

"Perhaps the most evocative American book about Paris  
since *A Moveable Feast*."

—JAN MORRIS

P A R I S,  
*p a r i s*

JOURNEY INTO THE CITY OF LIGHT

DAVID DOWNIE

Foreword by DIANE JOHNSON, author of *Le Divorce*

Photographs by ALISON HARRIS

“The delightful and insightful essays in *PARIS, PARIS* meld history, atmosphere, and observations on Paris places, Paris people, and Paris phenomena.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Downie is a saunterer, wandering down the narrow ancient streets of the Île de la Cité, picnicking in storied graveyards like Père-Lachaise, observing a seduction at Jardin du Luxembourg with a birder’s patience ... captures the sort of people and places missed by those jetting from starred bistros to hotels with showers.”

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“David Downie’s prose illuminates Paris with an unequaled poignancy and passion. He understands and evokes the soul and the substance of the city with a critic’s intelligence and a lover’s heart. He makes me want to live in Paris again.”

—DONALD GEORGE, contributing editor, *National Geographic Traveler*

“Downie brilliantly upholds the American expat tradition of portraying the City of Light with an original and endearing touch.”

—JOHN FLINN, former travel editor, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*

“If there is one book I’d read before heading to the City of Light, *PARIS, PARIS* is it. Downie, a longtime Paris resident and roamer, writes with knowledge and verve, pinning down the funny and the sublime as he captures on his canvas the quirks, foibles, and follies, and the peculiar mystery of the people and places, that make up this wonderful city.”

—HARRIET WELTY-ROCHEFORT, author of *French Toast* and *French Fried*

“All visitors to Paris who want their eyes opened and their knowledge widened should buy David Downie’s irresistible collection of Paris essays. Take the book with you on walks and be astonished at his sense of detail and place; read it in bed or over a glass of wine in a café, and be introduced to a Paris few know. The text is immaculately complemented by Alison Harris’s beautiful and evocative photographs.”

—ANTON GILL, author of *Il Gigante* and *Peggy Guggenheim*

“Beautifully written and refreshingly original ... Curious and attentive to detail, Downie is appreciative yet unflinching in describing his adopted home ... makes us see [Paris] in a different light.... There’s a deft portrait of the driven, self-created designer Coco Chanel, an acid portrait of the Brutalist modernizer Georges Pompidou, an evocation of the hardworking boat people of the Seine, and historical passages that effortlessly recall lost worlds in vieux Paris.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Gives fresh poetic insight into the city ... a voyage into ‘the bends and recesses, the jagged edges, the secret interiors’ [of Paris].”

—*Departures*

“A quirky, personal, independent view of the city, its history, and its people. Residents will recognize a place they can vouch for and not the clichés so frequently conjured up to match the legends. Visitors and newcomers are bound to find PARIS, *PARIS* reliable company as they discover the city’s beauties and pleasures and its problems too.”

—MAVIS GALLANT

“When good Americans die, Oscar Wilde wrote, they go to Paris. Don’t wait that long. David Downie’s new book reflects the city and its light with such power that its title says it twice. PARIS, *PARIS* shimmers with wit and mesmerizes with wisdom. With splendid photographs by Alison Harris, it is, as the French would say, *un must*.”

—MORT ROSENBLUM

“Like the guide who leads us through *The Hermitage* and its history in Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*, David Downie is the master of educated curiosity. With him we discover Paris, a seemingly public city that is, in fact, full of secrets—great lives, lives wasted on the bizarre; forgotten artisans; lost graves (lost till now); the ‘*papillons nocturnes*’; and the ‘*poinçonneur des Lilas*.’ I have walked some of the city’s streets with him, and reading this book is just as tactile an experience.”

—MICHAEL ONDAATJE

*Paris to the Pyrenees: A Skeptic Pilgrim Walks the Way of Saint James*

*Quiet Corners of Rome*

*Paris City of Night*

*Food Wine Burgundy*

*Food Wine Rome*

*Food Wine Italian Riviera & Genoa*

*Cooking the Roman Way: Authentic Recipes from the  
Home Cooks and Trattorias of Rome*

*Enchanted Liguria: A Celebration of the Culture, Lifestyle and Food of the Italian Riviera*

*La Tour de l'Immonde*

*The Irreverent Guide to Amsterdam*

*Un'altra Parigi (co-author with Ulderico Munzi)*

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*Journey into the City of Light*



DAVID DOWNIE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISON HARRIS

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*This book is dedicated to*

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*the memory of our dear friend Barbara Bray,  
who shared her wit and humor with countless friends and strangers,  
filling Paris with life-enhancing light*



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Of all the books about Paris published each year, not one that I can remember tells you where to find the famous Art Nouveau public toilets in Place de la Madeleine, let alone telling you what to look for in the cemetery of Père-Lachaise. David Downie has a delightful sensibility and the most delighted eye, the most perseverance, and the perfect French, *bien sûr*, and these allow him to uncover secrets. Uncover them he has, the secrets of this fascinating city, and not the ones you'll read about anywhere else. Did you know those ugly brown posts that keep Parisians from parking on the sidewalks are *bittes*, which is slang for what I guess we would call "pricks"? To take this book as a guidebook, walk out with it as he did and follow his path, is to have adventures, and to see a side of Paris anyone could see but hardly anyone does.

