on my back dried up, I was able to assess my room. Quite big, with a proper bed, table, armchairs and TV set. Mary, mother of God! - a microwave, fridge and a kettle. Cautiously I check if they too require me using a card. So far so good. I knew these appliances would be there but I was nonetheless surprized they were actually working. So was the AC which does matter in those built-in-haste hotels where temperature on a sunny day reaches 40 degrees Celsius. There were also some surprizes: Internet connection via TV – I forgive the Napoleon from the reception.

As it was quite early, we went for a drive to check out the show venue and have it easier the following day. Nothing special to be honest : a humongous area with exhibition venues, but at least we know how to get there. We are back in the room with Dupa and Dollar. We had been hoping we would have delivered Dollar to his owner the same day in the evening but obviously she wasn't too fond of him. She had called saying it was getting too late and that we would meet at the show. And because

Dollar is a charming low-maintenance dog I didn't get very angry. To prove it to you I'll only say that after that conversation I went to the bar and guzzled three beers. Costly!!! We also tried to dine at a local restaurant but since they don't allow dogs and don't serve alcohol we took offence and didn't even bother to go inside.

When I was booking the room, I came across a tantalizing ad that encouraged me to pay some extra for 'delicious, well-balanced breakfast prepared exclusively by the chef himself to meet my sophisticated expectations.' So I paid for that option. Dear Chef!... In the hotel cafe there is a big reach-in refrigerator. Inside, in plastic containers (teeny tiny ones) you can find "perfectly balanced" milk with rice, cereal (which I cordially detest), sandwiches the size of bird's poop and tiny little pieces of cold meat with colourful afterglow of preservatives. All of it most probably packaged in Hong Kong a week ago. I was willing to forgive all that however because of the outstanding coffee and croissants.

Our drive to the show area took only 10 mins. I stayed in the car with the dogs while Beata went to locate our ring. As I have already said, it's a vast industrial area so she was back within an hour.

Dollar was still with us and so it dawned on us that it was high time we did something about it. Although he truly is a great dog. Her friend answered her phone after a third try and told us she was busy judging and was unavailable. Another hour passed and shortly before it was our turn to appear in the ring, we succeeded in uniting Dollar with his owner and we were free to take care of our own business. 'Our' exhibition venue was 1 km from the parking lot. We didn't have any plan of the area so we ended up parking in the farthest spot possible. It took a while to get there but we made it. I have already mentioned what I think about indoor shows and I stick to what I have said. It's a mistake. I admit however that this time it was quite clean thanks to the unit of professional cleaners (even though the dog owners themselves were doing their best to ignore their dogs' poop). Outside the exhibition area – one big heap of dung.

To sum up the first day I'll only say that Dupa was 4th.

After the show was over, there came the time for me to enjoy myself and go shopping. We didn't have a clue where we were going but we managed to find Carrefour. It struck me that there was not a single 'pale face' outside the store. Let's say that Beata and the dog stayed in the car because of the unbearable heat. I grabbed a cart and hurried inside. Suddenly I realized my cart had a flat tyre and hence was making noise. At first I didn't care but when I got in the tile floor turned the noise into a racket. It's beyond my skill to describe it. Try to imagine it- a guy with a contrasting skin colour pushing a damaged cart which is causing a clangor similar to that of a jackhammer, which possibly is the only noisy cart in whole France. Putting on a brave face I marched through every aisle and, trust me, there wasn't a single person in the store who wouldn't turn their head to check out the moron causing all that clatter. Luckily they didn't kick me out.

We ate and drank like kings (though I did most of the drinking) but the French bread with a slab of blue cheese and good ham are hard to beat. Before we were back in our room however we had to park the car. This time the parking lot in front of the hotel was full so we had to go to the garage. It's a murky place and I don't recommend

using it if you are claustrophobic. Since the following day began with a 'perfectly balanced breakfast', the first thing I did when I got to the exhibition venue was buying French bread with ham.

But to do that we had to leave the garage first. Easy peasy? At the reception desk I was presented with yet another card- this time to open the gate. My caution levels rose immediately. I start the engine and am heading towards the exit. At the gate there is a sign that warns me to keep my card till I leave the hotel area. Sure, I'm not stupid. I insert the card into the reader. A crackling sound informs me that there's definitely something going on inside. Suddenly my card reappears in the slot and shoots out like Małysz from the take-off, straight into my window. I attack it fiercely with both hands trying to catch it but it's impossible to stop Małysz when he's already airborne. With a spiral movement the culprit lands gently on the garage floor. Have you ever tried picking something up from the ground sitting in a minivan? With your door only 10 cm ajar because any additional centimeter can cause the blocking of the ticket-spitting machine? When there's another vehicle waiting in line to drive out of the garage? Well, France will provide all those attractions.

The show was much more pleasant than it was the day before because instead of competing we focused on looking for a fiancée for Dupa. Needless to say, the pics came out poorly and there's nothing to publish on our website but we returned with a supply of three dry beds from London. The exhibition venues remained clean and the heaps of poop outside got bigger.

After the show we went shopping again, only this time the shopping got serious and included beer, wine and cheese in order to avoid waiting in long lines on Saturday. Then a few beers in the bar as a prelude to a real feast with the French bread as a main theme.

In the morning the 'wonderfully balanced breakfast' once more, plus a duel with the ticket machine in the garage. I defeated the vicious contrivance – I stopped Małysz at the take-off – by blocking the ticket exit with my hand. And then a boring journey back on predictable highways till Polish border.

In Poland I observed road workers- we passed by several construction sites on our way and none of them had more than 30 per cent people working. Out of every ten workers three are actually doing something and the rest is debating over the best way of carrying out the job.

Conclusion: I understand the passion for electronics and all those fancy card readers and sensing devices but you shouldn't entrust your lover with an absolute power, especially if that lover is indisposed.