

FOUR

LIFESTYLE



A cool corner of Paris

Paris has countless hidden gems and historic landmarks, some more intriguing and offbeat than others, as Rowena Marella-Daw finds out during a rare visit.

Sojourn on the Seine

My first impressions of Paris go back a few decades – Champs-Élysées packed with tourists, traffic and service with indifference. And barely a year after the terrorist attacks, I return to the City of Light clutching a mixed baggage of trepidation, excitement and curiosity. This time around, I'm drawn towards a facet of Paris I never really knew – the Left Bank's 6th arrondissement.

Something about this corner of Paris feels just right – civilised, yet quirky; fashionable but unpretentious. Vestiges of the area's rebellious past still lurk around Saint-Germain-des-Prés, one of the district's four quarters. This is where jazz and existentialism became post-war bedfellows; where the city's publishing industry flourished. Its smoke-filled jazz dens and cafés, notably Les Deux Magots and Café de Flore, were hotbeds of revolutionary and literary activity, frequented by A-listers of its time: Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, both forerunners of La Nouvelle Vague, or 'new wave' film movement.



Hotel Montalembert cuisine

Across from Les Deux Magots is the city's oldest church, the Abbey of St Germain-des-Prés, a fitting refuge from the quarter's hustle and bustle. It celebrated its 1000th birthday in 2014, although its founding dates back to the sixth century. Navigating the quieter back streets gives me a better picture of the community – boutique perfumers and interior design shops mingling with art studios, museums, antiquarian bookshops and delightful patisseries. At Rue de Verneuil, I happen across a building façade covered in graffiti and street art. At the centre of it all are depictions of a man who's been around the block. Call it vandalism or irreverence, to the French it's homage to the nation's most beloved singer-songwriter, Serge Gainsbourg. He lived in this house for 22 years until his death in 1991, and his legacy lives on through his risqué composition, 'Je t'aime... moi non plus', which he recorded with English lover, Jane Birkin.

The number of jazz clubs around Saint-Germain-des-Prés has dwindled since their heyday in the 40s and 50s. Fortunately though, there's Chez Papa, a popular haunt on rue Saint-Benoit for 21st century beatniks. Apart from the smoking ban, it speaks Bohemian cool – cosy corners, tables lit with candles, lived-in walls scribbled with messages and signatures from guests. A mix of locals and tourists occupies every table, and the food is great too. The best jazz talents in town perform here, and this evening female vocalist Leslie Lewis strikes the right emotional chord with her velvety voice, while her husband Gerard Hagen tinkers at the piano with ease. The evening is magical, I could stay there all night.

Back at Hotel Montalembert, a short stroll from the club, Eric, the amiable porter who bears an uncanny resemblance to President François Hollande, greets me. But the real star here is the hotel, which 25 years ago was recognised as the city's first 'boutique hotel'. At the age of 90, it needed a nip and tuck here and there, and after careful refurbishment an intimate vibe is achieved by harmonising contemporary lines with Retro touches, revitalised by a refreshing colour scheme of canary yellow and teal that's easy on the eyes. This grande dame looks sassy indeed.



Hotel Montalembert

Straddling the 6th and 7th arrondissements, Montalembert is tucked away in a quiet corner but close to places of interest, ranging from the traditional to the bizarre. On the way to Musée Rodin, Chapon chocolatier at rue du Bac is just too good to miss. Then there's Deyrolle, where the seemingly ordinary ground floor displays belie a secret. Ascending the stairs to the first floor, I come face-to-face with an assortment of imposing wildlife – tigers, leopards, monkeys, wild boar, sloth, to name a few, their frozen pose and empty gaze disconcerting. The entire floor is dedicated to taxidermy, and has been in business since 1831.

Hotel Montalembert has been an integral part of the community, an institution that over the decades has attracted a loyal clientele. And who better to judge the quality of food than discerning denizens? Chef David Marleau's lunch repertoire is a delectable journey bringing together flavours of the Orient and the West: a light starter of Organic tiger shrimp tartar, lemongrass broth and Koshi Hikari rice, followed by Turbot, stuffed leeks with truffle, samphire and sesame, then refreshing Wild seasonal strawberries, rhubarb and ginger marmalade served with frozen Chantilly. Undoubtedly, Marleau's creative cuisine, along with convivial service, sets the restaurant apart even from neighbouring Michelin star establishments. "It is the hotel of writers and artists, so we wanted to preserve this spirit, particularly for the restaurant whose customers are primarily local regulars," says owner Anne Jousse.

My sojourn in Paris would not be complete though without revisiting the Right Bank. Carrying on with the Bohemian spirit, the Buddha-Bar Hotel sounds like the perfect setting – intimate, unconventional, and far enough from the crowds. Bright red lanterns illuminating the entrance hall ceiling immediately transport me to 1930s Shanghai, the decadence of that era depicted in Imperial yellow pleated silk along the hallways, rich scarlet lacquer and sumptuous silk and brocade boudoir



Buddha Bar | Hotel Paris

furnishings lavished on every suite. The pièce de résistance here is the historical Suite de Gagny, a fitting homage to Augustin Blondel de Gagny, connoisseur of the arts and King Louis XV's entertainer. The 18th century building marries classical and neo-Asian features, with quirky, modern art installations on loan from the Opera Gallery around the corner.

Buddha-Bar Hotel attracts the trendy set and gourmands with its private club-style ambience and pan-Asian cuisine. Mixologists at the sexy and elegant Qu4tre bar create cocktails inspired by the four elements: earth, fire, water and air, and infuse them with exotic fruits, herbs and spices. Come summer time, everyone is out lounging at the terrace, where my companions and I savour delicious morsels and personalised tipples. The popular Sunday brunch is worth the wait, and my guilt-free indulgence starts off with a refreshing detox juice, then salads, the freshest prawns and sushi, seafood and other tempting delights.

My time in Paris is short but sweet, and while so much has happened there over the decades, I'm delighted to find the city still shining bright, pulsating, and beaming with defiance against adversity. It's good to be back.

Little Black Book

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