

The New York Times

TUESDAY, APRIL 6, 2004

Business Day

FREQUENT FLIER

Fluent in the Many Languages of the Road

When I moved from France to the United States 20 years ago, I barely spoke English. I refused to use a translator, so I had to learn the hard way — by being thrown into it. To make myself understood, I adhered to three basic practices: when confronting a verb, use the present tense; never lose your momentum when speaking; and if you don't know a word in English, substitute a French word. It was difficult for people to understand me, but I appreciated their patience.

Of course, I often travel to far-off places where English isn't even spoken. One of the first long motorcycle trips I ever took was a four-month tour of the Red Sea region which started in France and ended in Egypt, and took my brother, Hubert, and me through Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan. After we had ridden for days in the Saudi desert without see-

ing a soul, a Bedouin appeared out of nowhere, walking alone in the sand under a very hot sun in his djellaba, the traditional robe worn in Arabic countries. Using gestures, he invited us to have tea, and from under his

Translators, hand signals and intercontinental conference calls.

djellaba produced tea leaves, cups and a pot. Somehow, we gathered enough brush to make a small fire and brew the tea. After we finished, my brother and I resumed our trip and the nomad disappeared into the desert.

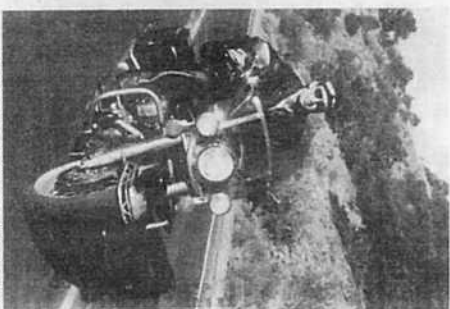
Once, I gave a dinner speech to 1,200 Chinese energy specialists at a

conference in Beijing. I would speak a sentence in English, the Chinese interpreter would translate it, and so on. All of a sudden, without realizing it, I reverted to French. The translator looked at me as if I had three heads. I didn't notice anything until a colleague shouted out to me that I was no longer speaking English.

Every summer a group of six friends from France and I take a 10-day motorcycle trip in the Rockies, packing only a few clothes and our maps. We sleep either at motels we happen to pass or under the stars. One year, I was in the middle of a business deal and told my fellow bikers I would have to keep in contact with my New York office. We traveled from Montana, through Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon, ending up in Washington. Cell-phone reception in the Rockies is often nonexistent, so every 90 minutes or so we stopped at a gas station so that I could check in with New York. The French troupe went to one side of the gas station and phillosophized, or as we say in



Chief executive of K Road Power Inc. and owner of La Cense Montana, a horse-breeding farm in Dillon, Mont.



Left photo, Vincent Lalloret/The New York Times

France, "reinvented the world," while I sat on the pavement in my leather jacket on the other side, at the end of a pay phone. My friends were annoyed to have to spend so much time at these dusty gas sta-

tions, but they had been forewarned. I'll never forget stopping at the last gas station on the eastern access road to Yellowstone where, after a two-and-a-half-hour conference call connecting the West Coast, the East

Coast and Europe, my colleagues and I nailed down the most significant deal of my life. What made it all the more fantastic was that no one other than my fellow bikers knew my exact location.

Corrections

Because of an editing error, a picture caption with the Frequent Flier column in Business Day yesterday about William Kriegel, the chief executive of K Road Power Inc., incorrectly described a property he owns in Montana. It is a quarter-horse training facility, not a horse-breeding farm.

As told to Abby Elhin.