

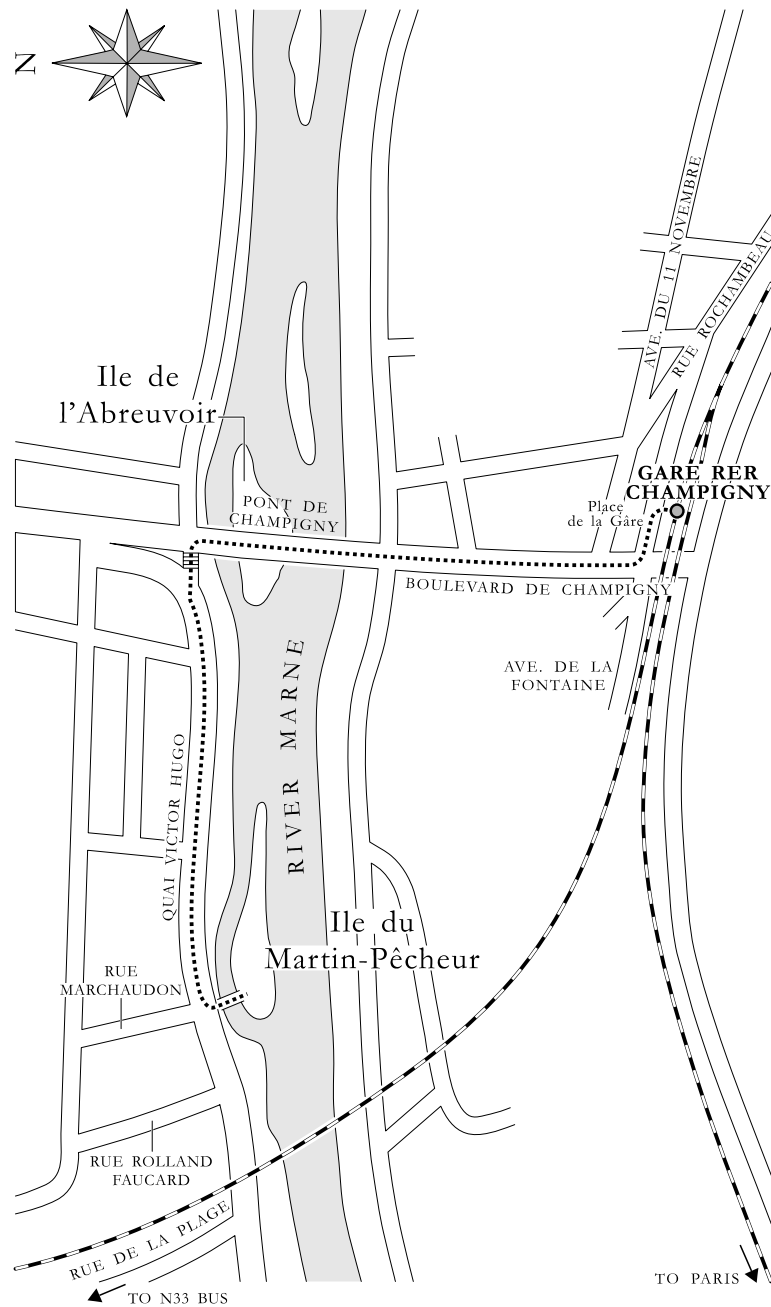
8. Ile du Martin-Pêcheur

Join in one of the most enjoyable of French popular traditions – eating, drinking and dancing at a *guinguette* in the open air by the river. This one is on a tiny island, reached by a footbridge

When you cross the bridge onto this particular island on the Marne, less than half an hour away from Paris, you step into the timeless world of the *guinguettes*.

Guinguettes are so called because *le petit blanc*, the modest but lively white wine of the Paris region they used to serve, made people *giguet* (ready to dance a jig). Scores of open-air restaurants serving this wine and its traditional accompaniment, *la petite friture* (fried whitebait) opened along the banks of the Seine and the Marne in the 19th century, attracting the working people of Paris, who continued to go there right up to the Second World War. They would spend Sunday afternoons beside the river, eating, drinking and listening to traditional French songs sung to the accordion, until they felt ready to get up and dance. Popular with artists as well as with artisans, the *guinguettes* recall the atmosphere of the inter-war years, evoked by the songs of Edith Piaf, the films of Marcel Carné and the novels of Georges Simenon, all of whom came under their spell, and they have never entirely disappeared from the affection of Parisians.

