

When NOELA WHITTON went to Paris it was in fulfilment of a 35-year-old dream, but the wait was worth it, she reports. Even the heat and the uncomfortable hotels did not dim the glamour

In love and in Paris: it was worth the wait

MY LOVE affair with Paris began in 1948 on the night I saw Ilsa Lund and Rick Blaine drive down the Avenue des Champs Elysees. I knew then that one day I would drive along that wide street with the wind in my hair, laughing, and in love.

We came to Paris 35 years later in 35 deg C heat and drove down the Autoroute du Nord laughing, with the wind in my hair, and still in love.

Our taxidriver sped along at 140-150 km/h in the 100 km/h zones, changing lanes, missing a semi-trailer by a millimetre. We left the autoroute, crossed Boulevard Ney, raced along Rue de la Chapelle, dropped back to 100 across Clichy where the signs suggested 80, into the Boulevard des Batignolles and arrived happy to exchange a 100-franc note (\$14), at our hotel on the Rue de Moscou.

We had left the Regent, Sydney, one of the world's most comfortable hotels, the day before, and we knew that four-star luxury is way ahead of three-star (European style) but we weren't prepared for the space-saving Astoria.

First, there was the lift.

It would accommodate one of us and some of the luggage, or most of the luggage on its own, or both of us and Evan's hand luggage.

Then there was the room.

The lift had more free floor space. No refrigerator, no place to make coffee, no room to move, no air. All this for \$57 a night, including breakfast.

The window, being French, opened into the bedroom. About 20 cm into the bedroom, where the bed stopped it. On what was decided would be my side of the bed, nearest the bathroom, there was so little space that when I stood beside the bed I was actually in the bathroom.

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll move in the morning."

I found, in the morning, that in Paris three days before Bastille Day, you take what you can get.

"We could try the Hotel de Vieux Paris," my husband said. "It's only a two-star but it's not far from the Boulevard Saint Michel."

Madame Odillard welcomed us to her 500-year-old "House of Old Paris" in the Rue Git-le-Coeur.

The Coeur, she said, referred to Henri IV whose favourite mistress just happened to live in this house. "Here," said Henri, one day in February, 1596, as he

rode past in his carriage, "I leave my heart."

"How romantic," I said. "We'll just take our luggage up in the lift."

Madame laughed.

"We ordered a lift. The man came. Pouf. He was gone. With not one wall in alignment, he was wise."

After climbing 60 stairs in 35 deg C heat a couple of times, hauling our luggage to the third floor, neither of us dared to mention the old dumb-waiter back at the Astoria.

The room, however, was spacious, and only \$35. "Wonderful," I said, unaware at the time of my stupidity, "the room overlooks the street."

"Did Madame Odillard say where we should go in the morning to see Mitterrand?" Evan called out from the shower.

"She was more interested in de Gaulle. De Gaulle standing at attention, no hat, no coat, in driving rain. De Gaulle, striding down the Champs Elysees, August 26, 1944, liberating Paris. She had tears in her eyes. I didn't like to mention Mitterrand again."

2 am. The unmistakable sound, coming from the street, of flesh on flesh seemed worth investigation.

Below, a young man was slapping the face of his girl. She stood, arms limp, unprotesting. He hit her again, a dozen times, he put his hands on her temples, pulled her hair, and her head back as far as his outstretched arms would allow, wrenched her face to his, then kissed her with what looked like extraordinary passion but may have been for the purposes of resuscitation.

He took her hand and led her a few steps closer to the hotel, under the light. He was slim, with frizzy hair. She was pale and tiny, her thick black hair softly curled.

Suddenly he grabbed her blue satin top and yanked it down the front. Like a sleepy child she stood while he forced the top down from her shoulders, tearing it again, to reveal her boyish figure.

A few more steps, some silent staring, another kiss of life encounter, and whoosh. He pulled her top down as far as he could force it and pinioned her arms. Off they went, very slowly, the man with his damaged puppet, into the night.

Back in bed, I could hear what was

clearly a horse and cart approaching. The clippity clop of the hooves and a strange squeaky sound a faulty spring might make.

This I had to see. The ghost of Henri IV?

It was a girl, at 2.40 am, taking her suitcase for a walk. She wore those wooden clogs that make even petite women sound like carthorses.

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Our walk along the Seine from the Latin Quarter to the Place de la Concorde was like discovering Humpty Dumpty just after he'd hit the ground. All the proud horses and cavalymen, brass helmets glinting in the sun, all the outriders charging along on their powerful machines and all that menacing machinery of war rolling away could not compensate for missing Mitterrand by a few minutes.

"We won't let this happen for the Tour de France," Evan said, as I took a picture of the empty red velvet chair with goldleaf on the woodwork.

