

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Paris

In This Chapter

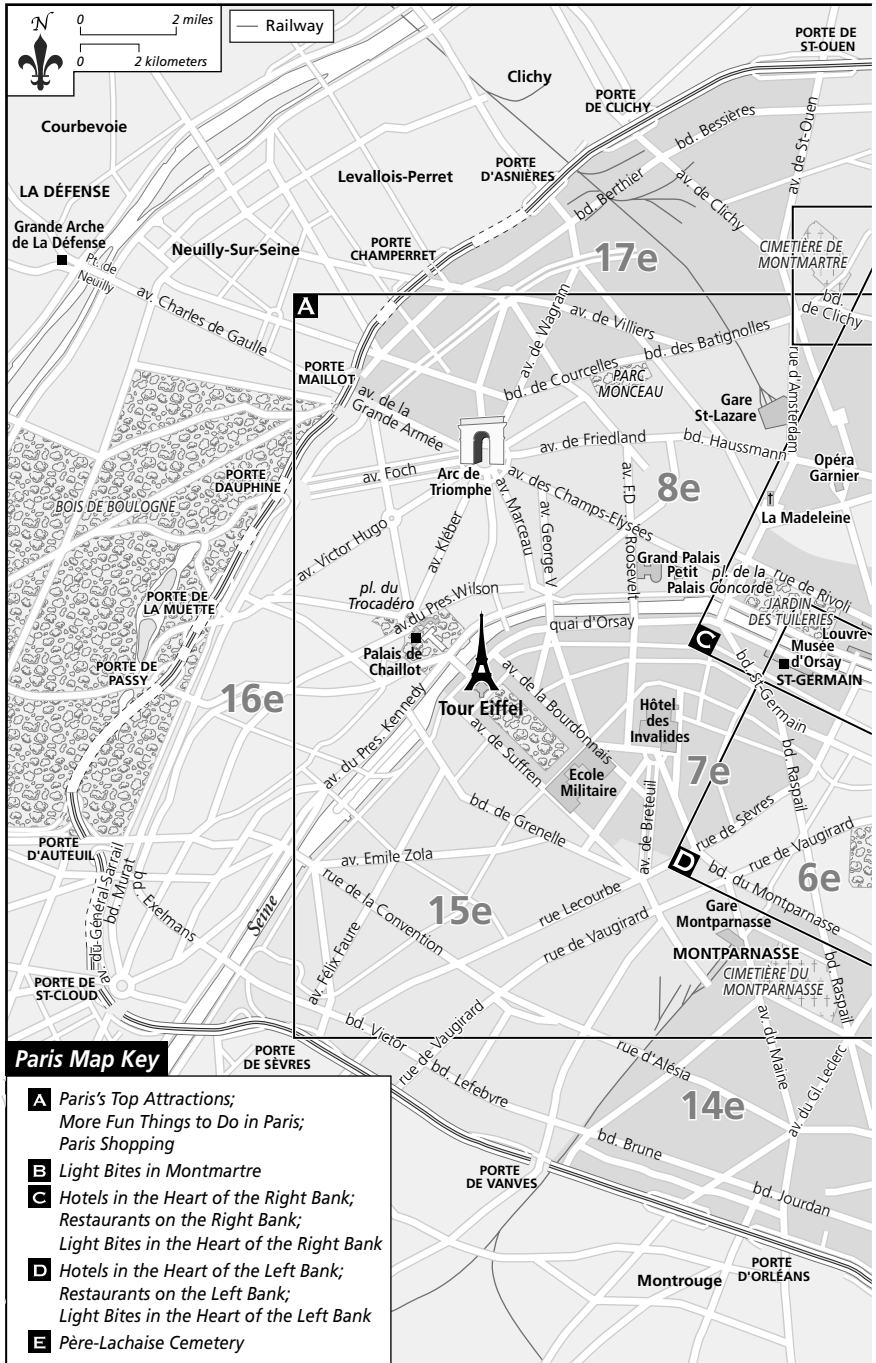
- ▶ Unveiling Paris's best sights
 - ▶ Discovering Paris's best accommodations for every price range
 - ▶ Indulging in glorious food, the best bars, a shopping nirvana, and the best culture, parks and gardens
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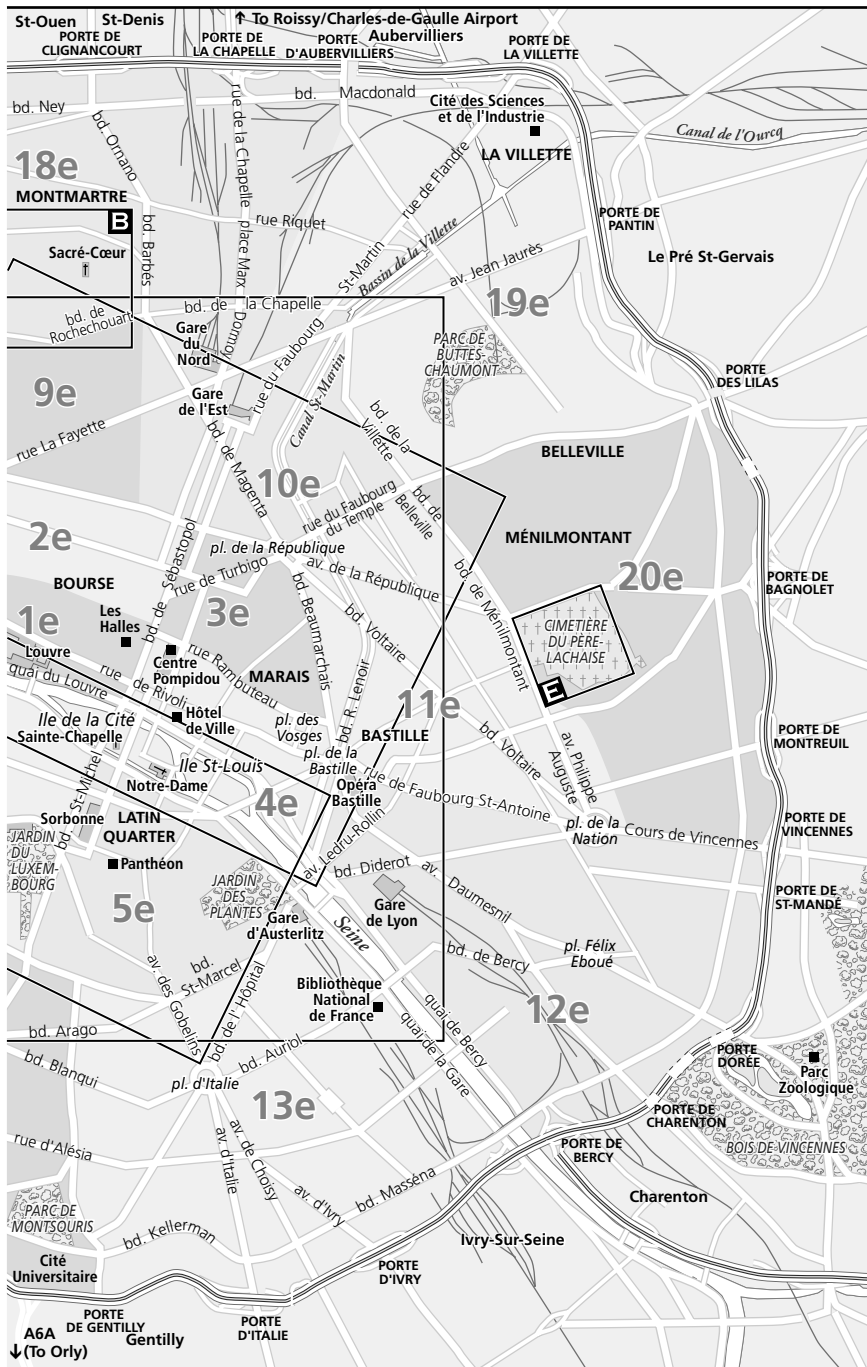
Congratulations on choosing to visit one of the most beautiful and magical cities on the planet! With so much to do and see, you're probably wondering what you should do first, and frankly, what's a waste of time. You may be concerned that you don't speak French, and that a language barrier may prevent you from doing some of the things you'd like. If this is your first visit to Paris, you know you want to taste the delicious food for which the country is renowned. But facing the choice of so many different types of French cuisine — Provençal, Lyonnaise, Corsican, Alsatian, Basque, classic, and more — might be enough to make you want to stick to tried-and-true McDo (pronounced *mac doh*; French for McDonald's) and just have a cup of wine with your fries.