Suppose you aren't in Paris? Or you're in Paris on a rainy day? Just to sit inside and read this book will transport you, for Downie is above all a wonderful, and wonderfully well-read, writer. The essays are delightful as essays, but come fine weather I also recommend following his programs to the letter—a day of looking at the Paris of 1900, for instance. It's still here. You'll eat at Julien, have a coffee at Angelina, go to the movies at LaPagode, look at the Palais des Mirages at the Musée Grévin, the wax museum, where he counsels skipping the wax statues to admire this wonder rescued from the 1900 Exposition Universelle.

Or if 1900 is too recent, try the Paris of Beaumarchais, the playwright who invented Figaro, in the days of Louis XV and XVI. Downie tells you how to get into his historic Hôtel Amelot de Bisseuil, little changed since Beaumarchais's day, to get a glimpse of the remarkable sculpture of the courtyard before the concierge throws you out. You'll learn about the topography of the Buttes-Chaumont, the gorgeous park in the 19th arrondissement far from the tourist track; it has a bridge by Eiffel and cliffs built to emulate the famous cliffs of Étretat.

What of the man who has served up this delicious array of treats? Something of a gourmet for one thing, and a fabled cook. I was familiar with his cookbook, *Cooking the Roman Way*, but now I see that the same qualities that make someone love cookery make him love the odd bit of information, the smorgasbord of observations, the taste of the something curious in the scenes before him. Beside a scholar and a gifted *flâneur*, you always want a food-lover to be your guide when possible, and Downie is all three.

And the photographs. Paris must be the most photographed place in the world, from Doisneau to Cartier-Bresson. These beautiful studies by Alison Harris extend that literature with a powerful formal talent. Her camera's loving dissection of details that the busy traveler might not notice makes of this book a splendid object in itself, a sort of bibliophilic gem.

Diane Johnson, Paris

Paris is the kind of city butterfly catchers have trouble netting, tacking down, and studying. Like all great cities and yet unlike any other, Paris is alive and fluttering. It changes with the light, buffeted by Seine-basin breezes. This place called Paris is at once the city of literature and film, an imagined land, a distant view through shifting, misty lenses, and the leftover tang of Jean-Paul Sartre's cigarettes clinging to the mirrored walls of a Saint-Germain-des-Prés café. It's also the city where I and more than two million others pay taxes, re-heel shoes, and shop for cabbages or cleaning fluids.

The tourist brochures and winking websites, the breathless conspiracy thrillers, cinematic fables, and confessional chronicles set in Paris, each offer a view of the city's districts that someone will recognize. Nearly all such views neglect the burgeoning, un-expurgated Paris of the last century's housing projects built within and beyond the beltway. For twenty years, my office was in the unfashionable 20th arrondissement. Its windows offered a kaleidoscopic vision of that Paris—a city of Asians, Africans, and Eastern Europeans. I gazed upon the city, walked through it, worked in their midst, but could not know them or it with anything approaching intimacy. The same applies to the gilded 7th arrondissement—a world of old money, old families, old furniture, old objets d'art, and very old, very heavy leather-bound cultural baggage.

The Paris of this book is not a product of the 7th or 20th arrondissements. In its irreverent, erratic way it flutters from one place, person, or phenomenon to the next, touching on aspects of history, alighting on the contemporary, choosing flowers both perfumed and even smelling.

The book's emphatic title refers to the Paris of the English speaker, and, in italics, the *Paris* of Parisians. They are cities apart. For a Frenchman, "Paris, *Paris*" sets words at play: *paris* is the plural of *pari*, meaning bet, challenge, risk, wager. Elevate the "p" to upper case and you get a city that's a roll of the dice, a life-wager, a challenge as formidable to meet as Manhattan is to a Mongolian or Miamian.

Beyond its linguistic ambiguity the name "Paris" has a peculiar, pleasing resonance. I often hear it in my head even when I don't actually hear it with my ears, for instance when I ride in the Plexiglas nose cone of the Météor high-speed subway, line number fourteen. I enjoy the subway's swooshing headlong rush down dark tunnels, and the verbal massage the Paris system provides.

