

A Touch of Paris **by Margot Justes**

A Touch of Paris by Margot Justes I'm convinced that it's time to go back to Paris, writing this article has been a delight, but leaves me with a sense of longing to revisit my very favorite places and discover new ones.

Last time I stayed at the Hotel Lutetia, (45 Boulevard Raspail 75006 Paris).The hotel evokes the Art Deco period masterfully. It's charming, intimate, the staff helpful and it is centrally located. Best of all it is within walking distance of the Rodin Museum. My absolutely favorite museum of all.

Volumes have been written about Paris, but I would love to share a few of the treasured memories and impressions of a city that has enchanted me for many, many years.

Travel within the city is easy, it's a walking city, have comfortable shoes and Paris is yours. If that is a problem, the Metro system is fast, quiet and efficient and trains run frequently.

My most cherished memories are those of the time spent in the Latin Quarter and the Rodin Museum. I will start our journey there.

The Left Bank. The Latin Quarter. The collegiate pulse of Paris, and what a pulse it is. The Latin Quarter so named because during the Middle Ages students attending the Sorbonne spoke Latin.

As in the rest of this remarkable city, the Latin Quarter has a vast architectural history and a history of political unrest, one worth mentioning was the 1968 student revolt, where even toilets were torn from the bathroom walls and destroyed.

This verve center never sleeps, the cafes are always brimming with students. Even today, you get the sense of the bohemian life style.

To be sure you'll hear discussions on the latest soccer scores, but you will also see games of chess being played, you'll hear philosophical discussions, you'll see students reading Voltaire, Zola, Rousseau and probably James Patterson while sipping their brew of choice.

The Sorbonne stands at the center, its creation dates back to 1253; see what I mean about history.

You're in the intellectual center of Paris, but you're also right smack in the urban center, vital and pulsing with life.

The Cluny Museum built on Roman ruins, also known as the Middle Age Museum is filled with artifacts dating to the middle ages, among them exquisite illuminated manuscripts. You have the Pantheon that dates back to 1750, the Natural History Museum and also the Arab World Institute, a relative newcomer built in the 1980's.

The Latin Quarter anchored (as it were) by Notre Dame, and the Seine at one end and the Luxembourg Gardens at the other and so much in between.

Go off the beaten path, stray from Boulevard St. Michel and you may find yourself walking on uneven cobblestones, a maze of tiny streets that lead into others. One among many is Rue de la Huchette, filled with beguiling multi national restaurants, just begging you to sample their cuisine.

The Luxembourg Gardens beckon you in, as the gentle mist falls on the tree branches leaving a crystal reflection, a heavenly clean earthy smell permeates your nostrils as you take a deep breath. Walk along the gravel path and hear it crunch beneath your feet. Listen to the birds chirp as they spread their wings and take flight only to land perched on a shoulder of a statue.

Watch the grass as it seems to become greener right in front of your eyes, the rain still falling and sinking deep into the earth.

Leave the peace of the gardens and walk out through the wrought iron fence. Go across the street while the gentle rain is still falling, sit down in the café, order a coffee and observe the wet wrought iron glisten in the golden sun peeking through the clouds.

Go to the Rodin Museum, (Musee Rodin 77 Rue de Varenne, 75007 Paris) walk, take a cab, the Metro, anyway you see fit, but get there.

Even before you enter the intimate museum, you can get a glimpse of the treasures within through the glass wall. Yes, a glass wall allows you to see the backs of the Burghers of Calais. Can you think of a better enticement to a museum?

Enter through the old doors and you're in Rodin's gardens, visiting his home. The Gates of Hell, the massive portals greet you coming in and going out; it is a portal as no other.

Inspired by Dante's Inferno, they are magnificent. An endeavor that took almost four decades and bears an unforgettable semblance of chaos. Rodin was thought to believe that hell is not only a place for the dead but the living as well. The agony, will to survive, beauty, horror, it's all there for you to see.

Wonder through the gardens, sit on the bench in front of the Thinker and strike a pose. He's there in the elements, right in the midst of the gardens. Stroll further and meet Balzac. Sit down in the outdoor café and sip a delicious cup of coffee, look around you, the treasures abound.

