



THE SECRET LIFE OF THE SEINE

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"The Secret Life of the Seine belongs to the Irresistible Seduction school of travel writing." —New York Times Book Review

you haul in your lines and go. He prefers to work the props, staying in the center, which is like balancing yourself in a subway without holding on.

In the *Andrésy* lock, we could do neither. Having left that spot by the wall at the back, we could only tie up to a barge and drop along with it. As we inched forward, one bargee yelled, "*Yachts go last.*" He pronounced *yacht* as though trying to clear some hideous substance from the back of his throat.

Finally, Charlie selected a *péniche* toward the front. He maneuvered slowly as a dozen captains watched with impatience. As we threw lines over the barge's bollards, the master scowled. Then I saw an evil gleam light his face. He goosed his starboard prop, and the wash shot our stern sideways. The bow, of course, headed into his steel hull. A friend up front, holding a tire on a rope to cushion shocks, screamed, "What do I do?" By the time anyone could tell her, we had struck the barge with a sickening crunch.

We shoved with boat hooks, but the brand-new bow beam pressed against steel, bending at a frightening angle. Finally, we backed away. The rest of the way, we took turns hanging over the rail to watch for cracks that might open and ignobly cut short *La Vieille's* first century.



Farther down from Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, the yachts strike back. By the nondescript town of Les Mureaux, the Cercle Voilier de Paris unites 350 members, a happy family of people who take their sailing seriously. One Sunday, I sat on the terrace of *le cloob'owse* as yachtsmen howled derision at pretentious window dressing—portholes decorated with something resembling ox yokes—on a passing *péniche*. Few

resent the bargees, who keep the river alive. But many are pleased to see their number dropping fast.

"Twenty years ago during a regatta, you couldn't go twenty meters without having to worry about altering course because of a *péniche*," said Boy Desouches. "Now it's what, 2:30? Maybe three have passed since ten o'clock. It has changed around here."

Boy would know. His father joined the club in 1900, and he followed in 1931, at the age of twenty. That was when women were banned from the rambling wooden clubhouse. His mother ate sandwiches on the dock with the kids—the rest were older sisters, which is why he is Boy—while his father luxuriated inside with his cronies. The revolution came in 1932.

In that year, Jacques Lebrun, the club hero, won a gold medal at the Los Angeles Olympics. So did Virginie Hériot, a French teammate who was not a member. The CVP threw them both a cocktail party. Inside. The women on hand, some sailors and some wives, peered through the windows at Mademoiselle Hériot alone among the males. They pushed open the forbidden door and stayed.

For the Cercle Voilier de Paris, that is recent history. The club was founded in 1858 at Argenteuil. Those little white sailboats the impressionists loved all flew the CVP's pennant. Back then, it was a green, flowered suburb just downstream from Paris, a short voyage from La Fournaise restaurant near Chatou, where Renoir painted the customers and Maupas-sant composed on the walls. In 1893, however, the railroad put a bridge across the wide stretch of water, cutting the yachtsmen's playground in two.

The club moved to Les Mureaux, twenty-five miles north, settling into a rambling wooden clubhouse. In 1994, the CVP celebrated the first century of its quarters, now

shabbily elegant and stuffed with souvenirs. Priceless wooden models line the walls, original builders' mock-ups of hulls that would be famous. Among them, from 1901, was the *Sequana*. A fortune in silver is shaped into cups, trophies and plates, all symbols of victory. But the eight Monets in the dining room are now only reproductions.

Monet was a member. Whenever his bar tab got out of hand, he painted some lovely boats and settled his account with a canvas. Until World War II, they hung on the walls along with sepia-toned photos of fast bottoms. Germans occupied a nearby air base, however, and the club fell onto hard times. All week long, German officers lounged around the place, sleeping in the eighty little cabins and guest rooms and eating on the terrace. Only on Sundays did members show up, and they enforced a rigid rule: no Germans. Amid postwar penury, the club sold its Monets to survive.

Today, the place bustles with life. The president is Jean-Robert Villepigue, a Sunday sailor who otherwise designs product packaging. He was the friend who took me around Marcilly. Jean-Robert loves the club and delights in showing it off. Although he also keeps a boat off Brittany, he does not think people should sneer at sailing on the Seine.

