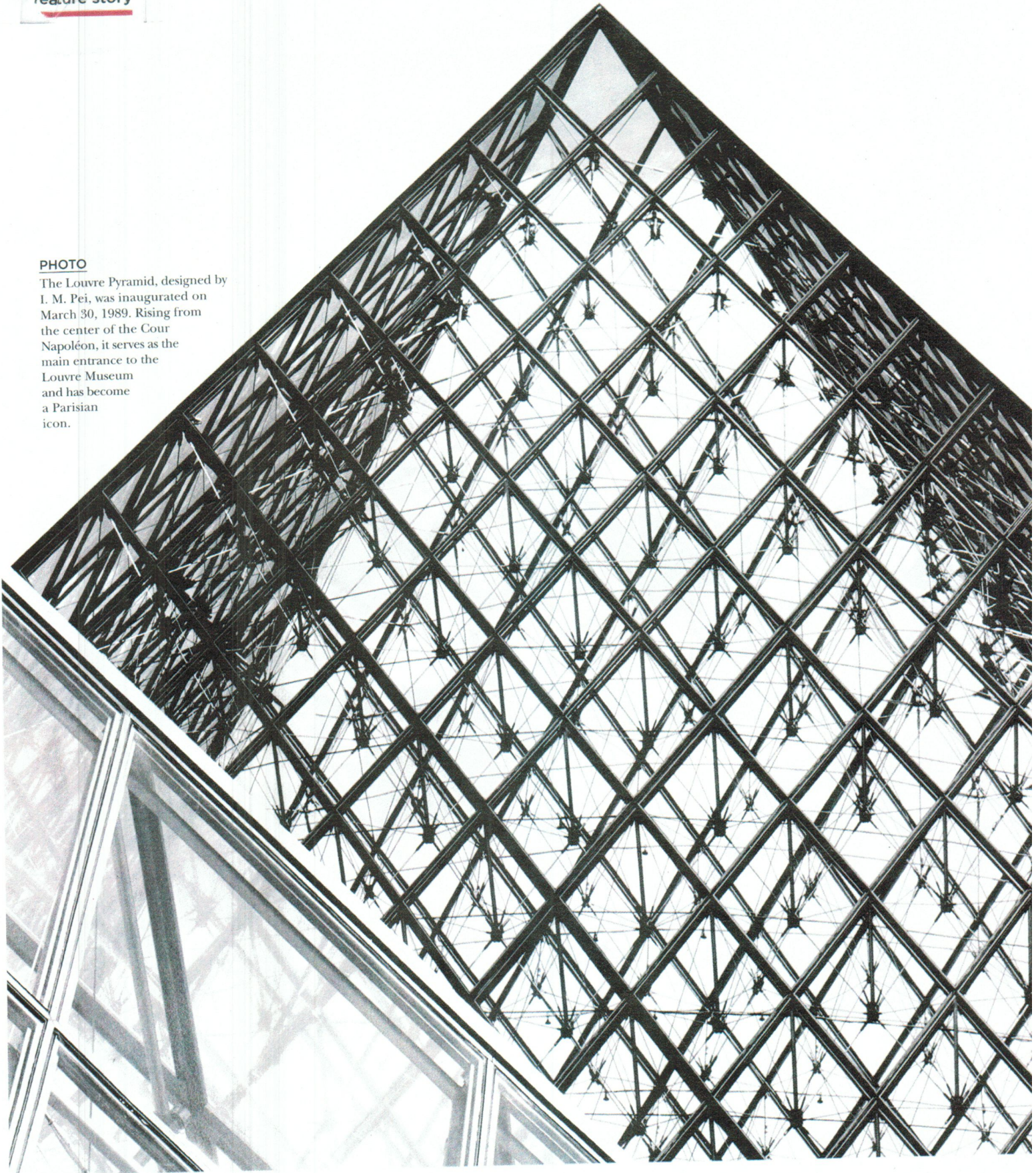




**PHOTO**

The Louvre Pyramid, designed by I. M. Pei, was inaugurated on March 30, 1989. Rising from the center of the Cour Napoléon, it serves as the main entrance to the Louvre Museum and has become a Parisian icon.



