

Jass Richards Does Europe

Jass Richards

jassrichards@gmail.com

www.jassrichards.com

People in business class and first class need to feel *important* and *special*.

So they get to board *ahead* of the rest of us.

Along with the other infants and small children.

The men in Sweden don't wear ties.

I don't know about you, but any country in which the men *don't* walk around wearing little nooses gets my vote.

Then again, given that most countries come nowhere near Sweden's 43% with regard to women in government — hell, they've had a woman president for years — well, the noose thing does provide a certain ... convenience.

Y'know, when you're travelling in different countries and people don't necessarily speak the language you do, you quickly realize it doesn't really matter whether you say "Thank you" or "Danke schoen" or "Merci" or "Tousen takk" — as long as you say something and smile, your gratitude will be appreciated and the other person will smile back.

So when I got off the bus at the stop for the train station kindly indicated by the driver to whom I'd shown my Eurail pass and then gestured helplessly out at the streets, I smiled at him and said "Your children have fleas."

And sure enough, he smiled back, nodding happily.

But I didn't realize how difficult it'd be to do simple things like buy groceries when you don't know the language. I mean you don't need to know Italian or Greek, for example, to recognize a loaf of bread when you see one.

Well, I can tell you now that whipping cream goes much better in tea than buttermilk.

In Europe, every train station has pigeons — not just out on the platforms, but actually inside the station building. I saw this one pigeon actually ride the escalator: it flew up off the floor to avoid being stepped on and landed on the escalator handrail and then ... just ... took the ride up.

Another figured out that if it hung around the station entertainers — and I use that word loosely — it could get *a lot* of crumbs: people would stand and nibble as they listened to the guy with the accordion or whatever.

I saw it two days later and it had its own act doing aerial manoeuvres. I don't know where it got the hat from or the sign saying "Cruddy chunks of food much appreciated" but it beat the hell out of the accordion guy.

Even before I got to France and Italy — in fact, as soon as I got to Sweden and saw huge outdoor flower pots at the airport terminal and then sculptures and art videos in the subway stations — well, by comparison, one comes to realize just how much "the aesthetic" simply does not count here. It has no value whatsoever.

'Course you can't really blame us. DaVinci and Michelangelo — *those* guys didn't bring their talent, their vision, to the New World. No, we got the guy with the accordion. The one who thought it would be more lucrative to play on a ship than on a train. A ship full of people who've just spent their last penny on passage.

Europe just doesn't have the junk food we do. I had a heck of a time finding Doritos.

Especially in, of all places, Amsterdam.

It's true that when you travel, your horizons get broadened. One time, there was a person sitting across from me on a train who was reading the Proceedings from some conference. I thought history maybe, or sociology. Turns out it was the Proceedings of the Fifth Annual International Congress on Boar Semen Preservation. They have congresses on boar semen preservation? See, I didn't know that before.

So I visited the famous opera building in Paris. And wow, talk about opulent. Marble columns and gold everywhere and chandeliers ... It is so breath-taking. And all I could think about was how underdressed I was.

And I walked along the famous Champs D'Elysees. Traffic whizzing by, must've been four lanes in each direction. Though the trees lining each side are cool. An especially nice view from the middle of the street. Which is where you get to stand if you don't race across doing your Marian Jones imitation when the light changes and the little green man at the crosswalk lights up.

Copenhagen, on the other hand, is *made* for pedestrians. It has lots of pedestrian-only spaces, the streets have these *really wide* sidewalks, and in Copenhagen, pedestrians *always* have the right of way. You can be crossing the street *anywhere* and the cars will stop for you.

They'll do that in Amsterdam too. Though that could be because you're apt to be crossing the street backwards. And giggling.

But in Paris, *cars* always have the right of way. Even if the little green man says it's okay to cross. Actually, in Paris the little green man says "Okay ... you can try it if you like."

There was this one small group of tourists stranded on a concrete island divider at a corner — I don't know how they got there, but they couldn't get off — they couldn't cross the street in any direction because cars kept coming, really fast, and none of them slowed down, they didn't even seem to notice that there were people standing there, trying to cross.

Well, except for the guy who looked over and started laughing. I think maybe he might've noticed ...

Eventually they had to send out some street-crossing officer to get us. But by then we were so dehydrated, and a little disoriented or confused, a few of us refused to leave our little island. It had become safe, you see ...

One of the shops on the Champs D'Elysees is the travel agency for *Iran Air* — *The Airline of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

I'll bet they're not doing much business these days.

