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A delightful stroll through the 'no-go zones' of Paris

America's Fox News recently described parts of Paris as 'no-go zones' where non-Muslims fear to tread. Rowena Carr-Allinson takes a stroll around these 'mean streets' of the French capital.

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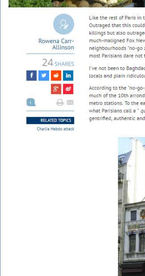

Rowena Carr-Allinson

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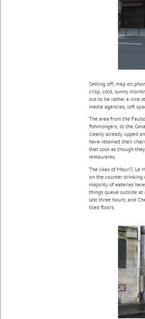
Like the rest of Paris in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, I was outraged. Outraged that this could happen, here or anywhere. Outraged by the senseless killings but also outraged by some of the news coverage, notably that by the much-maligned Fox News 'expert' Nolan Peterson, who declared several of Paris' neighbourhoods 'no-go zones' comparable to Baghdad, where Sharia law rules and most Parisians dare not tread.

I've not been to Baghdad recently but Peterson's analysis is way off; offensive to locals and plain ridiculous.

According to the 'no-go-zone' map produced by Fox, the largest marked area spans much of the 10th arrondissement, stretching from the Poissonnière to the St Denis metro stations. To me east of the city centre, 5km or so from the Champs-Élysées, it's what Parisians call a " *quartier dodo* " (bourgeois meets bohemian) - where the professionals and hipsters all hop mees an ecstric mix.



Setting off, map on phone, to visit the most "dangerous" quarters, I step out into a crisp, cold, sunny morning. Intrepid reporter risking her life? Not so much. It turns out to be rather a nice stroll through a vibrant *quartier* packed with restaurants, bars, media agencies, loft spaces and cute patisseries.

The area from the Faubourg Poissonnière, a large boulevard once populated by fishmongers, to the Canal St Martin is obviously up and coming, in some places it has clearly already upped and come. There's an edgy vibe, it is a good way, yet the streets have retained their charm thanks to the butcher and traditional haberdashery stores that look as though they have been here forever, as well as a host of trendy restaurants.

The likes of Hauvit', Le Moulon Blanc and Bonne Nouvelle, where scruffy locals lean on the counter drinking espressos, have remained unchanged for years. But the majority of eateries here are typified by the Big Fernand burger bar, where cool young things queue outside at all times; Paris-New York, where, rumour has it, the wait can last three hours; and Chez Janeteta, with its neon signs, red vinyl stools and shiny tiled floors.

At 52 Faubourg St Denis - a) unfinished concrete waize, ash wood and home-roasted coffee - I'm served by the obligatorily bearded hipster, who confides (truthfully, as it happens) that "the coffee is so good it won't require sugar".

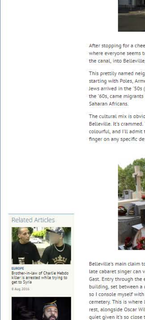
Lunches, next door, is another success story, with several outposts in the area. Part of a new generation of *epicerie-fusion* stores, its beautiful products are so well laid out, packaged and presented, it is hard to leave empty-handed. It's just the way you'd imagine the prettiest, quaintest French food platter to be presented - like something out of the movies.

Rue de Paradis, too, has its share of hip eateries but, once the site of a crystal works, porcelain makers and a cement, it now boasts homeware shops, as well as a number of long-standing fur merchants.

Tucked away in the Rue des Petites Ecuries, a tiny cobbled passageway in the heart of the 10th arrondissement, is the Brasserie Flo. Unchanged since 1871, this belle epoque brasserie was a hit spot in the 1960s thanks to its authentic art deco interiors and its proximity to theatres, such as Le Splendid. One of my father's favourite spots, I recall coming here one dark night probably 30 years ago. My memories are fuzzy, but I was overwhelmed and bedazzled by the noise, the buzz and the *joie de vivre*. I recall being being confused by the very friendly, scantily dressed ladies who lined the pavements - a scenes barrage my dad to squeeze past to enter the restaurant. The ladies of the night are long gone (or perhaps it's too early; it is only lunchtime, after all) but I'm glad to see the huge *fruits de mer* seafood platters remain.

The more you venture east towards Place de la Republique - the eight-acre square in which Parisians showed their solidarity after the January attacks - the more of a melting pot the streets become. Some might call Boulevard de Strasbourg intimidating - it's male-dominated and young women should expect looks and comments - but it's much closer to Barnéais or Dakar than Baghdad, surely? An ethnic and social mix no doubt, but not a war zone by any means. As another bearded, tattooed, mustard-coloured-jeans-wearing hipster walks by, I wonder how he would fare in Iraq.

If you're 'brave' enough to have come this far, the reward is the Canal St Martin, one of Paris' most popular waterways. In summer this is where one comes to enjoy a long *apéritif*, dine al fresco on one of the numerous terraces or have a picnic on the banks. Family friendly, fun and relaxed, the atmosphere here is welcoming and quaint. Mr Peterson, how wrong you were!



After stopping for a cheeky scone at the Ten Belles, a charming hole-in-the-wall café where everyone seems to speak English, I venture further into 'no man's land', over the canal, into Belleville, another of Fox's NGZs.

This prettily named neighbourhood has historically welcomed migrant populations, starting with Poles, Armenians and Europeans Jews after the first world war. Tunisian Jews arrived in the '50s (making it the largest Jewish neighbourhood in Paris) and, in the '60s, came migrants from Maghreb. Asians followed in the '80s, and then sub-Saharan Africans.

The cultural mix is obvious in the buzzing market held on the central Boulevard de Belleville. It's crammed. The fresh food looks amazing. The atmosphere is exotic and colourful, and it's exciting to feel like far-from-France, without quite being able to put my finger on any specific destination.

Belleville's main claim to fame is that it was the home of Edith Piaf, and fans of the late cabaret singer can visit her old apartment museum, on Rue Crespin du Gast. Entry through the elegant double-fronted wooden doors of the smart red-brick building, set between a cookie café and an African restaurant, is by appointment only, so I console myself with a wander around another must-see: the Père Lachaise cemetery. This is where luminaries such as Honoré de Balzac, Marcel Proust and Piaf rest, alongside Oscar Wilde and Jim Morrison. Serene and surreal, it's exceedingly quiet given it's so close to the city centre - the graveyard's 44 acres are a surprisingly prevalent place in which to rest.

A WEEK LATER, I find myself back on the 'mean streets', in Belleville, near the Puces flea market, beyond the Sacre Coeur and Montmartre.

Romantically named after a stream, the Jardins Du Ruisseau are set in 2.5 acres on the side of the disused rail track at the Gare d'Ornano. Local families join forces to cultivate the gardens, an endeavour that spews volumes about the quarter. The idea is to introduce gardening and renewable energy to local children and raise green awareness. The communal gardens even have a beehive, although, sadly, the chickens were recently stolen.

On my way home, along Boulevard de Barbes, I cut through the Marche Dejean street market and realise I've gone and ventured into Goutte d'Or; yet another 'no-go' neighbourhood.

I must stop living so dangerously …

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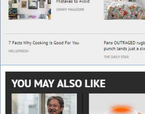

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