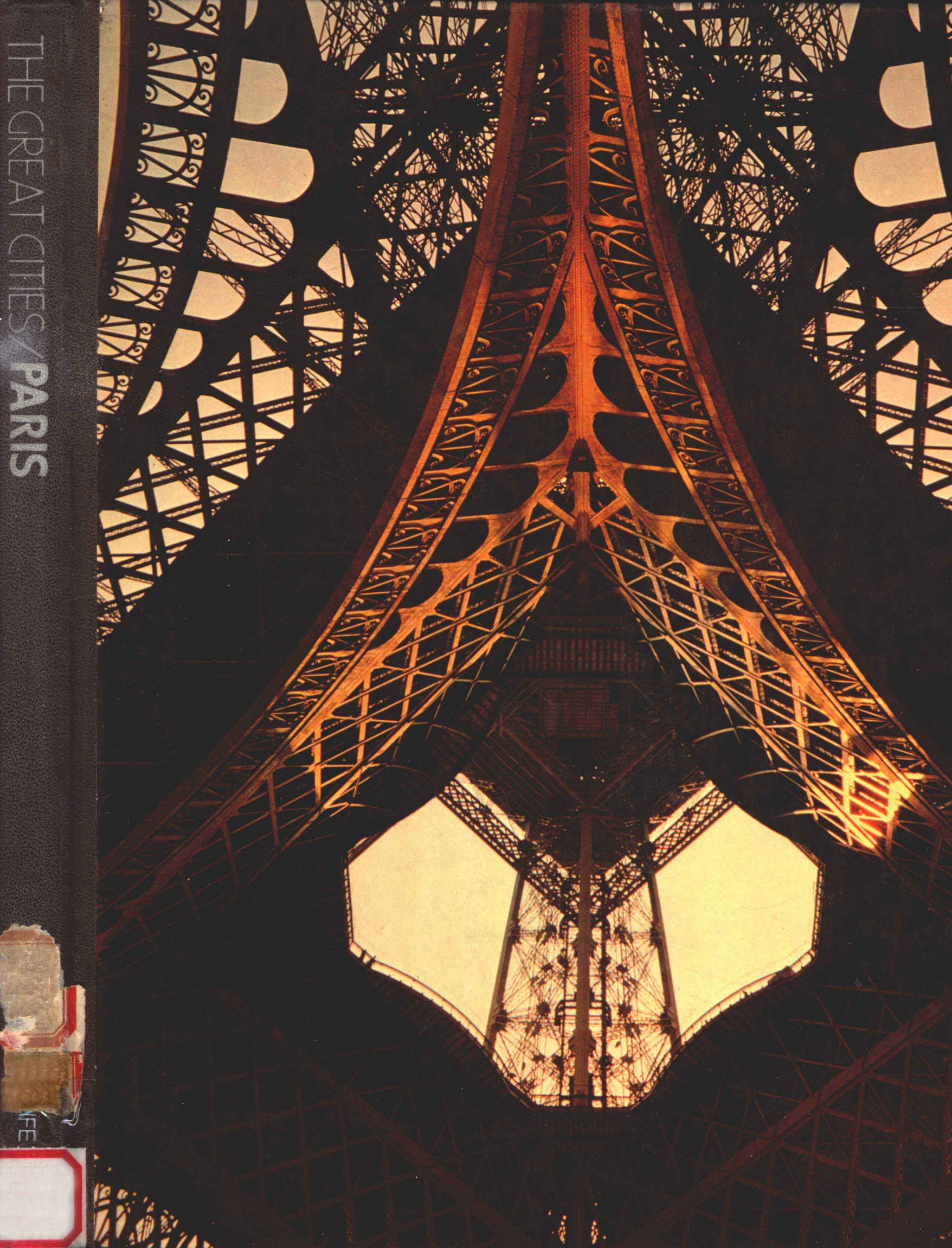


THE GREAT CITIES / **PARIS**



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PARIS

By Rudolph Chelminski
and the Editors of Time-Life Books

Photographs by Raghubir Singh

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Cover (photograph by Francisco Hidalgo): Viewed from a perspective beneath its familiar splayed legs, foreshortened against the sky, Paris' most famous landmark, the Eiffel Tower, assumes an entirely new geometry.