Given the tendency of Islamic pilots to fly *into* buildings.

I noticed there were no garbage cans along the Champs D'Elysees. Anywhere. And I thought "Well, *that's* wishful thinking." I mean it's nonstop tourists.

A block later I realized they'd just said "The hell with it," given a woman a go-cart, put a vacuum cleaner on it, and made it a full-time job.

I got so tired of getting lost though. It was bad enough that I kept getting lost on my way from my bed-and-breakfast to the museum or wherever it was I wanted to go to, but I started getting lost *in* the museums.

It's true. You *can* spend days in the Louvre ...

I saw this one painting of a shipwreck, the central figure was on the beach dramatically draped over crates and sails and stuff in a pose of utter exhaustion — and I thought "Oh get a grip!"

As a species, we are so in love with ourselves — almost every single one of the sculptures and paintings I saw features *human* subjects. I saw a few horses, a rabbit or two, and an antelope, but they were usually dead. Or dying a very horrible death.

'Course it could just be that animals won't sit still long enough.

That could also explain why they're usually dead.

I also went to the Versailles Castle. The fireplace in one room was all set and ready to go with three *logs* — seven feet long, ten inches thick. That'd take a lot of lighter fluid.

And the huge wall-to-wall murals of battle scenes — the 17th century version of Terminator on Imax, I guess.

And the beds — canopies, embroidery, feathers, gold , and a four-foot-high platform. Talk about pressure to perform.

The description says the castle is actually King Louis' hunting lodge "enlarged" by his son. I'll say.

I did wonder if they had chandelier insurance. If one of *those* things should happen to fall — Well, there'd be 98 chandeliers left ...

Another thing I got tired of was deferring to people taking pictures. What *is* this obsession with taking pictures of everything? If you want *pictures* of these places, why not just buy the book? I swear some people took pictures of the postcards in the ever-present souvenir shop.

'Course why not — the postcards *always* look better than the real thing.

Remember Jules Verne? The guy who went around the world in 80 days? He didn't have to deal with airports and train stations and ferries.

I saw a street musician (still in Paris), just clapping — in time, I guess — but I have no idea to what.

Travelling would be so much easier if we could just beam ourselves from point A to point B. You could be sitting in your living room and think "Gee, I'd like to go to New York" — and then just beam yourself there.

'Course, we'd need traffic conductors. Otherwise, we'd be colliding into each others' beams and who knows who you'd be when you got there. I mean, what if *your* beam crossed the beam of a Pekinese on its way to Chicago? You'd arrive in New York half-Pekinese.

So, four days and three nights after Paris, I was on Syros, one of the Greek islands.

I discovered when I rented a moped to get from my little fishing village into town — and back again at night — when it was dark — driving on the only

road — a narrow winding road that went all the way up a mountain and then all the way down — that not only do the Greeks not have streetlights, they don't really use guard rails to keep you from going over the edge and plummeting to a certain death.

At the really scary sections, they might have a few posts. No cable connecting the posts, just the posts. About, oh, how wide is a moped? That far apart.

And one section did have a low stone wall that I thought could act like a barrier. Apparently three other people thought the same thing. But they were wrong. And left three crumbling gaps as proof.

Some officials can be so unhelpful. While I was in town, I stopped at the ferry office to find out when ferries went from Syros to Santorini. There was a schedule posted outside, but that route wasn't listed. So I went inside and asked the ferry office person whether, and when, a ferry went from Syros to Santorini. She directed me to the posted schedule.

So I went back outside and read it again, and again, looking carefully at each of thirty different trips for three different ferries on seven different days leaving at six different times. Nothing from Syros to Santorini. I went back inside.

"Is that the schedule for *all* ferries?" I asked. Yes.

"Does the schedule change from week to week?" No.

"Does the schedule list all islands stopped on the way?" Yes.

Finally, the question I eventually asked — which wasn't among my first twenty — was "Is there another name for Santorini?" Sure enough, there it was: Syros to Thira, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at 7:00 a.m.

So Friday, I headed down to a beach. A beach on Santorini. And just where I wanted to lay down my towel — midway between the screaming kids on the left and the bickering couple on the right — there were four small rocks. Just four. So I picked them up and tossed them away (two to the left and two to the right).

I lay down my towel and immediately the wind whipped it up. I'd get two corners down and half the towel smoothed out, and then as soon as I got the other two corners down, the first two would get blown up. Eventually I thought, "Hey! I need something to hold down the corners! I know! Rocks! Four small ones!"

