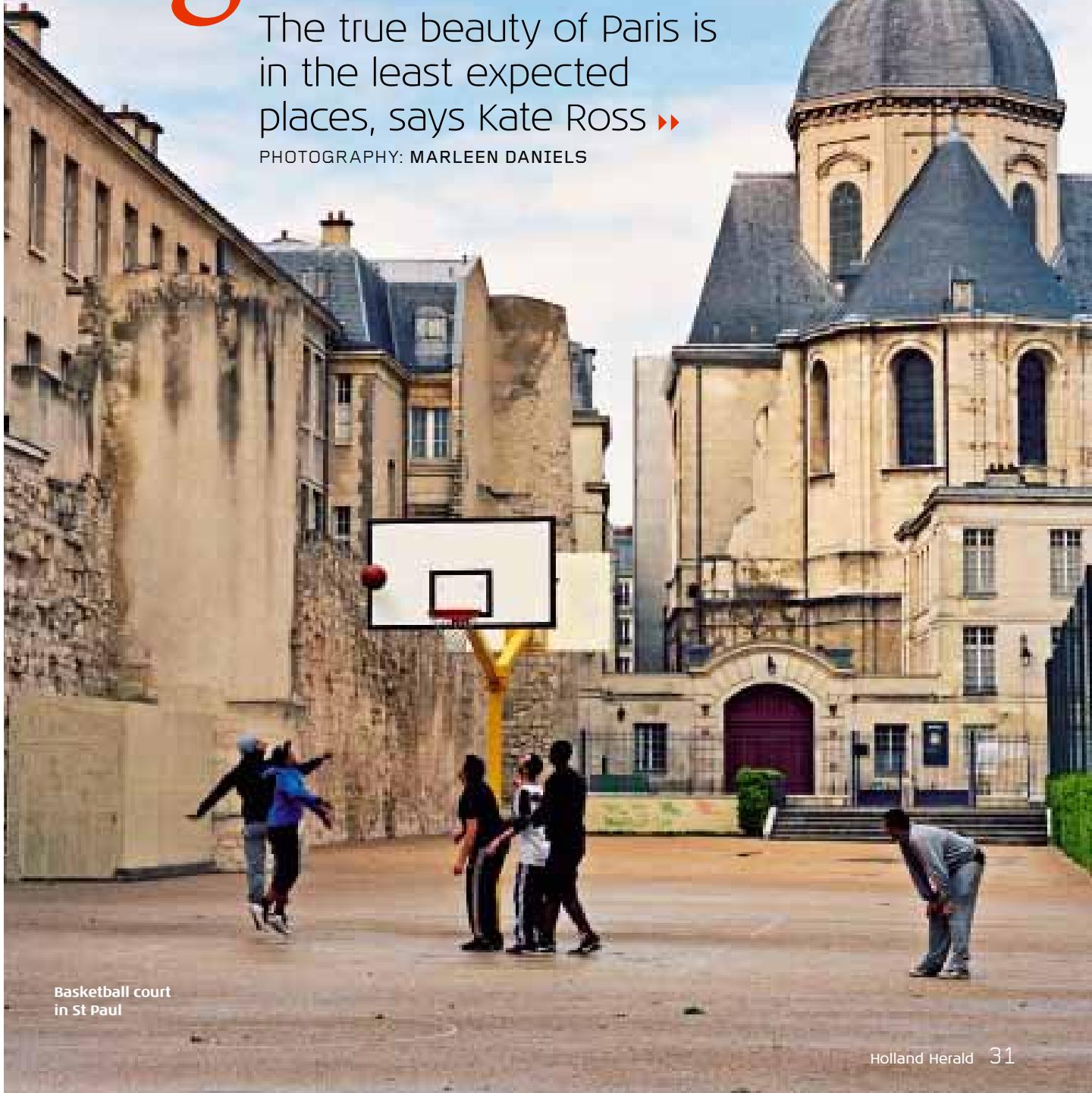


adv

Urban grandeur

The true beauty of Paris is in the least expected places, says Kate Ross ▶▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARLEEN DANIELS



Basketball court
in St Paul

RIGHT
Museum Carnavalet
BELOW
Palisade Tokyo



It is a city steeped in beauty, and to take full advantage of Paris' magnificence, automobiles and the metro should be shunned in favour of walking shoes, *vélib'* (city bikes) and scooters.

On a typical street on Paris' Right Bank, a woman in her fifties whizzes past on a kick scooter, avoiding cobbles with practiced ease, and pedestrians in search of grandeur are soon compensated for their sore feet.

Glance skywards, and you're rewarded with that striking Haussmannian style – five or six storeys, dressed stone in whites and pale greys and tiny almost-balconies under a mansard roof.