First end paper: Etched in the glass door of the famed Crazy Horse Saloon, the figure of a sleekly winsome siren promises customers as they enter that Paris will live up to its international reputation for sexy and sophisticated nightlife.

Last end paper: Its paint peeling, the wall of a Paris laundry advertises the establishment with this scene picturing a working girl in clogs hanging up washing.

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Indomitable Paris

Now that I look back, I realize that I had the luck to encounter Paris five or six days before I had ever set foot there. The time was the early Sixties; the place was the Atlantic Ocean, aboard *Flandre*, a little ship of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique; and, as one of many American students in Tourist Class, I was *en voyage* to a year at l'Institut d'Études Politiques, thanks to a fellowship granted by the French government.

My seagoing introduction to Paris began with the food. Even in the Tourist Class dining room, we ate like visiting gentry—plied with as much first-rate French cooking as we could force down our near-insatiable gullets, and given free wine as well. Relaxed but gracious presentation made the meals the high points of our days. As the French always have known, and as I was just beginning to learn, it is at the table that humankind is most civilized, conversation brightest, optimism most accessible.

The uncontested star and leader of our table was an 80-year-old gentleman from New Orleans—a renegade Parisian, dapper, energetic and charming. He had emigrated from Paris more than half a century earlier, and yet he spoke of the city as though he had been away only for a long weekend. That, I came to learn, is typical of Paris and Parisians: the city marks its children for life.

Our elderly friend dominated the table with his effortless grace and wit, regaling us with reminiscences and advice, and enjoying the sound of his own voice as much as we did. The French—and especially the Parisians, the women as much as the men—are bred to talk. When they do it badly, they are interminable bores. When they do it well—and most of them do—they are superbly entertaining.

If a Parisian seems to talk too much (as some Americans, less voluble by nature, have complained to me), it does not necessarily mean that he is an attention-seeking egotist. He has been taught to talk, as a social responsibility. The Anglo-Saxon respects words for their literal meaning, the Frenchman for their decorative effect as well, for the filigrees of *bons mots* he can spin in the air. If an Englishman or a German says something outrageous, chances are that he believes it. If a Frenchman says something outrageous, and he almost always does, there is little cause for alarm. In time, you can be virtually certain, he will be saying the opposite.

The *Flandre* also introduced me to the most Parisian of odours: the rich, acrid and intoxicating smoke of Gauloises, the characteristic French cigarette. Today still, the smell of Gauloises is as pervasively Parisian as low-octane gasoline is a reminder to me of Moscow, where I once lived.

In the doorway of an apartment house, a redoubtable Parisian concierge (caretaker) relaxes without losing that look of sharp-eyed inquisitiveness that all lodgers learn to respect. The concierge, a Paris institution since Napoleon's reign, has come to embody the self-assured attitude of the typical Parisian.

I took to Gauloises as soon as I came aboard ship (they cost one-third the price of American cigarettes), and even now, when I have been off smoking for years, the strong, mellow taste of that black tobacco haunts me like a Proustian *madeleine* multiplied by ten. The advantage of Gauloises addiction, though, is that once you have quit smoking there is little chance you will become a backslider. After them, everything else seems bland, feeble and uninteresting. It took me rather longer to become accustomed to the strange, bright-yellow aniseed aperitif that the French passengers invariably took before meals. In truth, *pastis* is traditionally associated with the South of France, but its tongue-numbing liquorice taste is as typical of Paris as the taste of Scotch whisky is of London.

Most of all, I learned about Paris from the ship's crew, especially the dining-room personnel who amazed me with their intelligence and humour and gaiety. Unlike most of their brethren around the world, French waiters actually *enjoy* their work. And beyond the dining room, I found that the crew led a double life: keeping the ship functioning while unabashedly involving themselves with the passengers. A deckhand could always spare five minutes from his brass-polishing to have a chat, usually instigated by himself, and officers accepted such breaches of marine etiquette with affable equanimity. Discipline was a bore, deadening to the spirit.

