

Hanging Out in the Jardin du Luxembourg

PARIS. If you can't get to heaven this morning, come sit down on this sunny bench in the Jardin du Luxembourg. We'll watch autumn leaves float down against a cloudless sky, snack on some roasted chestnuts, then bless our fate: We're a galaxy away from the world's troubles. We're cuddling up to life as it should be.

Cuddling is what an epidemic of lovers is doing all around us on this nippy, dazzling day. Entangled in each other like doting octopi, sweethearts are seizing the day, the hour, the magic minute. And frankly, my dear, they don't give a damn about us. Neither do the tai chi folks, *pétanque* players, tae kwon-do enthusiasts, oriental sword-twirlers, tennis jocks, wistful old ladies, kids on ponies, joggers, képi-capped guards, bistro waiters, chess-players, *pipi* ladies (2.5 francs for the loo, *s'il vous plaît*) or pigeons. For the Luxembourg, almost since Roman times, has always been a public universe for private worlds. A place where 3,000 people can stroll, read a novel, a poem or *Le Monde*, sip a Kir, and savor solitude.

Or punctuate it, if eyes and interests meet, by a well-mannered word that could lead to nothing or everything. Everything might be a coffee prelude to love in the afternoon.

A woman in the "fine flower of age" (that's any age a man finds charming) is likely to elicit an approach within an hour of settling onto a bench or chair here. If she leans even a little toward Catherine Deneuve (who lives down the street), say, 15 minutes. Men? Even we harmless pensioners can snag a smile and a chat.

The Jardin is a collection of many gardens, of secret places, each with its mysteries.

At the centre of a great French-style garden — all symmetry and subtlety — glows the exquisite *Palais du Luxembourg*, home of France's Senate. Built for Marie de Médicis (wife of Henri IV) during 1615-27, its vast salons are ablaze with Rubens. Its three-storey façade gives 321 French senators a stunning view running up to the Paris Observatory a kilometer away. Sprawl feet-up on two chairs facing the *Palais*: this will remind you of why you should have been, or married, a king. (It reminded Hermann Goering of something too. In 1940, he installed here the western headquarters of the Luftwaffe. This is commemorated in bombing raids on your *poulet-chasseur* by the ubiquitous and, alas, incontinent, pigeons perching Hitchcock-like in trees above two outside *buvettes*.)

Elsewhere, rioting English gardens play off classic French ones, with huge old oaks and splendid hide-and-seek bushes.

Statues of poets — Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Lamartine, Verlaine — linger everywhere. So do statues of sculptors and painters. And of scientists who invented stuff you always thought some non-Frenchman discovered. Tragically, Chopin stands 200 meters from his mistress, George Sand. But maybe that's why their relationship has lasted so long.

The loveliest statues, surrounding the central basin, place 20 queens of

France on pedestals. Ladies only, for the Jardin's mood is *la douceur*. My fantasy-love in this marble harem is Laure de Noves, a yearning of Petrarch's in 1327. Older women are in vogue, and she has aged beautifully.

In the wooded philosophers' walks toward Montparnasse, you can, I swear, hear the footfalls of Voltaire, Rousseau, Proust, Hugo, Hemingway. Just over there.

Tired of sitting? *Mais le jogging!* A lope around the Luxembourg takes you 10 minutes. My own style of jogging I call enthusiastic shuffling. I can blitz the Jardin's inside perimeter in 15 minutes, even stopping to wonder, again, at the achingly romantic *Fontaine de Médicis*.

Soul-food? The Jardin offers us four exhibitions today: giant photos of volcanoes; modernist wood sculptures; a tour of French flora; and paintings by Raphaël. In the lineup for Raphaël last week, somebody carried a boom-box playing Mozart's clarinet concerto.

In the end, the Luxembourg's enchantment lies in the spell it casts on everyone entering its high gilt gates. A sudden hush, a tingly illusion tell you this is your personal paradise. Your secrets are safe here. Your heart is free to sing or cry here. Your mind, like your feet, can roam over capricious itineraries.

There are countless Luxembourgs, each defined by one person's memories. Almost always, these recall children or some long-ago love affair. Among the besotted, a complicity reigns: you keep your secret garden, and I'll keep mine. But together maybe we can walk a little, then sit a while longer on this sunny bench.

Now, have we eaten all those chestnuts?