

The aggressive pursuit of leisure: An American in Europe finds play is hard work

The Ottawa Citizen, FINAL, The Citizen's Weekly: Style; E6
Saturday, September 16, 2000

By Richard Minitier

The other day, a well-fed Belgian couldn't take it anymore. He had been sitting a few tables away from me, in a small cafe, for some 15 minutes, making faces. So he came over to my cloud of cigar smoke in his own cloud of anxiety.

"Ah, excuse me," he said. Then asked, hopefully, "Do you speak French?"

"Not really."

"Ah, your cigar ... "

"You don't like my cigar?" I said it as gently as I could. I feared the worst.

"Ah, non, I am a friend of the Cohiba," he assured me. I said nothing, looking down at my notes and my legal pad half-full with a writing assignment that was due in an hour.

"You are working?" he asked.

He made furious motions: narrowed eyes to indicate reading, a spinning hand to indicate quick writing and so on.

"Yes." It was obvious.

"But you do not any pay attention to the Cohiba," he said. Cohiba is a brand of Cuban cigar. "You are working, working, too fast -- you do not enjoy the cigar. The Cohiba must be, ah, ah .. ." He searched for a word for a long moment, before he settled on savoured.

I was wasting pleasure by making it a mere sideline to work. He made me promise to smoke more slowly.

Welcome to the world of what I call "aggressive leisure," an attitude toward life that is quite alien to most Americans. It is a sense of entitlement to pleasure for itself, as an activity with a special claim on our attention. The world of aggressive leisure is filled with aesthetic riches and philosophical moments, or so it is believed. Thus the aggressive pursuit of leisure is every bit as "demanding" as work and not something to be taken lightly. Sometimes work must be put aside to make room for it. My cigar-savouring friend, I discovered, was a truck driver who had paused, midroute, mid-afternoon, for a smoke in a small cafe.

Aggressive leisure is everywhere in Europe. There's the doctor who invites you, after you've paid, to join him for an espresso, oblivious of the throng in the waiting room. And then there's the Dane who turned down a high-paying job at Columbia University because "New York is too busy."

Well, New York is too busy by such a standard. Too crowded with the work ethic, take-out coffee and Chinese-food delivery for the gang working late. For North Americans, everyday leisure extends to a 10-minute coffee break or a latte at your desk. And to the European mind, working over lunch is just "disguised labour."

Why do the Europeans think as they do? An aristocratic cultural heritage is one commonly cited reason. But economics plays a part. Europe provides generous stipends for students, job trainees, job seekers and almost everyone else. These people have better things to do (like get a job), but thanks to the state they have the wherewithal to put off the inevitable for an eternity. It's a fragile world: Stock options, when they come, might make it disappear. But in the meantime a critical mass of leisure connoisseurs learn the refinements of pleasure just when Americans are punching their timecard.

There is something charming about aggressive leisure, if also something a bit absurd. Take the taxi driver I met recently. We had only gone two blocks when he took his eyes off the road to ask: "Do you want to see a piece of sky in the shape of Belgium?"

He opened the sunroof and grew increasingly angry at the trees for blocking his view. So he sharked out of lane and sped onto a sidestreet in search of open sky. The streets kept getting smaller and snakier.

"I'm going to be late for work," I said. Silence. "You're taking me out of my way." Silence again.

He turned off the meter and kept driving. Finally, we arrived at a Gothic abbey. Above, two fluffy clouds framed a patch of blue sky. "Belgium, non?" he asked. At first, it looked like any other gap in the clouds. Seconds later, I felt the seductive spell of aggressive leisure. But I shook it off. Really, I had to get to work.

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