If you take the Météor from, say, Place de la Madeleine to the Gare de Lyon train station, at each stop you'll hear an unmistakable female voice sing out the stops not once, but twice with a variation in tone and emphasis. "Pyramides," says the voice of Paris, smooth with self-assurance, before the train pulls into the station. "*Pyramides*," the voice repeats as the doors slide open, impatient now, a disembodied Catherine Deneuve riding crop in hand.

The change is subtle, not so much marking an accent as a shift to those ambiguous italics. Up and down the futuristic subway's line, the names sing out modulated and *slightly* reformulated. For months, perhaps years, this peculiar duotone subway refrain played in my head without my knowing it, an earworm whispering not station stops but the words "Paris, *Paris*"—words that to me came to signify the great wager, *the* subway stop of my life, where

got off the train I'd been riding aimlessly, and made my stand.

Perhaps because I came to Paris expecting no favors, with few illusions, and with a generous dose of curiosity, I have yet to feel the betrayal some visitors and transitory residents distill into vague resentment. Paris has no monopoly on grumpy waiters, horizontal pollution, or enraged drivers, nor, in my experience, do the elusive, mythical Parisians focus their supposed disdain on any one nationality. I've been privileged to hunt for Paris in many places, with many people, including the occasional Parisian, for more than a quarter of a century. These essays are part of my catch. My vision of the city still blurs from Paris to *Paris* in my daily pursuit of fluttering wings. Happily, I don't want to pin them down, and anyway, Paris always manages to fly away.





*The time-worn stones were cold and the ever-flowing stream beneath the bridges seemed to have carried away something of their selves ...*

—ÉMILE ZOLA, *L'Oeuvre* (1886)

No single element of Paris evokes the city's ambiguous allure more poignantly than the Seine. A slow arcing gray-green curve, the river reflects the raked tin rooftops arrayed along its embankments, and the temperamental skies of the Île-de-France. Sea breezes sweep fresh Atlantic air up it into the city. Each day when I step out for my constitution around the Île Saint-Louis—a ten-minute walk from where my wife, Alison, and I live—I ask myself what Paris would be without the Seine. The answer is simple: it wouldn't.

At once water source and sewer, lifeline, moat, and swelling menace, the Seine suckled nascent French civilization. It made the founding of Paris possible, transforming a settlement of mud huts into a capital city whose symbol since the year 1210 is a ship, with the catchphrase *Fluctuat nec mergitur*: “It is tossed upon the waves without being submerged” (and sounds better in Latin). For centuries this murky waterway has filled Parisians' hearts, minds, and noses with equal measures of inspiration or despair.

Back in the mid-1970s, the low point of Paris urbanism, I visited the city for the first time and was taken aback by the river's chemical stench and the flying suds from its filthy waves quivering over the cars on the just-built riverside expressways. A decade later I willfully forgot such details when I engineered my move here. I was tantalized by the scenes—tango dancers on the Seine's cobbled quays, bridges compressed by a telephoto lens—in what might possibly be the worst movie ever made, *Tango*. Never able to tango despite lessons, and aware from the start that I'd duped myself into imagining such a dreamy place could exist, I've been stalking the photogenic quays of Paris ever since. Although I've sometimes felt my passion for Paris ebb, the Seine has flowed along, in its indifference seducing me, a knowing victim, time and again.

Not long ago, after a failed research mission to the National Library on Paris's extreme eastern edge, I glanced down at the river from the Pont de Tolbiac and realized that, despite my wanderings, I'd never actually followed the Seine downstream across the city to the quay of the 15th arrondissement. How long a walk could it be? Without real conviction and particularly comfortable shoes I set off to see how far I could get.

Judging by the smokestacks upstream, the glassy National Library towers, and the floating nightclubs moored in front of them, not to mention the cars dueling on the Pompidou Expressway, it struck me as hard to believe the Seine ever had been a wild river edged by marshlands, where the area's Celtic inhabitants lived. Five thousand years ago that benign river provided France's mythicized forebears—*Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois*—with food, potable water, and the protection they needed to build their island-city, which the Romans eventually called Lutetia. Until the 1980s no trace of the Seine Basin's early fisherfolk had been found, but while reconfiguring the formerly industrial Bercy area's warehouses, workmen turned up several Neolithic canoes. The hallowed site is recalled by Rue des Pirogues de Bercy, a street sandwiched between a multiplex cinema and a convention center. City officials quickly latched onto the canoes, seeing in them a symbol of pre-Roman civilization and the solution to an etymological mystery. The canoes jibe with the Celtic-language hypothesis of the origin of "Lutetia": *luh* (river) + *touez* (in the middle) + *y* (house), meaning "houses midstream" or an apparent reference to what is now the Île de la Cité and Île Saint-Louis.

