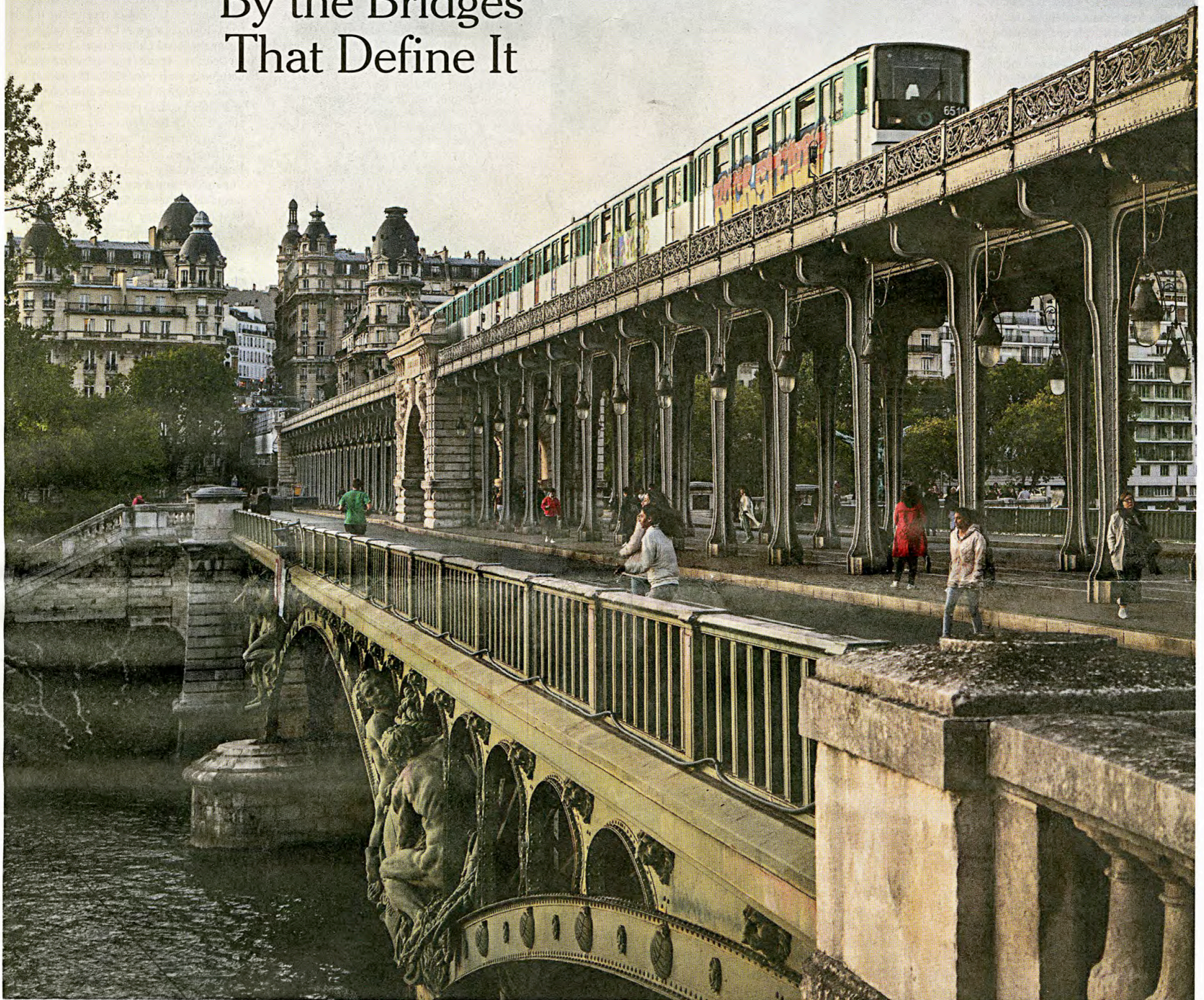


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Discovering Paris By the Bridges That Define It



JOANN PAI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Spanning the Seine, of steel, stone and wood, the city's many crossings offer lessons in history, architecture and romance.

