

# A lazy lunch on the river near Paris - without the crowds

We had been exploring the lesser-known bits of the Seine on the western edge of Paris for an hour and the novelty had started to wear off. My shoes had picked up a good dollop of river-side sludge which looked out of place once the footpath had petered out into a factory making concrete – Beton de France – and we were forced onto a dreary road leading to God knows which bit of industrial suburbia. It had started to rain and the river, almost invisible down a steep bank on the right, was inaccessible to pedestrians. The tall chimney of what turned out to be a rubbish treatment plant was smoking on the left and the road stretched uninvitingly ahead, with only a shabby café in sight. It was called, rather pathetically, Le Bord de Seine. ‘Bound to be closed’ muttered David, ever the optimist. It was 3 pm on a Sunday in January and for once he was probably right.

But when we reached it and tried the door, it was open. There was the usual small group of Algerian men at the bar and another, fatter Algerian behind the counter. The mirrors and lamps which constituted the decor had a vaguely retro look. We squeezed onto bar-stools and ordered coffee. I gave them brownie points for not staring – I was the only woman in the place and our French instantly reveals us as Anglophones – and idly noticed that the floor tiles were a restful pattern of blue, white and grey. I realised that they really did date from the fifties, as did the table-football machine which looked as if it had been lifted from a museum. Eventually I slid off my stool and headed for a door behind the counter labelled *Toilettes*.

It opened onto another world. The *toilettes* were there all right, but they were just part of a large *terrasse* overlooking the Seine, the existence of which we had almost forgotten. Tables with inviting cane-backed chairs were grouped near the parapet, which was lined with pots of geranium. Part of the terrace was shaded by a roof with ivy twining up its wooden supports. The whole unexpected picture was framed by a little green bridge with red trellis railings to the right and the trees on the river bank opposite, which was surprisingly only a few feet away. Leaning over the geranium pots, I saw several large barges converted into houseboats moored along the narrow stretch of the river snaking into the distance on the left. We were clearly overlooking an island, and a rather well-hidden one at that.

Full of excitement, I returned to the bar and started quizzing the *patron* about the food. Yes, they were open for lunch all year round, Sundays included. We had a short but highly satisfactory game on the ancient table-football machine before setting off to explore the island. It turned out to be the Ile St Germain and the trees were part of a park, accessible by the little red and green bridge tucked away behind the café, which is on a corner. There was a train station about a kilometre away, cutting out the tedious concrete-factory walk from Paris.

Three weeks later we were back, to test out the food. The elderly *patron* was being aided by a younger man (his son?) who was on bantering terms with the young and not-so-young French couples who were clearly regular customers. Everyone was relaxed and jovial and it felt as if we had strayed into someone’s family dining-room. The *couscous-merguez* was home-made and generous, so much so that we skipped dessert and just sat there, savouring the bouquet of the most expensive wine on the menu, an Algerian one at 9.20€, while engaging in an animated discussion with the people at the next table. It was about whether *résidus*, as in T.I.R.A. (Traitement Industriel des Résidus Urbains, the acronym for the rubbish treatment plant opposite) was a masculine or feminine noun. I have found that asking about the finer points of French grammar never fails as a conversation-opener with the French.

Two hours later, well-fed and at peace with the world, we rose to go. The bill for two came to 40€, but would have been half that had we contented ourselves with the house wine, a carafe of Côtes du Rhône.

I have not tried out the *terrasse* this summer, mainly because it is not the only one I have discovered. In my quest for places on the river, easily accessible from Paris by train and which are also charming and little-visited, I have stumbled across other humble but engaging establishments overlooking the Seine (see below). Unlike most Parisians, I find the Paris region endlessly fascinating and exotic. Here is all the French flair for *joie de vivre* in modest little places only a few kilometres from the capital, well served by public transport, but unknown to tourists and overlooked by the French themselves. They represent the best recipe I know for experiencing *la France profonde* without missing what Paris has to offer.

### **Le Bord de Seine**

20 minutes from St Michel on the RER C to Issy Val de Seine, plus a 15-minute walk. An excellent free map of the area is available from the RATP. Ask for no. 5, Ouest Parisien.

172 Quai de Stalingrad, 92130 Issy les Moulineaux, tel 01 40 93 02 11  
Open every day except Saturday until late, as it is also a hotel.

### **La Guinguette Auvergnate**

15 minutes from Gare de Lyon on the RER D to Villeneuve Triage, plus a two-minute walk  
Ask for the RATP map no. 13, Sud Parisien

19 Avenue de Choisy, 94190 Villeneuve St Georges Triage, tel 01 43 89 04 64  
Open every day except Monday in the summer until late, as it is also a hotel. Dancing in the evening on the second and last Friday of the month all year round.

### **La Terrasse de la Plage**

50 minutes from Gare de Lyon to the SNCF station at Vulaines-Samoreau-sur-Seine, plus a 20-minute walk along the river

77210 Samoreau, tel 01 64 23 95 51  
Open until 11 pm every day from May to September

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