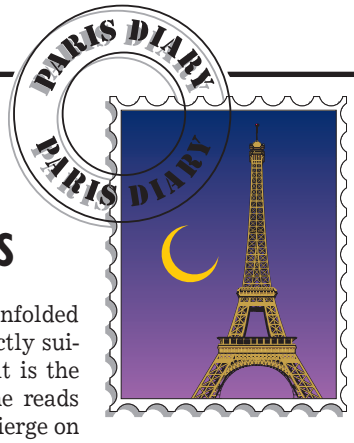

An Evening in Paris

SHEFALEE VASUDEV

A pleasantly nippy October day unfolded into an enchanting evening perfectly suited to a river cruise. "Oui, oui, it is the best madam," says the taxi driver as he reads 'Bateaux Parisiens' pencilled by the concierge on a piece of hotel stationery. There it is, across the road from the Eiffel Tower. A number of boats rock gently on the water, dressed with red and white trimmings. As people step aboard, the boats, disturbed by the footfall, try to regain their balance. "Welcome aboard. For English commentary please use the earphones," says a sweet voice. The hostess is a pretty French girl. The English voice on the earphone is male, husky and deep. As the boat leaves the banks behind, cutting an unhurried trajectory down the river Seine, history and literature become fellow cruisers. The Romanesque Church of Notre Dame passes by and an imaginary outline of Victor Hugo's Hunchback seems to emerge from the long evening shadows. The Louvre goes by, as does the University of Sorbonne from where Goethe studied poetry by a correspondence course. And there is the infamous guillotine where, along with the aristocracy and many plebs, the King of France, Louis XVI, was executed during the French revolution of the 18th century. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity—the words echo from nowhere and everywhere. Everything in Paris, as seen from the Seine, is frozen in time. The romance of the city comes from the stories in stone. Every pillar, every architectural detail, every statue—gold, black or in stone—has a link to the past. You cannot not fall in love with Paris. The kissing couples on the banks would agree. As will that lone guitarist in an orange sweatshirt or the painter in military cargos who whistles as she works on her easel. The Eiffel Tower is now bedecked with glittering lights as the colours of dusk deepen the horizon. Wow! so this is Paris, I say loudly. But the English voice on the earphone doesn't pay any heed. "Paris is the city of light, fashion and fine food," he says by rote. "A moveable feast," as Hemingway once said.

JAYACHANDRAN

In Da Vinci's Footsteps

"YOU must see the Louvre, but how will you see the Louvre?" asks *Outlook* publisher Mahesh Peri. Well, this is a work trip and what Mahesh actually means is that he will grant me a day off, which will be insufficient to see even a fraction of the Louvre! But I insist. So there we are, first thing in the morning, gasping at the sight of the famous pyramid catching the morning rays. Mahesh buys me a packet of salmon sandwiches and wishes me luck, not quite able to figure why I am jumping like a spring toy. I am in the Da Vinci mode.

After that roaringly successful book, *Musee du Louvre*, one of the most important art pilgrimages in the world has become an institute of human behaviour. Popularity is always a resurgent wave and nothing like this bestseller, which has given the Louvre back its honour of being the most visited museum in Paris. Predictability visits the museum everyday in the form of people who mob the Mona Lisa. Everyone is awe-struck, gaping at Leonardo Da Vinci's psycho trick. The diminutive lady stands tall. I must admit though that I am equally struck by the bigness of the biggest of the 282 diamonds on the coronation crown of King Louis XV. Also by the huge painting *The Wedding Feast at Cana* by Veronese.

The Little Black Dress

GEORGES is one of Paris' trendiest restaurants. Located atop the Georges Pompidou museum in the old Beaubourg square, it beckons everyone who loves good food and vintage wine. The unmistakable headiness of the French perfumes lingers among the many versions of the little black dress. They serve some of the best home-made mashed potatoes. Look up, urge our hosts—the international directors of *Marie Claire*. The lights of Paris are doing a tango with the Eiffel Tower leading the orchestra.

The museum, designed by architects Rogers, Piano and Franchini, is a metal and glass parallel-piped building whose air ducts, heating shafts, and stairwells are all stuck onto the outside for more space inside. It is also home to the National Museum of Modern art. No wonder the plates at Georges are dressed like pieces out of still-life art. A flower with a napkin, cute baby bottles of tomato sauce, perfectly pointed forks and knives. Even the hourglass-shaped coffee flask is wearing a black figure-hugging tweed dress. Very sexy and fashionably dressed, just as everyone in Paris is. Except the French baguette. Everyone's favourite, it is taken for granted, torn into pieces on the tablecloth and chewed up.

If it is history on one hand, it is ultimate futuristic chic on the other. Paris is a unique fusion between the past and the future. Champs-Elysees, couture's high street, now has the new, much-talked about Louis Vuitton showroom, designed quite like an art gallery. It has the first ever Louis Vuitton bookshop. It opened the week we were there and club-like bouncers minded people at the entrance. The prices in euros were Greek to me in any case. They were too much to even try and convert into rupees. I can't speak French either. "Hey Bhagwan," I said with an unsure smile. I think the bouncer understood—he shot me a stern look.

Where's the Soup?

MAHESH is a vegetarian. I urged him to have the French onion soup—it is delicious and light. When it arrived, Mahesh looked at the soup and then at me. A fat piece of bread soaked into a paste of onions sat in the bowl. It tasted like thick salty pudding of excessively browned Hindustani onions. But where is the soup? asked Mahesh thrice. I had no clue.

(This piece was written before riots broke out in Paris)