The Burghers of Calais await your visit, an incredible sculpture depicting men willing to sacrifice their lives to save their village. The heartbreaking sorrow reflected in their faces is simply astounding.

For me, the urge to touch and savor a piece of sculpture is always there, whether it's smooth and flowing or harsh and gnarly, doesn't matter, I just feel the need to touch. But it wasn't till I was introduced to Rodin's work that I saw passion portrayed with such force, agony with such poignancy, hope and survival with such strength; each sinew, rope, muscle so well defined.

I had a radio interview with Jena O'Connor of KORN 1490 AM Let's Talk and she asked a really

good question. She had read my book, liked it and wanted to know what makes the Rodin Museum unique? What makes it stand out and different from the rest?
And for once I was quick on my feet...it's still a work in progress...the thinking on my feet part.

For me it is matchless in its intimacy. The gardens are magnificent and the sculptures peek at you from unexpected places. It is relaxing, not chaotic, your eye wonders but there is none of the panic of what shall I see first or next. As a visitor you tend to relax, take your time. Savor. Enjoy. You're among friends. You're not overwhelmed. Look at the Thinker, thought and muscle? Or is it? What would you see?

Once you've wandered through the gardens, you're now ready to enter his home. Some pieces have been left as a work in progress, ready for the master to return and finish. That is entirely my impression, probably because his presence can still be felt, at least by me.

The Kiss, hard cold marble generating a tremendous amount of heat. Passionate. The lovers wrapped in an ardent embrace, totally oblivious of others. If you're lucky enough to be there, stand in front and decide if you agree with the critics and pundits, was it just a woman submitting to the man? Or is there more, much more.

The Hand of God, flowing, smooth, compelling. Can you feel the magic of the hand rising out of the un-worked marble? The hard, cold stone holds such magnificent power.

Walk through the house and listen to the creaking floor boards and imagine the beginning of life in the creative process.

Then of course there is the Louvre, world renowned and rightfully so, and on every tourists' map. It is huge and you can't possibly see everything in one visit. Select a few pieces and start there, otherwise you'll be overwhelmed.

My absolutely favorite sculpture is incredible in stature and appeal. Also known as the Winged Victory of Samothrace or Nike of Samothrace-the goddess Nike (meaning Victory in Greek) is an astounding massive piece standing at 328 cm. That's almost 11 ft from the top of her shoulders to her feet and she's standing on a ship.

Placed at the center of the landing in the grand Daru staircase in the Louvre, the statue takes your breath away. It is overwhelming in its sheer power, beauty and size.

The Victory made of Parian marble from Paros, Greece, circa 220-190 BC, can we say old, is so beautifully sculpted. The head is missing, as are the arms, but the sense of the power, the gigantic windblown wings held back, the seemingly wet garments flowing about the legs fighting the sea wind, displaying a stance of power, ferocity and victory, overrides everything else.

A graceful, ebullient and wind swept Nike coming down to earth standing on the prow of a ship declaring victory. The sculpture was discovered in 1863 on the small island Samothrace in the Aegean, by Charles Champoiseau, French Vice-Consul to a city in Turkey. Just in case you were wondering about the French connection.

The first time I came face to face with the statue, I know it's an odd thing to say 'face to face' with a headless statue, but the idiom fits. I wasn't very graceful, so awestruck I wasn't paying attention, missed a couple of steps and paid appropriate homage, on my knees, face down or up since I was staring at the magnificent site at the time. A clumsy introduction like that is memorable to say the least.

I think everyone has heard of the Louvre and the many treasures it houses, but I wonder how many of us actually thought about the historic building that so many masterpieces call home. As you might have guessed, I happen to like buildings too.

A fortress. A palace. A world renowned museum. The building has a grand and passionate history. Began in the 12th or 13th century, depending where you do your research. Suffice it to say, it is old. It has been build upon to keep invaders out, kings in extreme luxury and masterpieces comfortable and lovingly cared for.

The size is astounding, 60,000 square feet, give or take a foot or two, and hosts over 35,000 pieces of art. When I said it was huge, I was not exaggerating. Take a deep breath and forge ahead, just remember you can't see everything on one day. If your time is limited, decide before going in what you absolutely must see, and start there. The place is overwhelming.

