

Life on the Seine

On the *Île de la Cité*, in front of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, is a bronze compass set in the pavement. From here, point zero, all distances from Paris are measured. And at the heart of Paris is the River Seine. 'For Parisians the Seine is a compass, a way to know where you are,' says art historian Marina Ferretti. The river flows through and around the lives of Parisians and is the stage on which they live their lives.

I love my boat

There are 199 houseboats on the river in Paris. One day 34 years ago Claude Tharreau was walking along the Seine when he saw a 70-foot-long Dutch boat built in 1902 called the *Cathare* for sale. 'Actually I had been looking for an apartment,' he says. It was Sunday. On Wednesday he signed the contract. 'It was only afterwards that I noticed it was a boat with no electricity or water.'

Instant beach

The beach-on-the-Seine was the idea of Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë about twelve years ago. To make the beach, the Georges Pompidou Freeway on the Right Bank of the river is closed for four weeks each summer. For these weeks, the Seine becomes an urban Riviera, a constant movement of beach-volleyball players, sand-castle engineers, samba, tango, and break dancers, rock, jazz, soul musicians and of course sunbathers. Project manager Damien Masset ticks off the list of ingredients for an instant beach: 5,500 tons of sand, 250 blue umbrellas, 350 deck chairs, 800 chairs, 250 loungers, 40 hammocks, 200 tables, four ice-cream stalls, eight cafés, 875 yards of wooden fences; 250 people to put it all up, 450 to run it.

No waterskiing allowed

It's one of those hot summer days when you can see the heat rising from the road. The river looks cool and inviting. 'Can you swim in the Seine?' I ask the police commandant Sandrine Berjot. '*Non*,' she says. '38 euros.' That's the fine for swimming. 'What about putting your feet in?' 'You can't do that.' Here are some other things you can't do: go waterskiing, tie your boat around a tree with a rope, fail to help a person in the water. This is serious: the fine is up to 75,000 euros or five years in jail. 'If someone is drowning, you mustn't jump into the water. But you do have to call the police.'

The river

All kinds of objects flow down the river past the famous architecture of Paris: lost plastic toys, balloons, cigarette ends, empty wine bottles. Claude Monet kept a floating studio on the river near Argenteuil. Henri Matisse also had a studio on the Quai Saint-Michel. In their art we can see the constantly changing and dancing light of the river.

Glossary:

paddling (n) walking in water without shoes

infatuation (n) strong feelings of love or passion

Riviera (n) an area of the Mediterranean coast

Keywords:

beach-volleyball (n) a game played on sand with a net, a large ball and two teams

bronze (adj) made from *bronze* – a shiny orange-brown metal

contract (n) a legal agreement

fence (n) a structure around a garden or other area

plastic (adj) made from *plastic* – a light artificial substance

sand-castle (n) a small castle made from sand, usually by children

stall (n) a temporary table for selling things

sunbather (n) a person who lies in the sun

urban (adj) in or relating to a city or a town

wooden (adj) made of wood