

MY FAVORITE PLACE



A Bridge Too Fair

What fiancée-to-be could resist the most enchanting spot in **Paris**?

BY CHIP BROWN

I knew I wanted to ask her in Paris, if only for the advantage of proposing in a place that makes it hard to say no. So many generations have seized on Paris as the epitome of romantic communion that the city sometimes seems to have the character of a wise old matchmaker for whom no obstacle to love is insurmountable. Is it the idea of Paris that predisposes the heart, or is there something in the water?

“Paris,” you say, and people just sigh and fluff up their feathers. I know I was similarly affected—“undone,” I should say, or is the word *unbound*? All over the world places advertise themselves as the Paris of this or the Paris of that. And then you’re in Paris and it hits you: there are places in Paris that are the Paris of Paris. I knew it didn’t matter where we went that night, as long as we ended up down by the Seine on the Pont des Arts.

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And so we did. We had been the last to leave the restaurant, an out-of-the-way place on the Right Bank with checked tablecloths, extravagantly priced Margaux, and a proprietor who posted himself at the door to shake everyone's hand as if he were a host who'd had us

all to his house. During dinner it had rained, and the streetlamps in the mist looked like little ringed moons. We wandered down the Rue du Mail, past the colonnade of the Palais Royal, and then along the endless palisade of the Louvre where a pantheon of august stone

personages coldly eyed traffic from their niches. At the Quai du Louvre we walked upriver toward the bridge.

From afar the Pont des Arts is just a spindly footbridge, easy to miss. It takes its name from the passage it provides between the Louvre, once known as the Palais des Arts, and the Institut de France, where Napoleon was thinking of housing the École des Beaux-Arts. The Bridge of Arts. It has none of the ostentation of the Pont Alexandre III, whose winged eagles were recently regilded with 24-karat gold. It lacks the splendor of the Pont Neuf, whose stone archways the artist Christo swaddled in cloth more than a decade ago. It missed out on the expatriate cachet of the Pont de Sully, where Hemingway's beautiful losers stopped to assuage the bittersweetness of exile.

But never mind. Set in the heart of the city just downriver from the Île de la Cité, where Paris emerged from the wilderness more than 2,000 years ago, the Pont des Arts has a human scale and beauty that make it the most hospitable bridge in Paris. Its trestle boardwalk, free of cars, appears to float between the high embankments of the Seine; eight iron archways leap from pier to pier as gracefully as dolphins. At dusk tourists cluster at the rails holding maps they never seem able to fold right. Late at night young mademoiselles scuttle home from discos, trying to keep their heels from catching in the planking.

It's not what you see on the bridge so much as what you see from it, the phantasmagoria of nocturnal Paris. We walked out to the center and found a ringside bench. Here and there people were lingering, talking quietly or struggling with their infernal maps. The monuments were bathed in light; soon they would go dark. One of the long *bateaux-mouches* that ply the river glided upstream. Its wake sloshed against the stone banks, and its powerful searchlight swept the quay, illuminating the plane trees.

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When the boat slipped beneath us, it made the bridge seem much higher. It was as if we were suspended on an aerialist's catwalk above a gallery of circus-goers.

You could get dizzy just turning circles to take in the sights: the vaulting archways of the Pont Neuf, which form almost perfect circles when mated with their reflections; the Place Dauphine; the spire of Ste. Chapelle; the shadowy hulk of Notre Dame. North and south and west: gilded domes, zinc roofs, chimney thickets, slashing boulevards, the labyrinths of alleys and streets that by night seem not to have been cut into the city so much as insinuated. Even if your future wasn't hanging in the balance, you certainly could get dizzy looking down at the Seine, where the water is always murmuring to hulls and fish, and where it seems almost alive

with shattered light, flowing forward, pushing on.

So we are pushed through the world, or push ourselves, and arrive at the moment where we feel the urgency of choice. A frozen life unfreezes. "Everything flows; nothing remains," Heraclitus once wrote, long before iron bridges spanned the Seine or the river even had its name. What I had come to understand was that if you do not write your destiny, it will be written for you. I had my grandmother's ring in my pocket, and conviction in my heart, and I was afraid only of my clown-self enacting some masterpiece of clumsiness and of having to watch the family diamond squirt out of my hands and into the Seine, never to be seen again. Or not to be seen for decades—not until a flabbergasted fisherman discovered it in the stomach of a freshwater pike. (These

rings-recovered-by-fish scenarios have actually happened.)

Oh don't you know she said yes? She said yes, which I found almost impossible to believe, so I asked again, and she said yes again. In the rush of feeling I didn't notice when the city lights were turned off for the night, or when the sparse crowd dispersed, or by what art it was exactly that we came to find ourselves alone on the Bridge of Arts, sans tourists and mademoiselles. But we were alone. It seemed we lingered there forever on that bench above the Seine, lingered there midriver in the Paris of Paris, so that we might always remember the moment of this metamorphosis, and the water we had crossed.

CHIP BROWN is writing a book on alternative medicine for Riverhead Books, a division of Putnam.

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