The building, altered over the years gives you a glimpse of its complete history, if you take the time to look around you. Even Catherine De Medici had a hand in the re-design by combining the Louvre and the Palais des Tuileries. There were additions, rebuilding and destruction, but what remains to this day is simply inspiring.

Louis XIV, lived at the Palais Louvre but later moved to better accommodations- Versailles-and left the Louvre Palace to predominantly display the royal art collection. The museum opened its doors to the public in 1793. Changes made by Louis XIV, Napoleon and many others over the centuries have added an incredible imprint on the size of the building as well as the collection the museum houses today.

Surrounded by the Tuileries gardens, the mammoth Romanesque structure is awe inspiring at first sight. It cannot be missed. The serene quiet elegance outside, belies the richness of the galleries and collection on exhibit inside. The immense history of the Louvre from the first laid stone matches its gargantuan size. Take a leisurely stroll in the gorgeous gardens, admire the building from afar and imagine someone calling it home.

A visit to Paris must include a stroll on the grandest avenue of them all, the Champs Elysees. Trees border the wide avenue. My imagination always takes root, and I see a fanciful lush border that outlines the street, a gigantic sweep of branches that almost caress the ground, as the cars speed in manic hurry. Exhilarating. The site is a delight to the senses. Wide, open, elegant and vital. Brimming with life and expensive boutiques.

You have arrived at the shoppers Mecca in Paris. No, it is not the haute couture center, although fine shopping is indeed plentiful, it is simply an exciting mixture of stores, cafes, cinemas and tourists. Many tourists, no matter time of year.

The avenue's beginning is simple, an Elysian field-hence the name-became a strolling pathway in 1616, under Marie De Medici's guidance.

Today it stretches from the Place de la Concorde, the renowned obelisk marks the starting point all the way up to the Arc de Triomphe and the Place de l'Etoile (place of stars), over a mile long, it is easily the most recognized avenue in the world.

Once you reach the Arc de Triomphe and go upstairs, Paris will be at your feet, look down, you'll see why it is called the place of stars. It has since been renamed Place Charles du Gaulle, but for me it will always be the place of stars.

I have often heard it said that if you sit in a café on the Champs Elysees long enough, you will eventually meet someone you know. I never had, but am willing to test the hypothesis.

Yes, Paris is expensive, but simple and inexpensive pleasures can be found. Anywhere you may find yourself, take a few moments and make them uniquely your own.

You have to be willing to by-pass the tourist frenzy, the bus waiting to take you somewhere else, the time crunch because said bus will leave without you. Take timeout, by yourself and get to know Paris. You won't be disappointed. The intimate side streets, the age old buildings; the charm of the city awaits you.

It is early morning and the city is asleep, yet on the brink of wakefulness. You're back in the Latin Quarter strolling along the Seine, alongside the closed bookstalls. Peaceful. Quiet. Serene. You glance at Notre Dame before the tourists storm the place.

Yes, sort of like storming the Bastille, but without significant damage and destruction. In the early morning mist, see the flying buttresses of Notre Dame glisten as the sun rises and casts a spell on the stained glass windows; see the colors sparkle and glow in the early morning sun.

That little walk will cost you nothing, and you'll never regret it. Listen to the bells peel, as Notre Dame makes her presence felt. The steps quicken. The stalls open, one by one. The tempo picks up and life resumes. The pulse of this vital city is alive and well.

You will be seduced by Paris just by walking down a street. Stop in a café order coffee, it is pure nirvana, if your taste run to the brew as mine does. Relax and listen to the beat of the city coming to life. I love the early mornings, as the city wakes.

Take the time to get to know Paris, away from the bustle of the tourists. I have done exactly that many times and have found that a gentle rain, overcast sky can be as romantic as anything else, whether you're alone strolling and day dreaming or walking with someone special by your side. It's what you make of any given moment. Truly, in Paris every little thing that you take for granted at home becomes incredibly special.

Every moment counts and is treasured. There is something magical about the city, introspective, passionate and exquisite. Romance pure and simple.

There is so much more to see, arm yourself with a good guide book. Just remember, you can't possibly see everything in a couple of days; for your visit pick what is essential to you and save the rest for another day or another time.

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A Hotel in Paris
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