"Down there," he said, pointing to an aging man in shorts, sanding a keel, "is a two-time world champion. A lot of Olympic medal winners have trained here." He gestured to a patch of water perhaps five hundred yards wide, where prevailing east-west winds could whip you along for about three miles until a bridge snapped your mast. His sweep tool in a few Belugas, sleek little boats that were once made of wood.

"Those were born here," Jean-Robert said. "During the war, when Jacques Lebrun couldn't go to sea, he sailed the Seine in open hulls with no cabins. He put up tents, make

shift shelters. So he told Jacques Herbulot [the club's marine architect, an Old Master], 'Look, you've got to make something I can sail and live in that will do for the ocean when the war is over.' Herbulot designed the Beluga. France has made a thousand of them."

When I first met Jean-Robert in Paris, and he asked me to lunch at the CVP, he wore a blazer with a fancy patch on his breast pocket. This being a French yacht club, I came ready for anything, a cravat hidden away just in case. I knew it would be all right when he pointed to a blue plastic bucket on the bar and invited me to fish out my own ice cubes with my fingers.

Only Boy looked the part, in blue jacket with pink striped shirt, club tie, and polished black loafers. His bushy waxed mustache bristled skyward, but his sunburned nose aimed down at a friendly angle. "When the club moved here, this was the end of the world, and people didn't want to come," he recalled, "so the railroad laid on a special car every Sunday. It brought up members in the morning, and took them back at night. . . ."

I knew this story. The car was dropped off at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near a brothel of high repute. Members often took their time getting home. This custom went on until after the war when a prudish cabinet minister shut down the whorehouses. Others, who knew the story better than I did, broke in: "What about the brothel?"

But French yachtsmen take much of their vocabulary from the English, and the first term they learn is *gentleman*. Boy looked around at a lady of his generation, coughed hard, and replied: "Never heard of it. An ugly rumor."

He recounted the brutal cold war, since settled, with the Yacht Club de l'Île-de-France, just next door. Now the smaller rival is down to a hundred members and faced with

money troubles. No one wants it to disappear and leave its installations available to something else. Boy grimaced at the idea.

Jean-Robert guffawed. "Right," he said. "The last thing we need is a free, open Republican club with motors and"—he paused to sniff dramatically—"pedal boats."

After lunch, we left on a boating party in the grand style of the canopied launches that took elegant couples on the Seine a hundred and some years ago. Our party fell slightly short of the gathering Renoir depicted in his *Déjeuner des Canotiers*. We had no ditzzy black poodle, only an overweight golden retriever that barked at swans. None of the four women wore bonnets or bustles. Six of us weighed down a little flat skiff with a wheezing nine-horse Johnson.

We putted toward the regatta, twenty boats in a line, all billowing spinnakers in crimson and fuchsia, yellow and black, French blue and bordeaux. Villepigue steered us into a side channel, almost overgrown with thick trees. Stone towers were half masked by foliage. Old men fished from their piers. Deep greens were broken by hedges of brilliant red roses. I was on the river, almost in it, with bilge water lapping at my ankles and spray cooling my face.

Back in the main channel, Jean-Robert laid on the lore. He pointed out where Jacqueline Auriol, daughter-in-law of a French president and the first woman to break the sound barrier, crashed to her death while she was testing a sea-plane. He nodded toward a big rust-flecked hangar masked by trees. "That was where Germans made patrol boats during the war," he said. "A Frenchman at the plant sabotaged them all. Not one of them worked."

This was yacht country, but it was the Seine nonetheless. Whatever international rules say, working *péniches* have right of way over boats at play. And, head-on, who wants to

argue? I watched that familiar old tug the *Richelieu* push eight barges through the little fleet of sailboats like they were gnats around an elephant's trunk. On the way back, life's order of things made itself crystal clear.

We passed *Aérospatiale's* huge factory at the airfield the Germans once occupied. It is where the European Space Agency makes the Ariane missiles that carry satellites into orbit from Kourou, French Guiana. The most prominent feature is a massive corrugated steel wall that drops vertically from a wharf by the main building. On top is a row of bollards, for mooring barges tightly to the dock. Naturally. Each Ariane missile, just about the most advanced piece of technology the world can produce, starts its voyage into space with a piggyback ride on a Seine *péniche*.