

On the *Île de la Cité*, in front of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, is a bronze compass set into the paving stones. From here — point zero — all distances from Paris are measured. And at the centre of Paris is the River Seine: its liquid heart. 'For Parisians the Seine is a compass, a way to know where you are', says Marina Ferretti, an art historian.

I love my boat

A *coup de foudre* is to fall in love suddenly, fiercely. So it is with men and their boats. One day 34 years ago Claude Tharreau, a young market researcher, was walking along the Seine when he saw the *Cathare*, a 70-foot-long Dutch boat built in 1902, for sale. 'I had been actually looking for an apartment,' he says. It was Sunday. By Wednesday he had signed the contract. 'It was only afterwards I noticed it was a boat with no electricity or water.' There are 199 houseboats in Paris and, undoubtedly, 199 stories of infatuation.

Instant beach

The sandbox-on-the-Seine was the brainchild of Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë twelve years ago. To accommodate the beach, the Georges Pompidou Expressway on the Right Bank of the river is blocked off for four weeks. For this period, 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 of many shapes and sizes. Project manager Damien Masset ticks off the 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 stands, eight cafés, 875 yards of wooden fencing, 250 people to put it up, 450 to run it.

No waterskiing allowed

On one of those exhausting summer days when heat rises from the road in visible waves, the river outside the office of the chief of the police who patrol the Seine looks cool and inviting. 'Can you swim in the Seine?' I ask Sandrine Berjot, the down-to-earth police commandant who heads the Brigade Fluviale. '*Non*,' she says simply. '38 euros.' The fine for breaking the rule. 'What about paddling?' I ask. 'Not so much as a toe.' Other rules include: no waterskiing in certain zones; no tying your boat around a tree with a rope; no protesting or putting up banners. But more serious is failure to help someone in distress. The penalty: up to 75,000 euros and five years in jail. 'If someone is drowning, you don't have to jump in. But you do have to call the police.'

The river

All kinds of objects flow past the famous architecture of Paris: lost plastic toys, balloons, cigarettes ends, empty wine bottles. You cannot experience the same river twice. The Impressionist artist Claude Monet kept a floating studio on the river near Argenteuil. Henri Matisse, a post-Impressionist, had a studio on the Quai Saint-Michel. The flat grey ribbon of water which was painted by earlier artists became a dance of light through the lens of these painters. What colour is the Seine? It's complicated. The Seine reflects life and everything around. Its colours are infinite.

Glossary:

paddling (n) walking in water

infatuation (n) strong feelings of love or passion

Riviera (n) an area of the Mediterranean coastline

Keywords:

actually (adv) really, in fact

cool (adj) cold in a pleasant way

down-to-earth (adj) sensible, realistic

exhausting (adj) extremely tiring

fiercely (adv) intensely, strongly

inviting (adj) attractive, tempting

simply (adv) in a plain, simple way

suddenly (adv) unexpectedly, with no warning

undoubtedly (adv) certainly, definitely