

George East in France Online

George East Books

French Kisses

Price (piece): ~~£7.99~~ £6.99

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In the opening pages of the penultimate book in the series, we join the author and his wife at their favourite bar as they and a predictably bizarre collection of customers prepare to welcome in what will turn out to be a momentous year for the Easts. As usual, the owners of the Mill of the Flea are struggling to survive financially, and this time it is *really* serious. The dastardly bank manager is demanding the settlement of their overdraft, and if our hero cannot come up with a scheme to raise the money, the couple will lose their beloved home. George sets out on a quest to save their home of thirteen years, and predictably becomes involved in some very bizarre deals with Didier, the local and very dodgy general dealer. Sub-plots along the way involve the nobbling of the East's entry into the All-Cotentin Chicken Show, with the wily René Ribet stepping in to save the day and put one over on the rival village with his fox-like cunning. Then there's a memorable encounter with a synchronised drinking and smoking team and the baton-dropping champions of Lower Normandy, together with appearances from a Parisian clockmaker posing as the Prince of Darkness, and an alleged descendant of Nostradamus who makes his predictions *after* rather than before the events. As the pace quickens, it looks as if nothing will save the Easts from leaving the Mill of the Flea. But as usual, there's a twist to the tale. Or is there....?

According to most guide books, Cherbourg has more than a hundred bars and restaurants, and I have done my best to visit each of them. All have their own individual appeal depending on your mood and pocket, but there is one establishment which is certainly unique. In Paris, Madame Zizi's would be located in Montmartre; our town's own bohemian quarter is to be found very suitably on the wrong side of the tracks.

Most tourists, British booze-cruisers and locals looking for entertainment head naturally for the centre of Cherbourg. Those in search of more off-beat surroundings cross the Turning Bridge to what was until recently a mostly neglected area of the town. Close to the docks and amidst a network of rusting freight railway lines and crumbling tenements, what was once a decidedly seedy area is now becoming trendy.

Young professional people and those with an eye to the future are moving in to and restoring the once-decrepit 19th-century housing, and squalid former council flats have become stylish apartments. What makes the area interesting is that the process of gentrification is not complete, and hopefully never will be. In

what has been impishly dubbed the town's Right Bank, the old has not completely made way for the new. In dimly-lit bars once only frequented by dockers, merchant seamen and tarts, you will now also see style-conscious solicitors and estate agents taking coffee and croissants before setting off for work. While earnest discussions on the latest film noir are taking place over a cappuccino in a waterside bar, there may be a fist or even knife fight taking place in the alleyway outside. This sort of interesting social brew and its accompanying frisson of tension has always attracted artists, writers and other creative types. When I was much younger, my ambition was to live in a garret in Paris and write great works by day and spend my evenings at a classic zinc bar in deep philosophical conversation with fellow artists and thinkers. Nowadays, whenever I am in Cherbourg and in the mood, I head for the Rive Droite and Madame Zizi's.

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Early the next day, and I am feeling a little delicate. But in spite of the aftermath of my initiation to the drink of choice of some of the greatest and maddest French writers, I am in a buoyant mood. When it was clear that we were in for a long session at Madame Zizi's, Donella called a friendly neighbour and asked her to see the chickens safely to bed, and we spent the night on the floor of Henry's apartment. We could have found a hotel, but my wife did not think I was fit for exposure to civilised society. She also said it would save money, and anyway, the sleeping arrangements made a suitable finale to our bohemian evening.

Although I much prefer living in the countryside, I like to feel pavements under my feet at regular intervals and particularly enjoy walking the streets as Cherbourg wakes.

As we make our way across the Turning Bridge to where we left our car the previous evening, gulls wheel overhead and seem to be laughing harshly at some private joke as they swoop down to seek pickings in the overflowing bins outside restaurants and bars. The occasional car races by in search of an unwary cyclist or pedestrian, and small groups of dishevelled Britons look for an English-style pub that is open so they can refuel before catching the early morning ferry back to their real worlds. Although it has not been raining, the pavements gleam from the attentions of a council worker astride his ingenious water-spraying machine, and trolleys of fresh fruit, vegetables and fish are being wheeled into shops along the quayside. I breathe in the morning air, and savour the heady fusion of aromas coming from the sea, freshly-brewed coffee, baking bread, stale tobacco and urine which means we could be nowhere else in the world but a French port.

