

The Treasures of Gay Paris

The cold, concrete steps led to the equally, sparse and bare expanse of the train station's solitary platform. As I awaited the arrival of the express, I surveyed the plain, functional space that surrounded me. The grey sea of concrete was cracked and crumbling; seeds blown by the autumn breeze had burrowed into these gaps and were sprouting from their artificial beds. The infantile green of their stems bled into the tiled partition, which, accompanied by the twisted, rusting wire mesh, attempted to slice the platform in half.

My inspection of the platform was interrupted by a sharp, rasping cough let out by a well dressed man, who was holding a long cigar to his thin lips. The cigar billowed foul, pungent clouds which were instantly whipped away by the early morning breeze. His perfectly pruned moustache twitched as he inhaled the noxious fumes. Closely, a woman dressed in a black, well-tailored suit - a pink pashmina slung over her shoulders - cleared her throat several times and then moved away from the man. The expression on her face showed her concern and lack of comfort with her surroundings. As I looked at my own fluid portrait in a muddy puddle, I realised my confident veneer was being betrayed by the crumpled map I clutched. Suddenly, the express flashed by with such speed and force, I stepped back to gain a sense of security and safety. As the train's rhythmic motion slowed, we piled into a towering carriage.

I sat on a small, sticky, vinyl covered seat and was consumed by a silence that was eerie. Surprising! The carriage was full. As boredom set in, I looked outside to see the countryside fly by. The gel of greens was so fresh and natural in comparison to the cold, greys of the metal interior. The vast planes of the countryside emphasised just how small and claustrophobic the cramped carriages were.

After the train journey to the suburbs of Paris, I wanted the traveling to be over. However, I still had the daunting Metro system to navigate. I was greeted by a confusing spiral of mazes and pathways. A damp, yet familiar smell hung in the air like a dirty fog. I dug my map out and snapped it open. Meticulously I guided my way to a beeping carriage. I broke into a run and entered just as the doors clunked closed behind me. Desperately, I fought my way to a window through the seething mass of manicured bodies en-route Gare de Lyon.

The pleasant day now had been stolen away by a dark, thundery cloud and as I stood under a bottle green bridge I wondered what direction to go in. I headed towards a tall, sandstone building which was decorated by flower boxes brimming with blood red geraniums glaring through the steely rain. Under the cover of a myriad of candy stripes I once again conferred with my increasingly ragged and creased map. Uneasily walking down a back street, I pondered whether this really was the - but my thoughts were cut short as, before me, the Eiffel Tower was unveiled!

Although the brown, dusty gravel crunched solidly under my feet, I felt as though my body was spinning around in a circle as I gazes high into the bronze framework. I can compare la Tour Eiffel to nothing I have ever seen in my life: it was so enormous and imposing

Ascending in a bronze 'chariot' skywards, my hand held the steel rail tightly. I had never suffered from a fear heights but I had never been that high before! As I stepped out on to the observatory platform at the pinnacle, I was enveloped by a cold, moist mass of cloud. I glared through the hazy veil to see planned, orderly and, from up there, quiet streets which contrasted dramatically with the previous chaos. As it was a bleak day, my view was clouded; I soon descended and was intent on finding the next treasure of Paris.

Notre Dame Cathedral although an amazingly intricate and architecturally beautiful building was scarred by the scaffolding which cocooned it in an ugly blanket: the pigeons, too, had claimed it as their territory. However, the stone carved sentinels which stood on the front of the facade seemed to be guarding the building: their stoney faces' made a very daunting sight.

Inside there was a musky, damp and eerie silence. My attention was instantly drawn by the delicate and elegant Rose Window. So vast. So little light penetrating it. However, it was then my memories and images melted together as all I could focus on was what treasure of gay Paris I could next discover...