Most people are smitten by the City of Lights, but the first time I saw Paris, I was not. It was May — cold, rainy and so gray that Notre Dame’s stained glass windows looked pitch black. So why was every book, song and poem ever written about Paris a love letter? That summer, I toured the cities of Europe and then returned to Paris to catch my flight home, still wondering why I hated a city everyone else adored. I wondered if there was something wrong with me, so I sold my return ticket home and decided to stay and find out.

It didn’t take long. Paris assaults the senses. You can walk down the same street every day but you’ll always discover something you’ve never seen before — an arched dormer window set back from a slate roof, a flower-filled courtyard hidden behind a wooden door or an ivy-covered wall you never noticed. Everywhere, heady aromas of garlic-butter escargots, sugary crepes and pungent cheeses waft in the air. And then there are the sounds; the French don’t speak their language, they *sing* it. In the morning, you hear the *swish swish* of push brooms sweeping the sidewalks, the *click click click* of high-heeled shoes on the cobblestones and

quite often, organ music floating through the open doors of a cathedral.

It wasn’t long before I fell in love with Paris and made every attempt to become French. I went to Alliance Francaise to learn the language; I bought white Courreges yay-yay boots and sashayed through the Luxembourg Gardens like the French women; I smoked *Gitanes sans filter*, black tobacco which made me cough, but I forced myself to smoke them anyway. Each morning, I went to the market to buy poireaux and crème fraîche plus other produce I’d learned to pronounce.

My first job was as an assistant to an expat American director. He walked with a swagger and was the most brilliant man I’d ever met. I was smitten. He was much older, but this was Paris where age difference didn’t matter. We drank wine and ate oysters at La Coupole in Montparnasse and I pretended we were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Four years later, we married and returned to New York where he was directing a play. I missed everything about Paris, even the *eeee-awwww* whine of police sirens racing down the boulevards. A couple of years later, we divorced. I always

wondered if leaving the City of Lights wasn’t somehow responsible.

But that wasn’t the end of my love affair with Paris. My second husband’s firm had a branch office in Paris and we’d visit every year. During the day I’d meander to my old haunts and sip espresso on the Boulevard St. Germain. Our hotel room overlooked Place de la Concorde where I stood mesmerized by the fountains, the Luxor Obelisk and the glowing lights from the lampposts. I wondered how this could possibly be the same square where King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and Robespierre were guillotined.

Twelve years later, on one of our yearly trips, I was standing on the Pont Alexandre III looking out at the Seine and began to cry. My husband and I had grown apart and I knew it was over. There’d be no more walks together through the Tuileries Garden, lingering over dinners or sipping apple brandy at a cozy bar in Sacré Coeur. Soon after, we divorced.

I threw myself into my career and didn’t think too much about Paris. My *English/French* pocket dictionary collected dust on my bookshelf. And then, a couple of years later, a new

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...I CHUCKLED, THINKING ABOUT ALL THE TIMES I'D SAT ON THE BANKS AS THE BOATS WENT BY, PRETENTIOUSLY HOLDING UP MY COPY OF *LE FIGARO* SO EVERYONE WOULD THINK I WAS FRENCH.

boyfriend invited me to Paris for a romantic getaway. We kissed on every bridge and embraced beneath the Eiffel Tower; and while the relationship didn't last much past that weekend, at least once again I had happy memories of Paris.

Now I was back in Paris for the first time in 18 years — not as a wife or lover, but for business. Every free moment, I sought out my past, beginning by browsing the antique books and maps in the bookstalls along the Seine. I walked to the Pont Neuf and Ile de la Cité, and stood on the corner of Quai des Orfèvres and Place Dauphine. This is where I'd first arrived from the Paris airport, the location of my first hotel in Paris. I looked up at the same third-floor window, my room.

