



MARINA DE BERCY

A river cruise & Paris by night

If you have never seen Paris from the river, then here's a tip - take a night time cruise on la Seine, a voyage that will be pleasing both to the eye and to the palate. Not to mention the powerful romantic effect this will surely have on your companion...

Paris, as you may have heard, is a city that comes to life at night. Seven centuries of architecture create an intense visual theatre, a dramatic scene on a grand scale. The ancient stonework comes to life under the spotlights and the finer buildings surge triumphantly from their foundations, throwing the modern and ugly bastions of commerce into a receding shadow land. La Seine becomes a river of gold, reflecting a shimmering light on to the ancient bridges, bringing them into the foreground as the panorama of Paris recedes into a 'wide-angle' backdrop.

I find it ironic and exciting that the ancient monuments, somewhat obscured by the daylight of modern Paris, come alive once again at night. They win back the importance and grandeur with which they were ordained, exactly as you would expect when you see Paris from the perspective of the river.

Why is that? Simple - for three hundred years Paris was built with the river as its focal point. La Seine was the major trade route and the only way to visit Paris in comfort during the epochs of the French Crown. In short, Paris was designed to be seen, supplied and traversed via the Seine. If you ever try to cross Paris by car, this will explain quite a lot!

Our choice for a romantic evening cruise was the Bercy Marina, in the 12^{ème} arrondissement (twelfth quarter), a short taxi ride from Les Champs Elysées. We'd have taken the tube but it was raining cats and dogs; not our choice of weather, but magic was in the air

and it didn't seem to matter. The marina consists of a very smart riverside building with an interior like a luxury yacht. A cocktail or two are sampled at the bar as the other guests arrive for the trip. The cruise boat itself is a similarly smart affair, and the evening looked destined to be a success!

As soon as the vessel sets off, ones perspective of Paris changes. You have the immediate feeling of being at the true heart of this elegant city, and if you felt like a tourist earlier that day (waiting in a long queue for the Eiffel Tower) you now feel like a VIP in a very comfortable floating spaceship.

The boat has a line of spotlights, which illuminate the side and underside of the many bridges we pass under. The figures sculpted on the facades are so huge and ornate that their gaping gullets seem to be about to swallow us whole.

For those of you mad about food (that's probably all of you) the first course consisted of a very edible foie gras de canard, 'hugged' by a cinnamon and apple purée, with a delectable touch of crushed peppercorns and an edge of redcurrants. Fresh soft grain rolls were the perfect accompaniment to the delicate foie.

Forgive me for pointing out that your hand-to-mouth coordination needs to be pretty good, or you could do damage to your cheeks... as at this point the majority of the guests have their eyes fixed on the highly impressive view. All heads turn to the left as Le Louvre comes into sight. Work began on this imposing palace in 1204 and it served the kings of France until 1793 at which point it became a museum. (Well, you knew that didn't you?) Immediately after is Le Musée d'Orsay, a former railway station built in 1900 for the World Exhibition, housing masterpieces of the Impressionist period.

Our boat has a crew of nine souls. They're quick and sure-footed and seem quite used to the fact that none of their customers appear interested in them. The show is well choreographed; courses are served in virtual synchronicity, dishes arrive and



Céline!



disappear at moments when the views are less startling. Wine is tasted with a perfunctory acceptance. The bizarre truth is that the dinner (although a vital and important aspect) is mostly eclipsed by the rest of the experience. We are waited upon by three charming people, ever ready to throw their serviette over one shoulder, on request, and take a picture of one couple after another against a backdrop of the Eiffel Tower. Restaurant staff, Gregory and Sylvain, brought us our entrée and plat principal in rhythm with the voyage; the main course was a choice of roast pork and rosemary, or roasted salmon in a sorrel sauce. Both dishes were free of complicated cutlery technique - in other words the menu was designed to be simple to serve and easily consumed, allowing guests to keep their eyes on the changing scenery!

No doubt you can guess the highlight of the trip... (we were on the cheese course, but barely noticed). As we emerge from a bend in la Seine, the Eiffel Tower comes quickly into view and at this close range soon fills the entire sky. (Photographers will need a 20mm lens.) This is an impressive and magical moment and we seem to swim in its yellow light.

