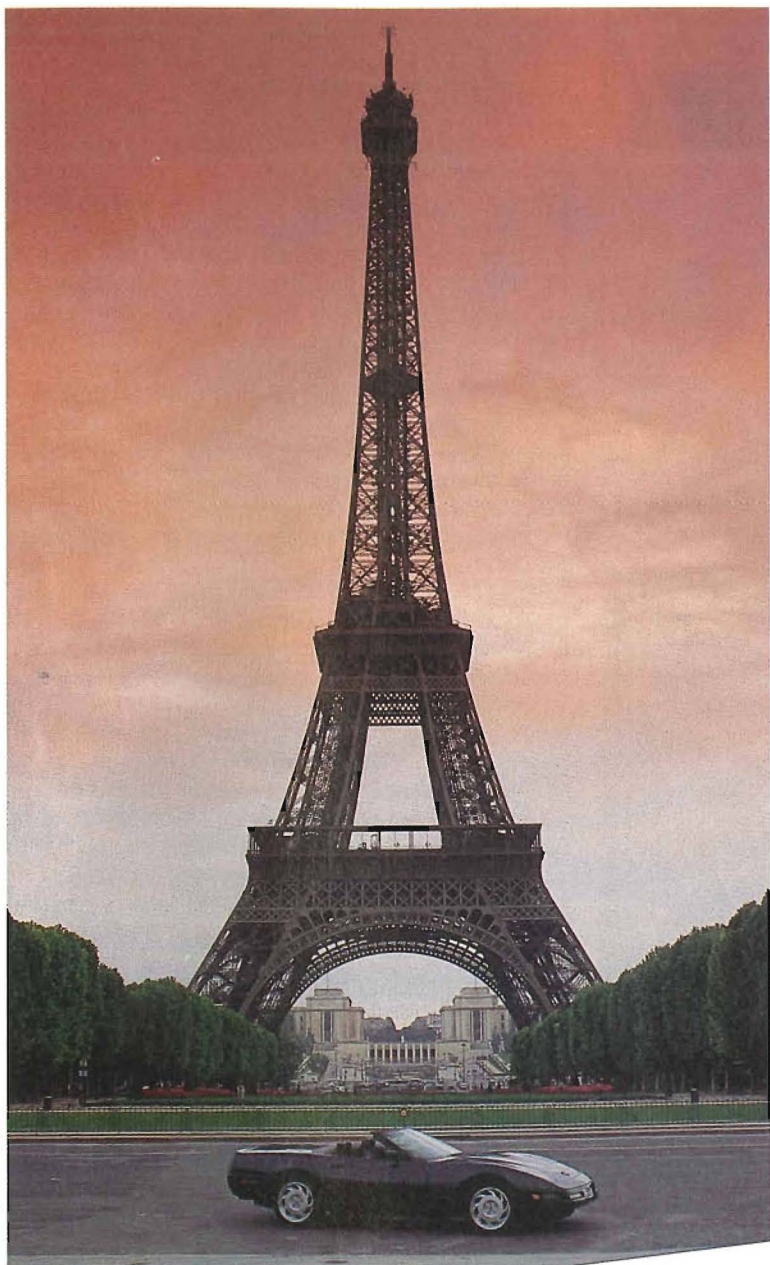


An American In Paris

Corvette touring in the City of Light

text and photography by Thomas Glatch



"Long-time readers of Corvette Fever may remember the story of M. Charbonneaux's possible contribution to the design of the original Corvette..."



I was traveling in the middle lane of a six-lane freeway, running a bit above the speed limit. On my right I was passing a Citroën 2CV traveling maybe 15 mph slower. On my left I was being overtaken by a seven-series BMW moving along at about 75 mph. Suddenly, a motorcycle, riding the white line and screaming at 100-plus mph speeds, squeezed between the Bimmer and I with inches to spare, streaking into the sunset without ever backing off the throttle. All the while a Peugeot 205 was riding within a hair's breadth of my rear bumper.

Just another day on the *périphérique*, the freeway circling the great city of Paris. It was my first time in the French capital, a two-week visit with American friends now living there. And for one grand and glorious weekend, thanks to the generosity of General Motors' International Export Sales Office in Rüsselsheim, Germany, I could experience Paris in a Polo Green 1991 Corvette convertible. How would the Corvette feel in a European environment, and how would Parisians react to American's finest? I would soon find out.

Paris itself is a compact, densely populated city of 2.5 million, with another 6 million in the suburbs. The city is only about six miles in diameter with the *périphérique* acting as its boundary, and over a million cars and trucks move in and out of Paris every day. Even under perfect conditions, driving here would be a challenge. At least the Parisians make a sport of it.