Why is it that people who in their normal lives wouldn't venture to walk around the block decide when on holiday to sign up for an excursion climb up a volcano. And show up wearing flipflops, sandals, and heels. Normally, I wouldn't object. Everyone has the right to be an idiot.

But not when it means the thirty-eight people behind you on the single-file path have to stop in the hot sun while you negotiate a ten inch step up from one rock to another.

I mean, it's not like you were caught by surprise and thus ill-prepared: if you sign up for "an excursion climb up a volcano" you should've known it would involve ... climbing up a volcano.

And then there's the guy who has the right footwear — heavy duty basketball shoes — but he's so cool he hasn't done up the laces. Watch how cool I am when he turns his ankle and asks for help to get back down.

And there's the guy who's mistaken the excursion for a race and attempts to pass everyone. At great risk not only to himself, which doesn't bother me, but to everyone he passes. When he finds himself behind a small group of women, well, you'd think he's never been so *insulted* — to see the look on his face and the determination with which he passes them. I almost bump him off. But the volcano wasn't active at the time.

I have to say that the train ride from Athens to Patras was *really* annoying. For five hours. Not only because of the steady drone and rattle — that's *two different* annoying sounds by the way — but also because of the almost continuous blowing of the horn. Up to seven times a minute. I swear the conductor blew it even when we were nowhere near an intersection with a road. I figure he must've been one of those kids who wanted to be a train conductor when he grew up.

Eventually, recalling my moped night ride from hell, I realized it's the Greek custom to honk every time you approach a curve — which makes sense when everyone drives in the middle of the road — which they do because the roads aren't wide enough for you to drive on one side — unless you're driving a donkey. That said, I'm not sure what the train conductor thought might be coming at us from around each curve that needed warning. And frankly I was afraid to ask.

Once I got to Patras, I took a ferry to another island, Kefalonia. And while there, I decided to go for a walk to see a cave with stalactites and stalagmites. It was September, so the temperature was about 40 degrees. Centigrade. That's about 100 Fahrenheit. What can I say, I felt like going for a walk.

Actually, I felt like going for a run, but I'm not stupid.

So I started out on this 5 km walk — about 3 miles — at about the time all good Greeks start their mid-afternoon siesta: the heat stroke time of day.

That Greek guy who ran the first marathon and then dropped dead? I always figured he died of a heart attack or something. Uh-uh. He died of embarrassment, what with all the locals laughing at him for even *attempting* such a thing.

Did I wear sunscreen? Not me, I tan, I don't burn.

Did I take water? Nope. I regularly run 10 miles without a water stop.

I *did* wear white. Which is a good thing. Because it makes you more noticeable to passing motorists when you've collapsed at the side of the road.

As a philosophy student, I'd always wanted to see olive groves, perhaps walk among them deep in thought. Well, I thought, as I walked along the road on this Greek island, I have now seen olive trees. At least, trees with what are almost certainly olives-to-be, olives-in-progress, *potential* olives.

Whether I've seen olive *groves*, however, depends on how many trees constitute a grove.

I bet *that's* a question Plato didn't consider while walking through the forementioned olive groves.

The cave — I did get there — was actually well worth the walk. It was huge. Well, I don't know if it was *huge*, but it was big enough for the batmobile. That came to mind because there was a bat, a rather fat bat, doing its bat thing up amidst all the incredible rock icicle things (I can never remember whether they're the stalactites or the stalagmites, so I call them rock icicle things). I'd never seen anything like it. The cave, I mean.

Though I'd never seen a fat bat before either.

I've seen a cute little baby bat that was hibernating tucked all cozy, dry and snug, between the plastic I'd put over my windows and the wood siding. And I've seen an injured bat that tore its wing — I tried to fix it with scotch tape. That didn't work, by the way. But I've never seen a fat bat before. And there it was fluttering around and occasionally hanging upside down on one of those rock icicle things.

On the way back from the cave, I saw some trees, evergreens of some kind, that were oddly cone-shaped, rising straight up out of the ground. Rather like copycat stalagmites — the opposite of rock icicles — now that I think of it. Which is interesting, because the trees wouldn't've ever *seen* the stalagmites.

I also saw a sign outside a small Greek hotel named Virginia. The sign said "Virginia – Vacantly."