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A couple of hours later an American woman who had been in our hotel checking accommodation for a friend said: "Why are you here? You could be staying at a beautiful hotel for very little more."

She told us we must see the Hotel Scandinavia in the Rue de Tournon near the Luxembourg Gardens.

We made our way there, noting that The Man From Snowy River was showing at a theatre on the Boulevard Saint Germain.

La Procope was on the way, so we thought we'd make a booking to eat there as Ben Franklin, Voltaire and others had done. It was closed for renovations, probably not before time, so we went down a lane nearby where, in 1790, a Dr Guillotin had perfected, using sheep, his "philanthropic decapitating machine".

What we need, we said, is a room off the street, with a refrigerator and coffee-making facilities.

There are more than 1,300 rated hotels in the centre of the city of Paris (which covers an area of 104 sq km in which more than two million people live).

Most hotels are not air-conditioned. Many do not have a lift. Coffee-making



The faces of France . . . as varied as characters from a novel by Balzac.

facilities are unheard of and refrigerators rare.

The former Hotel d'Alsace where Oscar Wilde spent his last days ("dying" as he said, "beyond his means"), now the elegant L'Hotel, could let us have an air-conditioned suite with refrigerator and room service coffee for \$271 a day, meals extra.

The Hotel Scandinavia, happy to make tea or coffee at any hour and supply cold drinks, was \$73 a day and this included an elaborate continental breakfast served on Villeroy and Boch china, the "blue castle" design.

When we arrived at noon the next day our luggage was taken up to our room. We opened the door, took the cork out of the Bisquit and sat, cognac in hand, on our Italian Renaissance chairs on either side of a fine Louis XIV table, looking at our Flemish four-poster reflected in the gold-plated Venetian mirror and listening to the bells of Saint Sulpice.

In 1539 King Francois I presented this hotel to the poet Clermont Marat. Distinguished guests have included Casanova and Verlaine.

The owner, a Paris antique dealer, has furnished the 22 rooms with Italian, Spanish and Flemish Renaissance furniture and paintings, and since 1960 when the hotel was restored, only one guest

has stolen a precious piece, a wooden horse.

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I'd broken my glasses at Versailles: this was no big problem when my walking history book and clever map reader was able to accompany me everywhere, but he'd taken to the Flemish four-poster, feeling poorly.

The learned doctors at the American Hospital of Paris in the ordered, wooded, outer suburb of Neuilly couldn't put a name to the problem.

What we didn't know — and didn't find out until the press conference in Sydney on July 29 — was that there was, very probably, a boy from Balmain pointing a bone.

I did a lot of exploring on my own, carefully avoiding the eyes of strangers.

I was searching the Rue Saint Honoré for an optician when I came to the Rue Castiglioni. In the window of Gianmaria Bucellati were the most astonishing pieces of jewellery and objets d'art. Unaware of my whereabouts I moved to the next window, wondering at the luxury.

Round the corner I went, overcome by the silver, the gold, the stones, the designs. I had stumbled into the Place Vendome.

The obelisk, with Napoleon as Caesar absurdly out of sight on the top, didn't

impress me at all. But the architecture gave me pause.

I walked out to the centre (there are no trees at all) and stood, in the blazing sun, wondering who could afford this magnificence.

Cartier and IBM, the Ministry of Justice and the Insurance Union of Paris wouldn't be troubled. The Ritz, with 163 rooms at their prices could cope and so could the French banks and the British Tourist Authority.

Schiaparelli (\$579 for a simple striped cotton marked down to \$347 for the sale), Van Cleef and Arpels, Piaget, Aldebert, Alex Maguy and Chaumet all sounded good risks.

But the safe tenants would have to be Morgan Guarantee, the Deutsche Bank, the European Bank and even Bank Sepah, Tehran.

Last week a glimpse of the seventeenth-century opulence at the House of the Sun King. Today, a few twentieth-century ~~people~~ carrying on the traditions.

Princes □ □ □

By Sunday the 22-year-old Parisian Laurent Fignon had become the talk of the town because in the 70-year history of the great race: no rider from Paris had won the yellow jersey. This year Fignon was in with a chance.

I left early, alone, to get at least a

glimpse of the hero. Phil Anderson was not in a position to win.

Stopping to pay homage to Gustave Eiffel, window shopping and lunch on the Avenue Montaigne brought me to the Champs Elysees by 2.30. I decided I couldn't get a good spot on the barricades I would leave.

The crowd was already lining every vantage point. I walked up and down. There was no gap.