One evening a steward suggested that if I and a group of my friends felt like breaking the monotony, we could always go and see what the swells were doing up in First Class. "But is that allowed?" one of us asked naïvely. "Allowed?" The steward raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and expelled a puff of breath to create the sound that is more representative of the Parisian mentality than the *Marseillaise*: "*Bof!*"

"*Vas-y, mon petit*. Go ahead," he said. "No one will stop you." And he was right. No one paid the slightest attention to our wanderings through the ship. Indeed, the First Class passengers were delighted to see us. They were bored up there, in their expensive dresses and tuxedos.

Some years later—after living in Paris for a while—I made the mistake of trying the same transgression aboard the old *Queen Elizabeth*. I was stopped cold in my tracks and escorted back to Tourist Class—a trespasser in deepest disgrace. On an objective level I clearly deserved it; I had been creeping about, putting my nose where it didn't belong, hoping to find and partake of privileges for which I hadn't paid. What it proved was that I had become a Parisian in spirit. Such rude and self-indulgent behaviour is typically, quintessentially French and, *a fortiori*, Parisian. It is predicated on an ancient racial wisdom about balancing humanity versus authority. Life is too short and potentially enjoyable, human intercourse too beautiful and too complex to be governed by a dour set of absolutes that brook no bendings or exceptions. No one in the world is more amenable to argument and exception than a Parisian ("*Bof! Vas-y, mon petit*. Just don't tell the boss I let you through.")



Three determined spectators at a Bastille Day parade peer through cardboard periscopes—one decorated with Paris scenes—in order to see over the crowd. Every July 14, a national holiday, Paris erupts in festivities to commemorate the fall of the notorious prison, the Bastille, during the revolution of 1789.

A few years back an eccentric French lady of my acquaintance once passed on to me a neat little formula she had picked up on her travels:

In England, everything is allowed except what is forbidden;

In Germany, everything is forbidden, except what is allowed;

In Russia, everything is forbidden, even what is allowed;

In France, everything is allowed, even what is forbidden.

Now I can't affirm this as the final distillate of the truth about Paris and the aggravating, complicated, subtle and talented people who inhabit it. But it comes close enough.

My fast-developing prejudice in favour of the French was fortified by my first encounter with their officialdom. On the boat train from Le Havre to Paris' Gare St-Lazare, the police had made only a cursory check on our passports—but Customs promised to be a trial. After all, the other students and I were travelling with as much clothing and equipment as we would need for a year; I was even carrying a 40-pound typewriter at the bottom of my duffel bag. When the Customs officer appeared, we scarcely had a chance to open our mouths. "*Étudiants?*" cried the face below the peaked cap. "*Oui,*" we chorused, making ready to mumble our declarations in our schoolboy French. But already he was gone. Welcome to France, I thought. This is a no-problem country. And I was right.

I was lucky to be travelling with my old friend Chuck Krance, later to become a professor of French literature in the United States. Chuck knew Paris well and, as a result, my first vision of the capital—the one that will always stick in my mind's eye as the symbol of the city—was old Place St-Sulpice, just around the corner from St-Germain des Prés. We took a taxi there from St-Lazare station, and on the way I saw only a jumble of shops and sooty-fronted buildings. But then suddenly everything changed when we turned down Rue de Vieux Colombier and into Place St-Sulpice. It was like driving into a Monet canvas. Imposing stands of red chestnuts, their leaves just browning and beginning to fall, filtered the autumn sunlight that dappled over white gravel and green benches, where children played noisily and pensioners leaned forward on canes watching silently. In the centre of the square, Lodovico Visconti's huge fountain, dedicated to four famous bishops, accentuated the verdant and shady secrecy of the little park with its soot-blackened stonework and barely rippling water. Everything about St-Sulpice was calm, reserved, umbrageous—an immensely appealing withdrawal from the 20th-Century racket and commerce on near-by Rue de Rennes, Rue du Four and St-Germain.

