



As the Eurostar pulls out of King's Cross station, I stretch my legs, plug in my phone and type three words into the Google search bar: *gay, bar, Paris*. I think about the trip ahead and know there's a twinkle in my eye.

It's a far cry from the first time I made the journey. In 1993 I was 18 and preparing to study French at university. Gap years were becoming more and more popular and those studying languages were advised to spend time living in a foreign country. In those days there weren't many options open to someone like me and everyone agreed living with a family as an au pair was the best way to immerse myself in the language.

I wasn't really sure what an au pair did but off I went, reassuring myself I'd be living a glamorous life in a famously chic city — only to find I was posted to a tiny village a 50-minute train ride away, working for a couple on the verge of divorce with two badly behaved children.

It didn't help that the mother made no secret of the fact she hated the English — or that the house I was living in was falling down and overrun with rats. I was desperately unhappy, not

FRANCE SOIR: The Champs Élysées, right, Notre Dame Cathedral, right top, and far right, the gay-friendly Le Marais district



WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE

Gay Paris, the City of Light, the City of Love... The French capital is famous for many things. But to **Matt Cain**, who spent his gap year there and recently went back to visit, it means something very different

# PARIS

least because I felt cut off from my life back home; in 1993 only the rich had mobile phones, there was no internet and they hadn't even finished digging the Channel Tunnel.

Each week I had two days off work and I began escaping to Paris. In *Moulin Rouge*, Nicole Kidman looks out over the city and sings *One Day I'll Fly Away* but when I flew away it was in Paris that I landed, albeit much less gracefully than Nicole.

To me, Paris was the place where I'd meet other au pairs, get drunk on cheap wine that made our tongues black, smoke Gauloises Blondes we were convinced made us look sophisticated, and swap stories of exploitation at the hands of our host families ("Can you believe she sent me out to buy her tampons?").

When my friends weren't around I'd visit art galleries and museums because they were the only places I could afford. Any time I ran out of money I'd wander the streets and dream about my future.



People often talk about going away to find themselves but it was in Paris that I became myself. It was in Paris that I thought about the person I'd been and the person I wanted to be. Getting to know Paris made me feel as if the world was opening up to me.

I discovered one of the most beautiful cities in the world but for me it was the city that also taught me I too could be beautiful.

I made it through my gap year and when I arrived back home, I brought a whole load of dreams with me. Since then, I've achieved some of those dreams and experienced more happiness than I'd ever thought possible. But I've also experienced deep sadness and so much disappointment that, if you'd told me what was coming, I don't think I'd have been strong enough to face it.



One of the things that kept me strong was Paris; I've gone back to the city at key points in my life, whether I've had something to celebrate or something to mourn. People often talk



about the importance of meditation or mindfulness but Paris has provided me with much more than that: it's been the place where I've come to reflect on some of the big questions thrown up by life, to stop and take stock of where I'm heading and how far I've travelled since starting my journey.

Now that I'm accomplishing another of my dreams, that of running a magazine, it's time for me to go back to Paris again.

Travelling to the city today is a totally different experience to what it was in 1993. The Eurostar moves at such a high speed it's quicker for me to get from London to Paris than it is to go back to my home town of Bolton. And with the new, spacious train carriages, it's much more pleasurable.

When I arrive I find that the city itself hasn't changed much. Apart from a huge ferris wheel temporarily

blocking the sightline from the Arc de Triomphe down the Champs Élysées to the Louvre, there are few architectural additions. The streets and parks are still laid out in that rigid, well-ordered French style, the blocks of houses along the boulevards all standing at exactly the same height and the trees

planted and pruned into neat rows. The view from Montmartre is just as stunning as ever and the River Seine still meanders its way through the city, its Left Bank lined with stalls selling paperbacks

so old they must have been on sale when I lived there.

And dotted around the city are spotty teenagers snogging while haughty middle-aged women pick their way past looking as if they can smell shit.

That's not to say that the city hasn't undergone some changes. The arrogance I encountered in so many of the locals has been swept away as Paris has been overtaken by London as the most visited, culturally vibrant city in Europe. With so many young Parisians



RED-Y FOR ACTION: You'll have fun at the Moulin Rouge

**SAME DIFFERENCE:**  
Main picture, Matt Cain, aged 18, in 1993, and in the same area, inset, 23 years on



crossing the Channel for a piece of the action, there's evidence that our own hipster culture is influencing little enclaves of the French capital. And the increased presence of armed police on the streets is a reminder that the city has also been through the trauma of a year of terrorist attacks, which must be imprinted on the psyche of Parisians.

On a personal level, my experience of Paris has been transformed by the fact that my French has deteriorated so badly that I can't even order food in a restaurant any more without the waiter wincing as if he's just swallowed a mouthful of out-of-date orange juice.

It's also been transformed by the fact that I'm now openly gay and earn my living from my sexuality. When I lived here, being gay wasn't a part of myself I explored at all. Although I'd come out to friends in the sixth form, in the 1990s people routinely confused gay men with paedophiles and often said we couldn't be trusted around children. I decided that if I was going to spend most of my year with two kids, it would be prudent to step back into the closet.

On this trip I spend Saturday night in Le Marais, the city's most gay-friendly area. It's very mixed and if you eat at a restaurant such as Le Gai Moulin, you can look out of the window at the fetish shop across the street while sitting next to a straight family with kids. If you want to find the gays, you can head to bars such as the perennially popular Open Café or current favourite Le Cox. The gym revolution hasn't reached France yet so there's less peacocking



**"ALL THOSE YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS WORKING OUT THE PERSON I WANTED TO BE, I ALWAYS KNEW THAT PERSON WOULD BE A PROUD GAY MAN — AND I ALWAYS KNEW THAT PERSON WOULD COME BACK TO PARIS"**

from the locals and the atmosphere isn't as intimidating as in London or Manchester.

If banging bods are your thing, there's always Raidd; I end up here watching the half-naked go-go dancers, one of whom has a bulge the size of a small puppy. If only my 18-year-old self could see me now. Although the funny thing is, if he could I don't think he'd be surprised. Because all those years ago when I was working out the person I wanted to be, I always knew that person would be a proud gay man — and I always knew that person would come back to Paris.

Part of me probably also understood that the city would always play an important role in my life, that it would reconnect me with the essence of myself and my soul.

So, if you too have a place that plays the same role in your life, make the

most of it. Cherish it and protect it and make sure it doesn't lose its function. Because this isn't the kind of thing you can replicate or manufacture.

But don't visit it too often. By all means, tell people about what it means to you, but don't let them tag along with you. Keep it for yourself. Keep it special. Just like Paris will always be special to me. **a**



**CLOCK THIS:**  
Montmartre on Paris' Right Bank, and left, one of the go-go boys at Raidd



**WHERE WE STAYED**

**THE HOTEL GRAND AMOUR**, which has 42 rooms, is situated a short walk from the Gare du Nord train station, in a predominantly African area which has much more buzz than most neighbourhoods. Inside, it's delightfully bohemian, with vintage Bowie playing, rare books of poetry lying around and quirky contemporary art lining the walls. The furniture looks as if it's been bought from flea markets and thrown together at random, and the staff are informally dressed — all of which creates a warm, homely feel. There's no breakfast buffet, but they more than make up for it in the evening when the restaurant becomes one of the coolest venues in town, rammed full of locals enjoying a lively meal with friends. Don't worry about the noise though — my sixth-floor attic room was quiet enough for me to sleep soundly.

hotelamourparis.fr