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

The Pont de Bir-Hakeim is named for a Libyan oasis where Free French forces battled the Germans during World War II.

Sometimes, when sleep eludes me in the dark hour before dawn, I make my way to the Pont de la Tournelle, the 400-foot bridge that links the Île Saint-Louis to Paris's Left Bank. I plant myself at its midpoint, face west and wait. Before me is the skeletal back of Notre-Dame, shrouded in darkness.

I watch as the sky moves from blue-black to deep blue velvet to soft gray, then light blue. The delicate architectural details of the cathedral gradually reveal themselves, until finally, the early morning sun bathes them in warm orange hues.

The back side of Notre-Dame is the creation of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc,

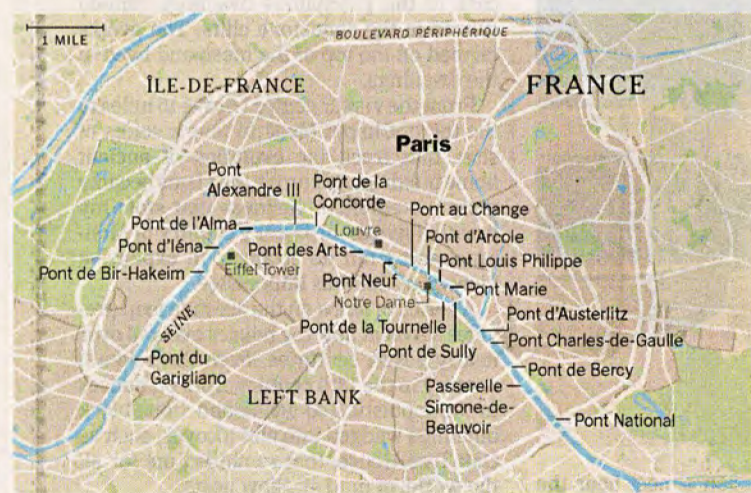
the young architect in charge of the cathedral's restoration in the 19th century. It looks nothing like the grandiose main entrance, whose hundreds of medieval stone carvings make it one of the most recognizable images of Paris around the world.

The view from behind is different from what it was just a few months ago. During the great fire of April 15, the cathedral lost the spire that Viollet-le-Duc erected, and sections of the roof are hidden under protective scaffolding. But the structure still

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Top, the Pont Alexandre III, with the Eiffel Tower in the background. The belle époque bridge links the Invalides to the Champs-Élysées. At night, the Pont de Bercy, left, is lit to dramatic effect.

and a lifelong photographer, was so passionate about the way the bridges look at night that he spent more than five years photographing them in black and white for a 190-page coffee-table book, "The Glow of Paris." Because Paris isn't fully dark in the summer months until about 11 p.m., he did most of his work during the winter. "I wanted to present the majesty of the Paris bridges in their most alluring setting," he said. "Nighttime."

By day, tourist boat rides on the Seine are interesting, of course, but at night, they become voyages of discovery. I take visitors on the Vedettes de Paris, a small batea-mouche, because if we arrive early enough, we can nab a spot in the front of an upper deck. When the boat passes under the bridges, we can see how the lighting from underneath reveals the curves and angles

of their underbellies.

Tour guides on the bateaux-mouches will tell you that the Pont Marie is the lovers' bridge. The story goes that if you make a wish as the boat slips under the bridge and keep the wish secret, it will be granted. One summer night, I took two female college

students for a boat ride. As we approached the bridge, a recording announced: "If you're with the person you love, kiss him or her under the bridge, make a wish, and your wish will come true." One of the students closed her eyes and made a wish, even though her boyfriend was an ocean away.



Pont Alexandre III are lit with the pointilism of the Lyon school. So are the arches and hanging lamps of the Pont de Bercy, the high-relief sculptures on the Pont d'Austerlitz, and the medallions on the N monograms, in honor of Napoléon III, on the Pont au Change.

Gary Zuercher, a retired businessman