

## 5. Neuilly-sur-Marne

An easy tranquil walk to a little-known *guinguette* on the Marne and along the rural Canal de Chelles

The modern commuter town of Neuilly-sur-Marne is so close to Paris that you will be pleasantly surprised to find yourself enjoying a peaceful stroll along the river within minutes of getting off the train. The *guinguette* (riverside restaurant where people go to dance) is only a short distance from the station, but in a different world. The nearby marina gives it a holiday atmosphere and unlike the better-known establishments near Joinville, it is mainly patronised by locals.

If you are pressed for time you could return to Paris the way you came, but it is well worth prolonging the walk along the surprisingly rural Canal de Chelles, where you will meet only a few strollers. From there it is a short bus ride to the station at Chelles-Gournay or you could walk the two kilometres to the station through a quiet residential quarter, peeping into well-kept suburban gardens. There is a popular café with a terrace in front of the station, with a relaxed, almost provincial atmosphere.

### *Les guinguettes*

*Guinguettes* (pronounced ‘gang-ETTE’) are traditional modestly-priced restaurants by the river where people go to dance. One theory is that they are so called because *le petit blanc*, the white wine of the Paris region they served, made people *giguet* (ready to dance a jig). Scores of open-air restaurants serving this wine and its traditional accompaniment, *la petite friture* (tiny fried fish, usually whitebait) opened along the banks of the Seine and especially the Marne in the 19th century to avoid the tax on

