

Sample Chapter

**Zen
and
The Art of
Moto Taxi Survival**

*What I Learned About the French,
Life, Motorcycles, and More,
While Flirting with Disaster in Paris Traffic*

By

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To learn more about the book and get updates, watch videos of the Daily Ride, and see how Zen works with an American doing business in Paris visit

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Lesson 1. Plan Ahead – Or Else

If you want a certain thing, you must first be a certain person. Once you are that certain person, obtaining that certain thing will no longer be a concern of yours.

- Zen Proverb

It was my third business trip of the year, and it was barely March. It was also my second trip to the Paris area in less than a month. And another one was in the early planning stages.

Groan.

You might think this was a great thing. Who *wouldn't* love going to Paris – let alone three times a year?

Well, I, for one. Paris is wonderful in the springtime, or when the weather is fine, and you have time to spare to explore and see the sights. Traveling for business, on limited time, and on a budget that's been stretched by previous trips – and in the bleak mid-winter – is less of a hoot. Add to it the strain of jet lag and juggling personal expenses, the wearing-thin patience of your family, whom you've “abandoned” twice already during a particularly heavy North American snowfall season, and it becomes even less fun.

My Paris-headquartered French employer had a regular practice of ordering its American minions over to France, as soon as the calendar year turned over. Organizational changes typically took place at the end of the year, and the annual “workplace satisfaction” survey results were announced around that same time. In ongoing waves of “continuous improvement”, the company shuffled folks in and out of positions, calling out connected rock stars, suspending the upward mobility of those out of favor with leadership, and reassigning people who were too dangerous to be left in

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place for long. Those who were happy about the annual restructuring, were far less vocal than the malcontents; the ones who made out probably didn't want to jinx their luck. On the other hand, those who fared badly in the annual political shuffle made no mystery of their professional distress. For years, I'd gotten earsful of rancor, in the early weeks of each new year, and I'd been known to add my own voice to the chorus of venting. Raging success and dismal defeat were all played out against the backdrop of political maneuvering that restarted anew, whenever new faces were slotted into important places.

The whole annual career shuffle thing was exhausting. It was hard to know who was who, who mattered, and who could stop your plans in their tracks on a whim. The Court of the Sun King was alive and well with overt hierarchical favoritism determining who succeeded. Or didn't. Approaching the whole mix as an American outsider was both disorienting and infuriating, not to mention somewhat pointless. Agreements reached across the Atlantic were swept away with a political wave of the hand on the other side of the ocean, usually while French was being spoken. Projects slated to start in June were delayed multiple times over the course of the languorous European vacation summer, and then stalled in the autumn until the new political order could “re-prioritize” them... right out of sight, and out of mind.

Only one thing could save your projects from inertial doom – developing real-life personal bonds with French colleagues who could further your shared causes in person at Paris HQ. Necessary alliances were forged over conference calls from afar and shared dinners while folks were in town, via friendly exchanges on Facebook, and making nice with the right people... all whilst keeping your finger on the political pulse to see who was the darling of senior management and who was getting voted off the island.

Now, it was all very well and good to connect with people online and during regular conference calls. But the **real** connecting needed to be done in person. In France. You simply couldn't be politically effective (or useful to others) while sitting at your desk in the States, sending emails and instant messages into the Francophone void.

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So the first calendar quarter of each year was prime time to swirl the political tea leaves and see who'd landed where. The first three months were the ideal window for new team members to get acquainted face-to-face, and for old allies to renew their ties. And since travel to the States was rarely allowed for French employees below director level, we Americans had to go to France.

It would have been great, had it been simple and straightforward. But it wasn't. Not ever. Since we had a corporate requirement for minimum 3-week advance reservations, and we didn't know who landed where until after the start of the year, the first meetings couldn't happen till late January or early February. And in the snowy northern parts of the USA, that's about the worst time you can pick to be away from home for more than a day or two. That's when the snow falls. And school holidays begin. Which means kids can be kept out of school. So, for professional couples with children, the extra burden of child care and daily logistics are shouldered by one parent, while the other one leaves the country. It's not good for anyone.

But there was no getting around it. Personal contact was the grease in the wheels of our corporate machinery – without it, the gears jammed tight.