You know, when you walk, you see a lot more than when you drive. A little later, I saw a rat. I'd never actually seen a rat before. Mice yes — cute little Mickey Mouse deer mice, and the other kind with the brown fur. But not a rat. Well, there was the white rat we were supposed to dissect in science class, but that wasn't a real out and about *rat* rat.

'Course, this one wasn't really out and about either. Well it was out, but since it was dead, it wasn't really about ...

When I finally got back to my hotel, I figured a swim would be nice. People should really be more careful about how they use words. When I asked where the nearest beach was, I was directed to a stretch of water with rocks. They call it a pebble beach. I call it a shoreline.

So when I asked the next person, I specified *sandy* beach. Though that wasn't likely to be any better, since the famous "black sand" beach on Santorini wasn't sand, it was grit.

And just for the record, it was more grey than black.

Florence is rather like Paris in its attitude toward pedestrians, because in Italy there are no sidewalks at all.

Well, there *are* —but apparently they're for the cars.

Another interesting thing about Italy is that the street people don't ask you for money exactly — they pray for it. Literally: they kneel on the sidewalk with their little cup in front of them and pray, hands pressed together, eyes closed, the whole bit.

Which has a weird effect. It makes you feel guilty if you don't give: how can we call ourselves Christians if we don't give to the poor? But then as soon as you do give, well, the person's prayers are answered, thanks be to — wait a minute! That was *me* who put the dollar in your cup, not God! Thanks be to *me*! (I'm God!)

When I was sitting in a restaurant, I saw a waiter take three dead fish on a plate to some people at one of his tables, I guess so they could choose which one they wanted. At first I thought "Ugh!" But then I thought, well, people choose which lobster they want from a bunch swimming around in a tank.

So okay, let's at least be consistent then. Next time someone orders weiner schnitzel, let's bring out all the little baby calves to frolic around the table.

('Course if they're gonna be veal, they've been kept too weak to frolic...)

In Vienna, I went to see a Wagner opera, "The Ring Cycle", at the famous — and beautiful, lush, red velvet everywhere ... — Staatsoper. My standing room place was in the second side balcony. On my way up, and up, I had to stop for a nosebleed.

Then as I continued, I noticed a lot of fire extinguishers on the way. And I thought, of course: a fire here would be a *big* problem. A little later, a little higher, it occurred to me that what I saw could have been oxygen tanks.

The view from the stage must've been magnificent. The view from where I was, however — well, you could only see part of the stage. Unless you leaned out, over the balcony. Which was what the guy in front of me kept doing. Just as I was about to say, "Sir, would you please sit down, don't do that, you're making me nervous," I was distracted by the brass section (we had a great view of the orchestra pit): the horn players were placing bets with each other — I didn't know on what, I just figured okay, I'm not the only one who's bored with Wagner after five minutes. Then suddenly the guy in front of me *did* lean out too far. He went over, down I don't know how many hundred feet, and half the horn section let out a cheer.

I think I was especially bored because I didn't know what was going on. Because of the horn players, I missed the English translation on the little screen about the ring thing — what the ring was all about. I did catch the bit about Brunnhilde, whose horse, Grane, who she was giving to Siegfried, had lost all its strength when she rode it. Well, she's a big woman. I have nothing against big women but there are some things large people shouldn't do and ride horses is probably one of them.

After a while I gave up my place at the railing and sat on the floor and the next thing I knew Siegfried was giving Grane to someone else — poor horse, kept being given away. And when asked if he took anything from the treasure he'd found, Siegfried says — well he sings of course — "Only this scrap of net, it's not worth much, you can have it." And the other guy sings back, "Oh that's Nibelung's work, it's magic, when you wear it, you can change shape." And Siegfried sings back, "Oh don't I feel stupid."

Then I noticed the two harp players — both women — behind the horn section. As soon as their bit in the overture was done, they took off for a cup of tea and came back in an hour or so — in good spirits apparently — (hm ... maybe it wasn't tea then) — because they proceeded to provide visual commentary to the opera. "I have lost my way," one guy sang, and the first harp player put her hands to her cheeks, "Oh no!" And when the old guy said to Siegfried "Take this" — I don't know what it was, a horse maybe, probably Grane — "and you can have the woman too," they both gave him the finger.

And that was the end of my trip to Europe. Next day, I flew home from the Vienna airport. Where they have a drug-sniffing dog. I'd never seen one of those before. This one was really happy doing its job. Every time it completed a circuit of the passenger waiting room, it got a red ball to play with. Yippee!!

I think we all should get a red ball to play with when we've done our jobs.