Directly ahead, through and above the treetops, loomed the ponderous and preposterous façade of St-Sulpice itself, one of the world's strangest churches. In a land that boasts an incomparable wealth of exquisite ecclesiastical architecture of all styles, St-Sulpice stands out as a bizarre and most ungainly sore thumb—the disastrous outcome of too many

architects commissioned over too great a span of time—six in all, over a period of 134 years. The stone-cutting and workmanship are admirable enough, but the massive pillared façade, the two disjointed and asymmetrical towers and the Jesuit-style main body sit in heavy opposition to one another. Jet-black as it was then (as was all of Paris before Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux's great clean-up campaign in the 1960s), it seemed the entrance to night, blocking off an entire side of the *place*.

At the south-east corner of the square, stuck off behind a little continuation of the park—with its own few chestnut trees, its own few benches—was the tiny Hôtel Récamier, where Chuck had reserved a room for himself and his wife. The Récamier was so like a Hollywood movie set I would not have been surprised to see Gene Kelly leap out of the front door, sail over a bench and go dancing down Rue des Canettes. The narrow, high-shouldered building was only six storeys tall and only two windows wide. Its 30 small rooms could be reached by means of a delicate glass-and-mahogany box that shook and rumbled upwards inside the coil of the spiral staircase. It was forbidden to use the lift for descent. After all, the staff argued with impeccable Cartesian logic, an elevator by its very name was meant to elevate, not to lower.

The “staff”, in this instance, was one white-haired and rather suspicious old lady. It did not take us long to understand that the real reason for the one-way elevator was to save wear and tear on the machinery. The French have a passion for saving, for conserving, for squeezing every last and conceivable bit of utility out of anything in which they have invested time or money. (Remember Guy de Maupassant's *A Piece of String*?) And for me this was indelibly illustrated at the Récamier by my introduction to that most French of all inventions, *la minuterie*.

You see them all over France—on every landing of every apartment house, hotel or office building: little buttons in the wall, often phosphorescent to make them more visible in the dark; when pushed, they give you exactly one minute of light. One minute in principle, that is. In reality, it is not unusual to encounter maniac *minuteries* whose timing mechanisms have become deranged with age (or have been tampered with by white-haired women fiendishly intent on creating “*seconderies*”) and which barely let you down one flight of stairs before the light winks out, forcing you to grope along the wall for the next button. In these tricky situations, the chances are about 50-50 that you will hit someone's doorbell instead of the next *minuterie*, so that your descent to the next landing is accompanied by muffled cries of “*Qui est là?*”

