

HEADS UP

Down by Paris's Riverside

By SARAH J. WACHTER

THE beauty of the Seine and its tributary, the Marne, has been drawing Parisians and tourists alike since the days of the Impressionists. But it's not just glittering waters that draw visitors, it's entertainment. It is this aspect that President Nicolas Sarkozy wants to magnify with "Le Grand Paris," a master plan that includes changes to the legal status of the banks of the Seine, the Marne and the Canal de l'Ourcq that would allow for further development.

But even in advance of Mr. Sarkozy's plan, the French are trickling back to the banks of the Seine. In recent years, restaurants have sprung up on old riverboats along the city's spruced-up quais, near the Eiffel Tower and as far away as the tony western suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine. And it's not unusual to find young French couples spending a Sunday afternoon dancing to an accordion waltz at a riverside guinguette, one of many small restaurants-cum-dance halls that originally sprang up

Dance to an accordion waltz or sleep in a barge.

starting in the 18th century outside the Paris city limits, partly in an attempt to circumvent a wine tax.

Recently, it's gotten easier to explore these often charming spots. This year, through Oct. 2, the mega-tour operator Cityrama (pariscityrama.com) is offering an evening of dining and dancing on Fridays and Saturdays at the **L'Île du Martin Pêcheur** guinguette in Champigny-sur-Marne, southeast of Paris. Then there is a floating guinguette, the **Antipode** barge (33-6-64-74-82-48; through Aug. 8), which sets out on Sundays on the Canal de l'Ourcq. The barge runs through northern Paris, docking in neighboring suburbs where singers and dancers help set the pace to an afternoon of dancing to traditional guinguette tunes, as well as to the occasional tango and gypsy swing.

Giquel, a Seine-side guinguette (33-6-6219-4771) — built in 1875 and restored 10 years ago — now resides in Rueil-Malmaison on the western fringe of Paris. On Sept. 19, it will host one of its regular "guinguettes éphémères," an affair that switches locations. (There are special guinguette events year round, so if you miss out on the fun this sum-



OWEN FRANKEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Seine, long popular for sightseeing, is adding entertainment.

mer you can visit culture-guinguette.com for more outings.)

For those who want to loll along the Seine a bit longer, a handful of the city's 160 barge owners are opening their quarters to visitors for nighttime stays. **Bateau Johanna** (33-1-4551-6083; www.bateau.johanna.free.fr), a former Dutch cement hauler that dates from 1936, is docked near the Tuileries gardens, and has two cabins available for a two-night minimum starting at 100 euros, or \$124

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More images of scenes down by the river.

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at \$1.24 to the euro, for two people.

The **Orion** (no phone; www.paris-peniche.fr), which once delivered oil to towns along the Rhône, is now docked on the Seine with a full view of the Eiffel Tower (150 euros per night, with a two-night minimum). The **Pytheas**, docked in the heart of Paris (33-1-42-68-05-85; 170 euros for two people) at the port of Champs Élysées, rents its front cabin — popular for anniversary weekends.

For those who relish a briefer outing, the **Musée Fournaise** (musee-fournaise.com), housed in a guinguette on the Île de Chatou, has an exhibition through Oct. 31 on the invention of the paint tube — appropriate, since the island is also known as the Île des Impressionnistes. ■

Check In / Check Out

VENICE

Centurion Palace

BASICS

Venetians are especially good at making centuries-old buildings feel contemporary. True to form, the Centurion Palace, a Sina hotel, which opened last October in what used to be part of a monastery, has the shell of a Venetian Gothic palazzo but an interior finished in high-end modern design. Seen from the opposite bank of the Grand Canal, the lobby glows brightly, illuminated by a chandelier made of opaque crystal cubes arranged in the shape of a gondola hull. Not quite sure what they're seeing (a museum? a palace?), tourists passing by regularly stop and snap pictures of what has become one of Venice's most distinctive-looking hotels.

LOCATION

The Centurion Palace occupies one of the most prime pieces of real estate in Venice, or the world for that matter: a spot right on the Grand Canal. Despite its ideal location, it is a safe remove from the areas of the city that get most clogged with crowds. The closest stop on the Vaporetto, Venice's water taxi public transit system, is a minute away on foot. So are the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute church, one of the city's most recognizable landmarks, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

ROOMS

The 50 rooms and suites look like something straight out of a modernist design magazine. Almost every surface in our first room, No. 601, was white: the walls, the bleached hardwood floors, the bathtub (just a few steps from the king-size bed). The two chairs at the desk, where a flat-screen television was positioned, and the bench at the foot of the bed were upholstered in sky blue, providing striking accents of color. Thanks to a family of noisy pigeons that had nested in the eaves near our room, the hotel manager graciously moved us to No. 209, a junior suite. The room was draped in sumptuous hues of scarlet and chocolate brown. There were double-height ceilings, a canopy bed and not one but two balconies that opened up right over the Grand Canal.

BATHROOM

The bathrooms are fit for a king — if that king's name happens to be Mi-

das. Ours was gilded from floor to ceiling, with gold wallpaper and gold floor tiles. Some design accents worked well, like a square of small LED lights embedded in the shower floor (which was also gold). But some, like the giant shower head in the ceiling (gold, too) that shot sharp streams of water in every which direction, tried too hard and failed.

AMENITIES

The hotel still has a few technological bugs. Reading lights built into the bed's headboard would sometimes turn on by themselves, or not turn off. The motion-detecting light in our closet didn't work. But the best feature was a switch by the bed that opened and closed the curtains. There is a gym, but it is pretty spare, with just a treadmill and a couple of stationary bikes.



A suite at the Centurion, on the Grand Canal.

ROOM SERVICE

For a 12-euro service charge, or \$15 at \$1.24 to the euro, you can preorder a free continental breakfast (cappuccino, croissants, fresh fruit, eggs) to be brought to your room. We opted for delivery between 8:30 and 9 a.m., and it arrived at 8:41. When I ordered two glasses of wine at the bar, the waitress offered to take them to our room. To my surprise, there was no service charge.

BOTTOM LINE

This is a beautiful hotel. From its attentive service to its sleek, elegant styling to its sought-after address, the Centurion Palace is not just another nice hotel, but an experience.

Centurion Palace, Dorsoduro, 173, Venice; (39-041) 34281; centurionpalacevenezia.com. Rooms start at 250 euros (\$312).

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