

INSIDE: CLOSE-UP WITH CHEF GAGGAN ANAND | HOUSTON INSIDER | TECH GIFTS FOR YOUR VALENTINE

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**THE ALLURE
OF PARIS BEST
ENJOYED SOLO**

The Maldives
for twosomes

Denim lovefest in
Japan's Kojima

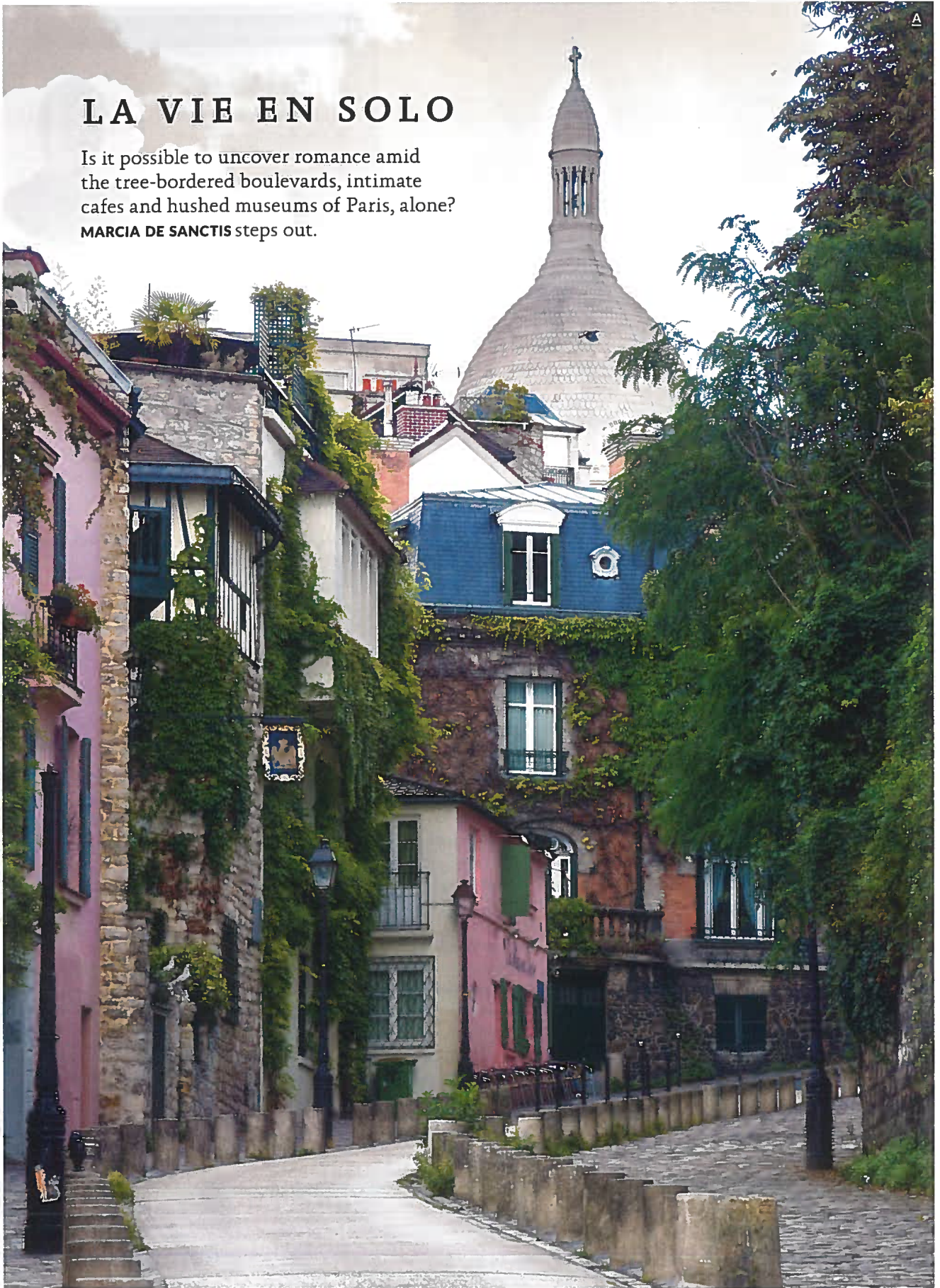
FEB 2018
A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

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LA VIE EN SOLO

Is it possible to uncover romance amid the tree-bordered boulevards, intimate cafes and hushed museums of Paris, alone? **MARCIA DE SANCTIS** steps out.