In the last ten years or so there has been a revival of the tradition, with the older *guinguettes* such as Chez Gégène at Joinville now featuring in the guidebooks and the *bal musette* waltz being taught at dance classes. The *guinguette* on the Ile du Martin-Pêcheur (Kingfisher Island) dates from 1991 and is less celebrated. However, it is already so popular that you will need to book your table and when you get there, you will see why. The few yards separating the island from the mainland



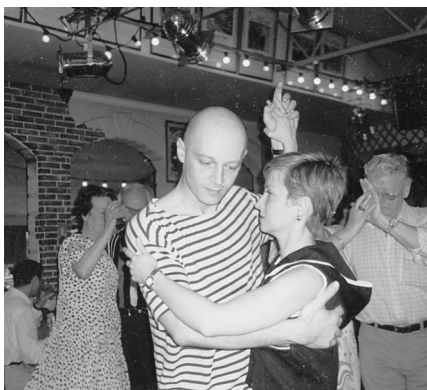
Ile du
Martin Pêcheur

0 250 metres

make all the difference. As soon as you cross the bridge, you are instantly drawn into a sense of happy complicity with your neighbours – you are all escapees from the mainland and the rhythm of everyday life. Seated at long tables outside, people of all ages, some with their children, exchange smiles of enjoyment. Everyone is relaxed, savouring the pleasure of the moment, whether they intend to dance or not.

The first time I went, the service was so slow that we had to leave without dancing, to catch the midnight train back to Paris. We were overtaken on the towpath by the young couple from the next table, who insisted on giving all four of us a lift back to Paris in their tiny car, with two of us illegally perched on our partners' knees. It was their first visit too, and we all agreed that we would be going back.

I did go back, on a cold, wet Sunday afternoon in August. All the tables inside were full and it felt like being on a cosy, old-fashioned cruise ship, an impression heightened by the dripping weeping willows and the green water outside. A kingfisher flashed past as the band struck up 'Le P'tit Bal de la Marine', and people started to leave their tables to dance, rather well, to numbers such as 'Be Bop a Lula' and 'Je ne veux pas travailler'. We seemed to be the only foreigners. Charmed, we sat on there, talking, eating, drinking, and occasionally dancing, for five hours, a record even by French standards. If you



Guinguette, *Ile du Martin-Pêcheur*

want to dance, I would add a word of advice, copied from a notice at another guinguette:

*Adoptez l'esprit guinguette!
Pas de jeans ni baskets!*

(Get into the spirit of the guinguette - no jeans, no trainers!)

¾ km walk from the station to the guinguette

Take the 'Sortie Boulevard de Champigny' exit to the buses outside the station and turn left into the Place de la Gare. Turn right into the Boulevard de Champigny and continue across the bridge, the Pont de Champigny. Take the steps down from the bridge on the left and follow the Quai Victor-Hugo or the towpath for about ten minutes until you see the bridge.

Distance from Paris: 13 km (8 miles)
Depart: Châtelet-les Halles
Arrive: Champigny
Journey time: 20 minutes approx
Length of visit: Half day
Carte Orange Zone: 3
Single ticket: 2.80€
Distance from station to island: ¾ km (½ mile)

Just before the railway viaduct take the Rue de la Plage on the right, then turn left onto the Quai Victor Hugo.

Getting back

The stop for the Noctilien **night bus** N33 is on Avenue Roger Salengro. Take the Rue de la Plage, following the railway line to the third road on the left. Cross to the other side of the Avenue for the bus stop to Paris. It takes 35 minutes to reach the Gare de Lyon. Every hour from 12.44 am.

Getting there

RER A2 trains to Boissy St Leger, stopping at Champigny St Maur, leave Paris every ten minutes. The last train back is at 12.25 am.

Car: A4 from Porte de Bercy to Joinville, then cross the bridge onto Avenue Gallieni which becomes Avenue Roger Salengro.

When to go

A Sunday afternoon in summer is best if you want to experience

the *guinguette* at its most traditional. Saturday evenings attract a younger crowd and tend to be so popular that you may have to book several weeks in advance.

NB: You could easily combine a Sunday afternoon at the *guinguette* with a morning stroll and lunch at the Domaine Sainte Catherine in Créteil, two stops away on the same RER line. See p. 87.

Useful information

For more about *guinguettes* in the Paris region, visit www.culture-guinguette.fr

Restaurant/*guinguette*

L'Île du Martin-Pêcheur, 41 Quai Victor-Hugo, 94500 Champigny, tel 01 49 83 03 02 (restaurant reservation is advisable), www.guinguette.fr.

It is the only building on the island. Open May to August for lunch, 12 noon-7 pm on Sunday, noon-5 pm on Saturdays in July and August, and for dinner 8 pm-2 am from Wednesday to Saturday. In winter open on Saturday evening and for Sunday lunch in April and October. Closed January to March.

The music varies from traditional French songs played on the accordion at the tables to live bands on the dance floor playing rock and roll, tango, waltzes, reggae, swing, blues and jazz.

Free admission to the bar/dance floor if you don't want to eat. Two-course *formules* at 20€ and 26€. The traditional *petite friture* is available as well as more standard fare and some imaginative fish dishes. Wine from 15€ a bottle. The food and wine was good value, and the service has greatly improved.