

SHOWERING IN FRANCE: A GUIDE.

Maintaining personal hygiene while travelling in France is important, not only for the benefit of your travelling companions but also because, as visitors to *La Belle Fromage*, we are each in our own small way ambassadors for our countries. However, keeping up a regular regime of showering or bathing, what the French call *laver*, can face the problem of *plomberie francais* and its worst manifestation, the French bathroom.

The first challenge is finding the light switch. In a recent sample of several hotels, all three and four star establishments mind you, the bathroom light switches were located variously on the outer wall, inside the bathroom, in the corridor outside the room and in one particularly inventive example, there was no switch at all: the owner had installed a movement-sensitive light which required the occupant to wave their arms about each thirty seconds or so lest the entire operation be plunged into speleological darkness.

Please ignore the musty smell which is mandatory in bathrooms in all French hotels and is achieved through long-life odiferous lozenges installed by certified officials of the French tourism board at the beginning of each season. Should you wish, packs of these discs are available for purchase from *Offices de Tourisme* throughout the Republic as a memento of your visit.

The next task facing you will be the shower. Unlike the lighting arrangements, showers are fairly standard - the apparatus comprises a set of taps and a spigot, about which will be curled a flexible metal hose connected to the shower head. Before turning on any water, look about you - you'll notice a bracket usually at shoulder height designed to hitch onto the showerhead. Try it out. Yes, by now you may be getting a sense of some of the challenges ahead of you: either the shower head will slot in below shoulder height requiring you to either bend at the hips or kneel to get

showered or, once hooked on the shower head will dangle down ineffectually directing water horizontally at the back wall. We have also encountered some showers that have replaced the single bracket with a chromed vertical pipe allowing the shower head height to be adjusted. You will find a knurled knob at the back which tightens to secure the showerhead in place. In France these contraptions are entirely decorative and should be treated with suspicion. Do not attempt to adjust these devices. Once loosened the shower head will either refuse to be re-tightened and slip down altogether or, even more serious, it will let go half-way through your shower resulting in a nasty bonk on the head.

All this may cause the traveller some consternation but be brave and crack on. If necessary, fortify your spirits with a glass of wine or two.

Now you should disrobe, stand in the bath, turn the water on and adjust for temperature and pressure *before* initiating the actual shower. Observe the valve on top of the spigot which once depressed will redirect the flow up the metal hose and through the shower. Before operating this, we recommend you retreat to the far corner of the bathroom, as once depressed, water will erupt from a variety of junctions, leaks and holes - along with much shuddering and disturbing plumbological noises coming from behind the tiles. Regardless of your pressure selection, needles of high velocity water will immediately spray out in a 180-degree rosette all across the bathroom. By now you, the entire bathroom and all the towels will be completely soaked. This is the time for you to lather up using several of the small squares of the water-resistant soap provided to you by your hotel. (You can request supplementary soaps from reception by using this phrase: *Savons, savons tout suite!*). After a period of extensive rubbing you will be covered in a thin sudsy foam.

Ensoaped, your next challenge is the rinse. You may think that this is simply a repeat of the first step outlined above. However effective rinsing requires greater *lave*-ing and is complicated by the valve's inclination to close and return the flow of water to the bath. Thus it is necessary to maintain

some pressure on the valve to keep the shower going. There are several positions which you can adopt to achieve this end.

The starfish. In this position the traveller lifts the valve with one foot, balancing with the other, while holding the shower head at arm's length and the operating the soap-like square with the other.

The supplicant. This is a less flamboyant position in which the traveller kneels in the bath and generates alternating streams of water to rinse their back and front by opening and closing the valve with their forehead through a kind of autistic rocking motion (a keening sound here is optional).

A variant of this position is *the Great Barrier Reef* which involves the traveller lying horizontally in the bath for a time and allowing the passing currents to gradually sluice away any soap.

As you can imagine, each of these carries with it particular risks but mastering these positions will become like second nature after only a few weeks or so.

Once the water is turned off, the traveller will need to step carefully across the now inundated bathroom floor - known in French as *le lac* - and out into their room. In the absence of dry towels, we recommend a period of vigorous calesthenics combining on-the-spot jogging, star-jumps and forward rolls until dry.

As you can see, maintaining personal hygiene in France is achievable even in the most unfavourable circumstances.