“Would you like to taste our kouglof?” A young female pastry chef leans towards me with a pan filled with slices of buttery Alsatian cake, just out of the oven.

I’m perched on an impossibly soft leather banquette for tea at Le Dali, French celebrity chef Alain Ducasse’s restaurant in Le Meurice (www.dorchestercollection.com). It’s Monday and the room is packed with mothers, businesspeople, lovers; many of them alone, all of us partaking in this Parisian ritual of unwinding. In the past hour I’ve been here, I’ve already swilled jasmine tea and devoured scones with jam, along with pastries – including a sublime tarte au citron (lemon tart) shaped like a golden egg. But it’s cold outside, the wind is ferocious and life is short. “Of course,” I answer, and reach for a warm chunk of cake.

TIMELESS PASSION

It is an ideal flourish on a Paris afternoon: a photo exhibition at Grand Palais (www.grandpalais.fr), my first visit to Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris (www.museeyslparis.com) on Avenue Marceau, shopping on the rue St Honoré. Finally, I relax for a while in one of Tuileries Garden’s distinctive metal chairs. People glide along rows of elms, leaving an echo of voices. It is a parade – despite the different characters – that has likely not changed much since the time of Catherine de’ Medici, the Queen of France from 1547 to 1559.

‘He travels the fastest who travels alone’, wrote the great English author Rudyard Kipling. With due respect, I’m changing the sentiment to ‘one travels with abandon when unencumbered by company’. This is particularly true in Paris, whose mysterious allure seems perfectly suited for solitude.

If that seems paradoxical for the world’s most romantic city, I say, au contraire (on the contrary). True, romance is everywhere in Paris: it floats on the Seine, breezes down its avenues, glimmers in its architecture, monuments, bridges and great works of art housed in its museums. It is in the lull that floats through green spaces such as the 17th-century public square Place des Vosges, where ➤

A The quaint, winding streets of Montmartre call out for a solo exploration.

B Ornate and classical, Le Meurice resembles a film set in a period drama.

C Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris is a celebration of the French couturier's iconic works.

D A colossal dome dominates the Panthéon, a mausoleum and a work of art in itself.

contemplation blossoms and tranquility reigns during a picnic lunch or over an engrossing book. It thrives in the city's history of famous couples – such as philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, whose spirit dominates the cafes on the Left Bank; the doomed medieval lovers Abelard and Heloïse, whose former home overlooking the river on Quais des Fleurs is marked by a plaque; and actors Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, who lived and dined daily at the Place Dauphine, an intimate oasis at the Île de la Cité.