"French architecture has always been careful to clothe innovation within a language of traditionalism," explains Gabriel Wick, an Anglo-American landscape architect and historian who leads walking tours for Context Travel.

Furthermore, he says, city officials and the government take a proactive role in ensuring the maintenance of old buildings, and a strict alignment code banishes most tall buildings to the city's farthest outskirts.

But while most of Paris still remains

staunchly conventional, there are some allowances for more modern touches: Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau coiling, green metalwork Métro entrances are a city trademark, and the postmodern Centre Pompidou sits like a giant, futuristic alien, accommodating Europe's largest collection of modern art.

"There is a certain spirit of generosity and collective pride that emanates from Paris' urban fabric," says Gabriel.

"I think we need to be reminded every once in a while that we do not always need to go into a museum to see things of great beauty."

Indeed, northwards stands the towering Basilique Saint-Denis, rival to Notre Dame and burial site of French kings from the 10th to 18th century.

The cathedral recently featured in the television adaptation of Ken Follett's historical fiction novel, *Pillars of the Earth* – an observation muttered fleetingly by a passing teenage boy as his parents gaze upwards with quiet wonder.

Considered by historians to be the first truly Gothic building, it has – as demonstrated by Follett – acted as both the inspiration and the physical model

for cathedrals and abbeys across northern France and England.

Tucked northeast lies Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, Paris' largest cemetery, sprawling a vast 44 hectares. Known affectionately as *la cité des morts*, more than a million bodies lie in chapels and mausoleums of varying extravagance, in a rainbow of greys, flecked with skinny, quietly shading trees.

Pick your way through the winding paths, and you'll stumble upon the grave of Jim Morrison, rather unimposing next to some more flashy neighbours.

Once headed by a bust of The Doors' singer, it now exhibits a simpler placard, but fans have compensated by leaving, besides flowers, beer cans and cigarettes.

A clump of mourners mark Oscar Wilde's grave, which is marked by a flying nude angel inspired by the Assyrian figures of London's British Museum.

Once imprinted with hundreds of lipstick kisses and scrawled quotes, French authorities and the Irish government have recently stripped and scoured the statue of rouge, erecting a glass barrier to protect the memorial from damage. ▶▶

“We do not need to go into a museum to see things of great beauty”



Walls of Gaul

If walls could talk, Paris' stones and bricks would speak of Jef Aérosol. His Right Bank stencils of the 1980s may have been lost with time, but in Place Stravinsky a giant fresco, *Chuuuttt!!!*, commissioned last July, stands proud. And on the Left Bank, his dancers, guitarists and Bob Dylans live on, twirling down rue Mouffetard and scattered throughout the 7th and 13th arrondissements. "The art on the walls of Paris reveals a great diversity," Jef Aérosol says. "The styles and techniques of street artists are many and varied. They offer to passersby a summary of international culture, mixed stories, melting pots and openings. There is an inherent poetry to the capital, something that dances in the air of Paris and makes it unique." It fills every neighbourhood with street art, such as the mural, below, in Charonne.



ABOVE
Passage des Panoramas
RIGHT
The Eiffel Tower



▶▶ But one British student applies a thick coat to her lips and presses them to the barrier. She is not the first: faint red and pink prints of other kissers dot the glass.

"I can understand why they did it," she says, diplomatically, of the glass, "although what it was before – that's a form of beauty too."

Other visitors aim cameras at the flowers and notes – many of them quotes from the man himself – that are casually strewn at the grave's base.

Graffiti is one of the characteristics that define Paris, and the art of the streets can even act as part rival to the city's many museums.

The sharp-eyed can still locate the work of Blek le Rat, the father of the street stencil.

Faded by the years and hidden by other artists, his work is still present on cobbled rue des Rosiers in the heart of the vibrant Marais, the thriving Jewish and gay quarter, amid the commotion of shouting schoolchildren and those pursuing crispy falafel wraps.

At Clignancourt's flea market he's there again, among busy market stalls that give way to the quiet of old cameras, vintage jewellery, furniture flecked with age and a red London telephone box.

Or the inconspicuous rue des Bons Enfants, where a stencil of his, near a straggle of shops and industrial yards, attracts barely a cursory glance from the accustomed passersby.

It is cities, Blek le Rat reveals, that provide him with inspiration: "All the cities of the world are beautiful because the men who built them harmonised and mixed aestheticism and functionality," he explains.

"The cities are extraordinary when you are young," he adds, then smiles, "they could be less attractive when you begin to become old like me."