Of course everyone knows the unappetizing alternative, which Victor Hugo pointed out in the mid-1800s: in Latin *lutum* means mud, therefore Lutetia was the "City of Mud." As to the etymology of "Paris," the canoes came in very handy. The ancient Celtic word appears to be composed of *par* (a kind of canoe) + *gw-ys* (boatmen or expert navigators). Therefore the Parisii tribespeople were expert navigators with canoes. The Romans dubbed the muddy settlement *Lutetia Parisiorum*, a mouthful that later inhabitants shortened to Lutetia then Frenchified to the euphonic Lutèce. Paris's neolithic canoes are evoked by the dozens of paddle-shaped information panels, designed by Philippe Starck, found in many places around town.

If you believe what the conqueror Julius Caesar wrote in *Gallic Wars*, France's expert canoe navigators (and other warlike inhabitants) savored not only Seine trout, but also human flesh. The fearsome Gauls called their river Sequana, meaning "snakelike," presumably because the Seine meanders on its 482-mile course from its source on the 1,500-foot Langres Plateau in Burgundy to the Atlantic, a torpid yard's tilt per mile. The Romans lost no time humanizing the snaky Sequana into a curvaceous water nymph of the same name. In case your mind's eye fails to envision her, a mid-nineteenth-century rendition of Sequana stands in a faux grotto at the Source de la Seine. This watery enclave is near the village of Chanceaux. But the property belongs to Paris: Sequana's fountainhead was claimed for the city not by Caesar but by another emperor, Napoléon III.

By continuing downstream from the National Library on the landscaped left bank, under rows of poplars, past barges, houseboats, and homeless people's encampments, you will eventually catch sight of Notre-Dame's spire. It marks the center-point from which distances in France are measured. Fittingly, not far from where Notre-Dame stands the Romans built their walled citadel or *civitas* (later bastardized as *la Cité*), ringed by the Seine's natural moat. Then as now the river ran at its narrowest around the Île de la Cité and could be forded where



low, which is why Roman engineers first bridged it here.

There was nothing new under the sun in Caesar's day. The Seine's ford lay at the crossroads of older, Bronze Age trade routes, routes that led south to the Mediterranean and west to the English Channel. In time, Lutetia became the crucible where the south's copper and the west's tin met and melded into bronze weaponry. In the fourth century AD, when Julian the Apostate was proclaimed *Augustus* in Paris, the rebellious young emperor elevated Lutetia to the rank of "summer capital" of the Roman Empire, and the Seine became the new Rome's Tiber. In due course, once the Romans had vacated, upriver paddled medieval missionaries and Norsemen of an equally bloody-minded nature, bent on trading, raiding, and proselytizing. And the rest, as they say, is history, a murky tale splayed over centuries and far too slippery to grasp here, with Lutetia becoming "Paris," Sequana morphing into "Seine," and my feet already sore after a mere mile's march downstream.

Since the early twenty-first century even the short seedy stretch of quay fronting the Austerlitz train station has been pedestrianized. You can now walk unmolested by cars along the river's left bank for several miles, almost as far as the Musée d'Orsay. I paused on the Pont d'Austerlitz to reconnoiter and rest my bunions. With several specific episodes of city lore in mind, it struck me that, probably ever since the first Gallic fisherman-cannibal feasted on the afoul of his neighbor hereabouts, the Seine has been the favorite accomplice of murderers and a convenient channel for the lifeblood of adulterers, warriors, revolutionaries, royalists, and massacre victims.

Take, for instance, Isabeau of Bavaria, luckless bride of mad King Charles VI. Around 1400, in a fit of jealousy, he had one of her admirers sewn into a cloth sack and tossed into the river (from where the Pont Louis-Philippe now stands, on the Right Bank). And what about the Saint Bartholomew's Massacre of 1572, when the Seine famously ran red? It did so again during the Revolution, as illustrated by eighteenth-century chronicler Jean-Louis Mercier's account of Louis XVI's execution at Place de la Concorde. Mercier tells of an onlooker who dipped his finger into the sovereign's blood as it ran toward the river, pronouncing it particularly salty. Victor Hugo, no stranger to prose in full flood, preferred the sewers to the Seine for many uplifting scenes in *Les Misérables*, though he did finish off his misguided police inspector, Javert, in the river's maelstrom.

As I ambled downstream, I tried to remember how many times in Georges Simenon's novels Inspector Maigret fished bodies or their parts from the Seine, into whose depths Maigret stared daily from his office on the Quai des Orfèvres. The silver screen has certainly upheld the ghoulish-river tradition. People are pushed or flung themselves into Sequana's arms with alarming frequency, as in the otherwise forgettable *Paris by Night*. Relatively recent history has also seen the river run *rouge*: in October 1961, during the Algerian War, the infamous Nazi collaborator Maurice Papon, then prefect of the Paris police, ordered hundreds of Algerian demonstrators to be beaten or bound and dumped into the Seine. The crime was denied for decades, and Papon, protected by everyone from De Gaulle to Mitterrand, remained free until 1999. A plaque on the Pont Saint-Michel records the event. It was placed there in 2001 by mayor Bertrand Delanoë.