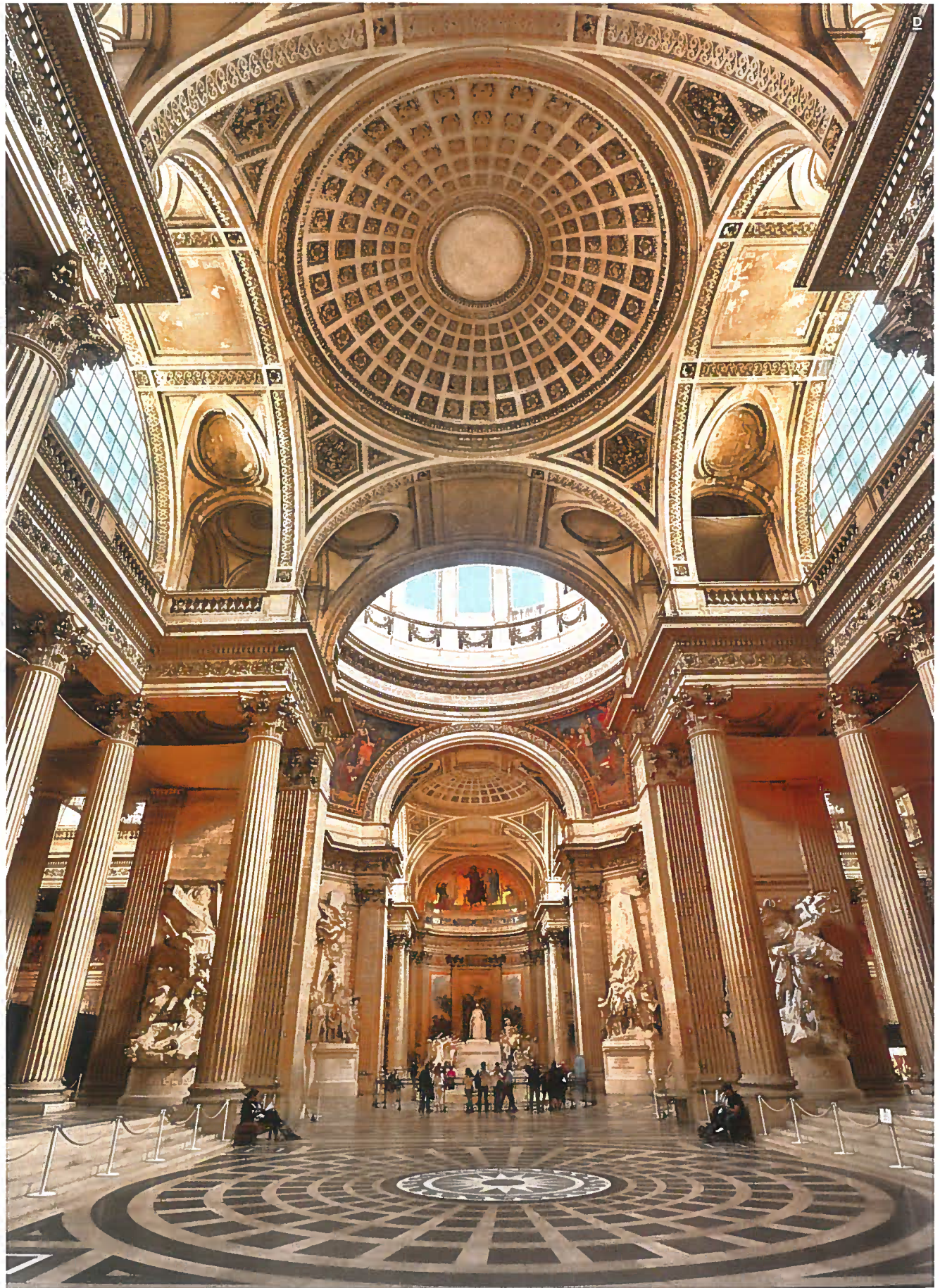
But romance, and indeed, Paris, isn't just for lovers. The city richly rewards those who wish to slow down, look up and engage with the cityscape, enabling us to be both immersed in and detached from the urban hum. After all, the flâneur – a solitary, artful figure who strolls through parks, boulevards and cafes searching for nothing except la belle vie (the good life) – is a local institution.

When I wander, I treat Paris' majestic cityscape and Second Empire embellishments that unfurl like lace along the river with the reverence they deserve: I leave my sneakers and sweatpants at home, and even wear a slick of red lipstick.

My inspired roam takes me next to the Panthéon (www.paris-pantheon.fr), the resting place of France's intellectual giants such as Voltaire and Victor Hugo, where massive murals by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes tell the story of Paris' patron saint Genevieve, who helped avert an attack by Attila the Hun in AD451. From April to November, guests can climb an interior stairway leading to the building's circular dome – and a spectacular view of Paris.

As I cross Pont de la Tournelle, a bridge spanning the Seine, the bells of the nearby Nôtre-Dame de Paris thunder and stir my bones. Had I been travelling with a companion and in conversation, I might never have heard them. ➔





RUE LOVE

JANE DROTTER, owner and occasional chef of Yard, one of Paris' most popular bistros, gives her top picks of her city's streets.

EDIBLE JOYS

Septime (www.septime-charonne.fr) is the best restaurant in Paris right now, with a relaxed, unpretentious vibe. Bertrand Grébaut is a brilliant chef and an absolute original. One of my favourite dishes in Paris is the roasted cauliflower at Miznon (www.facebook.com/miznonparis); it's cheap, fast and out of this world. I also like wine bar La Crèmerie (www.facebook.com/lacremierieparis), which is so beautiful and French, with wonderful cheese, charcuterie and wine.

STALL OR NOTHING

My favourite market, Marche Aligre (www.equipement.paris.fr), is the best place in Paris for fresh food, flowers and bric-a-brac. Before visiting it, I grab a kouign-amann (a round, crusty cake) at the nearby Blé Sucré (7 Rue Antoine Vollon; tel: +33 1 43 40 77 73). For lunch, I love having white wine and oysters at Le Baron Rouge (www.lebaronrouge.net).

BOUTIQUE GEMS

Merci (www.merci-merci.com) is hard to beat for gifts and linen. I'm obsessed, too, with the white tees at Bellerose (www.bellerose.be), and adore the super-cute shoes and bags at Amélie Pichard (www.ameliepichard.com).