By French business custom, the first meeting of the year was purely a getting-to-know-you affair, where little was accomplished other than learning your new team members' names and personality quirks, letting them get to know yours, and mutually testing the political waters. The second trip of the year (usually in late February, early March) was when things actually started picking up speed, plans for the year were broached and debated, and tentative decisions started to form. And the third trip, customarily before March was up (and Corporate found out just how much the last two trips had cost them), was to reinforce your stated intentions, refresh memories on shared interests and promises made over dinners shared in your last visit, and to make sure people knew you were genuinely, deeply, unwaveringly serious about what you'd discussed, the last time you were there.

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Then, around the end of March, the Accounting department would realize how much coin was flowing to the airlines, chain hotels, and restaurants in Paris, flaming red flags would go up, and all that travel would skid to a screeching halt. And for good reason. Travel to Paris got pricey – even the most Spartan of trips. You wouldn't think that staying at the company-mandated Holiday Inn... grabbing a quick complimentary hotel “breakfast” of espresso, chocolate croissants, and containers of cold cuts and fruit... lunching in the company cafeteria... with maybe having a dinner or two out with colleagues... would cost all that much, but multiply that by all the Americans who were jockeying for position with colleagues in France, and it added up. Unfortunately, many of us weren't placed high enough on the food chain to command a travel budget that stayed under the radar, so we got the closest scrutiny. There was a fine line between expediency and perceived excess when traveling to France, and Accounts Payable only had eyes for what it considered excess.

Anyway, I was more than happy to quit traveling after three back-to-back trips. I love to travel, but I also love sleeping in my own bed in the heart of winter. Most of the nomadic enthusiasm was in the hearts of middle managers, who seemed to delight in turning their direct reports' lives upside-down for the first three months of each year. It was expensive, counter-productive, and it came at a terrible time of the year. Every traveler had to pay out of pocket for up-front travel expenses; company credit cards were available, but reimbursement usually lagged enough to require personal funds to cover the amount.

What's more, three trips to Paris in the first quarter was murder on project planning and execution. A full schedule in the US is not helped by a weeks of trip prep, followed by week-long absences from the offices, followed by another week of jet-lag – times three. To top it all off, northeastern snowstorms had an uncanny ability to coincide with my travels abroad, which put me in deep debt to neighbors who cleared the 18-24” of snow from my driveway, so I could actually reach my house on my return. And to top it

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all off, being away from U.S. winters was no great relief; the weather was often just as crummy in France as it was in the northeastern United States.

I'd had some less-than-stellar visits, with gray skies and damp cold, in the past. But that was one of the longest, hardest winters in recent memory – and that was on both sides of the Atlantic. Winter in Paris is seldom fun, with lots of rainy, gray days, and sometimes a bit of snow. But the weather had turned nasty in a big way, dumping more snow than the Paris municipality was prepared to clear out of the way, and screwing up the flow of their already cold and gray daily grind. Several times that winter, they'd gotten not one or two, but four inches of the stuff. And without proper plows, shovels, and ice melt, the city and its vicinity had skidded to a halt. Buses didn't run. Drivers were told to stay off the roads. People were told to lay low. Many folks worked from home, but nobody went to the office. And from home, their connectivity wasn't great. In short, that winter sucked.

God, was that painful. You couldn't get a damn' thing done. Weather-related disruptions threw a wrench in everybody's schedules and working styles, putting already tight deadlines at risk, and putting everyone on edge. Patience wore thin, tempers got hot, and nobody seemed able to reach anyone else – by email, phone, or Messenger. Exasperated and feeling the fetid warmth of management's goal-oriented, results-driven breath on the backs of our necks, Anglo and Gallic factions spent a whole lot of time bitching about each other behind their backs, with managers doing double duty as confidantes and referees.

To say there was tension, would be an understatement. And since I was stateside, I must say I didn't make a whole lot of effort to adapt. It's ironic, because my position involved a lot of interaction with folks from overseas, and I was on good terms with everyone abroad. I had actually lived in Europe for some time, many years ago, so I knew how to get things done as an American working with folks from everywhere else. There was no reason for me to follow suit with my American coworkers, who resisted

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integrating, digging in their heels – often simply for the sake of the digging. but for some reason, I did. I'm not proud of it, and looking back, it was pretty silly.