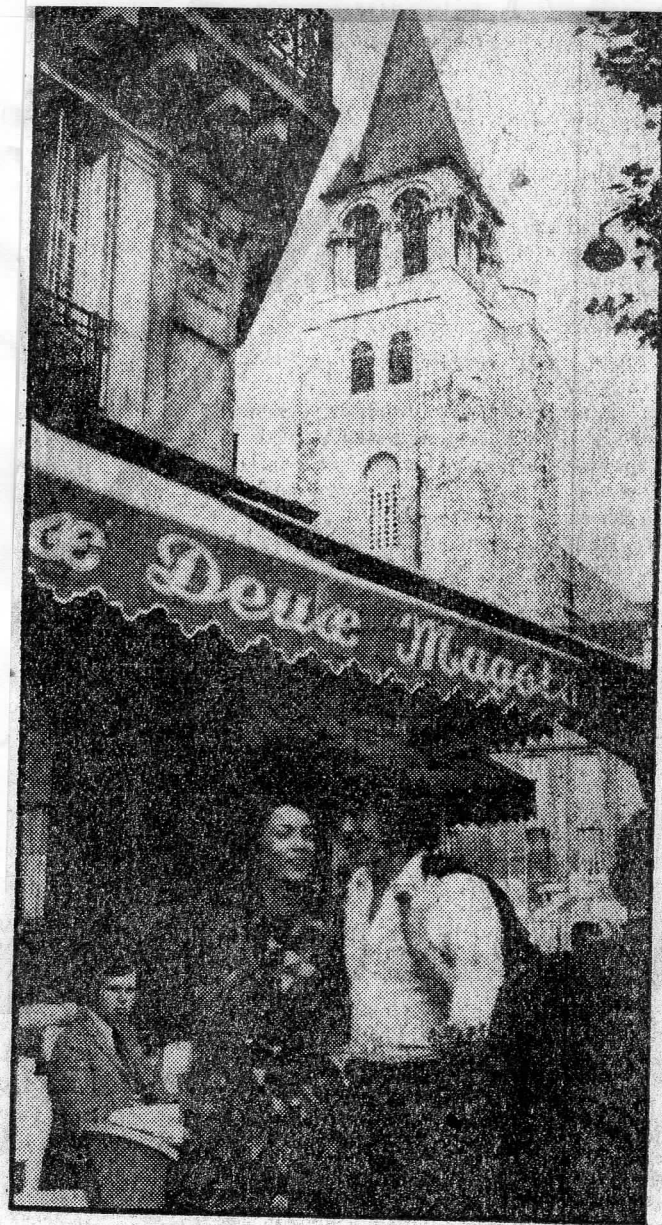
Then I saw the big white banner indicating the finish line. I also saw a group of young men standing on top of a huge mound of sand, balancing wooden boards. There was room for just one more person.

I smiled, told them in my halting French where I came from and one of them fell off their mountain as they did. "The Imitation of The Kangaroo", a standard reaction of the Frenchman to the word "Australia".

When the laughing stopped it made me welcome.

It was perfect. We could see over the crowd in front and between our hill; the finish line and official stand, there was only the military band, and they were seated.

To start the televised proceedings the band played, the gendarmes ordered people down from the trees, per-



Paris . . . the city of romance.

be late.

"Fignon will get an apartment at the coast," the announcer said. Official cars went round the circuit and finally the procession of all the promoters began making the waiting easier to bear.

Then the TV cameraman in front of us suddenly sprang into action. The advance vehicles flashed past. Police press trucks, Tour de France officials, the ones immediately preceding the 8 cyclists on brand-new, specially prepared motorcycles, emitting no evil fumes for the riders to inhale.

Then the riders, reminding me of motorised greyhounds bent low over the bars, shouts of "Fignon", "C'est Fignon". And dozens of support vehicles, cars with bikes upended on the roof, spare wheels, sparkling in the sun (and later the rain).

The final circuit, from the Tuileries Gardens to the Arc de Triomphe, had to be covered six times so we saw this rapidly moving tribute to the great sport of France 12 times. I counted 89 support vehicles as we stood in the sharp shower in the final moments of the race.

Fignon, of course, won. The wife of the Minister of Sport helped him put on his yellow jersey. I saw his mother, in her blue dress, crying as she kissed him. I saw his father, smaller than his son, reach up to put his arms around his neck and hold him tight.

And while the military band played the Marseillaise, Laurent Fignon found it necessary to keep wiping away his tears.

When I got back to the Rue de Tournon Evan was just about to put on his Trent Nathan and start calling the city morgues. I'd been gone for nine hours, but somehow I hadn't noticed the time.

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I waited 35 years for the ticket, but with Edith Piaf (and Robyn Archer, who sings the words with equal conviction) "Je ne regrette rien".