For the French, the object of driving is not to get to one's destination. Rather, it seems, the goal is to pass as many cars as possible in getting there. French law requires that the far left lane be used for passing only, and passing on the right is very illegal. So life in the left lane requires special technique. There is a definite caste system: Top-of-the-line BMWs, Mercedes and Porsches have precedence, while the mid-range of these three plus the top French Peugeots, Citroëns, and Renaults come next, and so on down the automotive line. Should a slower car stay in the left lane a millisecond too long for the impatient Frenchman, the first tactic is to tailgate to within inches of the idiot. Should

that not work, flipping on the left blinker often forces the offender out of the way. If two or three seconds pass without movement to the right, the faster car flashes the headlights (a sign of courtesy in other countries, but not in France), or finally, the headlights are turned on. That will usually do the trick, but if all else fails, the faster car will literally squeeze between the inside guard rail and the lane hog, physically forcing it to the right! On some of the overpasses large signs remind drivers of the need for safety. One reads *Dormir ou Conduire* (Sleep or Drive), while another asks the question *La Vitesse ou La Vie* (Speed or Life?) Out here we know the answer — *La Vitesse!*

Where did the Corvette rate on the caste system? I swung into the left lane and eased down on the gas. Immediately cars moved to the right, a reaction at least as good as that of the big German cars. Was it the shock of seeing a new Corvette, a very rare happenstance in France? It would seem so. Andy Warhol believed everyone would have 15 fleeting minutes of fame in his life, but he must never have driven a Corvette in Paris. Everywhere I went the car caused stares, smiles, and plenty of comments (I wish I could lip-read French). Many would even slow down to catch a better look, and these people slow for nothing. One passenger in a new Renault 19 even pulled a camera for some snapshots. I was wrong — here the Corvette was in a class by itself, and for the entire weekend I felt like a celebrity.

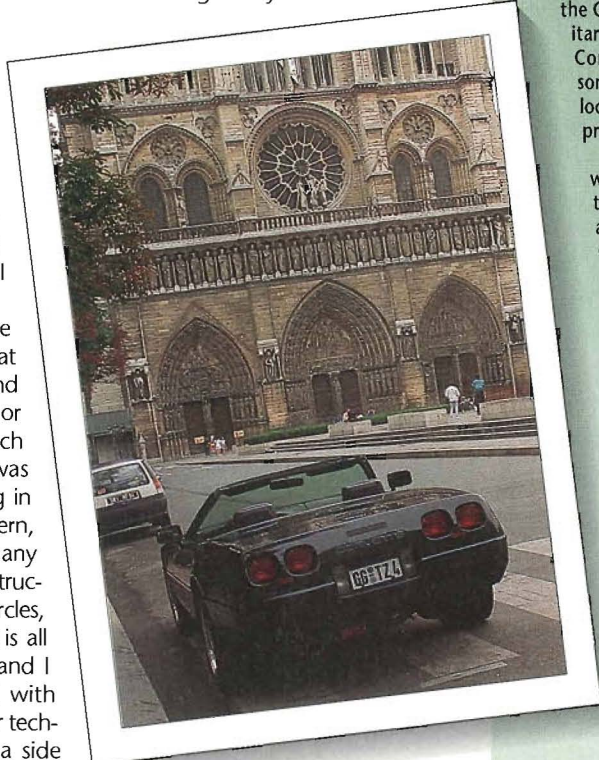
At one of the entrances into the heart of the city, the *Porte Maillot*, I turned onto *Avenue de la Grande Armée* heading for the *Arc de Triomphe*. Up to now driving in Paris made mid-town Manhattan or Chicago's Loop look like a day at the beach. The terror, I found out, was just starting.

Paris streets have no lane markings, except occasionally at traffic lights, and signs are far and few. Knowing where to drive, or where all those little French econoboxes were heading, was impossible. Apparently nothing in Europe is laid out in grid-pattern, either. Driving through Paris or any other village, town, or parking structure is an exercise in loops, circles, one-ways and traffic islands. It is all very confusing and dizzying, and I never did learn how to deal with them. But I did learn the proper technique for turning right onto a side

street: From the far left lane, crank the wheel, hit the gas, turn on the blinker, and pray everyone has good brakes and fast reflexes. It usually works. Not surprisingly, fender-benders are common, and the French never repair the damage. Instead, they wear their dents and dings like some automotive Red Badge of Courage — "I may have been hit, but my manhood (or womanhood) was preserved!"

