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My Paris

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Sanderson
A Travel Guide Series

My love affair with Belleville

Catherine Sanderson, better known as the blogger Petite Anglaise, describes how a vibrant working-class Paris neighbourhood captured her heart

When I began blogging as Petite Anglaise in July 2004, I'd been calling Paris home for nine years and couldn't imagine living anywhere else. I set out to write a 'Brit's eye view' of life in the City of Light and, even though my web diary gradually morphed into a far more personal story, Paris has always loomed large.

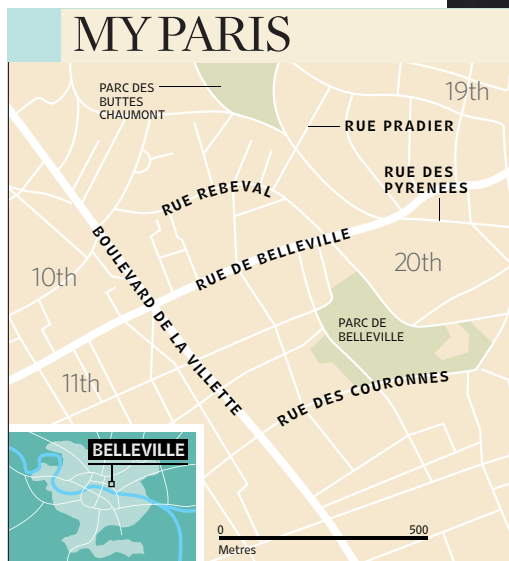
Ever since my first French lesson (at school in York, aged 11) I'd fantasised about living here, though for many years my love affair with France was little more than a long-distance crush. I made my first proper trip just before my 18th birthday, using my savings to visit a pen friend in a village near Lyons. Three years later, I worked as an *assistante anglaise* at a lycée in Normandy as part of my French degree.

My first trip to Paris – sightseeing with a friend – only lasted a couple of days. My most vivid memory is of our seedy hotel room near Bonne Nouvelle, which was decorated, floor-to-ceiling, in fake animal fur. Despite this inauspicious introduction, Paris worked her magic. I resolved to return, not to visit, but to stay.

Finally, my degree course behind me, I packed my belongings and took a Eurolines coach to Paris. English conversation classes would, once more, be my bread and butter, this time at the Sorbonne Nouvelle university. I found my first Parisian *chez moi* – a hastily rented *deux-pièces* on rue de la Roquette, not far from the crowded bars of Bastille – by scouring the small ads at the American church. Although I ended up in the area quite by chance, I've been a Right Bank girl ever since, snubbing the picture-postcard *quartiers* in favour of the former working-class neighbourhoods of the north-eastern arrondissements. Eight years later, I moved with my French partner to Belleville, which is where I live with my four-year-old daughter today.

Hotels are rare in my neighbourhood and few tourists venture this way, even if it is a mere five stops away from Hôtel de Ville on the metro (line 11), or a five-minute bus ride (No 26) from Gare du Nord. Yet from the *belvédère* on rue Piat, by the entrance to the steeply downward-sloping Parc de Belleville, the widescreen panorama of the Paris skyline is every bit as stunning as the view from Sacré Coeur – and you don't have to fight your way through swathes of portrait painters and peddlers of fake watches and handbags to admire it. The only people you'll meet are nannies pushing their charges through the park or locals taking a stroll.

Belleville was once a hilltop village surrounded by farms and vineyards belonging to nearby abbays. By the time it was absorbed



The panorama is just as stunning as the view from the Sacré Coeur

into Paris proper, in 1860, it had become a large town, reputed for its *guingettes*, vast establishments where hundreds of revellers came to eat, drink and dance. Workers arrived in Belleville en masse when Baron Haussmann began demolishing inner-city slums in the mid-19th century, and during the workers' uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871, the last barricades to fall were in Belleville. The neighbourhood is still home to the headquarters of the Parti Communiste Français, as well as two of France's largest trade unions.

Before I moved in, like many a visitor who leaves the metro at Belleville, I was under the impression that it was Chinatown. At the busy junction by the station where four arrondissements meet (which plays host to an outdoor market on Tuesday and Friday mornings), it's true that most of the shop signs are in Mandarin and at my daughter's school there are as many Chinese children as French.

But the neighbourhood is far more culturally diverse. If you walk a few hundred metres along Boulevard de Belleville, Chinese supermarkets and snack bars soon give way to Jewish-Tunisian couscous restaurants and, in the side streets around rue des Couronnes, corner shops sell plantains to their African clientele. Belleville has seen many waves of immigration over the past century. The most recent arrivals, in



Relaxing in the Café Chéri(e) and, below, the church of St Jean-Baptiste. Photographs by Magali Delporte

this era of spiralling property prices, are the *bourgeois-bohèmes* – bobos for short – a cosmopolitan crowd of affluent twenty- and thirtysomethings.

