

Travelling to another dimension

Without a DeLorean DMC-12 or an H.G. Wells time machine, all I needed was my bike, helmet, my phone and the certificate to travel 20 km



Let us be clear, this second lockdown sucks! It is even worse for those who, like me, enjoy travelling and who soon realised that their next trip would probably be post-vaccine. So, what can you do with this free spirit unwilling to be restrained by a global pandemic? In my case, I used my imagination. I know, it sounds dull and too Disney to be true, but do not judge me just yet; this 'Disney story' involves jaguars, wild parties and intrigue...

The keen traveller in me decided to grab my bike and make the most of the three-hour/20-km window of freedom allotted to explore my neighbourhood and its surroundings. So far, so vanilla, but there was a twist, with the help of my phone and of the all-mighty Google and Wikipedia, I embarked on some time travel by exploring Le Vésinet (Yvelines, 78110) in the 1920s.

'Oh, that is an easy thing for a history lover to do', you might say. But let me tell you, as a young child, I used to hate history lessons. Memorising all those dates, battles and names used to give me a headache. Then, one day, my mother saw me struggling to remember key dates of Venezuelan independence, and shared a tip with me: 'Do you know how I passed my history tests when I was at school? I had a teacher who told us about historical facts as if they were the biggest piece of gossip to be heard'. History = gossip. Now, I was interested. This changed my views on history, and my grades in it, forever!

So, with time on my hands, I did some research on the history of my area and found a list of famous people who lived in Le Vésinet during the 1920s, also discovering that the '*banlieue-ouest*' of Paris was *the* place to have wild parties, exotic pets, to write and even conspire against the Nazis. How's that for gossip, intrigue and excitement! During this second lockdown, I have travelled back 100 years in time and enjoyed lovely bike rides through the green avenues of Le Vésinet. Let me tell you about the secrets (and gossip) I discovered.

The exotic neighbour

The beloved cabaret dancer, singer, actress and war heroine, Josephine Baker lived in Le Vésinet between 1929 and 1947. Her husband and manager, Giuseppe (Pepito) Abatino bought her a beautiful palace at 52 Avenue George Clemenceau, so that she would have enough space for her pets, which included her jaguar Chiquita, a family of monkeys, ducks, chickens, cats and dogs.



In the Beau-Chêne Villa, Josephine had a large orchard, a greenhouse with exotic plants, a vegetable garden where she used to grow her own fruit and vegetables, as well as collect snails for a family of ducks. It was a very exotic paradise in *la banlieue parisienne* that was involved in a scandal when Chiquita went for a run around the neighbourhood.

But this is not all, every night during the Second World War, Josephine Baker managed a refugee centre at Gare du Nord that she had set up at her own expense. Her contribution to fighting against the Nazis was not only humanitarian. She took advantage of her position as a Parisian vedette to be invited to Embassy parties and gather information on the movements of German officers. (I wonder how many conspiratorial meetings were held at the Villa!) When the Germans invaded Paris, she took refuge in the south of France and subsequently in North Africa (Morocco). She was hospitalised there for a long time, suffering three times from sepsis, but as soon as she left the hospital, she joined General de Gaulle's movement for Free France.

Josephine Baker's villa has new owners and they have started a renovation process to restore it to its former glory. Classified as an exceptional historical monument, the Beau-Chêne Villa will be open to the public every September during the European Heritage Days.

Recommendations

- **To read:** (2016). – BD Josephine Baker, Catel & Bocquet; Nathalie Moller (2017). 10 (petites) choses que vous ne savez (peut-être) pas sur Joséphine Baker. France Musique.
- **To see:** Josephine Baker, Première icône noire
- **To hear:** 'J'ai deux amours'. Archive INA.
- **To visit:** Villa Beau-Chêne, 52 Avenue George Clemenceau, Le Vésinet 78110

An eccentric rose palace

A few steps from Parc des Ibis, your eyes will alight on this magnificent reproduction of the Petit Trianon, Maria Antoinette's refuge in Versailles. Called the Palais Rose, the property was built in 1899 and

welcomed major figures of the early years of the 20th century. Among them, the Comte Robert de Montesquiou, French poet, writer and ultimate dandy of his time. It is said that he was the inspiration for Marcel Proust's character the Baron of Charlus in *In Search of Lost Time*. Enchanted by Palais Rose's architecture and extravagant luxury, the Comte declared on his first visit, 'If this house, which is not for sale and which, moreover, my modest means do not seem to put me in a position to acquire, if this improbable, impossible, and yet real house, is not mine tomorrow, I'll die!' He bought it on 29 October 1908 and lived there until he died in 1921.



A couple of years later, another *bonne-vivante* bought the palace, the Marquise Luisa Casati, a very extravagant patroness of the arts in Europe in the early 1920s. She commissioned a heated terrarium in the winter garden of the residence, to house her collection of reptiles. The sun pattern on the floor of the large dining room, made from black and white marble, could also be attributed to her: here she insisted that her dinners were lit only by the baubles in her necklace.

Both were eccentric characters who held incredible parties at the palace. Some of the invitees included Ida Rubinstein, Claude Debussy, Colette, Rodin, Sarah Bernhardt and Jean Cocteau. Among the parties organised by Casati were a famous evening in tribute to the Italian magician Cagliostro and a costumed party inspired by the Louis XIV era. Oh, if those walls could talk!!!

If you have trouble imagining what those parties would have looked like, you can visit the Sotheby's website to stimulate your imagination.

When the '*années-folles*' were finished, the palace also welcomed a very prominent French hero, no other than Charles de Gaulle, who had just been appointed as Commander of the 4th Battleship Division and who stayed three days in the palace on his way to the South of France.

These stories and the amazing places that surround my neighbourhood, have kept me somehow connected to the sense of adventure that my inner traveller misses dearly. I hope by sharing this gift with you, you will also be able to view with more curiosity, the city you live in.

If you're interested, I keep track of my in-time travels on Instagram @ingridcca.

We wish to thank Ingrid Contreras for writing this article in the OIE In-house Times.

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