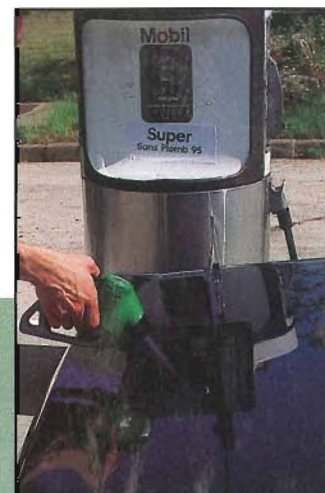
Suddenly, I was face-to-face with the *Arc de Triomphe* and the circle road around it, the dreaded *l'Étoile* (the star). Here, 12 of the main streets in Paris converge on a circle seemingly 8 to 20 lanes wide (there are no lines, remember). Cars entering *l'Étoile* have the right-of-way, so those on the circle must watch for, a) cars coming on, b) cars on the left turning right to go off and, c) cars on both sides not knowing where to drive. In a Renault 5 (America's old Le Car), the experience is horrifying; in someone else's \$40,000 Corvette, it simply is beyond words.

180 degrees around the *Arc* I carefully made my move right, onto the famed *Avenue des Champs Élysées*. Even though we were causing a tremendous stir, neither my friend and navigator, John Smallshaw, nor I were having any fun, and we certainly could not appreciate the city this way. We pulled the Corvette into one of the inexpensive underground parking garages just off the *Champs* (complete with piped-in jazz). It was time to see Paris the right way



— on foot. Since the city is so compact, walking is a realistic option, and seeing it at twilight, as the "City of Light" earns its name, is just the right time. Historic, clean, and safe, Paris could well be the world's most beautiful city.

It was after midnight when we left the city and traffic was still surprisingly heavy. Early the next morning we returned to photograph the sights of Paris without crowds or congestion. Even without traffic, and with the benefit of an ace navigator, I still found myself constantly in the wrong place at the wrong time on the Paris streets — wrong side of a traffic island, wrong lane of a circle, trying to go the wrong way on a one-way. The shock value of



Owning A Corvette In Europe: It's Not Easy

Owning a Corvette in Europe is not always a pleasant experience. There are hazards and hidden costs Americans would never dream of.

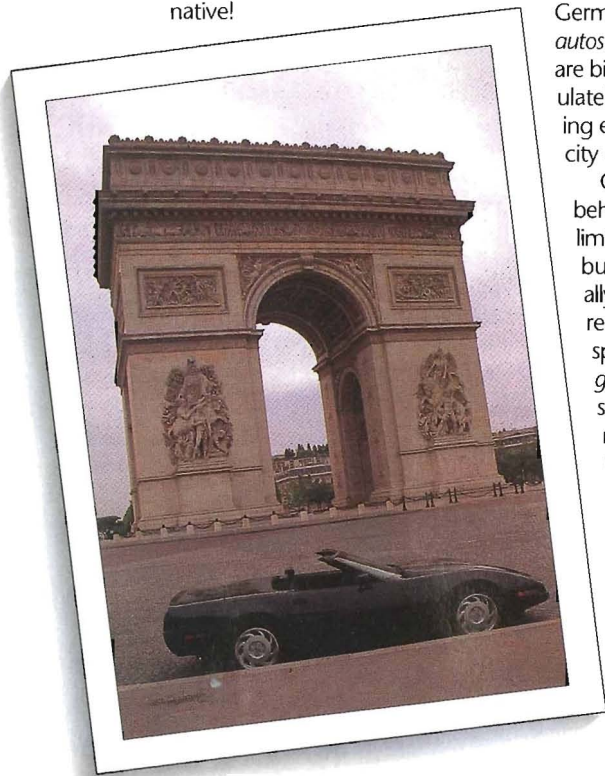
"Import on demand," is how Jean-Philippe Coulaud, Public Relations manager for GM International Export Sales in Rüsselsheim, Germany, explained General Motor's policy on the Corvette. "Very few are brought in through official channels. American military personnel and individuals import most of the Corvettes into Europe." The number of American military bases in Germany and Great Britain explains why Corvettes are somewhat common there. Military personnel will often bring a car onto the base, then sell it locally. But France does not have an American military presence, and the Corvette is a very rare sight indeed.

The shipping and insurance to bring a car into France would be about \$1,000, but then add a 10 percent sales tax for the European Economic Community, and an additional 22 percent French sales tax, and your \$40,000 Corvette is now well over \$60,000. But because GM does not officially import the Corvette, registration is up to the owner. M. Coulaud owns a 1991 Corvette convertible, and when he tried to certify and license the car in his native France, "I could not do it. French nationalism, I guess, but every time I tried to homologate (certify) the car the authorities refused, for no reason at all. I was lucky, my wife is Swiss, so I was able to license the car in Switzerland."

Then there is the *vignette*, the French annual road tax. The tax is based on some archaic and illogical formula factored on cost and horsepower that nobody can explain. If you could license a Corvette in France, the *vignette* for either an L98 or a ZR-1 would be about \$1,500 for a Parisian, or about \$2,000 for someone living in the suburbs. That's per year! Add to that fuel at \$3.70-plus per gallon, an oil change at about \$50, narrow streets and roads, lack of service and parts, the constant threat of theft and vandalism, diminutive parking spaces, and tiny one-car garages that a Corvette will barely fit in, and you have a good number of reasons for not owning one of these cars.

