

TRAVEL

Tour guide insists France is warm, welcoming

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

France has this image problem.

Many travelers have heard that the French are cool and even downright rude to visitors. They've heard that the French are arrogant, self-centered and unwelcoming.

David Groen doesn't believe a word of it.

"My personal goal is to show that the French are warm, hospitable and welcoming, contrary to stories people come back with," Groen said.

Groen of Redford has been taking groups to France and other European countries for 30 years and he believes the image problem begins with the tourists.

"People go into France with an attitude that this is the greeting they will receive. People go with a chip on their shoulder and a superior attitude," Groen said. "I travel with hostile visitors, and they find out everything, well almost everything, they heard is false."

Groen, a former French teacher at Livonia Stevenson High School, began his group trips with students.

"In 1968 I got a group of parents together to see it they want-

ed to send their sons and daughters overseas," he said. "The first year I took 12 young girls to France. That started 30 years of group travel, students and others."

Since retiring three years ago, Groen has stepped up his personal travel service to include several trips a year. In February he is leading an opera trip to Paris, where his group will see three operas at the city's two leading opera houses. He will be assisted as tour guide by Shirley Harden, who teaches at "Let's Go to the Opera" class at Schoolcraft College.

"The last eight years, I've been taking trips designed for leisure and comfort," Groen said. "My approach is the humanities, art, architecture, foods."

A recent trip featured 12 days of wining and dining through southern France with stops in the Champagne, Alsace and Burgundy regions.

Groen, a graduate of Central Michigan University, spent some time studying at the University of Strasbourg in Alsace.

In addition to the opera trip, Groen is planning a trip to Italy next year to see the Shroud of Turin and to visit Florence and Rome. He would also like to lead

a trip to Morocco, focusing on the less traveled inland area of Fez, which he recently visited.

But Groen's real passion is France.

"France is like the U.S., it changes so rapidly from area to area," he said.

Before each trip, Groen prepares his travelers by giving a presentation on what to expect on the trip. This presentation is usually held in the informal setting of a cocktail party or wine tasting.

"You have to be prepared by talking and reading," Groen said. "France has tremendous beauty and history, a culture that has influenced the history of the western world."

Groen has traveled to all sections of France, but Paris is his favorite place.

"It's a city that seduces," he said. "It has physical beauty, the energy, the elegant aloofness of the city. It's visually attractive and emotionally exciting. I never tire of the city."

Groen prefers not to deal with day guides and handles the touring himself. He has become an expert on Paris' 20 districts. He is especially fond of the Marais district, which was declared the country's first historical monument in 1961.

Groen has also kept current with the raging controversies over several new buildings that have gone up in the last 20 years, including the Pompidou Center, the I.M. Pei pyramid entrance for the Louvre and the city's new library.

"The French will debate, they call it discuss, vehemently anything that happens in their city or country. On buildings it's natural to take sides," he said.

Tourists who join Groen for his opera trip will be visiting two contrasting opera houses. The Garnier, built in the 1870s, is, according to Groen, "a pastiche of baroque and renaissance ... a wonderful building that reflects the period."

The "gilt, crystal, glass and marble" of the Garnier is the



Tour guide: David Groen, center, tells his travelers about the Palais Royal in Paris.

opposite of the new Bastille.

"The other house, the Bastille, is a direct contrast - sleek, coldly elegant, black, silver and chrome. It had very good acoustics, wonderful staging," Groen said.

Opera goers will get a taste of Italian, French and German opera. The trip will feature performances of Puccini's "Tosca," Bizet's "Carmen" and Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde."

Groen said he stumbled into his lifelong interests in France and opera. He was originally a pre-optometry student at Central when he switched to French. And his love of opera began as a college student when he heard a performance of "Mephistopheles" at a friend's house.

In addition to music, the Paris

trip will also feature a lot of French dining. Groen said he has a "litany of little places I like to go to." He said his tastes run from neighborhood bars and bistros to haute cuisine restaurants. He said he is especially fond of a small restaurant called Bonne Femme which is housed in a 300-year-old building.

The opera tour is scheduled for Feb. 10-18 at a cost of \$2,110 which includes round trip airfare from Detroit, transfers, hotel, breakfast each day, two deluxe dinners and category A tickets to two operas with an option to see the third opera.

Groen will take up to 25 people and is taking applications through Nov. 5. For more information, call 313-255-9666.



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Jaunty travelers: David Groen, in straw hat, and his travelers prepare to take a train at the Gare de Lyon train station in Paris.



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