

On the Trail of *Manon*

*The real-life sites of
Massenet's opera present
a charming tour of Paris*

Jules Massenet's *Manon* is by no means the only famous opera set in Paris. Puccini's *La Bohème*, of course, brings the Latin Quarter to splendid life. And in Verdi's *La Traviata*, Charpentier's *Louise*, Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, and Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, Paris is inseparable from the action of these operas. But, arguably, *Manon* holds an even dearer place for lovers of the city.

In a similar way that Puccini's *Tosca* plays out in the historic buildings of Rome (the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, Farnese Palace, and Castel Sant' Angelo), the romance, ebullience, and tragedy of *Manon* transpire in key sites in the heart of the French capital. For those who want to experience more of Massenet's opera (based on the 1731 novel by Abbé Prévost), a promenade through the real-life locales is a rich and fascinating pleasure.



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1. Rue Vivienne

What happens here in *Manon*: Manon and the Chevalier des Grieux are living happily together in a simple apartment. Their hideaway is discovered by Manon's cousin Lescaut and the well-heeled Brétigny who warn that Des Grieux is about to be abducted by his father, the Comte des Grieux. Brétigny tempts Manon with a life of luxury if she lives with him instead. Alone, Manon sings farewell to her humble life with Des Grieux ("Adieu, notre petite table") before he is taken away.

What you see now: Located in the second arrondissement, this short street is considerably more posh than the second act of *Manon* would suggest. The north side of the street borders on the Bourse (top left), the historical Paris stock exchange also known as the Palais Brongniart, with the gardens of the Royal Palace adjoining to the south. Charming shops, including the covered passageway of the Galerie Vivienne (top right), proliferate in between. Designed by architect François Jean Delannoy and treasured for its mosaics and glazed rotunda, the Galerie Vivienne has been registered as a historical monument since 1974.

Tip: Enjoy a café au lait or lunch at the Bistrot Vivienne (4 rue des Petits Champs).

What's nearby: The Opéra-Comique, which premiered *Manon* on January 19, 1884.

2. Cours-la-Reine

What happens here in *Manon*: A holiday crowd files along the garden walkway by the Seine River. Manon walks arm in arm with Brétigny, enjoying her new status. She overhears the Comte des Grieux tell Brétigny that his son is planning to take holy orders and preach that evening at the church of Saint-Sulpice.



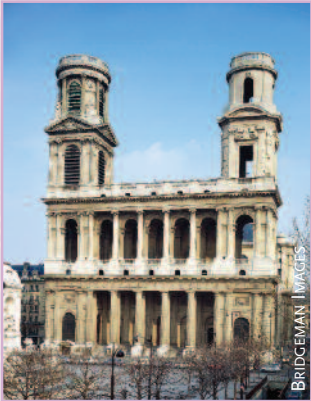
What you see now: Pedestrians and bikers happily share this narrow promenade between the Place de la Concorde and the Place du Canada. Lined with chestnut trees with beautiful views of the Seine, the Cours-la-Reine (French for "the Queen's promenade") was created by Queen Marie de Medici in the early 17th century. Other public parks are adjacent, including the Tuileries and the Jardin des Champs-Élysées.

Tip: Take a scenic walk directly across the Seine to the Left Bank and visit Les Invalides, the famous burial place of Napoleon Bonaparte.

What's nearby: Impressionist art at the Musée d'Orsay and shopping on the Champs-Élysées.



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3. Church of Saint-Sulpice

What happens here in *Manon*: Des Grieux receives praise for his preaching, but he can't help but think of Manon. He finds her waiting for him in the church. Manon reaffirms her love, and they flee together.

What you see now: This largest church in Paris is renowned for its neoclassical architecture, *Gran* organ, knockout Delacroix paintings, Louis XV-period paneling and stained glass. Of scientific interest is the Gnomon, a 36-foot-high obelisk and meridian line of brass that was constructed in 1743

to verify the calculation of the date of the spring equinox and Easter and improve the precision of astronomical data.

Tip: The church conducts free guided tours every Sunday at 2:30 p.m. with organ recitals taking place most Sunday afternoons or evenings.

What's nearby: The Jardin du Luxembourg, which was also created by Marie de Medici.

4. La Salpêtrière

What happens here in *Manon*: In the final act of Massenet's opera, Manon is held in custody and transported to Le Havre, Normandy where she is to be finally deported to Louisiana. But in the original story by Abbé Prevost, she is confined in La Salpêtrière, where prostitutes were often jailed during the 18th century.

What you see now: One of the largest hospitals in Europe, the Hôpital universitaire Pitié-Salpêtrière is a teaching hospital of Sorbonne University. Sigmund Freud taught there, and over the decades it has treated many VIPs. Among the celebrities who died at the Hôpital were singer Josephine Baker in 1975 and Princess Diana of Wales in 1997.

Tip: Go see the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière (Hospital Chapel), one of the masterworks of Les Invalides architect Libéral Bruant (1635–1697). Built on the model of a Greek cross, it has a beautiful octagonal cupola, illuminated by picture windows in circular arcs.

What's nearby: The Opéra Bastille, which is just across the Seine via the Pont Austerlitz.

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