Forty years earlier, I'd found the hotel in a guidebook, *Europe on Five Dollars A Day*. There was no bathroom (it was down the hall), but the room was only three dollars a night, breakfast included. There was a sink, a bidet in which I'd chill white wine, an armoire for my clothes and floor-to-ceiling *porte-fenetre* windows that swung open to the statue of Henry IV and the Pont Neuf. I walked towards the door leading to the hotel's lobby recalling

how scared I'd been that day, my first time alone in a foreign country. Back then, the hotel entrance had been difficult to find, but there had been a small sign; now there was no sign. The front door was locked and next to it was a panel with apartment numbers — my hotel had been converted into condos.

I walked through the Place Dauphine, which was pretty much the way I remembered it, except there were more restaurants lining the square. Restaurant Paul was still there even though it now seemed fancier. I suddenly had a craving for foie gras pâté, but it was only 10 in the morning and they weren't yet open. I continued to Quai des Orfèvres towards Notre Dame. A tourist boat passed by on the Seine and I chuckled, thinking about all the times I'd sat on the banks as the boats went by, pretentiously holding up my copy of *Le Figaro* so everyone would think I was French.

Ahead, the twin towers of Notre Dame Cathedral jutted into the sky. I walked through the cavernous church and gazed up at the stained glass Rose Windows flooded with light. Then I continued to the end of the island where I noticed a small park enclosed by an iron gate with a sign saying the

park was created in 1962, a memorial to the 200,000 people deported to concentration camps. So that meant the park was here even before I lived in Paris. How could I have never seen it before when it was only six blocks from my hotel?

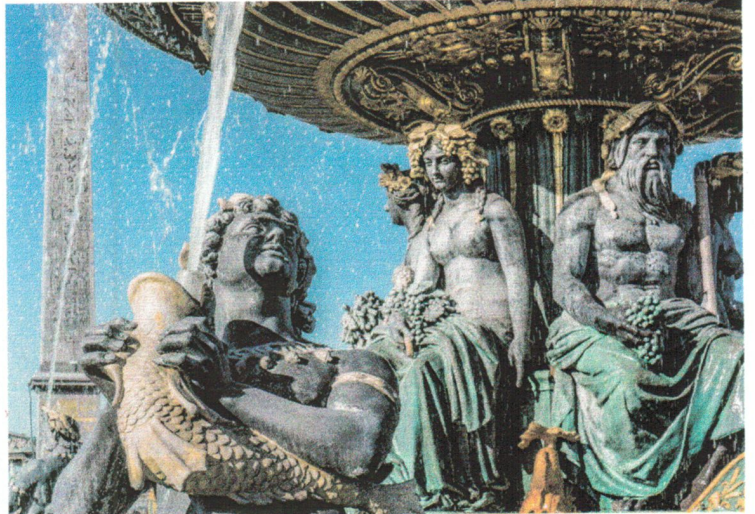
I looked in the windows of the chic shops of Isle St. Louis, then walked back towards Notre Dame where a small group of tourists on a Paris Fat Bike tour stood looking up at the gargoyles. "See that one that looks like a woman?" their guide asked. "Unlike the others, she has a real face and is wearing a bonnet. The artist hated his mother-in-law, and that's as close as he dared to portray her." Another thing I'd never seen before.

I continued across the bridge to Shakespeare and Company to browse the bookshelves, then meandered up and down the alleyways behind St. Michele. Everything felt so familiar and yet at the same time, brand new. The door to a *boulangerie* opened and I inhaled the heady smell of freshly baked baguettes. And just for a second, I thought about how easy it would be to skip my return flight home and live in Paris one more time.



