

to walk in Paris



**Vignettes from two months
in the City of Light**

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MCCAA BOOKS • SANTA ROSA

McCaa Books
1604 Deer Run
Santa Rosa, CA 95405-7535

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First published in 2014 by McCaa Books, an imprint
of McCaa Publications

ISBN 978-0-9960695-3-3

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Minion Pro
Cover design and photo by Sharon Beckman

www.mccaabooks.com

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Introduction

EACH MORNING at 7 a.m. we drank fruit, vegetable and *fromage blanc* smoothies in the tiny kitchen of our flat at 37 rue Descartes. Then we descended two flights to the street, which often smelled damp from the night's rain, and sometimes pungent of stale beer, from the late-hour student bar across the way.

We walked a half block north, turned right onto rue Clovis, skirted a last remnant of the 15th-century wall that once protected Paris, and angled down rue Monge, toward our health club for a workout. Back in the apartment we loaded a backpack with maps, guidebooks, sweaters, hats, an umbrella and a camera, and set out for some far-flung neighborhood to find lunch, preferably at a street-side café table. Then the real walking began. Logging four to seven miles on foot every day for two months tested our feet, legs, lungs and our French.

Which is exactly as we wanted it. For some time we'd yearned to know Paris close up and at

a lingering pace. This time we wouldn't be tourists. We'd go local.

Writing vignettes was an afterthought. One day we just started, emailed them off and, encouraged by friends back home, continued. This book contains all eleven of them, plus a poem.

Our sojourn in Paris deepened our relationship with each other and enhanced our love affair with the city. To embrace the timeworn label City of Light is to revel in its profound beauty, but doesn't capture the hurly-burly, shoulder bumping, and traffic. Fortunately, years in New York had conditioned us for these.

Evenings sometimes brought the most memorable moments, when, after a salad, paté, baguette and glass of wine, we ventured out yet again, this time down rue Sainte-Genève and across the Place Maubert for an aesthetic, even spiritual, nightcap: moonlight touching Notre Dame's spire and sending the Seine sparkling, as if for the first time, westward under its bridges.

We hope we've captured impressions and sentiments worthy of Paris in our vignettes. And more importantly, that you enjoy them.

—Sharon and David Beckman

First Sunday

DB

THANKS TO SHARON'S research, we had a plan for our first full Sunday in Paris—a trip to *Marché l'Aligre*, an outdoor food bazaar in a neighborhood of working people, shops, artists and artisans, reminiscent of Brooklyn before it became chic, or the Mission District in San Francisco before high-tech discovered it.

Our bus delivered us a block from the market, which occupies a large square and nearby streets, featuring Middle Eastern, North African and French merchants behind stalls of fruits, vegetables, cheeses, fish and meats. Vendors were intense, friendly and vocal, calling out their wares in sing-song cadences. Soon the passageways between stalls were crammed with families, young couples, elderly people and tourists vying for elbow space. Our bag was soon heavy with dates, ham, cheeses, a cucumber, olives, and bread.

Needing a break, we found a nearby café and took a table at the curb for the quintessential Parisian snack: *croissants* and *café au lait*. Soon we were chatting with the young man at the adjacent table, an Irish expatriate furniture designer with an easy manner and Belfast lilt. He'd lived in Paris for 10 years, after stints in San Francisco and New York. He knew the neighborhood intimately, and gave us good advice for our walk.

Off we went, on to a trek along bustling streets with shops, cafés, and apartment houses. It turns out that the area has been vibrant for 300 years (hey, this is Europe). One house featured a plaque explaining that, in 1830, in the interior courtyard, a hot air balloon that had ascended on the other side of Paris had made an emergency landing.

By 4 p.m. the warm day was cooling, with fluffy soft clouds enhancing a blue sky. We took a bus back to the Left Bank. The city was suffused with a painter's light, so we headed to the Pantheon, passing Eric Kayser, considered to be among the very best bakeries. We pressed our noses against a window displaying seriously delectable-looking breads, tarts and cakes, then made our entrance, Euros at the ready.

On to the Pantheon, which was being extensively renovated and restored. Finished in 1790,

it had been the tallest building in France until the taller Eiffel Tower reared its Erector Set head in 1889. A wide street, rue Sufflot, named for the Pantheon's architect, runs 300 yards from its front columns west toward the Luxemburg Gardens. Like a giraffe peeking over a tree on an African savannah, the Eiffel Tower, three miles distant, stands visible and aloof as if to say, "Take that, Pantheon."

It was the world's tallest structure until 1933, with the building, considerably further west, of our own Empire State Building. Which despite its height, is out of view from here.

Tired and satisfied with *un autre jour complet* we walked home by way of two tiny winding streets to a light dinner of paté, bread, cheese, olives, an avocado with a pool of vinaigrette in the space left by the pit, and the last of a bottle of Bordeaux left from the day before.

Oh, and a pistachio and apricot tart from Eric Kayser.

Fashion

DB

TODAY WE HAD LUNCH on boulevard Saint-Germain, which Sharon and I particularly like, one reason being that it reminds us of upper Broadway in our old New York neighborhood. Sitting at our café, watching the sun-splattered street and the passing people, we ordered beer and salads. After a bit, Sharon nudged me and said, “Look at the woman over your left shoulder.”

She was a middle-aged Parisienne a few tables back. “Her hair,” Sharon said. Moderately curly, salt and pepper, asymmetrically cut, perhaps three inches long, with a slightly up and forward bias. The effect was casual, subtle and fetching.

“Toni Wilkes would look good with her hair that way,” Sharon said. (Sharon, it turns out, had recommended her Healdsburg hairdresser to Toni – a good friend back home.)

Our lunch arrived and we lost ourselves in eating, drinking and doing what everyone here

does—watching the passing street scene, not just for its color and flair, but as a plein air lesson in human possibility, intention and what it is to present the self, unguarded or otherwise, to others.

As we finished lunch, Sharon said that at one point she'd looked up and that the woman had caught her eye and they'd both smiled. Sharon had pointed to her own hair and had made the universal thumb-to-forefinger, "I approve" sign. The woman, in turn, had done the same thing, complimenting Sharon on her hair.

Ah, fashion—one of its pleasures is that two strangers who have an innate gift for it find each other and naturally, sweetly, gesture mutual admiration.

Paris

DB

light cathedral towers straining west gardens
where trees wear scarves and
people plant themselves deep
putting out roots and leaves that
fall come fall Streets matrix at corners
buses troll daring history

in the metro below rue Monge an old man
in tattered sweater
birdwalks toward me to say *monsieur votre
echarpe est dans le sol*
("sir, your scarf is on the floor.") then bends
to retrieve it for
me we resist all history here all
light for fear it has more to say than we
and feels it more
and will far past when these words wash
away toward
Argenteuil

we can't get enough of your river as if finer
life were flowing here
and we tourist-lemmings head for it day
and night looking for some truth awash
near Pont Neuf since 1607 when men
sharpened quills dreaming
under scudding clouds that beauty was
only here and
art

beauty is here and art and forgotten hands
that strained to be a part of it at
the tip of Ile de la Cité randy Henri IV
established
a pubic bone of land where he dallied long
and named a narrow cobbled triangle
opposite the clitoris of Paris *oh, le
mot juste* we walk there now thirsty for
meaning and a glass of red
Bordeaux