Arriving in the Place du Théâtre, I am reminded that it is market day, and see that our car has metamorphosed overnight into a sausage stall. I ask the owner if he has seen a white English car in the vicinity, and he says he has seen no white cars of any nationality this morning. I remember Donella's current experiments with growing a moss culture on Victor's bodywork, and ask him if he has seen a green car with English number plates.

The man concentrates on tying a bunch of bright red saucissons on a pole above his head, then says that, now he thinks of it, he does remember the foreign wreck that was occupying the place he and his family have been trading from every market day for the past century. I take the hint and buy a brace of large and odiferous salamis, and he tells me that the police responded to his call an hour ago and came and towed it away. I could try the gendarmerie, but bearing in mind the condition of our car, he suggests we might try the town scrap heap first.

Realising what the gulls were laughing about, we start on one of the salamis as we retrace our route across the bridge. At the police station, a fat policeman eating a croissant directs us to the traffic department, where an even fatter policeman is eating a filled baguette the size of the riot baton on his desk. We tell him our problem and he suggests we try the compound behind the station.

There, we find a group of officers clustered around poor Victor, who is hanging forlornly from a tow-truck. One of them is testing the play of the front wheels with his boot and another is poking a penknife through the thinner part of the bodywork. Another whistles in amazement and almost awe as he inspects the remains of the exhaust system, and I begin to tally up the likely total of fines which could be impending, quite apart from the cost of the parking violation.

Offering the sergeant a bite of my salami I decide to come clean, and explain that we live in the countryside near St. Sauveur and I, as an author who writes solely about the Cotentin and how it is the finest area in all

France, had spent the previous evening seeking inspiration at Madame Zizi's where I was introduced to and fell foul of a litre bottle of absinthe.

This is not the line one would take with a traffic officer in Britain, but we are in France. After writing down his name so I would spell it properly in my next book, Sergeant Guy Lecroix shakes my hand, wishes us a safe voyage home and orders that Victor be lowered from the back of the tow-truck and our parking ticket torn up.

I thank him for his courtesy and indulgence, and as we climb into Victor and start our journey back to the tranquillity of La Puce I think how good it is to live in a country where the pursuit and exercise of personal liberty and creativity is often seen as much more important than observing the letter of the law.

[Vendor Information](#)

Customer Reviews: Vincent Carr (Sunday, 28 October 2007)

Rating:

Don't read this on the train. Only one author in a thousand can command belly-laughs, at will. This chap, East, is one of them. His adventures with his 'power behind the throne' wife, Donella in rural France are a constant delight and disturbingly true. As an expat of twenty years standing it amazes me that this writer is the first to understand what makes the French tick and we Brits collapse at the first taste of an alien culture. Buy this book before George East becomes a much bigger name. But only if you can face yourself in the mirror; no punches are pulled. It's the honesty that shines through - and the laughs.

Charlotte Gill (Friday, 31 August 2007)

Rating:

By George, I think he's done it!, I must have just about very book ever published on moving to France, Spain or Italy. Books written by gardeners, painters, people just looking for sun and those running away from life, but this last book by George East is by far the most intense, useful, heart warming and the most difficult to put down.

(Friday, 03 November 2006)

Rating:

The best travelling companion I've ever had (including my husband). I bought this wonderful book on the ferry boat to France and read the whole thing on the crossing. I simply couldn't put it down. It is obvious to me that George East loves people and their peculiarities and doesn't shy away from showing these and his own foibles to us readers. Almost a laugh a minute but littered with some very serious and poignant episodes. In short, I loved this book so much that, sorry George, I passed it on to a friend for free.

Peter Clayton (Wednesday, 29 March 2006)

Rating:

The best yet from George East! A cross between Bill Bryson and Peter Mayle - but better!

A Reader (Wednesday, 23 March 2005)

Rating:

The Little Englanders will hate it. Another one to get up the noses of the boring old farts who look only for a corner of little England when they venture overseas. George does it with such affection that even the bad times feel tolerable. We did it the wrong way round and decided to live in France before we had read George's series in detail. I can only echo the laughs, the frustrations, the disasters and the triumphs of coming to terms with a culture that is geographically so near to but spiritually so far from the UK norm - which is precisely why we like it. George has captured it perfectly.

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