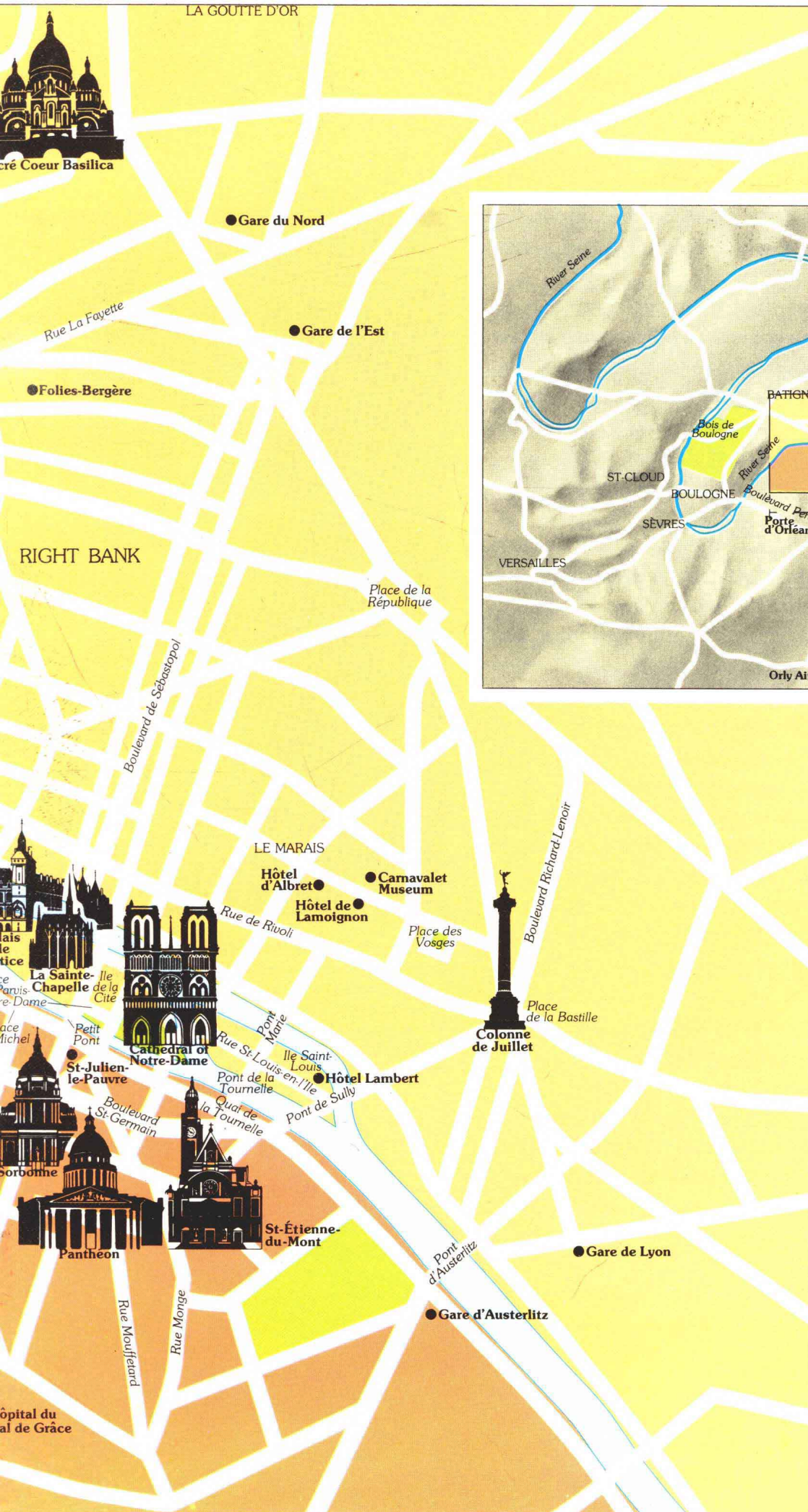
The Récamier, I am happy to say, is still there, cowering in its corner in the lee of St-Sulpice, and the lift is still exclusively a lift. But the tall chestnuts have gone from the square. They were chopped down a few years back when progress, in the form of an underground parking garage, came to this tranquil backwater of the Left Bank. The Paris Parks Service did their

best to restore the *place* after digging it up. Visconti's monumental fountain, with its four seated bishops, is back in the middle, and you can hardly detect the lines where workers cut it up when they carted it away for safekeeping while the subterranean digging went on. Unfortunately, the new chestnuts that were subsequently planted around the fountain are still young, providing inadequate shade and only symbolic greenery against the aggressive brilliance of white gravel underfoot and the newly cleaned stonework of the church.

Leaving the Krances to settle into the Récamier, I set out in search of a hotel for myself. But all sense of urgency was immediately lost. It was one of those glorious autumn days. With all deference to Tin Pan Alley, September and October in Paris are the best months; April is usually terrible, chilly and rainy. The air in the autumn is warm yet fresh, the light subtler than in midsummer, the winter rains around the corner. As I struck out across the square and down through the little lanes leading out towards Boulevard St-Germain, I was stopped in my tracks again and again. Everything was strange, funny, exciting: so many overhanging, crazily out-of-plumb 17th-Century buildings; a brazenly striped tabby perched between two lofty geranium pots and gazing down on me with infinite superiority; the cockeyed parade of unexpected shop fronts—brooms and baskets hanging from the ceiling in this one, fat loaves of country bread in the next, a dimly lit bar inside another where the Auvergnat proprietor dispensed wine on the zinc counter and sold sacks of charcoal and kindling wood from the storeroom behind. What a city!

