

Travel and Adventure: The Best kiss in Paris

by Karen Kenyon

Paris is one of those cities, or rather THE city, where you can't avoid love or lovers kissing, even if you wanted to. And who would want to?

It's all around you – it's life at its best.

A couple kiss with the Pont Neuf, the oldest standing bridge crossing the River Seine in Paris, in the background. Photo by Karen Kenyon. "The Kiss" by Auguste Rodin is on display at the Musee Rodin, formerly the Hotel Biron, in Paris. Photo by Karen Kenyon. Seagulls bathe in a fountain in the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris. Photo by Karen Kenyon. I arrived in Paris the first warm day in spring.

Before the trip I thought of all the pictures I'd seen of couples kissing in Paris – and I laughingly thought – maybe I could talk someone into kissing me in Paris – just for a photo opportunity, you understand. Perhaps on the Pont Neuf.

But that was only a little pitiful joke I'd babble to friends.

When I arrived in Paris, I saw them – the lovers – on the streets, in the parks – young and old – smooching and cuddling. And it felt good. How open! How lovely and loving!

Isn't this what spring is about? Part of what Paris is about?

It seemed a kind of magical place where people are in love with love and life. And not afraid to show it.

The first evening I arrived I had dinner with a friend who'd made Paris her temporary home. After a few pleasantries, and "welcome to Paris" comments, she suddenly said "I have to tell you, I've met someone," and then she blushed and said she'd fallen in love only a week or so ago. She'd gone to Greece with another woman friend and then taken a day trip on her own to the island of Hydra.

She'd sat next to a man on the ship. They'd struck up a conversation, she offered him an apple - really "and they'd spent the day hiking the mythic island together.

In a few days the new lovers were both in Paris, hugging and kissing in the Jardin des Tuileries.

My friend, divorced, middle-aged, her daughters on their own, had bloomed!

So I'd heard my first real-life Paris love story. Things like this really happen, I thought.

As to my own quest, I decided that at least I could photograph lovers, if I couldn't actually become one on my one-week trip. As a writer I'm used to observing life, anyway.

And Paris is, I realized, after all, also a city where you can love many things. I decided to concentrate on that.

I realized there are many types of love. I loved the waiter who tried to pronounce the word "carrot" in English, in answer to a question I had about the food. When I couldn't quite make out what he was saying, he took out a writing pad and drew one of the most beautiful carrots I had ever seen.

I loved the gourmet food shop, Fouchon. Every lovely tidbit there is in beautiful pink tins – chocolates, mustard, madeleines, reminding me that food is indeed art, too, and worthy of love.

I loved having dinner in a real French apartment. A couple I know live in the city part of every year – the wife American, the husband from Romania. I loved having a really civilized dinner with them – roast lamb, several vegetable courses, three cheeses, chocolates with a special wine, and a very important conversation about where to buy the best chocolate. All surrounded by wonderful paintings and music.

I loved walking into Notre Dame de Paris one day to light a candle, and finding Mass had begun. I was overcome with the richness of the sound of the organ, the choir, and seeing the chandeliers suspended from ropes, the banks of candles that flickered all through the sanctuary.

And then there was the glitter and gleam of the Garnier Opera building, with its history of elitism and opulence – and the overlay of "The Phantom of the Opera." Everyone feels they know that chandelier and that grand staircase personally. I loved that too.

I loved the various people on the street who helped me find my way. Somehow we communicated with one-third French, one-third English, and one-third smiles and encouragement.

Then one day I set out for Monet's Garden – a short train ride from Paris. Besides the gorgeous backlit green, pink, red, yellow, lavender environment of the garden, I saw two pastel blue boats bobbing gently in the pond water. Even the boats appeared to be kissing.

I couldn't help falling in love with Monet's Garden in general - the fairyland quality, the spirit of the great artist.

Later, back in the city itself, in the Pere Lachaise cemetery, where the great and famous are buried - Moliere, Gertrude Stein, Chopin, Jim Morrison - I saw lovers kissing among the tombstones and I whipped out my camera.

But even though the couple was at somewhat a distance, they felt my spying eye, and inadvertently stopped cuddling. And just looked at me.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

The Rodin Museum was not to be missed, and I was not about to. So another day, half sunny, half rainy, I walked through the garden where the statues appear to have risen from the ground. I toured the museum itself (Hotel Biron) where Rodin, with his secretary/assistant, the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke, lived and worked for several years.

The building is full of the sculptures too, of course - with a separate room dedicated to Rodin's "mains," French for hands. Truly no one has captured the poetry, the power, the expression of hands as Rodin did.

Chandeliers also filled the spaces above - and wonderful windows with views of the garden.

And whoops! There was another couple kissing. I controlled myself this time, and didn't pull out my camera.

But in the next room — there it was — Rodin's exquisite "The Kiss," in

all its marble glory.

Here it is, I thought. This stands for it all — not just lovers — though lovers they certainly are, but to me, an homage to the love of beauty. To beauty that is not self-conscious, that never ages, that merely offers itself every day — for our wonder, for our appreciation of that exquisite union.

I took out my camera, one last time. Here I'd found my subject. They wouldn't mind at all.

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