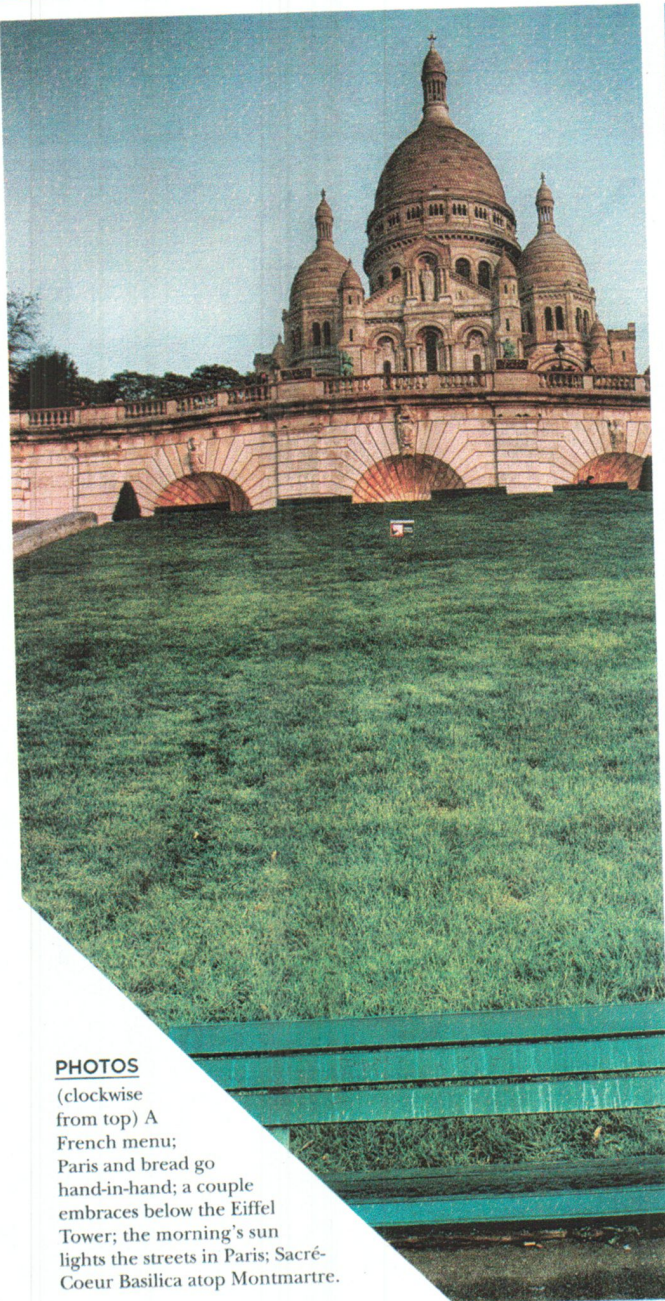
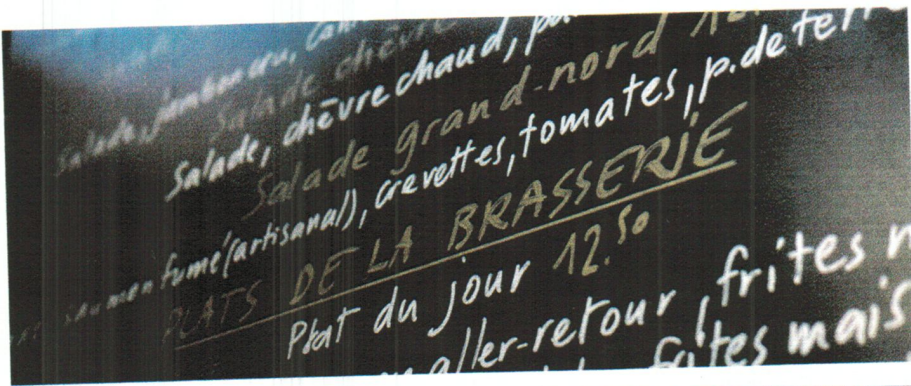
**PHOTOS**

(clockwise from top)  
A view of the Paris cityscape from Montmartre; the Jacques Ignace Hittorff-designed Fontaine des Mers in Place de la Concorde; beneath the iconic Eiffel Tower.



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**PHOTOS**

(clockwise from top) A French menu; Paris and bread go hand-in-hand; a couple embraces below the Eiffel Tower; the morning's sun lights the streets in Paris; Sacré-Coeur Basilica atop Montmartre.