My aimless stroll took me across Boulevard St-Germain and down Rue de Buci to its intersection with Rue de Seine. There I had my first plunge into that garden of delights for eye, nose and palate: the Buci open-air market. Paris has taught me many things, but one of the most useful is that the best way to know a people is through its food markets. In Beirut or Barcelona or Bari (all great market towns), go where the locals are buying their fish, oranges and garlic and you will be better instructed about the population than in all their best museums. Latins are public people; in the street everyone is part performer and part spectator. The market is the forum where the show of life goes on, and nowhere is the show better than in the Marché Buci.

Into the milling, swirling crowds poured the voices of the stallholders who vie with each other in France, as they do in Italy, for volume and speed of delivery and the colourful image given at just the right moment. "Take a little look, take a little look, take a little look," chanted a courgette-seller *basso continuo*, as his colleague, high tenor, counterpointed with brilliant improvisations about his *frisée* lettuces. "Two francs for three, two francs for three," someone else sang with breathless urgency, while a fish vendor latched on to a pretty, young pregnant woman and strongly



A Monumental Metropolis

Paris grew outwards from the Île de la Cité—originally the stronghold of its namesake inhabitants, the Parisii—to spread over both sides of the sinuous Seine: the Left Bank (brown on the map at left) and the Right Bank (cream). Early buildings like Notre-Dame, La Sainte-Chapelle and the Louvre cluster on and around this island heart.

The expanding city swallowed up smaller established communities, but some—such as St-Germain des Prés, Montmartre and Montparnasse—maintained their distinct identities. These and the broad boulevards and parks laid out in the 19th Century during replanning of the city are featured on the large map. Today the old city of Paris, within the ring of its Boulevard Périphérique (small map above), is surrounded by a sprawl of modern suburbs.

advised her to buy a fillet of sole for the future good of her impending offspring, promising that if she did so she would produce a son almost as handsome as he.

The Buci had three fish stalls (one has since been replaced by a dry goods emporium) within the space of a city block; and ranged between them were a couple of butchers, one *boucherie chevaline* (selling fresh horse-meat and its conserved derivatives), two enormous vegetable stands, two cheese shops, two *épiceries* (French versions of grocery shops that make the American ones look like Mother Hubbard's cupboard), a *triperie* (the tripe specialists my wife refers to as "offal organ grinders") and a variety of smaller stands.

In the cacophony of the market, only the two cheese ladies (curiously, cheese is almost always sold by ladies of dignified, reserved comportment) remained silent. They sat in their white smocks, peering over Crottins de Chavignol *fromage frais*, bottles of milk, baskets brimful with eggs, and high, yellow mounds of fresh butter that they neatly sliced up with a wire held taut between two wooden handles.

What a city! I sat at a café's sidewalk table and nursed a beer for half an hour, watching the show. On a corner a jocular old man in a blue blouse was hawking beautifully fresh, real coconut macaroons; near by, a straggle-haired, middle-aged hippie was carrying on a monologue from his bicycle in a vain effort to sell his outrageous, surrealistic newspaper (*La Presse Périodique*); and across the way some intensely serious Communist and socialist youths were marching up and down among the shoppers, brandishing *Lutte Ouvrière*, *l'Humanité* and *Unité*, Communist and socialist papers, and entreating everyone present to remain vigilant against the encroachments of devil capitalism and to support the just struggle of the workers against the bosses, against the de Gaulle government and against the entire Western economic system.

Since that first visit, I have been back to the Buci a thousand times. I can still sit there happily for hours, watching the French at their Frenchest. Nowadays, however, I make it a policy not to go there hungry; otherwise I will return home laden with more food than my family and I can hope to devour. In America, the supermarket geniuses invented the science of packaging to make items sell. In France, they have an even cleverer marketing trick: they display the produce fresh, without any packaging.