At the same time, though, dealing with folks at HQ was a far sight different from jumping on a conference call with lower-level colleagues abroad. The political divide was pronounced, and the antagonism was clearly bilateral. Our French colleagues made even less effort to understand or accommodate American working styles, than we did towards them, and there didn't seem to be the least bit of interest in resolving our “dynamics”. Confusion ruled day, in terms of how things got done, and nobody was budging, either way.

Only one thing would solve our fractiousness, as we leapt from the starting gate of the new year to rally and unite as a cohesive new organization – in-person team-building meetings and face-to-face working sessions with valued stakeholders.

And so, we were ordered to Paris – all six of us on the American part of the team – for a little *Kumbaya*, shared meals, and an all-day team-building session led by an official facilitator whose job it was to strengthen the Franco-American connection. The experiment flopped; the only thing it accomplished was keeping us from getting our work done. But it checked the “team-building” box on our manager's goals, so victory was declared. Now that we were all in alignment, we could continue with our first quarter meetings and calendar year agendas, which now included even more trans-Atlantic collaboration.

So, less than a month later, it was back to France.

Again.

Groan.

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I didn't mean to be unwilling, and I wanted to make the best of things and get what I could out of the experience, but it was tough to work up the exuberance. For all my

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travel to Paris over the past several years, few of those visits had been particularly successful. The haze of my jet-lagged memory was punctuated by recollections of trying to keep my umbrella at just the right angle, so I wouldn't get drenched by icy horizontal winter rains, while waiting for the shuttle from the office back to the hotel... hoofing it to the office when the shuttle didn't arrive on time, zig-zagging along muddy tracks through torn-up sidewalk construction sites, trying to not collide with other pedestrian commuters who were on a mission to get somewhere fast... jumping on evening emergency conference calls, 16 hours into my already busy day, while dining on some supposedly nutritious, indeterminate food product in a plastic-wrapped package I'd picked up at the local grocery store on my way back to the hotel, trying to get state-side projects back on track over a phone connection that kept breaking up... not to mention the bad taste in my mouth left by too many cab rides with cranky or inept drivers who overcharged me and/or couldn't seem find their way where I needed to go, but apparently thought cursing a blue streak at the GPS would magically transport us to my destination like Scotty hitting the “go” button on his teleportation device.

It would have been nice, if I *had* had a Star Trek-type transporter, thanks to the several strikes that put serious crimps in my trips on at least three occasions over the years. It's not uncommon for French to act out when things are not to their liking. And it's not uncommon for regions – and sometimes the whole country – to come to a standstill due to strikes. Trash removal strikes. Bus driver strikes. Taxi driver strikes. These interruptions in service can last a day or two – sometimes longer – and they never happen at a good time. They're not supposed to. Over the course of less than four years, even with short (4-7 days) trips, I'd felt the effects of at least three strikes – two taxi strikes that impacted me personally and professionally, and a public transit strike that made it difficult for my colleagues to meet me at the office. And those were just the ones I knew about.

On the business side, my last several trips had been less than stellar, as well. I'd made plans to meet with colleagues, only to have them ditch me at the last minute due to

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“conflicts” or not being able to find an available conference room in the maze that passed for a corporate campus. The few meetings I *had* managed to initiate and complete in the indicated times and places had been spiced with cynical, enthusiastic, almost recreational combativeness that my French colleagues seemed to consider an art form.

Indeed, according to multiple sources on doing business in France, the French educational system is laser-focused on logic, and that carries over to the working world, where folks eagerly tear down assertions and arguments, finding weak spots, and debating almost every conceivable point, as a matter of regular business dealings. The worst thing you can do is present an argument that's “illogical” and poorly thought-out, and it's to be expected that any proposition you make is going to be subjected to intensely rigorous examination. The more closely it's examined, the higher the honor, it seems. So vigorous, heated debate is actually a sort of backhanded compliment. That means people are taking you seriously and are willing to expend the energy on exploring all the options.

