

# ‘Flâneuse-ing’ Our Way Through France

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To be a “flâneur” in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, first of all, one had to be male. From the French verb “flâner”, a “flâneur” was ‘one who wanders aimlessly’. There was no feminine form of this noun.

Such a dandy gentleman, says Lauren Elkin in her new book “Flâneuse: Women Walk the City”, was “an idler, a dawdling observer, usually found in cities.” Now, says Elkin, a thirty-something native New Yorker who has lived in Paris since 2004, she herself has become a “flâneuse”, wandering the grand boulevards and the medieval warrens of Paris as a woman “keenly attuned to the creative possibilities of the city and the liberating possibilities of a good walk.”

Elkin exhorts, “Anywhere at all, cross the street, open your eyes.”

So, I did.

Last month I took my two teenage granddaughters to France. We arrived on our Independence Day - the 4<sup>th</sup> of July - and spent our last day in France on that country’s equivalent national holiday, Bastille Day.

French tri-color flags (also red, white, and blue) fluttered everywhere. There was little outward sign of the angst and anger that has gripped France for the last several years. The sidewalk cafes were full of cheerful people – many of them French -- as we watched military planes do a thrilling fly-over along the Seine, trailing streams of red, white, and blue smoke.

The French seemed to be excited about their new, young (age 39) progressive president, Emmanuel Macron. For the moment, at least, there were no strikes, no protests, no terrorist attacks – although soldiers wearing camouflage and carrying machine guns were everywhere.

I introduced the girls to some of the icons of France: the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame de Paris, the Musée D’Orsay, the Louvre, the palace at Versailles, the Luxembourg

Garden. We took a guided bicycle ride along the Seine, mostly along bike paths but also veering occasionally into Paris traffic. (It wasn't as scary as it sounds.)

But we also meandered through various city neighborhoods. We poked around the quiet, cobbled streets of the Île St. Louis, tasting delectable macarons and the island's famous ice cream, but also imagining the men and women who lived and toiled there centuries ago. (My father's ancestors came from this area. Some of them emigrated and settled in Quebec, Canada, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.)

We roamed the narrow 12<sup>th</sup>-century streets of the Latin Quarter near the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), today overflowing with cheap restaurants and annoying men hawking their tourist wares. But it wasn't difficult to imagine the likes of Montaigne, Voltaire, Emilie du Châtelet, and Heloise and Abelard once ambling here, books in hand, centuries ago.

We wandered around the charming Marais, not far from the Place de la Bastille where the infamous prison once stood, and also near the area where, tragically, more than 13,000 Jews – including 4,000 children - were rounded up by the French Vichy police in July 1942 and deported to Auschwitz for mass extermination.

Later, we hopped on a small (98 passengers) riverboat and wound our way up the Seine, drinking in artist Claude Monet's spectacular Impressionist garden in Giverny, and then time-traveling in Rouen, with its slender, soaring memorial to Joan of Arc, who was born here and was burned at the stake here. Rouen also boasts its own famed Notre Dame Cathedral, painted by Monet more than 30 times.

“Flâneuse-ing” was especially rewarding in small Normandy towns like Rouen, where around nearly every corner sat an ancient half-timbered house or a venerable stone church.

We ended our Seine journey at the Normandy beaches of World War II fame.

Omaha Beach and Utah Beach, where thousands of American soldiers landed on D-Day - June 6, 1944 - are lovely and tranquil today. Children scamper on the sand and people swim in the same sea that witnessed so much blood and death 73 years ago. “Some people say it is unseemly for us to still use these beaches as beaches today,” our French guide told us. “But we say, ‘This is what those gallant men fought for’.”

Later, during a visit to the magnificent and peaceful Colleville-sur-Mer American Cemetery (the girls recognized the cemetery from the opening and closing scenes of the Steven Spielberg film “Saving Private Ryan”), each of us was handed a white rose to place on one of the endless rows of white Latin Crosses -- and an occasional Star of David – that mark the burial place of a soldier killed on the beaches in June 1944 or in the months afterward as the Allies moved inland to free Europe from Nazi rule.

Emma chose the headstone of a soldier from Pennsylvania, Ciara that of a soldier from North Carolina. I laid my rose at the final resting place of Sergeant Lawrence R. Ruckreigle of Michigan, 326 Bomb Squad, 92 Bomb GP (H). He died on July 8, 1944.

Some 9,387 American soldiers – including four women, who were nurses -- are buried at this largest World War II American war cemetery in France. Seeing this exquisitely beautiful memorial park overlooking the bright blue sea was a fitting way to end our excellent journey to France.

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