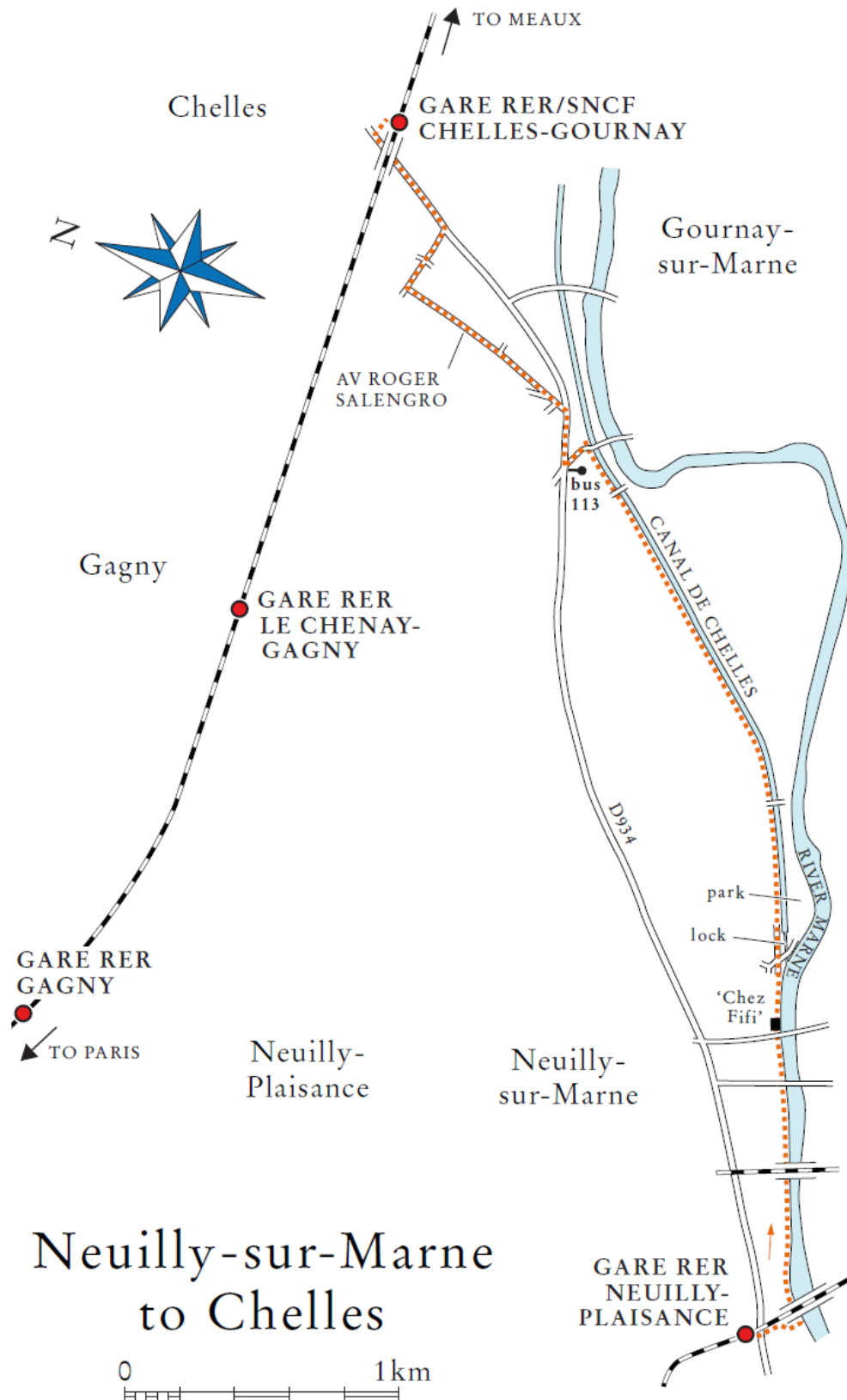
## NEUILLY-SUR-MARNE



*Guinguette 'Chez Fifi'*

goods coming into the capital. Working Parisians would spend Sunday afternoons beside the river, eating, drinking and listening to popular songs played on the accordion, until they felt ready to get up and dance.

Attracting artists as well as 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. Although these days most of them are no longer particularly cheap, they are always cheerful and they have never entirely disappeared from the affection of Parisians, despite the lure of television which nearly killed them off in the 1960s. In fact, in the last 30 years or so there has been a revival of the tradition, with the long-established *guinguettes* at Joinville now featuring in the guidebooks and a newer one on an island at Champigny, the Île du Martin-



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Pêcheur, attracting a younger clientèle. Chez Fifi, described below, is resolutely anchored in the 1960s and 70s, and its prices are still modest.

### *4 km walk from Neuilly-Plaisance station to Pointe de Gournay bus stop*

Leave the **station** via the exit marked ‘Sortie 2, Boulevard Gallieni’, go through the ticket barrier and walk down a further flight of steps. At the bottom of the steps ignore the walkway directly in front of you and turn round to the left until you are facing in the opposite direction. You will see a discreet red and white GR sign (see pp. 177-178) facing you, in the right hand corner of what appears to be a dead end, but isn’t. Continue straight on, beneath the railway line overhead which crosses the river ahead of you. The walkway ends in steps down to the water’s edge, where you are immediately in another world, with the quiet spacious river glittering in front of you.

Turn left and walk along the Marne for a kilometre, passing a few strollers and joggers and the occasional water-skier in summer, until you come to **Chez Fifi**, just after the fourth bridge. It has tables outside, a dance floor inside and accordion music with live bands at the weekends.

The clientèle is mainly local and over 60, although there is a sprinkling of younger people. The plump *patron* waiting on clients in his cloth cap is instantly recognisable, as there is a picture of him over the entrance next to the legend ‘l’Ambiance d’Autrefois’ (‘the Atmosphere of Times Gone By’). This claim is borne out to a certain extent by the décor, the women’s dresses, the 1960s music, the traditional menu and the prices. The food is certainly not haute cuisine but the *friture d’éperlans* (fried smelt, tiny fish very similar to whitebait) was garnished with garlic and parsley, and the *moules-frites* were freshly made. The waiter was so rushed off his feet by a large group celebrating a birthday that our *friture* and wine arrived without the bread and I despaired of ever getting any, after two fruitless visits to the kitchen and frantic reassurances by the waiter. Our newly-arrived



## HALF AN HOUR FROM PARIS



*The patron of Chez FiFi*

neighbour, a regular, was so touched by our plight that she got up and returned in triumph with a basket of bread for us, saying 'Ici, c'est à la bonne franquette'—'we don't stand on ceremony here'. The dancing starts at 3 pm and lasts until early evening so you could spend the entire afternoon at the guinguette, returning to Paris the way you came. You can order à la carte or just stop by for a drink. It is a relaxing place in which to sit in the sun at a table next to the river, watching the cormorants as well as the people. I once saw a water wagtail here, bobbing around at the water's edge.

Continue walking along the Marne towards the marina and the next bridge, where you can occasionally see huge barges going through the lock. Do not cross the bridge to the bland park on the other side but stay on the left to follow the narrow path beside the canal. The **Canal de Chelles** is quiet, shaded by trees, with only a few cyclists and strollers. On a hot day a few years ago I saw some boys jumping into the canal from the little iron bridge further on and happily splashing around in the water. The decaying bridge is now fenced off but the walk is



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still unpaved and feels like real countryside, with a wood and a stream on the left and buddleia growing by the water's edge. It is so overgrown by lush foliage in the summer that in parts of it you have to walk in single file. After about two kilometres you will pass a footbridge, a favourite spot for fishermen. Just after the next footbridge leave the canal by a little uphill path, as the towpath comes to an abrupt end soon afterwards.