To the untrained eye, however, it just looks like arguing for the sake of arguing, with no goal in mind, other than to be difficult. Now, I won't back down from a justifiable conflict, but trying to align with coworkers who apparently love to quibble over details just for the sake of fighting, seemed like a monumental waste of time to me. I'm no Pollyanna, but doing pitched battle over **every . little . thing** gets pretty old after a while. In the survival-of-the-fittest, eat-or-be-eaten Darwinian world of work, almost without exception, my French colleagues seemed hell-bent on hunting each other (and their American counterparts) to extinction.

But what can you do? These are long-standing practices and qualities that have stood the test of time. And my French colleagues absolutely reveled in them. Rather than fight the flow and make myself miserable, I eventually decided to “get zen” about it, and roll with the peculiarities. Observe. Learn. And make the most of the circumstances. There's something to be said for letting people just be, finding out what makes them tick, and then tucking into their wake to be swept along by their momentum.

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It took me a couple of years before I quit fighting the current. But when I did – and I made a point of listening and learning how to use circumstances to my benefit, instead of pushing back on every little thing – I learned a whole lot that came in handy. And I wished I'd done it sooner.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was that no trip to Paris was destined for success without a thorough, comprehensive plan, which wove past, present, and future into a seamless progression of well-thought-out steps, milestones, and clearly defined deliverables. This applied to everything from arranging when you'd go, to setting up meetings, to conducting meetings, and wrapping up your visit.

Heaven help you, if you just showed up without announcing yourself in advance. Members of my team had tried that, and they'd found themselves holed up in a spare conference room for days, sequestered from the regularly scheduled action, without a single individual reaching out to help them find their way around or connect with their counterparts. In the States, you can give folks a general idea of when you'll be arriving and what you'd like to accomplish, then make it up as you go along, and the trip can end up a success. You're flowing. You're free. You can get a lot done in that mode in America.

But when doing business in France, *everything* must be carefully arranged in advance, from arrival times to meeting agendas to presentations to lunches to evening meals and entertainment to departures. Showing up at a meeting without a proper PowerPoint is the kiss of death. And if – God forbid – you're showing even some of the slides from a deck that you already discussed with some of the attendees in a prior meeting, you're not going to get a warm reception. Careful preparation and codification of every conceivable detail is the way to go, with a high premium placed on formality and conducting yourself as though you're lesser royalty stopping by to see what the rest of the Court is up to.

It took me several years of trial and error to learn that lesson well. Hours upon hours were filled with blank stares and nervous shuffling from the French during

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meetings that were specifically designed by the Americans to be free-flowing and spontaneous. Days and weeks were spent dashing from one Paris HQ office building to the next, searching high and low for offices whose location I hadn't scouted out ahead of time. Months... even years were passed, being practically invisible to my Gallic colleagues because I didn't convey the right combination of formality and elan, didn't set a formal agenda for my meetings, and I didn't rely on an official document to structure a discussion with team members. What passed for easy-going confidence and normalcy in the States, didn't fly in France.

Now, as the first quarter neared a close, with next to nothing accomplished, goal-wise, I was back in Paris again, a ton of lessons under my belt, determined to make up for the missed meetings from prior nearly pointless trips. I was doing it differently – *very* differently – this time. For weeks on end while still at home, I'd tracked down my French colleagues who had been “unavailable” the last several times I'd uprooted my everyday life and put my own raft of work initiatives in jeopardy to visit them. I'd especially focused on those who had declined my prior meeting invitations only **after** I was in their country. That little habit was not going to go unaddressed. I'd quadruple-confirmed with all of them that they'd actually **be** there when I arrived, harassing them via email, Messenger, and phone – both publicly and privately – till they'd surrendered and made room for me on their calendars.

I'd collected my talking points and painstakingly prepared my PowerPoints. I'd set agendas for meetings and made sure everyone knew I'd booked my calendar solid for the afternoon of the very day I was going to arrive. I wasn't going to spend the afternoon sightseeing in Paris or catching up on my sleep on the day I flew in. My preparation for departure was meticulous in every detail, from when and how I'd download and print out my eTicket and boarding pass... to how I was going to pack all my clothing and supplies into a single carry-on that would expedite my movements... to when I would leave home for the airport and where I would park for quickest and most reliable access to my terminal... to the overcoat and shoes I would wear that were easiest to remove for

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security... to when and how I would hydrate before my flight, to minimize the impact of jet lag.

