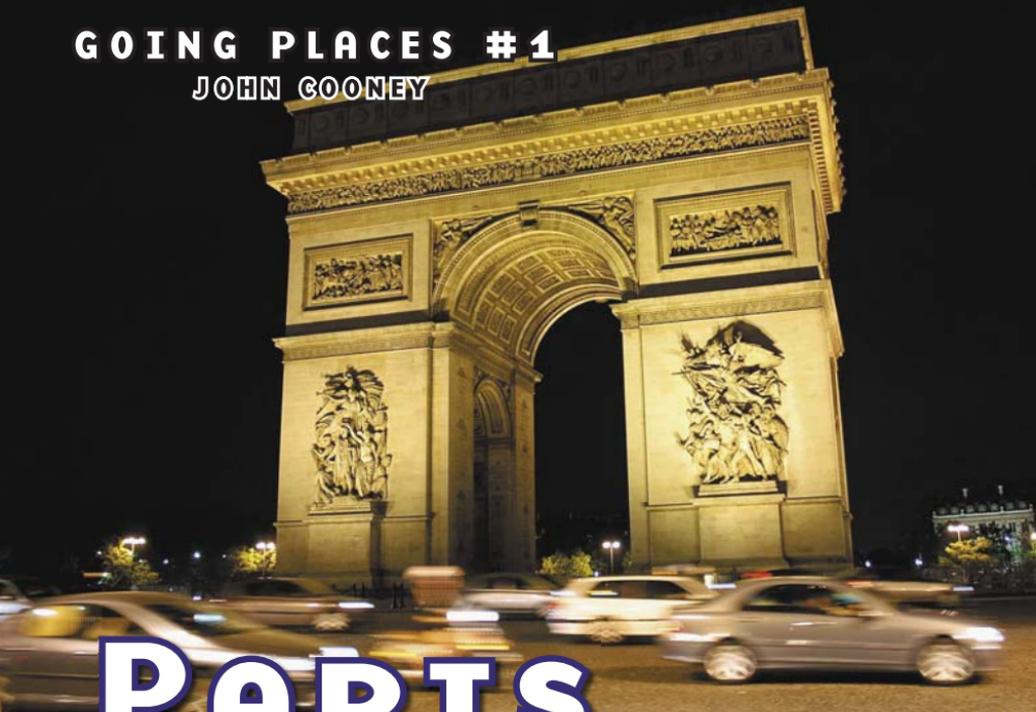


GOING PLACES #1

JOHN GOONEY



PARIS

A MOVEABLE FEAST



Somebody (probably a Frenchman) once called Paris “le deuxième pays de tout le monde” – everybody’s second country. And somebody else (Ernest Hemmingway) once wrote: “If you’re lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.” I didn’t need a second country, but I was in the mood for a moveable feast – and seeing we were just across the road (in England) we thought: why not?

From Dover, on a clear day, you cannot see forever. But you can, apparently, see the shoreline of France, only 35 kilometres away. Unfortunately, this wasn't a clear day, so we had to take their word for it. However, from not-too-far-out-at-sea, we could look back and catch an eyeful of the white cliffs of Dover.

Yes, they really are white. And stretching along the English coastline like they do, they must've been a welcome sight for tired Battle of Britain pilots as they straggled back home after bombing the heck out of some unlucky place.

I don't think it had anything to do with the bombing, but the French in Calais must have heard we were coming – because they'd gone on strike. So we tricked them, crossing the Channel and sneaking ashore further south at Boulogne. A waiting coach then took us inland across an old World War I battlefield, surrendering us to Paris at about 6pm.

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. Or so they say. But the rain in France (take it from me) falls mainly in Paris. At least it did when we were there. Europe's glorious City of Lights was downright dripping wet.

But somehow it didn't matter. The fashion capital of the world was still able to work its magic on us, with its wide boulevards and big-name boutiques ... its crowded cafés and spectacular landmarks ... its unashamed passion for eating, drinking and dressing well ...

The first thing we saw from our hotel was the glittering Eiffel Tower, illuminated on the skyline like a golden chandelier. And as soon as we'd bounced on the bed and freshened up, it was back down the road for a closer look.