More street art amasses in the 10th arrondissement, among brasseries and ▶▶



“The art of
the streets
rivals the
city’s grand
museums”

Strolling near
Canal St Martin



RIGHT
Cimetière du Père-
Lachaise
BELOW
Waitress at
Les Maggots



“It’s, ‘interestingly ugly,’ comments a French jogger as he stops to stretch”

►► pavement bars where students munch cheese and meats, swigging cheap beer.

In this urban jungle, tags swathe metal shutters and giant poppies that wouldn’t look out of place in Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory.

Tagging is taken to new levels in Pantin, a town ballooned onto the east of Paris, where a six-storey abandoned warehouse sits by the waterfront and

runners and cyclists pause to admire this heaving, gritty monster.

Canal de l’Ourcq hosts many such neglected warehouses, but this particular one, once used for grain storage, now acts as the concrete plaything of graffiti artists desperate to squeeze their own tag onto the colourfully caked walls.

“Interestingly ugly,” comments a French jogger, as he stops to stretch.

As the sun dips and buildings fade under the grey dusk, the sprawl around rue Oberkampf awakens, cluttering bistros and bars up and down the roads.

Cafes unveil circular tables, and from then on in, it’s never entirely quiet, swarming with Paris’ hip twenty-

something crowd until the small hours.

They come for coffees, beers and music, and the streets waft just slightly with the smell of slowly sizzling crêpes as *les bobos* crowd round for the perfect Parisian late-night snack.

“What’s nice is you can pretty much put on a blindfold, walk into any bar and it’s likely to be cosy, fun and cheap,” says Flo Villeminot, lead singer of Parisian band Hold Your Horses!

In the brasseries, couples work through plates piled high with steak frites, and a jostling queue on the wide pavement marks the wooden front of music venue Nouveau Casino, which has hosted the likes of British Sea Power, I Blame Coco and Patrick Wolf.

Mark Thompson, who runs website Gigs in Paris, likens the venue to a robot's stomach: "The videos playing on the walls, the multi-coloured jagged panels lining the stage, the twinkling strip lights above you," he explains.

"And it's this futuristic interior that's reflected in their booking policy. Twin Shadow, Neon Indian and Toro y Mo have all made this their first port of call."

A croissant's throw away, on one of the narrower side streets flecking the main run, smokers cluster around the entrance of l'International.

But it's not just the decently priced beers that pull in the crowds; the main attraction, and body of the bar, lies in the cavernous basement, with free live music almost every night of the week.

Big enough to show off your dance moves, but with the right amount of

cosiness to add intimacy, the lineup intermingles the up and coming with the well established.

"It was a hell of a good time," recalls Flo, of her band's performance at l'International. "It's nice to have somewhere that gives new artists a chance to show off their chops.

"The bar itself is very *stylé* as they say in France, and it attracts a really mixed bunch, but be ready to sweat. A lot. By the end of the gig we felt like we'd jumped into a pool."

One particularly enthusiastic jumper peels away from the crowd, stumbling sweatily off the packed dance floor, stopping at the long bar to wrap his fingers around a cooling pint.

Despite the ruckus, a few bloggers still nestle in l'International's cosier corners, typing furiously on their MacBooks.

"The quality may vary but there's

always the chance of seeing and chatting to the next big thing before their first album is even released," says Mark.

"You'll often catch scouts from nearby La Flèche D'or, La Maroquinerie and Nouveau Casino dropping in for exactly that reason."

Partying can carry on long into the soft break of dawn. Paris' clubs stay open until the first morning Métro picks up the last of the footsore stragglers, and then there's a brief calm on the streets.

But come midmorning (except Sundays, when much of Paris sleeps quietly away behind cool metal shutters), Oberkampf swings back into action for brunches, mid-work espressos or, for those who still haven't dragged themselves away to bed, cocktails for those hair-of-the-dog moments.

Any excuse to witness more of this glorious city. ■

Paris fact file



GETTING THERE

KLM operates six direct daily flights to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. Air France also operates six direct daily flights.

WHERE TO STAY

For rooms beautiful enough to justify a visit of their own, the achingly hip **Mama Shelter** (mamashelter.com) is by Cimetière du Père-Lachaise.

WHERE TO EAT

If you're loaded up on steak frites, try **Restaurant Bon** (restaurantbon.fr), which, despite its very French name,



delicately and elegantly fuses European and Asian. Green papaya salad, black cod, and coconut and mango soup are the house recommendations. You can

choose to linger over wine in the stylish **Vinothèque**, dine under chandeliers and a giant rhino head wall mount in the **Cheminée**, pen yourself in a sea of magnificent



trompe-l'œil books in the **Bibliothèque**, or unwind in the calm white space of the **Boudoir** - all the design of Philippe Starck.

MORE INFORMATION

paris.fr
parisinfo.com