PARIS

Pompidou Centre

The high-tech superstructure that brought culture to the masses

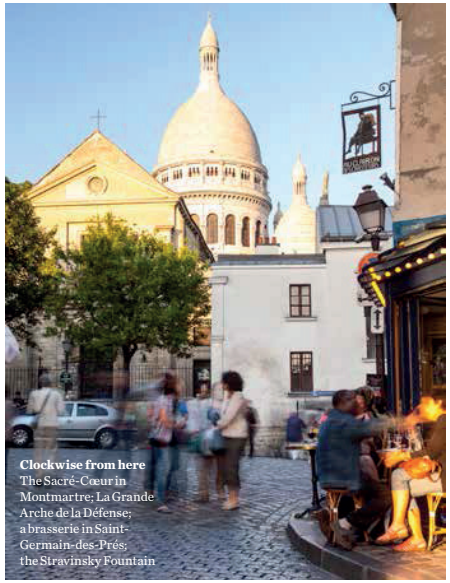
Words **FRANCES HEDGES**

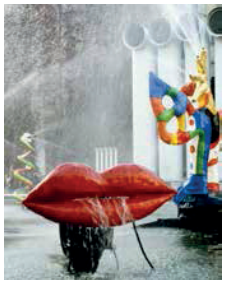
'PARIS HAS ITS OWN MONSTER, just like the one in Loch Ness,' reported *Le Figaro* following the unveiling of the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1977. Yet the controversial steel superstructure designed by Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Gianfranco Franchini has attracted more than 160 million visitors since its opening and now stands as a symbol of architecture at its iconoclastic best.

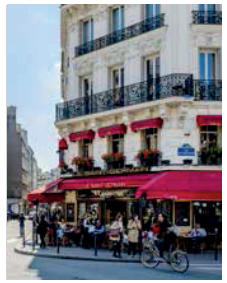
The brainchild of Georges Pompidou, France's then-president, the centre was conceived in the late 1970s as a way of showcasing contemporary art in the local area of Beaubourg, as well as enhancing Paris's international reputation as a city of culture. In 1971, a jury of world-renowned architects (including Oscar Niemeyer) oversaw France's first major global architectural competition, selecting Piano, Rogers and Franchini as their dream team. The subsequent six-year project resulted in the opening of a building like none that Paris had ever seen. Resembling a huge transparent box, the new centre was framed by exposed tubular steel columns. This 'exo-skeletal' design philosophy extended to every part of the structure, from the external escalators visible through clear plastic tunnels to the giant tubes for supplying water and electricity. Equally bold was the colour scheme, which featured bright green pipework, blue ducts for climate control and red lifts. Forming a conspicuous contrast with the traditional houses that surrounded it, the building was designed as a celebration of flexibility and mobility.

Today, the Pompidou Centre – or Beaubourg, as it is known affectionately among locals – has lost none of its power to shock, although the surrounding areas have taken on aspects of its playfulness. Now Europe's largest museum of modern art, with more than 50,000 works in its collection, the venue takes pride of place in the Place Georges-Pompidou, where street performers entertain passers-by. Moments away is the Stravinsky Fountain, whose 16 sculptures by Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle have a fittingly quirky appeal. The popularity of the neighbouring Marais district is testament to the success of a project that, at its humblest, sought to bring life to a local community and, at its most ambitious, aimed to reinvigorate a capital city.

Place Georges-Pompidou, 75004 (centrepompidou.fr/en)







Clockwise from here
The Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre; La Grande Arche de la Défense; a brasserie in Saint-Germain-des-Prés; the Stravinsky Fountain

PICTURES, GETTY/POMPIDOU CENTRE, LA GRANDE ARCHE), GETTY/AGE FOTOSTOCK (STRAVINSKY FOUNTAIN), ROBERT HARDING/JULIAN ELLIOT (MONTMARTRE), CHRIS SORENSEN/GALLERYSTOCK (BRASSERIE), ADRIEN DIRAND (MONSIEUR BLEU)

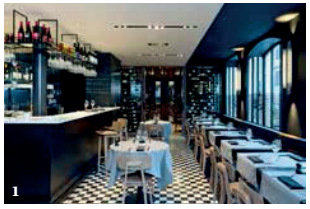
WHERE TO STAY

❶ HÔTEL DE NELL
This 33-room hotel is a lesson in minimalist chic. Rooms have a neutral feel; the bistro features blackboard walls and monochrome flooring.
Doubles from £273; 7–9 rue de Conservatoire, 75009 (hoteldenell.com)

❷ LA MAISON CHAMPS-ELYSÉES
Maison Martin Margiela is behind this hotel's elegant interiors. Located in a townhouse in Paris's 'Golden Triangle', it features an all-white lounge, a cigar bar and 17 'Couture Collection' rooms.
Doubles from £146; 8 rue Jean Goujon, 75008 (lamaisonchampselysees.com)

LE ROYAL MONCEAU
A stay here offers everything from private film screenings to art installations, plus a huge indoor pool.
Doubles from £600; 37 avenue Hoche, 75008 (leroyalmonceau.com)

MAMA SHELTER
With interiors designed by Philippe Starck, this affordable hotel attracts a youthful crowd. Exposed concrete walls are offset by quirky touches such as masks turned into lanterns.
Doubles from £70; 109 rue de Bagnolet, 75020 (mamashelter.com)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WHERE TO DINE

❸ MONSIEUR BLEU
Situated inside the Palais de Tokyo, this restaurant designed by architect Joseph Dirand sets lavish materials against a minimalist backdrop. Expect top-quality dishes such as sea bass carpaccio and citrus pavlova.
20 avenue de New York, 75116 (monsieurbleu.com)

LA POULE AU POT
This all-night eatery on the former site of food market Les Halles has been open since 1935. The highlight remains the eponymous poached chicken dish.
9 rue Vauvilliers, 75001 (lapouleaupot.com)

SOMA
Join in the growing Parisian trend for Japanese cuisine by sipping a glass of sake and sampling exquisite dishes such as green tea-infused octopus slices.
13 rue de Saintonge, 75003 (00 33 9 81 82 53 51)

ANGELINA
Founded in 1903, this classic *salon de thé* is renowned for its rich hot chocolate and decadent pâtisseries.
226 rue de Rivoli, 75001 (angelina-paris.fr) ➤