



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

REMEMBRANCE OF TIMES PAST

A few days ago, I was glued to my television screen, watching in horror as flames engulfed Notre-Dame Cathedral. I held my breath as the roof caved in and the tall, elegant spire bent over and plunged into the inferno. My thoughts raced to Paris and I was awash in memories of my last visit to the city and to the stricken church.



It was mid-morning and we'd stopped at the Café de Flore on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Sitting at a sidewalk table on red and green chairs, facing the street, savouring the thrill of being in Paris. *Deux croissants et deux cafés au lait, s'il vous plaît.* French phrases resurfacing, gliding tentatively over the tongue, summoning memories of days gone by. Dunking croissants in our milky coffee. *Merci!*

Lillian and I had flown in late the previous evening and, after sleeping off the jet lag, had risen and struck out from our hotel in Le Marais on a crisp, sunny morning. With guidebook in hand and only a vague plan in mind, we wandered down to the river, where we paused to get our bearings. We strolled along the right bank, past the Hôtel de Ville, then crossed over the Pont Notre-Dame to the Île de la Cité, where the famous cathedral has stood for centuries. Inside, the air was cool. Despite the throng of people, barely a murmur

floated around us under the cavernous trove of silence overhead. Delicate shades of light filtered through the Rose windows. Here, one doesn't have to be Catholic, or religious at all, to feel transported to a realm of peace, a primal place of refuge.

Spiritually fortified, we crossed the Seine again and turned right on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. The map in the guidebook showed that we could continue in a westerly direction, veer left on the rue Saint-Dominique, and eventually come to the Eiffel Tower. It would be a long walk, but conditions were ideal, and the idea was appealing so off we went.

We'd read that the massive public works program undertaken by Baron Haussmann in the mid-nineteenth century included demolishing the narrow, cobble-stoned rue du Jardinnet to make way for the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Napoléon III appointed Haussmann as Prefect of the Seine in 1853 and instructed him to *aérer, unifier, et embellir* Paris—create open spaces designed to circulate fresh air throughout the city, connect and unify the different districts, and make it all more beautiful. The project, which dragged on for decades into the 1920s, involved tearing down crowded, unhealthy, medieval neighbourhoods; building broad avenues, parks, and squares; annexing surrounding suburbs; and putting in new sewers, fountains, and aqueducts. Haussmann's work inevitably prompted fierce opposition, but the layout and distinctive look of central Paris today is largely the result of his vision.

After taking a slight detour to see Rodin's *Thinker* and the Place des Invalides, we came across a street vendor selling crepes, hot off a flat top grill. We took one filled with spinach and cheese, and one overflowing with chocolate. After devouring



BACK IN TIME

...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

them on a park bench with sincere compliments to the chef, we were off again, now getting very close to our destination. And, sure enough, after just a few more blocks, there it was in all its iconic beauty.

This wrought iron lattice tower is named for the engineer Gustave Eiffel, whose company designed and built it in the late 1880s. It was intended as the grand entrance to the 1889 *Exposition Universelle*, which was organized to celebrate the centennial of the French Revolution. The original plan envisioned the edifice being taken down after 20 years, but it proved so useful for experimental and communication purposes that it was allowed to remain aloft after the permit expired in 1909.

The graceful *Tour* rises up from a square base that measures 410 feet on each side. It is 1,063 feet tall, or roughly the same height as an 81-storey building. On completion it was the tallest man-made structure in the world, a title it held until it was overtaken by the Chrysler Building in New York in 1930. The Eiffel Tower has three floors with stairs and elevators to all of them. The top level's upper platform is 906 feet above the ground, where tourists can gaze out at breathtaking views in all directions. As a historical note, when German armed forces occupied Paris in June 1940, early in World War II, members of the French Resistance cut the elevator cables. The tower was closed to the public during the



occupation, and the cables weren't repaired until after the war. In August 1944, when the Allies were poised to retake the city, Hitler ordered General Dietrich von Choltitz, the military governor of Paris, to destroy the Eiffel Tower along with the rest of the city. To his enduring credit, and our profound relief, von Choltitz chose to disobey the Führer. About 25,000 people visit the Eiffel Tower every day, which means there can sometimes be tedious queues; but we were lucky, and it wasn't long before we stood on the second level, with Paris spread out beneath us in the late afternoon.

We'd walked many miles that day, and climbed many stairs, so when we got back down to the Champ de Mars, we caught a cab back to our hotel. After freshening up we ventured back out for dinner. We spied a tiny restaurant just off the rue Saint-Antoine, and when we opened the door for a closer inspection an extraordinarily sophisticated Airedale Terrier came to greet us, wagging his tail. Meeting this charming and impeccably domesticated dog struck us as a positive sign, so we took a seat in one of the booths in the miniscule dining room. The house special that night was duck confit, which I'd heard of but never tried. The chef-owner, a fussy man with dishevelled white hair wearing a white apron, explained that this was a classic dish that required time and patience to prepare. He told us, very seriously, that his version was sublime and assured us that we would not be disappointed. He was right. I've ordered duck confit a number of times since then, in various restaurants around the world, and have never had a better one.

After dinner we strolled back to the hotel, chatting about our excellent day. In retrospect, that visit seems to be from a different era entirely, almost a different world. A time when any mention of the City of Light made me think of Eartha Kitt and her irresistible promise: "Under the bridges of Paris with you, I'll make your dreams come true."