We turn our eyes from one sumptuous sight to another, as charming crewmember Céline approaches with our desserts; a gâteau au chocolat and a faiselle with crème fraîche.

The boat is now making a tight turn around the tip of the Ile aux Cygnes for the homeward run, as coffee is served. A music hit from Broadway wakes us from our reverie and before we can make sense of the intrusion, the Statue of Liberty appears before us. (This smaller version of the famous monument was a gift from the American community living in the capital. The original statue, designed by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi and Alexandre Gustave Eiffel and completed in 1886, was a gift of France to the United States).

Well, there you have it. It's not just a tourist trip; it's a fantastic night out - highly recommended!



Our host, Mohammed shows Hervé (the chef) port & starboard!

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JEAN-SEBASTIEN MOUCHE

by Régine Godfrey

HOW A SPELLING MISTAKE LED TO THE CHEAPEST OF PUBLICITY STUNTS...

When Jean Bruel bought the dilapidated company of Bateaux-Mouches in 1953 the whole fleet had shrunk to a single boat called *L'Hirondelle*. (The Swallow).

Boats had lost in popularity to the tramways and buses, and no one had yet conceived the idea of cruising the Seine River.

Jean quickly commissioned a painter to design a splendid sign as a means of advertising his new enterprise. However when it was produced, the letter **S** at the end of Mouches was missing. There was not even enough space left to add it on and Jean, owner of only one boat anyway, displayed the board as it was.

This seemingly insignificant spelling mistake soon gave way to derogatory and sarcastic insults in a newspaper. "The people in charge of the Bateaux-Mouches are not only profiteers, they are also illiterate," wrote a famed *académicien* (a man of letters, member of the learned French Academy).

A few days later, a Bentley pulled up on the quay and a prosperous-looking gentleman approached Jean.

"Do not worry, he's got it wrong!" This man - who was also an *académicien*, and obviously no friend of the above-mentioned scholar - told a bemused Jean that there was in fact no spelling mistake.

Mouche could not be written with an s, as it referred to a proper name. Jean was by then looking more and more puzzled. "Mouche is the name of the inventor of your boats, isn't he?" And after a pause, the *académicien* added: "Well, you do understand me, don't you?"

Monsieur Mouche had just been born.

But now Jean Bruel had to find him a Christian name. His close friends pitched in: Auguste Mouche? No, Auguste was too well known as the 'funny man' at the circus. "Why not Jean, as most people are called?" Someone added: "Jean-Sébastien ... like Bach... he could claim to be from an old protestant family!" They voted. Jean-Sébastien Mouche was adopted, unanimously.

They went to the flea market to search for a figurehead. They found the bust of a superbly bearded chap, with a serious enough air.

The final task was to compose his biography, written in a lighthearted manner with the maximum use of puns on the name *Mouche*.

"He was a brilliant collaborator of the Baron Hausmann and organized in 1886 a corps of astute police inspectors who acquired the name of 'mouchards' (a familiar term for police informers). His ancestor, Nicolas allegedly created the male hairdressing stubble style 'la mouche'. He had apparently cut Richelieu's pointed beard too short and made up for it by leaving lots of hair under the chin. His great-grandmother Suzanne was one of King Louis XV's last passions. She was such a sharp customer that she was nicknamed 'Fine Mouche' (as in "there's no flies on her!") During the 1889 Universal Exhibition, his ingenious idea to use boats on the Seine River efficiently reduced traffic congestion in town, and 'Bateaux-Mouche' became their trade name, in his honour."

The inauguration on April 1st 1953 of Jean-Sébastien Mouche's bust made headlines in the French newspapers. The choice of April Fool's Day did give the journalists some cause for concern, but they nonetheless all flocked to the wharf to drink to the unknown Monsieur Mouche. The business was successfully launched and in private circles Jean Bruel was heard to say: "Thanks to a spelling mistake, Jean-Sébastien has saved me a fortune in publicity!"

A few years later, Jean Bruel officialised the legend by naming the sleekest boat in his fleet **J-S Mouche**... naturally!