

STREET SMART

A visit to Belleville rewards with fine Pho – and gorgeous graffiti, writes Ruby Boukabou.

Main image: Stencil graffiti by Nemo.
Photo: © Paris Tourist Office/Amélie Dupont
Inset: Work on Rue Dénoyez.
Photo: Julien Thonnard



The Belleville area in Paris's 19th arrondissement is not just famous for its Vietnamese noodle soups; there are also elephants, red balloons, a white ghost and a multicoloured spaceship. And most of the locals love these unconventional masterpieces.

'The haphazard topography of Belleville means there are lots of hidden and enticing urban canvasses for street artists,' says Paris-based illustrator Sarah Wilkins, originally from New Zealand (www.sarahwilkins.net). 'It's an immediate platform for social commentary.' Wilkins' own mural (on 108 rue Pierre Timbaud) was commissioned back in the 1990s, and reflects the area's rich multiculturalism.

But the first port – or laneway – of call for any urban art seeker should be rue Dénoyez, a 50-metre walk uphill from the Belleville station of the Paris Métro.

'Rue Dénoyez is covered and re-covered with new graffiti every day,' explains Julien Thonnard, a local who started photographing Belleville street art two years ago and now boasts a collection of over 5000 snaps. 'There are mosaics, stencils, inventive tags – even the flower pots have become pieces of art.'

Jef Aerosol, Miss-tic, Jérôme Mesnager, Space Invader, Zeus and Belleville Zoo Project are among the names to check. Nemo is another – look for his classic stencilled images of red balloons, black cats and picture-book boats, which he originally created for his children in the 1980s.

'Since *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) and its portrayal of [British graffiti artist] Banksy, a new public has opened up to street art,' says Thonnard. Many artists' works can be purchased in Belleville, including at rue Dénoyez galleries Frichez Nous la Paix (run by an artists' association), La Maison de la Plage, and Art Cru, dedicated to stencil art. Not in Belleville, but worth a visit for its street art, is Galerie Onega, at 60 rue Mazarine in the 6th arrondissement.

For more open-air discoveries, climb uphill towards the Belleville Park with its Paris panorama, stopping for a break in neighbouring Ménilmontant for a picnic in the park.

Or how about a Pho?