As I sat with my beer, I looked up and noticed that the very bar I was patronizing had a small hotel attached. "Bar-Hôtel Stella Artois", the big sign said. How convenient. Within minutes I found myself signed up for a room at the ridiculously low cost of ten francs. I ambled back to St-Sulpice to tell Chuck and his wife Mary Ann that I would be staying at the Hôtel Stella Artois. Chuck raised a speculative eyebrow. "Are you sure that's the name?" "Why, yes," I said. "The Bar-Hôtel Stella Artois." Patiently, Chuck explained that Stella Artois was the name of a brand of Belgian beer. Any



A flower seller in the Passy quarter on Paris' Right Bank continues her sales talk to a critical-looking customer even as she hands him a bunch of fresh tulips from her barrow. She is one of many such flower vendors who are found all over Paris and add splashes of brilliant colour to the city's busy streets.

bar or restaurant that contracted to sell it on draught would receive, as a free sales bonus, a handsome, hand-painted sign. My announcement had been roughly equivalent to a Frenchman arriving in Indianapolis and telling friends he was staying at the Coca-Cola Hotel.

The “Stella Artois” (I never did discover its real name) gave me my second lesson of the day in French mechanical accessories. This time it was the door buzzer. The side entrance leading up to my room had an electric lock that freed the door at the push of a button set in the wall. The button also activated a clamorous buzzer next to the cashier’s desk, where Madame could look up from her accounts, see me walk in and ascertain whether I was alone. Not that she cared for any moral reasons; what concerned her was that an extra person should pay an extra charge. This ubiquitous buzzer—every front door of every apartment house in Paris opens with one—is a direct descendant of the Napoleonic institution of the *concierge*, that omniscient sentinel who, in days before electricity or gas, used to unbolt the main entrance and, candle in hand, guide apartment dwellers to their doors—a role the *concierge* neatly combined with that of police and tax informer. With modernization, the buzzer has supplanted the iron knocker and bell, and the *minuterie* has replaced the candle. But the *concierges* remain, usually relegated to mean little cold-water, one-room apartments on the ground floor, opposite the stairway. Through their glass doors they see everything, know everything. It is an excellent idea to stay on the right side of your *concierge*.

I didn’t achieve much academically at l’Institut d’Études Politiques that year. In fact, one might say I downright squandered my fellowship. But I prefer to think that I re-routed it—redistributing its benefits from scholarship to walking, looking and talking. I learned Paris. Eventually I moved out of my perch above the Stella Artois bar and settled into the Luxembourg, a sombre but relatively clean student hotel on Rue Royer-Collard, uphill from the Sorbonne. Twice a day, with the predictability of a tide, I was drawn towards the miraculously cheap (one franc a meal) student restaurant down on Rue de Médicis. The remainder of my time was given less to lectures and study than to exploration: roaming through the twisting maze of medieval streets behind the Panthéon, down Boul’ Mich into the even more ancient St-Séverin quarter, over to Montparnasse and St-Germain des Prés, and sometimes into the more glamorous Seventh Arrondissement (for administrative purposes Paris is divided into 20 *arrondissements* or districts) with its trio of landmarks: the Hôtel des Invalides, the École Militaire and the Eiffel Tower.

On very rare occasions I even ventured out among the tourists and merchant philistines of the Right Bank, all the time buttressing my failing resolve—enemy territory!—with the fine-honed contempt that only a poor student can feel for the other side of the river: the wealthy, industrious,



In spite of grim weather, Paris begins a spectacular Bastille Day celebration with a fly-past of jets trailing smoke plumes of red, white and blue—the colours of the French flag. In the foreground police keep the Champs-Élysées clear for a military parade—barely visible in the rainy distance—approaching from the Arc de Triomphe.



bourgeois side. I had a somewhat artificially developed scorn for Hemingway, Fitzgerald and other semi-mythic American literary figures who had larked over to Paris 40 or so years before me, most of them without bothering to learn the language but instead settling into arty, Anglo-Saxon ghettos typified by the Hôtel Ritz on Place Vendôme and Harry's American Bar at 5 Rue Daunou. Harry's Bar indeed! *Sank roo doenoo*, indeed! As for Hemingway's celebrated wartime stunt of "liberating" the Ritz Bar by being the first to arrive there when the Allies entered Paris, that was about as swashbuckling as a safari in a Rolls-Royce. Bah! We purists would rather have swallowed gall than set foot in the Ritz Bar.

