**Why it really is OK to stray in France**

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**The French are famed for their relaxed approach to extra-marital affairs, but is the country's love of a bit on the side really just a bit of a myth? Or is adultery really a very French affair? Matthew Warren investigates.**

As with food, wine and fashion, it seems the French possess a certain flair when it comes to bed-hopping.

French movies are filled with married men and women slipping elegantly between partners with not the slightest hint of marital discord.

Everyone seemingly gives a Gallic shrug, smokes a cigarette and moves on.

And it's not just the movies. French presidents through the years have been well-known to have had affairs with women other than their wives.

France's last Socialist president, François Mitterrand, kept a whole second family on the go while married. He had a daughter, Mazarine, with his long-time mistress, Anne Pingeot. Both attended his funeral in 1996 alongside his wife, Danielle.

Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac, wrote in his own memoires about his affairs. “There have been women I have loved a lot, as discreetly as possible,” he said coyly.

In many countries, such tales would mark the end of a politician's career. In France, it often seems to have the opposite effect, giving them a poll boost.

Maryse Vaillant is a psychologist who has written extensively about infidelity in France. She published a book on the subject called *'Les Hommes, L'Amour, La Fidélité' (Men, Love and Fidelity)*. She agrees that the French see things differently.

"Our culture isn't as harsh about infidelity as, say, the Anglo-Saxon countries," she says. "It's different to the US where cheating on your wife is seen as very bad, by the wife, the cheater and the whole community. There, people would rather get divorced and remarry, whereas in France we can imagine someone being married and having relationships at the same time."

Still, in France's macho society there remains a big difference between what men and women can get away with.

"French culture is hard on women who cheat," says Vaillant. "The husband of a woman who cheats is ridiculed, even today."

American writer Pamela Druckerman researched infidelity around the world for her book, *'Lust in Translation: Infidelity from Tokyo to Tennessee'*. Druckerman lives in Paris so has first hand experience of how the French approach the topic.

"At dinner parties other women's husbands and boyfriends hold my gaze a bit longer than all but the most lecherous American men would dare," she writes in the book. "Flirting with someone else's partner isn't a betrayal of your spouse or a gateway to extramarital sex. It's a harmless way to have fun."

This breezy nonchalance was shaken over the summer when leading politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested for the alleged rape of a hotel maid.

The former IMF boss was once seen as the most likely candidate to challenge Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential elections and had a huge lead in the polls until the incident on May 14th at New York’s Sofitel hotel. Charges were eventually dropped but the resulting cascade of stories about his behaviour ended his aspirations, for now.

The seriousness of the accusations went beyond the dalliances that the French would normally regard as nothing to get too fussed about. Nevertheless, forgiveness appears to be swift. A poll taken in mid-September by Ifop said that 47 percent would like to see him return to politics. A DSK comeback is far from unlikely.

One of the most striking features of the Strauss-Kahn story was the behaviour of his wife, Anne Sinclair. This glamorous, independently wealthy former TV journalist has stood by her husband throughout the ordeal, not with a pale smile through gritted teeth but with full make-up, perfect hair and expensive shoes.

While many non-French commentators have been amazed that she has stuck with her husband, the French find it completely acceptable and her personal approval rating has soared.

A poll found that 54 percent of women say they "understand" the support she gave her husband. 58 percent of women said they have a good impression of her and almost three-quarters said she was "courageous."

Maryse Vaillant says the role of the supportive wife who accepts that her husband may stray from time to time is well understood in French culture.

"Anne Sinclair is perfect, a true companion. The French love women who are 'grande dames', who support their husbands."

The truth is that the powerful elites have a much easier time of it than most French people.

"Ordinary people allow elites to act in a way that they themselves wouldn't, in particular powerful men," says Vaillant.

So what are the non-elite majority of French people up to? Are they also indulging in the famous *cinq à sept*, the term for the 5 to 7pm slot in the day when the French reportedly scuttle off to their lovers for a couple of hours together before going home?

Gleeden.com is a website that was set up for married people to meet others who want an uncomplicated romantic tryst. It already has 500,000 members in France alone and almost a million worldwide.

Hélène Antier, a spokeswoman for Gleeden, says many French people prefer to avoid divorce by finding a few “moments of adventure” outside their marriage. It may be working. Divorce rates in France are certainly lower than many of the country’s European neighbours, including the UK, Germany, Belgium and Sweden.

Antier says one of the particularities of their French members is the time spent wooing each other before actually meeting.

“In France, our members don’t want to meet up immediately. They’re not after a sexual encounter tomorrow. People take several weeks before they meet up,” says Antier. “In Spain, it’s much quicker. People spend less time on the site before meeting up”

Gleeden’s own figures suggest that the French are no more likely to stray than other nationalities. Its own research found that 17 percent of the French admitted to having an affair, the same as in Spain and Italy.

Yet if the French aren’t cheating more than others, they do seem more tolerant. 53 percent of those questioned by Gleeden said it was possible to cheat on your partner while still loving them, the highest rate for all countries.

Maryse Vaillant agrees that infidelity doesn’t mean you no longer love your partner. Indeed, she argues that being unfaithful can actually be a good thing for a relationship.

"My research showed that giving in to temptation can help a man understand the extent to which he is attached to his wife," she says.

"With his wife he has projects of bringing up children, buying a house, creating a life. With an attraction to another young woman it's not the same thing."

"Sometimes we need a little emotional crisis to show the difference between a moment's satisfaction and building an existence together."

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