



On
Becoming A
Flâneur

*Cath Johnsen explores the romantic
French notion that you don't really know
a city until you've been lost in it ...*

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ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: GETTY IMAGES

An illustration of a woman with long, dark hair blowing in the wind, wearing a white sleeveless top and black leggings, walking on a large orange dune. The background is a gradient of purple and pink, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is minimalist and modern.

ART OF LIVING

I t's mid-morning on a Monday,

and I'm strolling along an inner-city street in Brisbane, with no particular destination in mind. Men and women stride past me, power-suited, heads bent over phones, hands clutching steaming takeaway coffees. As I near the end of the street, an old building with two wooden doors catches my attention, showing its age in a city that has demolished many of its original buildings in favour of newer, shinier, taller monoliths of concrete, steel and glass.

A sign above the entrance beckons me in with the promise of 'one million books' inside, and so I push through the heavy timber doors, away from the sounds of crawling cars and tradespeople wielding jackhammers, and into the cocoon of this musty-smelling, second-hand bookshop. Thousands of well-thumbed tomes reach from floor to ceiling along narrow aisles, with some only reachable by ladder, others locked away behind glass, but all the collective pages seeming right at home in this creaky-floored, heritage-listed building.

I'm sure Charles Baudelaire would approve of this use of my time, the French poet who coined the idea of the *flâneur* – an idle, urban ambler who strolls the streets observing society, attentively soaking up the

vignettes of metropolitan life. In fact, I may even be lucky enough to find some of Baudelaire's writings in a place like this.

But while the original concept of the *flâneur* belongs to times past, the practice of *flânerie* is very much still in use today.

Tracey Zielinski, a clinical psychologist and author, says she regularly takes a leaf from the *flâneur*'s book, both when she's at home and on holiday, but especially when she's in the birthplace of the *flâneur*: Paris.

"I've been to Paris at least a handful of times," Zielinski says. "I've never done the Eiffel tower, and I never will. I want to be amongst the real Parisians, I want to eat where they eat, and I want to explore.

"Like the time we were walking down this narrow little street in the Latin Quarter in Paris, and all of a sudden this vista opens in front of us, and there's a staircase leading to an amazing courtyard with flowers and cobblestones."

But Zielinski explains that one clear distinction between the *flâneur* and the tourist is that you must not be following a guidebook or a map, either in hardcopy or on your phone.

"Technology is such a big part of our lives, so it's easy to live your life



vicariously through your phone and miss out on so much, but life is happening around you, it's not happening in your phone," she says.

The idea of the flâneur is not about simply following directions and finding the next tourist attraction, she says. "It's about finding something that people don't see in general, because they stick to those major routes. It's about getting away from the crowds and exploring the hidden gems."

Dr Joe Hardwick, a lecturer in French language and culture at the University of Queensland, explains that when the flâneur emerged in the 19th century, it was during a time of rapid change due to the industrial revolution, the influence of modernity, and the introduction of timetables

IT'S ABOUT *GETTING AWAY FROM THE CROWDS AND EXPLORING THE HIDDEN GEMS*

and scheduling. Baudelaire's flâneur, he says, spent time walking through the streets of Paris to bear witness to this change.

"The flâneur is somewhat anachronistic, belonging to another time period

and not fitting in with modernity in some ways," Hardwick says. "Because the very slowness of what the flâneur does is out of practice, out of whack with the speed of modernity. I think that's probably even more the case now than in the 19th century... It's about being deliberately out of step with the fast pace of modern life."

It certainly feels out of the ordinary, indulgent even, to be wandering my own city on a weekday without a to-do list, or a purpose such as a work meeting to attend. Instead, I emerge from the bookshop where I

READER'S DIGEST

have spent an indeterminate amount of time lost in its aisles and let my feet choose their path. As I walk, I notice the city's frenetic workings all around me, including an inordinate number of cranes and construction sites. Clearly, Brisbane is shrugging off its 'big country town' label for good as it busily prepares to host the 2032 Olympic Games.

A few hours and blisters later, I realise that my time spent as a flâneur has slipped away more pleasantly and quickly than I could have anticipated. According to Zielinski, the art of flânerie is not just fun, it can be helpful in managing or preventing anxiety and stress, thanks to the employment of mindfulness.

"Flânerie allows you to be creative, it allows you to just immerse yourself in something completely different, and take notice of what's around you," she says. "When you're ambling, you've got the time, you've got the space, and you've got the intention of just noticing what's around you.

There'll always

be something new to observe, whether it's the architecture or the flowers, Zielinski says. And it's not just a visual thing – "you're listening and you're smelling and you're feeling the sun on your skin, and the texture of the road under your feet."

Zielinski says that mindfulness is about exploring your senses one by one, or even sometimes in combination. "It's about being in the moment with what's around you, and noticing

it and sensing it and experiencing it."

I notice that my feet have carried me to the city's botanic gardens, and I ponder how I seem to be inextricably drawn to my two favourite things – books and nature – even on an unplanned outing in a large city.

And unplanned is the operative word – both Zielinski and

Hardwick believe that being a flâneur requires you to act on the spur of the moment, explore, seek out the unfamiliar, not watch the clock or check your phone, and be curious. Perhaps even get lost.

"There's that novelty and excitement and

FLÂNERIE ALLOWS YOU TO BE CREATIVE, *IT ALLOWS YOU TO IMMERSE YOURSELF* IN SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT



On Becoming A Flâneur


interest that just ambling through somewhere you're not familiar with allows you to experience," Zielinski says. "And there's so much joy in just stumbling across a little treasure."

I discover a little treasure myself in the far reaches of the gardens – a quiet café in the historic groundskeepers' cottage, serving coffee that I don't have to slurp hurriedly from a take-away cup, but can instead take the time to sit and sip and watch the rest of the world go by.

Slipping my phone into my bag to avoid temptation, I instead watch people: joggers rush past, some with personal trainers haranguing them from behind, and couples stroll along with pampered pooches straining at their leads. There are academics from the nearby university seated at tables near me, hunched over laptops. I look up at the palms that dot the gardens, and I'm amused to see a lone ibis bird sitting atop one, gazing serenely at the cityscape before her. Driven out

of her natural environment of inland wetlands due to drought and habitat degradation, the ibis now calls the city home. She appears to enjoy people watching, too.

My attention is then caught by an avenue of jacaranda trees flushing purple. A sign explains that jacarandas first arrived in Australia in 1864 on a ship from South America that docked at the Brisbane wharves across the river. Like the ibis, the trees have seemingly flourished in their new environment.

I am a witness to all of this, I realise. I observe the changes and notice that some things never seem to change. I watch as modern life rushes by, as people jostle to get to work, as the city swells in size, and as nature changes and adapts to anything humans throw at them. Tomorrow, I will be just as they are – scheduled, busy, preoccupied. But today, today I am a flâneur. Perhaps I'll order another cup of coffee. 



Musky Scent

One of the world's richest men, Elon Musk, has scented a new opportunity to capitalise on quirky products, launching a 'repugnant-smelling' perfume called 'Burnt Hair' that he claims sold 30,000 bottles to earn a million dollars in just a few hours. "With a name like mine, getting into the fragrance business was inevitable – why did I even fight it for so long!?" Musk asked on Twitter. Previous brainwaves have included Tesla's own-brand tequila, and a pair of 'short shorts' to signify Musk's victory over stock investors who bet against his electric vehicles. REUTERS