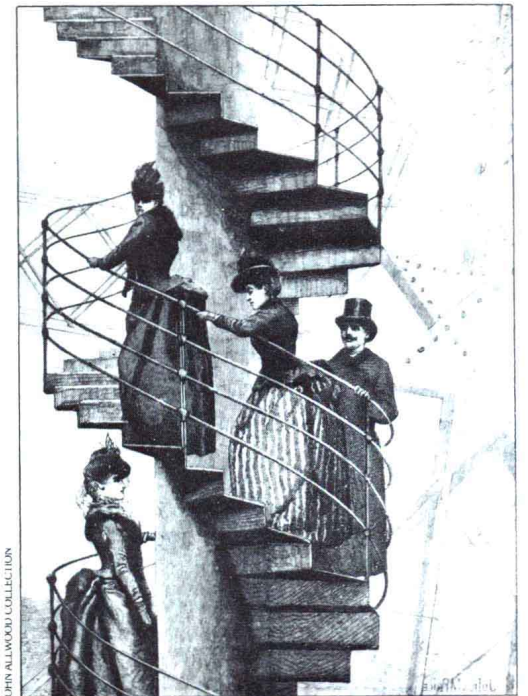
On those obsessional promenades I kept an indispensable notebook, jotting down French phrases and words that seem simple enough now, but that were utterly bedevilling then. The labours of trying to replace "get"—that fabulous, all-purpose English verb—in my French conversation gave me months of frustration, during which advice from my 80-year-old friend aboard *Flandre* kept coming back to me. "It is futile to try to make the French language behave like English. The only way to make it work is to start thinking like a Frenchman." His advice applied equally well to the country as a whole—and especially to its capital. I certainly think in French now; I even have a Parisian accent on top of my American one so that when I go to the provinces I am instantly identified as an American from Paris. But do I think like a Parisian? After all these years, I would say "yes"—to a large degree, at any rate.

Without doubt, the Parisian is different from the rest of the French. As millions of tourists discover every summer, he is not the sort who inspires instant affection. The Parisian is quick, impatient, difficult, sceptical, unsentimental, sarcastic—and very smart. While I would be happy to claim these virtues for myself, I'm afraid the best I can do is admire them and sometimes reflect them, as I did when I trespassed aboard *Queen Elizabeth*, shamelessly seeking personal gain in violation of the rules of the collective. That incident might well be taken as a microcosm of the Parisian attitude that is just one blink this side of anarchy. A rebel at heart, the Parisian has never quite accepted the lines of authority of the ship of state. He believes himself to be just as smart as the prince or the rich bourgeois above him—and he usually is. So how come they are up there and he down here? The answer, his reason tells him, is simple: because they got into a position of power and then made the rules. Consequently, the individual who spends his life passively obeying the rules is a *couillon*—a dope (or worse). Whatever the Latin inscribed on the city's coat of arms, the true motto of the Parisian is, as Pierre Daninos pointed out in *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*: "*On se défend*," which might be translated as "Keep your guard up".

Many foreigners—and especially Americans—never manage to understand, let alone appreciate, the Parisian attitude. For some strange reason

An Iron Giant Rises

While it was under construction the 984-foot-high tower designed by Gustave Eiffel for the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition inevitably attracted sightseers and artists, who recorded its progress with engravings such as these. For two years workmen laboured to erect the colossus, planting masonry piers 40 feet into the earth and joining 12,000 iron girders with two and a half million rivets. It was the world's tallest structure until 1930 when New York's 1,048-foot Chrysler Building superseded it.



Exposition visitors clamber to the top in 1889.