But I suspect most contemporary visitors to Paris couldn't give a flying buttress about the morbidity of moviemakers, literati, historians, and statisticians, who note that in an average year about fifty people fling themselves into the river hoping to end their lives. Like many

when I'm in a good mood, they imagine the Seine as a romantic setting, with pairs of love twining. That was precisely what I saw ahead, midstream, in the shade of a spreading sycamore, on the upstream tip of the Île Saint-Louis. The sight reassured me that, on the river's edge, there's something for everyone. There's the Tino Rossi sculpture garden, for instance, with built-in sand pits and convenient statuary for insouciant dog-walkers. There are concrete-lined heat sinks for sun-seeking optimists, amphitheatres for tango enthusiasts, footpaths for red-faced joggers, and many an isolated stretch where anglers wet a line or clochards a wall.

Day and night, the river buzzes with *bateaux-mouches*, speakers blaring and floodlights glaring, gaily conveying millions of merrymakers each year on a magical Paris mystery tour.

But how much of the Seine's glamour is carefully staged illusion? When in a sardonic frame of mind, induced, as was now the case, by the press of bodies around Notre-Dame, I often think of the river's curving sweep as seen from a satellite: an eyebrow raised at all romantic notions of Paris, starting with my own. Romance? Two hundred years ago Napoléon I, even the poet, dubbed the river "The highway linking Paris and Rouen." Thanks to inspired twentieth-century planners, the Seine is still a highway, paved with asphalt on both sides, and girded by commuter train rails underneath the left embankment. Industrial barges and tourist boats churn up the dark waters between.

Twenty-five million tons of freight, much of it toxic, transits on the river yearly. The effluent and garbage of the capital and upstream Seine Basin have flowed across Sequana's bosom since the days of Lutetia. That paragon of romantic bridges, the Pont des Arts, linking the Louvre to the Institut de France, was long where street sweepers dumped their loads. So foul was the Seine by 1970, the statistical baseline for reclamation efforts, that it was pronounced "nearly dead." Of the dozens of fish species pre-industrial fishermen once snared in their nets, scientists could find only three remaining. The situation has slowly improved with bottom-feeders such as torpedo fish making a comeback, though in the early 1990s the mayor Jacques Chirac was a trifle premature when he tossed trout and salmon into what was still a sump. The fish promptly went belly up. Granted, a few escapees from the Canal Saint-Martin do cross Paris now and again, swimming as fast as their fins will take them to Le Havre and the sea. In 2010 one lucky angler famously fished out a plump, healthy hatchery salmon—and practically made front-page news.

Today, with the river's quays and bridges a UNESCO World Heritage Site, few Parisians suspect that Sequana is on a respirator: six oxygen-pumping plants hidden along the banks keep floundering fish species alive. Still fewer people notice the submerged garbage-catching barriers discreetly emptied by trucks or barges. And hardly anyone thinks of the hundreds of employees working around the clock to keep the river tidy, police it, control its flow, and purify its water. This is not done merely to please environmentalists or the tourism board. The fact is eighty percent of Paris's drinking water comes from the Seine. The turbid flow is treated in four plants at the rate of three million cubic meters daily then piped into the homes of unsuspecting residents. I recall the day I heard rumors that, on average, by the time the Seine reaches my kitchen sink it has been through five human bodies. Try telling that to an enraptured visitor at a riverside café.

Parisians shrug off such reports. They seem to acquire a taste for chlorine and kidney-filtered water. With that pleasant thought in mind I gulped an espresso and a glass of Seine

then descended a stairway to the riverbank, just downstream of Place Saint-Michel. I was in time to see the Brigade Fluvial, stationed near the Pont des Arts, struggle into wetsuits and brave the waters. I prayed to Sequana that these fluvial firemen were inoculated against every known water-borne disease and heavily insured. Ditto the Seine police, who fly by on speedboats, their sunglasses flashing, apparently having the time of their life. If only their dream duties did not include dealing with the successful suicide victims, and the many, many others who try but fail.