Paris-by-night is truly something else. And a colourful commentary from our guide (Hans, a hilarious Dutchman) helped bring it all alive. We toured the Place de La Concorde – a city square to beat all city squares. The Louvre, once the home of French kings and now the finest art museum anywhere, stood darkly in one direction (boasting 30,000 works, if you've got all year ... or just the



Mona Lisa and *Venus de Milo* if you've only got five minutes). And way off in another direction, we watched the trendy set (and cuddled-up couples) strolling along the Champs-Élysées, Paris's legendary oh-so-romantic promenade.

In yet a third direction, we spotted the Arc de Triomphe. This monumental archway built to celebrate the victories of Napoleon's *Grand Armée* can be reached by sprinting across the busiest roundabout in France. "But death is certain!" promised Hans – so we chickened out, took the underground passage, and lived a little longer.

The Eiffel Tower (it didn't seem quite so gorgeous close up – more like a giant grey *Meccano* thingy) was erected over 100 years ago for no particular reason by



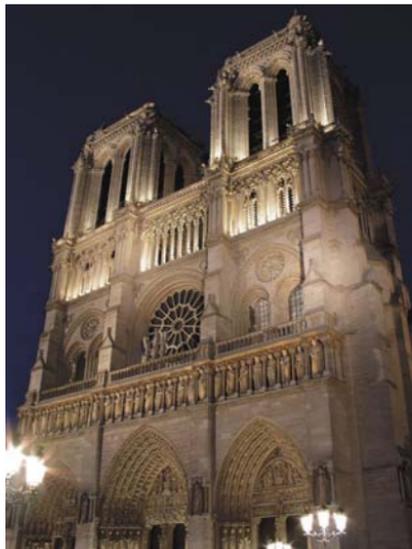
Gustave Eiffel (which is probably how it got its name). I wanted to take the lift to the first-floor landing, with its promise of city-views, restaurants and souvenir shops. But others in our group were starting to starve – and in a restaurant called La Cremaillere, our dinner was getting cold ...

Montmartre, highest of Paris's seven hills, (you can count 'em if you've got nothing better to do) is the home of the quaint Place de Tetre where the city's pavement artists do their best to charm tourists out of a few Euros. Once we'd eaten ourselves silly, we mingled with the carefree crowd, pretending to know what the locals were talking about and pretending to know a lot more about art than we really did. Then we wandered up the steps of the famous white-domed, bell-towered Sacre-Coeur Basilica. The first martyrs of Paris met their deaths here, but we settled for something less breath-taking (although only slightly less): a fabulous panoramic view of the city.

Paris straddles the River Seine. And Notre Dame Cathedral, on the banks of the Seine, was first on our agenda following breakfast next day. If you're into cathedrals, this is rated one of the world's best – and if you're looking for flying buttresses, Notre Dame has got some beauts. Quasimodo, the ugly 'Hunchback of Notre Dame', met Esmeralda, the beautiful dancing gypsy, right here on this spot.

Cheeky gargoyles (immortalised in Victor Hugo's novel) pulled faces at us from high up on the looming stone architecture, and an equally cheeky Frenchman tried to sell us some cheap postcards.

By day, Paris seems overrun by maniac drivers and hurtling cars. But you don't go half way round the world to hide inside. So, armed with a couple of umbrellas plus the few French phrases I could remember from school, my lady and I took to the streets.





We spent some small change in Gallery Lafayette (Paris's answer to Harrods). But failed to spend some at a coin-operated street-side toilet – where, no matter how carefully I tried to translate the instructions and push the right buttons, I couldn't get the stupid door to open.

Desperate now, we snuck back into Lafayette. And after venturing by mistake into the ladies' loo (*slow learner, this boy: failed School C French*), I managed to find what I was looking for.

Phew!



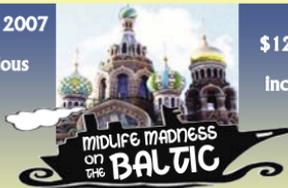
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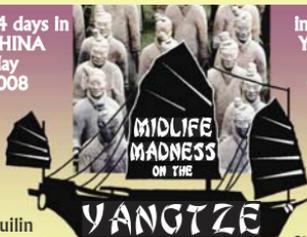
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