- E** Cafe St Regis is tucked in a street corner on a natural island.
- F** Luscious seafood is a highlight of Le Fumoir's menu.
- G** Centre Commercial showcases fashion by local designers.

MUSER-FRIENDLY

Invigorated, I stop by Cafe St Regis (www.cafesaintregisparis.com) on Île Saint-Louis, an island in the Seine. It is a gorgeous bistro, with white tiles and well-patinated wooden banquettes. Seated at a corner table, I tuck into a warm goat's cheese salad and a crème brûlée, and open, half-heartedly, Earthly Paradise by French novelist Colette, who wrote passionately about her beloved Paris.

Later in the afternoon, I cross Place de la République and head to the Canal Saint-Martin district, arguably Paris' trendiest neighbourhood today. But the energy is not electric; it's bucolic. Sycamores line an urban waterway – its construction, ordered by Napoléon in 1802 to supply the city's growing population, took 23 years and was paid for by a tax on wine – casting



E



G

reflections on the glassy canal. I think of *Amélie*, the achingly romantic titular character of the eponymous, quintessentially Parisian film, kneeling on one of the bridges here in a red dress, skipping stones into the water.

From there, I make a beeline for Du Pain et Des Idées (www.dupainetdesidees.com), baker Christophe Vasseur's temple of pâtisserie excellence, and then to Centre Commercial (www.centrecommercial.cc), a tastefully curated concept store full of sunlight and chunky wool coats.

Life in Paris, it seems, is lived in cafes; at times, it feels as if the city's entire population is seated alfresco – flirting, discussing, having tête-à-têtes over strong coffee or table wine. So I park myself outdoors at the venerable Le Nemours (www.lenemours.paris) by Palais-Royal ([\[domaine-palais-royal.fr\]\(http://www.domaine-palais-royal.fr\)\) for hot tea before a twilight stroll through the gardens. Colette lived in an apartment above the colonnades here, and I imagine waking to the vision of linden and chestnut trees, tidily lined up in Paris' most elegant enclosure.](http://www.</p>
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It's Thursday and the museums are open till late. This is not my first time in Paris, so, apart from lingering in the Cour Carrée, one of its main courtyards, and feeling the brisk air by the glass-and-metal Louvre Pyramid as night falls, I largely bypass the Louvre. At Musée d'Orsay (www.musee-orsay.fr), I'm the lone figure in many of the galleries, and I idle awhile at the gauzy dreamscape of Monet's *Haystacks*, at Corot's *Young Woman In A Pink Dress* and at Manet's iconic *Olympia* – I had never before noticed the black cat in the last painting. ➔

H The pointedly modern Les Grands Verres draws a brisk crowd.

I By night, the Eiffel Tower glows like a beacon.

After checking out an exhibition of dazzling Fortuny gowns at Palais Galliera (www.palaisgalliera.paris.fr), I make my way to Les Grands Verres (www.quixotic-projects.com), a new restaurant at Palais de Tokyo with pristine, modern decor. Dinner is a delicious piece of trout, followed by a poached pear for dessert. As comfortable as I am by myself in the joyously packed room, I cannot imagine sitting alone in this restaurant if it were in New York or Los Angeles. On a whim, I decide to brave a plunge into deep romance, and walk over to the sultry champagne bar at Le Dokhan's (www.hotelledokhansparis.com). I've celebrated with my husband and children here before, but on this night, I raise my glass not to them but to Paris and how it nourishes and invigorates me.

The next day leads me on an extended walk through the Marais, where I lived when I first married. I miss my husband, but I'm utterly content.

On my last evening in the most romantic city on earth, my legs carry me across pedestrian bridge Pont des Arts. Below it, the river that roils brown and thick like a pot of pea soup in the day is a glittering black canvas. On it float ribbons of gold and silver, the watery reflections of white and yellow street lights. It's hard to fathom the sublimity of the panorama before me that, for centuries, has been the repository of people's dreams. The Eiffel Tower sparkles as it does every hour, illuminating the sky. The sight ignites something in me too. Paris has revived my belief in the absolute transformative power of beauty. A young couple walks by, whispering, heads close.

I recall my visit to Le Fumoir (www.lefumoir.com) earlier, when the light outside the restaurant near the Louvre was like a pale blanket. I asked the hostess for a table for one. "I'm alone," I said. "Madame," she said, "you're never alone in Paris." ■



What are the iconic and underrated romantic spots in Paris to visit with your loved one this Valentine's Day? Find out on www.silverkris.com