"Mobil Super 95 Sans Plomb (no lead) cost 5.55 Francs per liter (\$3.70 per gallon)..."

Corvette Country the Corvette and our German license plates must have been enough to mitigate my mistakes to the few who were sharing the roads. Then again, I may have seemed like a native!



Enough thrills. We got back on the *périphérique* and then on to the A4, the *Autoroute de l'Est* (East). The *autoroute* system is the French version of the British *motorways*, the German *autobahnen*, and the Italian *autostrada*. Like all French roads, they are billiard-table smooth and immaculately maintained. We were heading east on a 70-mile journey to the city of Reims.

Once on the *autoroute* the French behave very differently. The speed limit here is 130 km/h (80.6 mph), but 10 percent above that is usually tolerated. The authorities have recently instituted heavy on-the-spot fines for speeders, but the *gendarmes* are very rarely seen, so speeds of 160 km/h (99.2 mph) or more are common. Obviously, things happen in a hurry at these velocities, so although tailgating and left-lane jockeying is still *en vogue*, an air of professionalism is present, much more so than on our 65 mph interstates. In two weeks of travel around France we only saw one police van that we even suspected of having radar —

today of course. But once past him I raised the ante and moved into the left lane. *La Vitesse ou La Vie* the sign asked again. Top down on a glorious day, cruising at 170 km/hr (105.5 mph), engine loafing at just under 2400 rpm, listening to the German band *Nena* on the CD, the answer was simple. Out here we had Speed and Life — to the fullest!

After paying more than \$6 in tolls, and after averaging about 150 km/h (93.1 mph) for the trip, we entered the heart of Reims. Our first stop was the great cathedral, a magnificent example of Gothic ecclesiastical architecture and the sacred place where France's kings were crowned. But our primary destination was the *Centre Historique de l'Automobile Française* (French Automobile Historical Center) containing the collection and works of the famed French stylist Philippe Charbonneaux. Long-time readers of *Corvette Fever* may remember the story of M. Charbonneaux's possible contribution to the design of the original Corvette (Nov. 1989), and this collection certainly exemplifies his great talent.

Driving back to Paris to return our
continued on page 50

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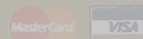


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Corvette Country continued from page 48

Corvette, we stopped to fill the fuel tank. Mobil Super 95 Sans Plomb (no lead) cost 5.55 Francs per liter (\$3.70 per gallon) a wonderful Super 98

Sans Plomb was even more. We pumped 13.75 gallons of 95 octane into the Corvette, at an equivalent cost of \$50.88! The Corvette's metric trip computer indicated our fuel economy for the weekend was 14.1 liters/100km, or 16.75 mpg, for both crawling in Paris and flying on the *autoroute*. The modifications on our German-registered Corvette included a factory option metric instrument panel, red rear fog lamp (mandatory in many European countries), rear reflectors and blanked-out center brake lamp (illegal in Europe), and a German specification tag under the hood.

the European continent, we can think of no better way than in a Corvette. Fast, comfortable and very stylish, it's *magnifique!*

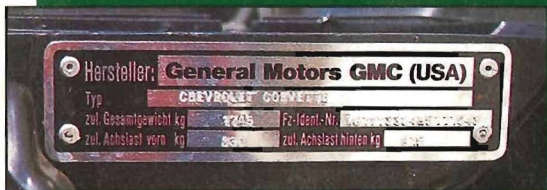
During my two week stay in France I saw only one other Corvette, a gray 1990 roadster with Virginia plates. It was heading in the opposite direction, and we found ourselves pointing and shouting at the sight. Now I know what it is like to see this American in Paris.

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European Modifications



Red rear fog lamp (mandatory in many European countries), rear reflectors, and blanked-out center brake lamp (illegal in Europe).



German specification tag under the hood.

I returned the Corvette to Jean-Philippe Coulard of GM International Export Sales with definite mixed emotions. Around Paris, the Corvette is perfect for only one thing — drawing attention. For someone with deep enough pockets to sacrifice that expensive fiberglass to the Parisian traffic without worry, and with a big enough ego to want to be seen in a big, big way, this is the car. Otherwise, buy a brand new Eastern Bloc ARO or Lada for \$6,000 and drive like the rest of them. But for exploring the countryside or criss-crossing

Author's note

I would like to extend special thanks to:

Jean-Philippe Coulard,
GM International Export Sales,
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GM International Export Sales,
Detroit

Ron Shannon,
GM Atlanta District Zone Office

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