Despite the widely reported death of Jacques Chirac's trout and salmon, many Parisians continue to dream of fishing and swimming in the Seine, so much so that Paris's police authority and long-serving mayor Delanoë are studying the feasibility of creating inner-city bathing beaches. Delanoë got his toes in the water in summer 2002 with an initiative called *Paris Plage*, as in "beach." He ordered that the Right Bank expressway be closed temporarily and had outdoor cafés, sun umbrellas, and portable swimming pools planted on the tarmac. The initiative is now a regular summertime event, and the expressway is also closed from mid-morning to early afternoon on Sundays, transforming the pitted asphalt into an enchanted Yellow Brick Road. But no one so far has been foolhardy enough to scatter sand on the riverbanks and dive in.

As I shuffled now over the handsome, modern Solferino footbridge to the Right Bank quay flanking the Tuileries, I paused to take in the seductive views, and had to admit that a sandy strand somewhere hereabouts wouldn't be bad. Once the water was clean enough for a swim, however, there would remain the minor detail of the Seine's yearly floods, which tend to wreak havoc and would possibly sweep away the mayor's beaches.

Earthquake-prone California lives in fear of "the big one." But Paris dreads a repeat of the 1910 flood, whose height and extent are remembered around town by small plaques. Were it not for the reservoirs, dams, locks, and embankments perfected following the 1910 deluge, in the dry season the Seine would be a muddy trickle, while in rainy months it would slosh as far as the Bastille, Odéon, and Opéra neighborhoods. A replay of 1910, termed a "Parisian Chernobyl" by police and municipal authorities, would cost billions of euros and shut down the city for months.

Floods would be nightmarish indeed, but occasional high water can be a boon, providing walkers with a blissful respite between marks on the meter stick. Moderately high water means cars can no longer use the expressways, while pedestrians can still pick a path between the puddles. Traditionally, Parisians gauged the river's height by Le Zouave (it rhymes with suave), a giant statue of a soldier. Le Zouave juts from the Pont de l'Alma and when Sequana caresses his neck, the city is in trouble. Happily, the river was barely licking the statue's boots as I crept by on the Pont de l'Alma. I switched back to the Left Bank and sauntered along the stretch of quay in the Eiffel Tower's shadow.

Feet throbbing, I limped onto the Allée des Cygnes, a narrow, half-mile-long island anchored midstream. It joins the tiered bridge of Bir-Hakeim to that of Grenelle, thereby uniting the bridges' respective monuments to hope, pride, or self-deception, depending on your interpretation of history and your worldview. At Bir-Hakeim a 1949 plaque reminds readers that "France never stopped fighting" in World War II. Downstream at Grenelle the thirty-foot Statue of Liberty faces west, turning its buttocks to Notre-Dame. On the Allée des Cygnes itself I saw no swans, but spotted many peacocks in designer sportswear. They laze

on benches, and appeared to be enjoying the unusual views of 1950s to 1970s high-rise architecture.

Another quarter-mile downstream at Javel (as in *eau de Javel*, or bleach, produced here starting in the 1770s) the Seine flowed melodiously beneath the ironwork Pont Mirabeau. In the rushing mainstream I could hear Guillaume Apollinaire's wistful refrain of time and love slipping by, the one every French high schooler memorizes: *Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine et nos amours faut-il qu'il m'en souviene la joie venait toujours après la peine ...*

But I hadn't walked three hours to weep tears of nostalgia. The goal I had been advancing toward was near: a giant bronze nymph, symbol of the river, affixed to the Pont Mirabeau. On the railing above her head is a crown in the shape of a turreted citadel, and the device *Fluctuat nec mergitur*. The sculpture's décolleté suggests that the sculptor was more interested in his model's bounteous *seins* than in the Seine. I gazed down into her corroded but smiling eyes and recognized Sequana.



*[Y]ou shall meete some walkes & retirements full of Gallants & Ladys, in others melancholy Fryers, in others studious Scholars, in others jolly Citizens; some sitting & lying on the Grasse, others, running, & jumping, some playing at bowles, & ball, others dancing & singing; and all this without the least disturbance ...*

—JOHN EVELYN'S diary, April 1, 1644

The gardens shall be open from sunrise to sunset all year, but never before seven a.m.” S reads one of the nine articles of the *Règlement du Jardin du Luxembourg*, that most sublime of Paris parks that greens the Left Bank between the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse. Like countless enthusiasts who’ve visited the gardens in the past few centuries, I’ve stood at dawn before the wrought-iron gates waiting for the keepers of the castle to let me in. On warm summer evenings, when the sun and moon meet in the canopy of horse-chestnut trees west of the Palais du Luxembourg, I’ve hidden in the shadows, savoring the dusky light, until the guards have ushered me out of those tall, uncompromising gates.

You are denied sunrises and sunsets at the Luxembourg (and the pleasures of the night) by little else worth mentioning. In their own way, the gardens are a perfect world: sixty acres of terraced woods and walks, fountains and pools, with sweeping perspectives along alleys of surgically clipped trees. There’s an old-fashioned music stand, two quaint cafés, a restaurant

and several snack bars. City and country embrace to seduce you. A day spent loitering here teaches you more about Paris and its inhabitants than many a scholarly tome.