Continue into a small road now closed to traffic, the rue du Chetivet. At the end of the road on the left is the 'Pointe de Gournay' stop for the **113 bus** which will take you to **Chelles-Gournay station**, four stops away. The time of the next bus is shown on the electronic indicator.

*Lock at Canal de Chelles, Neuilly-sur-Marne*



## HALF AN HOUR FROM PARIS

### *Optional 2.3 km walk to Chelles-Gournay station*

However, if you want to prolong the walk you can take a less direct but almost traffic-free route to the station. Turn right from the rue du Chetivet, cross the main road at the pedestrian crossing, continue to the right, and take the first road on the left at the corner of the 'Speedy' garage, the quiet residential avenue Roger Salengro.

The road soon forks, so take the right-hand side which continues dead straight for almost a kilometre, with the railway line visible at the end. You will pass suburban houses, each with its little garden and a general air of modest prosperity. Just before the end, turn right into the avenue Ronsard, which becomes rue Pierre Dupont. Continue to the right of the little roundabout and take the boulevard Alsace-Lorraine, still quiet, but with bigger, older houses.

At the end of the boulevard turn left into the busy avenue du Maréchal Foch and continue for a little way. Go under the railway bridge, with its incongruous but imposing white neo-Doric columns, to find the **station** on the right.

There is a popular brasserie, **La Chelloise**, with a large terrace facing the station. I once ended up there on a sunny Sunday evening on 21 June, the Fête de la Musique, and was charmed by the sight of the local families, both French and immigrant, sitting together at tables outside. They had come to cheer on their teen-aged children who were performing with touching enthusiasm in an amateur concert on the station concourse.

**Chelles-Gournay RER station** opposite the brasserie is smart and modern and as soon as you step inside its glass doors you will be spiritually back in Paris. You can be physically back within 15 minutes.

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**Distance from Paris:** 19 km (11½ miles)  
**Depart:** Châtelet-Les Halles  
**Arrive:** Neuilly-Plaisance  
**Journey time:** 15 minutes  
**Length of visit:** Half or full day  
**Alternative return from:** Chelles-Gournay  
**Journey time:** 14-28 minutes  
**Navigo Zone:** 3 (Neuilly-Plaisance) and 4 (Chelles-Gournay)  
**Single ticket:** 4.05€ (4.95€ from Chelles-Gournay)  
**Distance from Neuilly-Plaisance to Chez Fifi:** 1 km (½ mile)  
**Distance from Chez Fifi to Pointe de Gournay bus stop:** 2.8 km (1¾ miles)  
**Distance from bus stop to Chelles-Gournay station:** 2.3 km (1½ miles)  
**Population:** 34,763 (Neuilly-sur-Marne); 53,833 (Chelles)

### Getting there

**RER A** trains to Marne-la-Vallée stopping at Neuilly-Plaisance run every 10 minutes.

Return from Chelles-Gournay: RER E stopping trains to Magenta (Gare du Nord) and Haussmann Saint-Lazare every 15 mins, 30 at weekends, taking 28 mins; fast SNCF trains to Gare de l'Est every 30 mins, taking 14 mins.

**Bus 113** runs daily, every 5–20 mins depending on time of day.

**Car:** A4 to Joinville, then A86 to Le Perreux-sur-Marne and N34 to Neuilly-sur-Marne.

**RATP map** *plan de secteur*, no. 11. See p. 179.

### When to go

Sunny weather is ideal to enjoy the play of sunlight on water. The atmosphere of the *guinguette* is at its most traditional on a Sunday in summer, when the transparent plastic 'walls' are rolled up to let in the sunshine, but you could go in winter as it is open all year round and cosily heated.

### Useful information

For the addresses of other *guinguettes* near Paris, visit [www.culture-guinguette.com](http://www.culture-guinguette.com).

### Restaurants/café

**Chez Fifi – Bar de la Marine**, bar/restaurant, 2 rue Maurice Bertaux, 93330 Neuilly-sur-Marne, tel 01 43 08 20 31, mobile 06 81 52 91 04, [www.guinguettechezfifi.fr/](http://www.guinguettechezfifi.fr/). Open daily all year round to 11 pm, dancing at weekends and public holidays 3–7 pm. Three-course *formule* including apéritif, wine and coffee, around 36€ or à la carte. *Friture d'éperlans* around 7€, traditional main dishes such as *moules-frites*, *choucroûte* or *tête de veau* 17€, 50cl *pichet* of quite drinkable rosé 9.80€. Admission to the dance floor without eating 10€, including a drink.

**La Brasserie Chelloise**, 71 avenue de la Résistance, 77500 Chelles, tel 01 60 20 50 71. Open daily to midnight, live music on Friday evenings.