

Paris: Barefoot In The Parks

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

American Way - Sojourns

Magnifique, another foolish French institution bites the dust - grass, or not walking on it, that is.

For the past few hundred centuries, an ancient Napoleonic law has prohibited Parisians from prancing on the city's perfectly manicured lawns. Those who had the temerity to ignore the red-and-blue warning signs incurred a cranky chorus of hand-waving, whistle-blowing park police.

French parks, an intricate world of topiaries, fountains, and flower beds bisected by symmetrical paths and perfectly placed benches, sprang up in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From Bagatelle to Butte-Chanmont, aristocrats strolled, writers wrote prose, and lovers carried on trysts within the confines of these verdant oases. But neither revolution nor riots managed to undo the Draconian landscape decree that prohibited tiptoeing upon city greenery.

Last spring, however, Paris officials finally capitulated to the demands of Frisbee tossing tourists and office-bound urbanites. With the exception of Paris' three most prominent parks (the Tuileries, Luxembourg, and Palais-Royal), the city's 416 garden spots are experiencing a liberation of Parisian lawns.