I had my in-air activities planned, with the books and papers I needed within easy reach in my laptop bag and a chunk of time blocked out for some zazen meditation to balance the fight-flight predilection from my stressed-out autonomic nervous system. I was going to take good care of myself during the flight, with gum handy to “pop” my ears during takeoff and landing, and scheduled walks up and down the aisles, and a specially requested dairy-free meal to keep myself feeling sharp and mucus-free. I had a pretty good idea how I was going to spend my 6 hours in the air, followed by a 2.5 hour layover at Schiphol in Amsterdam, and the final hour or so to Paris. I'd grab some breakfast and coffee during the transfer, and start to wake myself up. When I finally landed at CDG, I'd grab a cab to the hotel to check in and drop my bags, shower and change into my professional attire, then make my way to the office, and commence my meetings without delay.

And I wasn't stopping there. I was booked solid, every day of my visit, and I made sure everybody knew it. I was going to be working from early French time till late in the evening on nightly conference calls with the States, for the duration of my stay. I was serious about this trip, and I wasn't in the mood to waste any time. It took constant work to get people in line with my schedule, but eventually my professional-grade bad-assery paid off in a calendar packed full of meetings with just the folks I needed to see, all arranged in carefully choreographed order, that kept me on schedule and spared me from racing from the far corner of one building to the other on the far side of the campus.

I was on a mission, and I was not to be trifled with.

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The flight to Paris was uneventful, and even with a two-hour layover, it wasn't too much of a trial. I rarely sleep on red-eyes. It's easier to acclimate to the French timezone,

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if I'm tired enough to get 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep the day that I arrive. Of course, I'm only "part-way there" for the first day, but the rest of my stay works out well. Staying awake for the whole trip isn't for everyone, and I often doubt my choice, four hours into a ride aboard one of Air France's aging rattletraps.

This time, I got lucky. I was on a newer plane with a working movie screen in front of me, and plenty of USB power plugs at hand. Between the subtitled Asian organized crime movies, in-flight magazines, and European newspapers I picked up on the gangway before boarding, I had plenty to keep me occupied. I'd packed my laptop bag well, and it was easy to pull books and papers out of the zippered top, even with it wedged beneath the seat in front of me.

I also had some time to sit zazen, a meditative practice that dates back to the Samurai of feudal Japan (and possibly farther back) which is pretty much "just sitting". I first learned about it in 1992 from a friend of a friend who was teaching it to her grandson to keep him out of jail. It worked. He went overseas with his dad to work on a cattle ranch, and he kept his act together. Intrigued, I wanted to hear more, and she gave me some pointers based on her own experience. Then I went out and did my own research, discovering that there are any number of different ways to practice sitting.

Some meditative practices include mindfulness, counting breaths, puzzling about impossible scenarios that can never be solved to teach you that your brain isn't all that, or just observing your thoughts as they rise and fall. My practice includes sitting absolutely still and not reacting to anything – be it an itch, a cramp, or a sudden urge to move. No matter what you feel, no matter what pains or irritates or tries to pull you into a reverie, you don't react. You sit upright, keeping your spine and head aligned, breathing from the belly, keeping your *tanden* tense. And nothing else. Some teachers say that proper posture, absolute motionless, and holding the belly tight as you breathe are the keys to a good "sit". I have no reason to disagree. I've gotten a number of benefits from zazen, including:

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- Balancing my autonomic nervous system and reducing fight-flight impulses, which improves my overall decision-making abilities under pressure
- Clearing my mind of intruding passing thoughts that have no business taking up space in my head, so I can focus on the true task at hand
- Calming the “passions” so that I can interact with people in a way that avoids collateral damage from poor impulse control, avoiding outbursts and erratic behavior I will regret later, and
- Waking up the mind, while the body stays still

I've used zazen in countless business situations, and I credit “just sitting” for keeping my cool while being raked over the coals by folks who were looking for a weakness . Thanks to knowing how to simply sit still and not react to everything that was said (and implied), I kept my act together, and they didn't find what the weakness were looking for. Their attacks fizzled, and we all got back to doing our jobs. It's safe to say that if I hadn't been able to remain calm and detached from countless furies unleashed around me, I wouldn't have been put in charge of overseeing the activities of global staff on four continents at one of Europe's top ten technology companies, and I certainly wouldn't have been on a plane traveling to France to firm up my professional network. I can't say I'm any more brilliant than the next person, but when it comes to keeping cool under pressure, I know very few who rival me. And you can bet that my ability to remain steady in the face of the shitstorm – an ability honed and tempered through zazen – has made me an asset to small teams and large companies alike. Keeping my composure has long been the one differentiator that set me apart from my professional competition.

