

Marseille has an image problem.

After many years in the down-and-out zone, Marseille is on the up. Each time you read about the city in the English-language press these days the story centres on how, suddenly, everything in Marseille is rosy. The problem, of course, is reality.

Reality is something Marseille knows about. Reality is its speciality. Marseille can be counted on to bring the Mediterranean traveller back to earth. Marseille is industry-by-the-sea. Drugs and immigration. Flyblown streets and prostitution. Unemployment and demonstrations. Abandoned port and downtown areas. Football hooligans. Teenage sex and violence. Or that's what we always used to think.

Marseille is not France. Such has been the line from Paris. Excuse or explanation? Marseille is the Jacobin exception, despite being the inspiration for the national anthem. Modern Marseille was tacked onto the Bouches-du-Rhône by France's need to connect with its colonies, eventually becoming the hapless funnel of problems as *pieds noirs* and *harkis* in full retreat were followed by Algerians fleeing from the very regime they fought to establish. Marseille is France's alter ego.

Or was. Today, France needs Marseille as a role model for the multicultural world which patently fails in Lyon or Bordeaux, Toulouse or, dare one say, Paris itself. Marseille is the only city in France where the central areas of town aren't the preserve of the bourgeoisie. Marseille is like Glasgow or Liverpool beside the

Mediterranean, with Manchester thrown in for good measure. Marseille is reality.

That's why Paris (not to mention London and Brussels) is pulling out the stops to rehabilitate Marseille. Capital cities have much in common when it comes to dealing with the provinces. Now that the TGV line has put Marseille just three hours from Gare de Lyon, the Mediterranean metropolis can be seen as a distant suburb of Paris, somewhere good for the weekend, once it has cleaned up its act a bit. But not too much. For Marseille is reality.

We English – I speak for myself, of course – know the syndrome. A decade or so ago northern cities like Manchester and Liverpool decided to rebuild their image vis-à-vis London. Fed up with derogatory phrases like “Up North”, “North of Watford” and “Frozen North” they set out on the trail by hiring publicists and pitching for the Olympic Games. Well, that was a bit optimistic. No matter how good the technical bid, and how enthusiastic the glad-handing, cities like Sydney could always play the “Manchester factor” – do you really want to spend time in a cold, grey, depressing, flat place pretending it's the world's greatest summer festival?

Too much reality there. Manchester eventually landed the Commonwealth Games (a mystery to the rest of the world and not much less to those countries which used to be banded with the red of Empire). Liverpool got European Union Objective 1 status – a lot of investment cash – but little else. Sheffield got rejected as the alternative venue for staging World Cup football when London's bid fell to pieces over its inability to build a stadium complex. Glasgow got European City of Culture which hardly compared with its rival Edinburgh's annual festival, a truly international event. The capital city syndrome again, Scottish-style.

Seven years ago Marseille was in the dumps. That's to say, Paris still had its back turned. You wouldn't have thought so that July in the Vieux Port, where the week I happened to be there the city staged a dramatic free-to-all World Petanque Championship (no matter that most of the competitors came from nearby Provence villages). The night of the grand finale was capped by an illuminated launch breaking out from the Quai des Belges to a 30-piece swing band playing Glenn Miller. The fish restaurants of the Rue Saint Saens area were full every night despite their spectacular overcharging policies.

Marseille 1995 seemed to me a great place to party. Yet as recently as January 2002, with the image-makers at work for several seasons, no less a luminary than Nicholas Woodsworth of the London

Financial Times arrived with all the old pre-conceptions intact.

"The very idea of spending a weekend break in Marseille, when more genteel places are on the same coast, seemed ludicrous. But I had come to give it a try, although I doubted that even Marseille's finest bouillabaisse could redeem a city with such a bad street reputation," he wrote.

This reputation, stemming directly from *French Connection* 11, was stood firmly on its head by the weekend that followed. In place of pimps and druggies, Woodsworth found "fishermen in rough woollen clothing tending nets"; in place of racketeers and muggers were "large African businesswomen in bou-bous, bearded Arabs in jellabas, beautiful Malagasi women in flowing gowns and turbans." Indeed, the streets around the notorious Canebière, were "bustling, colourful and so exotic I had difficulty believing I was still in France."

In other words, the folklore of Gene Hackman had been overtaken by one closer to Mediterranean and African stereotypes. The article was headlined "My very own French connection". Woodsworth had tasted and approved the "authentic" Marseille. However, the man from Britain's capital was less impressed by any evidence of culture. Wandering up the Cours Julien, our writer noticed "a few people poking about a Saturday morning book fair set up outside, but intellectual pursuits do not seem to be Marseille's favourite activity."

Are they really London's favourite activity? Or Paris's, for that matter? Are the millions who flood into London each day in pursuit of the architecture of Sir Christopher Wren or of a nine-to-five job which pays the mortgage in Orpington? Is Sartre the main preoccupation of rush-hour motorists on the Boulevard Péripherique?

All cities are places of "popular culture" – the culture Woodsworth so patronisingly ascribes to Marseille. Events at London's six Premiership football clubs, for example, draw bigger, more animated and higher-spending crowds than those at the Tate Modern or the National Theatre. Far more visitors to Nice end up on the beach than in the Matisse Museum. And so on.

Without the top museums and the front-rank theatre, Marseille will probably never draw its fair share of the weekendening crowd who read newspapers like the *Financial Times*. In truth, it does not have the hotel base to attempt that sort of tourism. It has never been in that market. Why pretend?

Marseille sees a need to work on its image because of the IT developments and projects like Euroméditerranée which assume a young, flexible workforce and an ability to key in to the mood of the

moment. Ironically, perhaps, it already has a highly-educated, dynamic, alternative sector drawn to the city because reality is to be found there (and because prices were cheap until Paris nodded approval). Whatever Woodsworth thought he saw during his weekend stay, Marseille is not lacking in grey matter.

But he was right to assume that, for the great majority of Marseillais, day-to-day life in a Mediterranean metropolis full of light and noise and pollution is what matters. Images come and go. Marseille carries on regardless. It doesn't really care that Paris and London have chosen belatedly to approve. Reality was there before, and will probably survive even this intrusion.