Some Parisians make a science of studying people's behavior in the Luxembourg gardens. My friend of mine once boasted that he could tell the time of day by the breathlessness of the before-work joggers, the ruddiness of the lunchtime loafers, and the decibel levels of the babies, maids, and beaming young mothers out for an afternoon stroll. I challenged his boast but had to admit that, though I'd been to the gardens many times (they're only a half-hour walk from where I live), I'd never actually spent a day there. And I resolved to do just that.

I arrived at the park from Place de l'Odéon one spring morning and walked straight to the wooden kiosk. A handful of these are scattered around the gardens. Displayed are a map and a poster showing the species of trees—elm, sycamore, ginkgo, giant sequoia—that grow here with names in French and Latin, for the benefit of budding botanists. You also find a brief history, in four languages, of the Luxembourg palace and its grounds.

Legend has it that the gardens stand over the ancient Roman encampment of Emperor Julian the Apostate (AD 331 to 363). But there's no trace of it. From Julian's day to the eleventh century, the area was farmed. The farms are also long gone. In the 1200s, Louis IX—known as Saint Louis—gave part of the neighborhood to the Carthusian monks. Alas, the monastery is gone, too.

As for the flower-spangled, sun-washed gardens we know today, their life began in the early 1600s as a green garland adorning the palace built by architect Salomon de Brosse for Henri IV's widowed queen, Marie de Médicis, née Maria de' Medici, a Florentine. She wanted an Italian-style palazzo to remind her of the Pitti Palace back home. Instead, she wound up with rusticated stonework grafted onto the archetypal Île-de-France château, surrounded by formal French gardens.

Jostled by joggers, I strolled from the kiosk to the Fontaine de Médicis and sat beside it. This oblong pool is flanked by twin ranks of tall sycamores draped with ivy bows, a living garland motif. No matter what the season, it's cool and damp here. The moody setting seems to attract a soulful breed of visitor. On one side of the pool sat a solitary young man pretending to read *Le Monde*. Across from him posed a comely young woman, the real object of his attention. She looked wistfully at the white marble sculptures of Acis and Galathea enlaced rapturously in the fountain's grotto. Above them lurks the menacing Polyphemus, a greenish bronze monster twice their size. The young woman's eyes swept over the pool to the ivy garlands, to the half-opened newspaper, and finally to the young man's handsome face. Each time her gaze fell upon him, *Le Monde* trembled.

My thoughts returned to the luckless Marie de Médicis, who so loved this fountain. She moved into her palace in 1625 while the plaster was still wet and was expelled from France shortly thereafter by her thankless son Louis XIII. The name of the Duc de Tingry, Luxembourg, the property's former owner, was revived, and Marie de Médicis's was forgotten. The palace then passed through the hands of the Duc d'Orléans, the Duchesse de Guise, Louis XIV, and several less illustrious heirs. The only notable incidents in the garden during these centuries seem to have been the visits of Watteau, who painted many a sensual canvas here, and the late-night summertime orgies of the Duchesse de Berry. She had all the gates but one walled up so she could frolic "with the sort of abandon that requires accomplices and not witnesses."

I was just about to leave Marie's fountain when along came a teetering octogenarian, le unsteadily by her young grandson. "Where are the goldfish?" demanded the boy, waving stick. "They must be at the other end," whispered the woman. They shuffled along together side-stepping the nervous young woman and attracting the attention of the man reading *Le Monde*. He folded his newspaper then edged around the pool. "Aren't you Sylvie?" he asked. She said a friend of hers was named Sylvie. Perhaps they'd met at Sylvie's house? "Yes," replied the eager young man. "That's it ... Shall we have a coffee? It's damp by the fountain." And the two walked awkwardly toward the park café in a nearby grove of flowering horse-chestnut trees.

Meanwhile, there were no goldfish to be found at either end of the fountain. The elder woman and her grandson headed toward the so-called Great Octagonal Pool—the garden centerpiece—facing the rear of the Palais du Luxembourg. I followed, settling into an armchair to sniff the sea of flowers and watch the world go by.

It's hard to imagine this place as a prison. Yet during the Revolution's darkest days, the grounds were sealed and hundreds of royalists and sympathizers interned. Guests included Danton, the painter David, and Tom Paine (who had the effrontery to vote against the execution of Louis XVI). Paine spent many a day wandering the gardens' alleys, looking for a way out, and by luck escaped the guillotine. Few others did.

Revolutionaries also ransacked the palace. A series of monumental paintings by Rubens depicting the life of Marie de Médicis that had hung here for more than a century were packed off to the Louvre, where you may admire them to this day.