So, having a long, relatively uninterrupted block of time on the plane to sit zazen came in handy. It was a welcome break from the frenetic activity of the past weeks. I'm not sure how long I sat still, just breathing in and out, reacting to nothing going on around me. But I got my system settled, slowing down my breath and returning my heart rate to a

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steady beat. I had a full week ahead of me, so any measure of calm and stability I could create – while I could – would only work in my favor.

After what felt like just a few hours, we landed in Amsterdam at Schiphol, where I stretched my legs, grabbed something to eat, then found my gate and continued to Paris. My company's travel policy required taking the cheapest flights available in the system, which usually meant at least one connection. Non-stops were a rarity, but connecting flights had their benefit. Changing on the European side of the Atlantic gave me a chance to stage my arrival and prepare to land in Paris. There's nothing like stepping off the plane and making your way through an unfamiliar airport with signage in multiple languages to rouse the senses and stir the blood. It wakes you up. It staves off the deep vein thrombosis. That's always good, after hours of being shoe-horned into a seat designed to a formula, rather than human dimensions. It lets you get your head on straight for dealing with CDG when you arrive.

For those who are unfamiliar, *Aéroport de Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle* is massive. With nine terminals covering over 30 square kilometers (more than 12 square miles), it's nearly as large as Paris proper. It's second only to London Heathrow in terms of business, and over 60 million travelers pass through it each year. It's big, it's busy, and unless you want to fly to Orly, or land somewhere else in Europe and take a train, it's pretty much unavoidable.

And it is an indifferent, unforgiving place. If an armed guard tells you you've got to check your carry-on because it's “too big”, you do it. If they tell you you'll deplane in one terminal, ride a shuttle bus across the tarmac to another terminal, where you collect your luggage and go through security again, before you hop back on the shuttle to return to the terminal you first flew into for your connecting flight, you have no choice – you do it... along with 150 other pained-looking travelers who know resistance is futile. If someone is stupid enough to leave their bag unattended in a corner of a terminal and walk over to a vendor cart to pick up some cookies or sweets for the trip home, uniformed men with machine guns can clear the terminal and leave you shivering outside in the cold until the

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offending luggage is dealt with (carted off and possibly detonated). Every day almost 200,000 people stream through that airline hub, getting to and from by taxi, hired car, motorcycle, train, shuttle, bus, jet, and just about any other way you can get in and out of a 12.5-square-mile piece of concrete that's a gateway to just about anywhere you want to go in the world.

I've passed through CDG more than a dozen times, over the years, and while that's not excessive by modern standards, every time I learned something new – and re-learned something old – about that hulking monstrosity. The new stuff had to do with the quickest ways to get through security or customs, the best places to get a cup of coffee upon arrival, and where to get info about taxis and trains. The old stuff I re-learned was simply that CDG is one of the last places on earth I want to spend any more time than I have to. Each time I passed through, I was more eager than ever to get the hell out, by any means possible.

That last trip was no exception. As I hauled my carry-on out of the overhead bin and joined the shuffling line of drowsy, travel-dazed, mobile-phone-checking travelers filing past the flight crew saying “*Merci Madame! Merci Monsieur! Bon voyage!*” into the bright and chilly gangway, all I could think of, was how to get out of the airport and on with my day.

My course was clearly laid out before me: land, cab it to the hotel, shower, change, and hit up my colleagues for a full afternoon's worth of meetings, followed by light supper in my hotel room during a conference call with folks at home. I'd make sure that each person I met with knew I'd just arrived that morning, and my day was going to last a lot longer than theirs. I meant business. I was not to be trifled with. I was a bad-ass international business traveler, and yes, I was there to do a job. After my full day, I'd settle in and sleep like the dead. But before that, I had work to do.

It really was a perfect plan.

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... But what does this have to do with motorcycles?

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