



TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC IN PARIS

By Sandy Bexon

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My sister and I had left our third day in Paris ‘open’ to fill with whatever came our way. Little did we know, when we started our casual meandering that morning, that the day would become one of our most memorable together!

We had already toured the city by bus and the Seine by boat, had café au latte and chocolate croissants for breakfast, had chilled white and abundant salads at a riverside café, had walked the streets around our rented apartment and sipped cold beers at different squares. Yup, we were in Europe together for two weeks and were going to live it up in every minute! We had stood as close to Notre Dam as possible during the time of its closure because of the fire, which had happened just a few months before. It was July 14, 2019 – we didn’t know that a pandemic was on its way that would halt airplanes and travel the world over, or that it was Bastille Day in France.

What had we wanted to do that day? Well, I was on the prowl for two things: a notorious restaurant where all the famous writers and artists hung out and smoked cigarettes in the 1920s, and a tiny chapel that was apparently the catalyst for The Da Vinci Code. The chapel seemed closest, my sister had announced, studying her iPad while she sipped her morning coffee in our little apartment kitchen. She was older and wiser than me, so she mapped out our days on the trip. And pretty much all throughout our lives!

We laced our sensible walking shoes and headed out – the chapel was within walking distance. We walked and walked for quite a distance, indeed, and figured we should just stop for a cappuccino for sustenance to carry on. It seemed to have been all uphill and we were both happy to find a café with a handful of little tables outside that we would return to once we placed our order. We carried our little cups and saucers back outside and fussed around a bit, setting them down and arranging the chairs just so. And then we looked up. And gasped.

Down the hill, far away but directly in front of us, framed by the French architecture on each side of the narrow street, was The Eiffle Tower. The morning was still new and the sky was pastel around the tower, which stood like a beacon just inside the distance. Oh, we were stunned into silence with the view – which is saying a lot. We stared and closed our eyes from the beauty of it all and then stared some more.

The Eiffel Tower was, according to the start of the day’s reconnoitring, going to fit nicely between my chapel and restaurant as the one place my sister wanted to re-visit. We had passed the landmark twice since we arrived, once on each of our tours, but we needed to mosey around it she said. So we began our pilgrimage down the street toward it.

So many things along the way: a bagpiper walking to and fro in a small courtyard with the tower booming large in behind him as we got nearer to it; a number of army vehicles passing and then more and more arriving; soldiers with guns at arms and loud aircraft flying very low over the

scene. It must be a terrorist threat, we thought, we shouldn't gather around any notable structures.

Feeling quite nervous about what might be coming next, we nonetheless stuck to our day's schedule and made our way to the restaurant. We didn't check the distance, we just checked our maps because we walk everywhere when we're together and have been happily lost together many a time. We arrived without mishap to La Rotonde en Montparnasse. What joy! Not only to be in the space once held by Hemingway, Picasso, Kisling, Matisse. But to discover from our server that there wasn't a terrorist threat in progress, but a celebration of the founding of the French nation. It was Bastille Day, a national holiday with many military parades.

Not only that... there were to be magnificent fireworks at The Eiffel Tower that night. Whoa, we knew the best place to watch them from! So, after we enjoyed dry martinis as a tribute to the writing crew, and a shot of fresh vegetables for lunch, we began to retrace our steps to our little morning café. We stopped to ask directions many times, and laughed just as many at the pleasant nature of the helpful Parisians. Yes, we found each and every person we met to be polite to us wandering Canadian seniors!

Eventually we made it. We were back to where our day had begun, and our little outdoor table was free! The lighting had changed, the street was bustling with activity, and our drink at hand had become wine. But we sat in the exact same spot as we had twelve hours earlier, with an appreciation of the frivolity around us. We had breathed and swallowed and loved Paris during those hours in between. We were healthy and together, and as the night fell we left our table briefly to zip into the scarf shop next door. We hadn't anticipated being out this late and hadn't brought coats or sweaters or extra clothing at all. But we chose perfect scarves to keep us warm and to keep us reminded of this magical day. Sophisticated black with pearl border for my sister, silly pink flamingoes for me.

We scooted back to our table, where many others had crammed in by then. The couple at the table next to us refilled our glasses from their bottle of wine, and we all turned to look downhill at the light show that was bringing the tower, and everyone who saw it, to life.