

# Paris, Home Town of the World

All Nationalities Know the Magic of the Siren "City of Light,"  
2,000 Years Old but Young as Spring

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1952  
*With Illustrations by National Geographic Photographer Justin Locke*

AS I entered the familiar hotel once again, the proprietor's wife looked up from her paper. "Welcome back to Paris, monsieur!"

Thanking her, I said I hadn't thought I would be back so soon.

"But, monsieur!" she exclaimed. "Surely you expected to return?"

I assured her I had.

She beamed. "Ah, yes," she said, "everyone always comes home."

The *patronne* was right. The appeal of Paris is so universal that in a sense the city is everybody's home town.

I have come "home" to Paris many times and in many ways. Approaching it by air at the velvet hour of twilight, I have seen the capital glowing like a bed of hot coals. Wriggling through its suburbs by automobile, I have stolen upon it almost unawares.

But this time I came to the City of Light by train, from the port of Cherbourg across the pastures of Normandy. I liked this approach then, as always, because in the train's own movement I sensed a gathering impatience which matched my own, a crescendo of expectation for the delights of the capital.

Outside my window the farmlands gave way to towns; the towns clotted abruptly into suburbs; the train rushed headlong into the smoky shed of the Gare St. Lazare and drew to a stop. Paris. And home.

On the station platform mustachioed porters in blue smocks and berets swarmed over the luggage. One stocky fellow, a smoldering, hand-rolled cigarette drooping from his lip, snatched my bags and trotted off, favoring me with only one word of explanation: "Taxi!"

## Battle of the Boulevards

Soon I was in one. A rickety antique, it looked as if it had been left over from those commandeered by General Gallieni to rush troops to the Battle of the Marne. With bulb horn squawking impatiently, it sailed into the frenzy of Parisian traffic.

Our first near-accident was not long in coming. The other driver, of course, had blundered; at once the air was filled with waving arms, cries of "*Espèce d'idiot!*" and various other phrases not generally found in the dictionaries.

Paris, when at length I could settle back in

my seat to contemplate it, looked as familiar and as welcome as an old friend. The great plane trees with their mottled trunks and elephant-ear leaves, the lichen-encrusted chestnuts and acacias, all seemed to share with the city its patina of dignified old age, gray but indestructible.

Along the narrow streets crouched the tiny shops I had known so well, their windows whitewashed with price quotations for wine, bread, meat, and other edibles. Kiosks, barnacled with layers of daily and weekly papers, and pillars festooned with posters for the theater and opera, told me Parisians had not lost their appetite for politics, polemics, and the arts.

The French themselves, some in patched denim, some as chic as next week's showings, seemed as always to have stepped from a canvas by Renoir.

I left my bags at the hotel and took to the streets again, on foot, driven by the desire common to tourists and old hands alike—to swallow Paris at a gulp, to see everything at once, whether for the first time or the fiftieth.

## Where Burns the Flame of France

Walking up the great Avenue of the Champs Elysées to the Arc de Triomphe (page 773), I found I was not alone in my pilgrimage. Toward it also marched a column of gray-haired Frenchmen. Many limped; all wore campaign ribbons. At the head of the formation strode a standard-bearer with the flag of the regiment.

Under the Arch, from which rippled a huge Tricolor of France, these veterans of World War I bared their heads, eyes fixed on the flag and on the bronze plaque which commemorates the liberation of Paris in August, 1944.\*

Their commander then stepped forward, bent down at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and turned up the flame which burns there, low but constant, in honor of those who fell for France in World War I.

When the veterans had departed, I went up by elevator to the top of the Arch. Here, high above the Place de l'Etoile, I could study once more the twelve avenues which radiate from

\* See "Paris Lives Again," by Maynard Owen Williams, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, December, 1946.