Bobos spend their time on the *terrasse* of Aux Folies, the Belleville bar adjacent to the former Folies-Belleville cabaret (now a discount supermarket), where Piaf and Chevalier performed. They eat out in the cosy restaurants at the top end of up-and-coming rue Rebeval, and the arty boutiques that have sprung up along boulevard de la Villette wouldn't survive without them. I know this – I'm a bobo too.

Since I began working from home, the area in which I go about my daily business has become much more circumscribed: if I drew around it on a map, the result would be a rhombus about two-and-a-half kilometres square. At the outer tips lie the Parc des Buttes Chaumont (where my daughter watches the

ON THE WEB

To take a virtual walking tour of Belleville with Catherine Sanderson, go to:

► www.observer.co.uk

Punch and Judy-like 'Guignol' show) and St Jean-Baptiste de Belleville church, in the shadow of which lurk my favourite *fromagerie* and fishmonger. Then there's Aux Folies, aforementioned, at the bottom of the hill, and the Café Chéri(e) along boulevard de la Villette.

A typical day sees me dashing to drop my daughter off at school (doors open at 8.20, closing at 8.30 with military precision) then heading to one of my favourite cafes with a newspaper. After that, if I'm feeling disciplined, I adjourn to my tiny writing studio opposite place Fréhel,

where the *trompe l'oeil* artwork warns me, rather aptly, to beware of words (the fake billboard reads *Il faut se méfier des mots*). I spend my lunch break in one of the many Chinese cafes on rue de Belleville. (I won't divulge my best address; it seats approximately five.) When school's out, I'm often to be found with my daughter in one of the local parks.

What I love most is that I've been in the neighbourhood long enough now to be considered a regular. Some bar owners actually know my name. In all the 13 years I've spent in Paris, I'd never experienced such a feeling of belonging until I moved to Belleville – and I think it's safe to say I'm here to stay.

► *Petite Anglaise*, by Catherine Sanderson, is published by Penguin (£12.99). To order a copy for £11.99 with free UK p&tp go to observer.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0885.

PETITE ANGLAISE'S GUIDE TO BELLEVILLE

GRÉGORY DESFOUX

112 rue de Belleville, 20th

The baguettes and pâtisserie are pricey for the neighbourhood, but the dark chocolate tartlet, made with chocolate pastry, is worth every centime. I love buying an assortment of their dissolve-in-the-mouth pastel-coloured macarons.

LA BAIE DES ANGES

11 boulevard de la Villette, 10th

This old-school bakery is renowned for its *pains spéciaux*. The breads are sold by weight and the portions (€6/kg) keep for ages. My favourites include the *seigle orange et chocolat* (chocolate orange rye bread).

LE KD

1 rue Pradier, 19th

This cafe, with its red walls and elaborate ceiling mouldings, is where I curl up with a copy of *Libération* and a large café crème after the

morning school run. There's also a three-course lunch menu (€12).

LE CAFÉ CHÉRI(E)

44 boulevard de la Villette, 19th

This grungy Belleville cafe draws a crowd of laptop-toting 'bobos' (bourgeois-bohèmes) during the day (free wi-fi), then gets noisy in the evenings (live music, DJs). The outdoor tables catch the afternoon sun, making this my favourite spot for reading the Sunday papers.

LES DOIGTS DE FÉE

356 rue des Pyrénées, 20th

The sticky Moroccan pastries piled high on silver trays can be bought to take away or eat in, with a *thé à la menthe*, in the quiet adjoining tearoom with its riad-style decor. The sister clothes shop next door is no place for a sticky-fingered child in the throes of a sugar rush (as I once discovered to my cost).

LE CHAPEAU MELON

92 rue Rebeval, 19th (00 33 1 4202 6860, dinner only, Weds-Sun, €29)

and

MON ONCLE LE VIGNERON

2 rue Pradier, 19th (00 33 1 4200 4330, Tues-Sat, €25-30)

Reserve in advance if you want to try either of these cosy table d'hôte restaurants as they seat few and are deservedly popular. Both serve a single *menu du jour* in home-from-home surroundings.



'Bobo' favourite: the Aux Folies bar.

LE PARC DE BELLEVILLE

Entrances on rue Piat, rue des Couronnes and rue Julien Lacroix, 20th

I often take a picnic lunch here. From the much-coveted patch of lawn just below rue Piat's *belvédère* you can munch a boulangerie-bought sandwich while admiring the spectacular view of the Paris skyline.

PORTES OUVERTES DES ATELIERS DE BELLEVILLE

16-19 May 2008 (www.ateliers-artistes-belleville.org)

In the private courtyards hiding behind the facades of rue de Belleville and the surrounding side streets there are scores of artists' workshops, many of which open their doors to the public for one weekend every May. I always make a point of picking up the 'Portes Ouvertes' map and going for a stroll, as much to marvel at the secret gardens as to inspect the artwork.

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