Since then, with brief interruptions, the building has housed the French Senate. The grounds were expanded under Napoléon I, who destroyed the Carthusian monastery, and were reduced in the 1860s under Napoléon III, who ordered his prefect, Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann, to rebuild the neighborhood from scratch. Haussmann would have paved the gardens over had not twelve thousand angry citizens poured into the streets to stop him. Instead he moved the Fontaine de Médicis to its present location and ran a road or two across the grounds.

But Haussmann and his team did bequeath the park its handsome round music stands, gingerbread cafés, beekeeper's bungalow, and most of the compound's other charming nineteenth-century elements. For years my favorites were the battered green metal garden chairs, about which I developed a theory long ago. Each of the four distinctive types of chairs seemed to have its own personality and attract people of corresponding character. Some chairs were upright and grave, others slung back at a suggestive angle, still others had generous round seats decorated with delicate pinhole patterns and armrests shaped like arabesques. These I thought of as grandmother chairs, and sadly they have disappeared. They were comforting and weathered, appealing to thoughtful, mature strollers with a nostalgic twinkle in their eyes.

On weekday mornings, when the gardens aren't too crowded and there are plenty of chairs to go around, you can still guess what kind of person will choose what kind of chair, when the Sun gods and goddesses lope down the gravel lanes then drape themselves over the low-slung variety, usually in the vicinity of the *orangerie*, a heat sink dotted with orange trees and outsized potted palms. Chess players favor a combination of one upright, armless chair (for their boards) faced by armchairs. They set up in the grove of paulownia trees and in spring

play under a rain of mauve blossoms. Amorous couples prefer secluded lanes, leaning two armless chairs side by side. The empty chairs, left as arranged by their last occupants, tell of trysts, duels, and roundtable talks.

From my comfortable old armchair by the octagonal pool, I watched as children played with weathered wooden sailboats, prodding them with long wooden sticks. A sinister-looking man of middle age with a radio-controlled submarine chortled as his U-boat prowled just below the surface.

The wizened woman who rents the sailboats displays dozens of the battered little craft on the cart she wheels out rain or shine. She is known to be fierce, defending her boats from the abuse of rambunctious children. Every once in a while, a submarine or powerboat rams a sailboat and she flies into a rage.

Children often misuse the wooden sticks she supplies and take a poke at the pool's enormous old carp. Witness the fish-hunting grandson I'd seen earlier at the Fontaine de Médicis: the boat woman has summoned a park guard and ordered him to subdue the child and confiscate his stick.

As the grandmother and her chastened grandson slunk off, I remarked to a neighbor in an upright chair that the *gardien* was perhaps too strict.

"Monsieur," my neighbor remonstrated, "the rules must be enforced." A chorus of Gallian voices agreed. "Rules, rules, rules," echoed the stiff chairs.

With that mild reproach coloring my cheek, I stole away to the park café, installed myself under the leafy horse-chestnut trees at a wobbly metal table, and soothed my pride with a sandwich and a beer. The beer was cool and refreshing, the sandwich tough as rubber and the prices extortionate. Still, a brass band was playing under the music stand's canopy, the sun slanted through the budding grove, and I couldn't help enjoying myself.

I hadn't been there five minutes when a battalion of *gardiens* appeared for their break. Paunchy and of indeterminate age, the men ordered rough red wine and soon it was flowing like the Médicis fountain. The *gardiens* wear dark blue uniforms with brass buttons and matching képis. In winter, they wrap themselves in dark blue overcoats or heavy black capes and look like avenging angels. They carry walkie-talkies and whistles and are not shy about using either. Peep-pee-EEP—get off the lawn! Peep-peep-pee-EEP—don't pick the flowers! Put away that camera—no photos allowed with a tripod!

Some afternoons, the birds can't compete with the *gardiens*'s shrilling. But now, as they ate and drank and smoked luxuriantly, they seemed entirely human. Every kingdom must have its rules and someone to enforce them.

Later, as I wandered around the romantic English garden west of the main esplanade, I reflected upon this simple fact. Without the *règlement*, would the Luxembourg lose its magic? As it is, no one pilfers the pears grown by botanists on the pocket-size orchard's espaliered trees. Or throws smoke bombs at the beehives kept by the Société Centrale d'Apiculture, whose courses on beekeeping, devised to bring Parisians into contact with nature, have been a fixture since the 1860s. Were they allowed on the lush yet delicate lawns, would the gleeful thousands of students from the Lycée Montaigne facing the park soon wear the grass thin? One nineteenth-century chronicler remarked that so many high school and college students have always come here that if the trees were full of parrots, the parrots would speak Latin—though the current language of choice seems to be Franglais, that admix of French and



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