Take it easy. Know up front that, much as you'd like, you simply won't be able to do, see, and taste it all. Avoid the Griswold syndrome (think of the family in the movie *European Vacation* who rush to see all of Paris and suffer the consequences!), and take in what could be Paris's greatest attraction of all: a way of life in which relaxing in a cafe and watching the world go by are natural parts of the day. Bring a phrase book, but keep in mind that Parisians are much more eager to speak English with visitors than they were even a few years ago, especially with those visitors who make an effort to try speaking French first. After you realize that you don't have to tour to exhaustion, you can appreciate Paris the way it was intended to be enjoyed — in parks, on bridges, and along streets meant for strolling and exploring.

You'll discover that the **Louvre** Museum is as incredible as its reputation and that the views from the **Eiffel Tower** are stunning — but did you know that the views from the terrace of department store **Samaritaine**

Paris at a Glance





also are pretty spectacular? You'll find that taking a **boat tour of the Seine** is one of the best ways to see Paris, but rowing a boat in the **Bois de Boulogne's Grand Lac** can be much more personal. Whatever you do, you'll quickly discover that Paris (see the "Paris at a Glance" map) is more of an experience than merely a city, and each visitor experiences it in an entirely individual way.



This chapter is designed as an at-a-glance reference to the absolute best — the Best of the Best — that Paris has to offer. Each of these experiences and places are discussed in detail later in the book; you can find them in their indicated chapter, marked with a Best of the Best icon.

The Best Accommodations

With more than 2,200 places to rest your head in Paris — chain hotels, deluxe, palace-like accommodations, hotels that cater to business travelers, budget hotels, and mom-and-pop establishments — it's difficult to narrow things down to just a few. But the hotels here are the hotels to which, in my opinion, you'll want to return on your next visit (because no one can see Paris just once!). See Chapter 9 for more information on the accommodations I list here.

- ✔ **Hôtel Minerve** (5e) is a welcoming budget, kid-friendly hotel in the Latin Quarter. Rooms are decent-sized and have wood-beamed ceilings, exposed stone walls, carved mahogany wood furnishings, and ten have large balconies with a table and chairs overlooking rue des Ecoles, just around the corner from the Cluny Museum, a true Paris treasure.
- ✔ For a just a few more euros, you can stay at the pretty **Hôtel de Seine** (6e) in St-Germain-des-Près. Each room is distinctly decorated with either French provincial furniture and flowered wall-paper or Provence-inspired jewel-toned paint and Louis XVI-era reproductions. Located on a street full of art galleries, it's a few blocks from the Seine and the pedestrian bridge Pont des Arts that leads to the Louvre.
- ✔ Have the autonomy of an apartment with the amenities of a hotel at the **Citadines Prestige Haussmann Aparthotel** (8e). Part of a chain, Citadines Haussmann has 24-hour reception desks, satellite TV, and housekeeping services, as well as kitchenettes with dishware (if you prepare only a few of your dinners here you can save a bundle on your dining budget). Located near Galeries Lafayette and Au Printemps and within walking distance of the Champs-Élysées, the Madeleine church, and parc Monceau, this is one of the chain's most luxurious featuring rare wood furnishings and granite bathrooms.
- ✔ Celebrate special occasions and bask in the privacy of the gorgeous deluxe **Pavillon de la Reine** (4e) right off place des Vosges. Rooms are simply divine: from the large standard rooms decorated with gingham wallpaper and Louis XIII-style furniture, to superior duplex

rooms in which modern beds are located in a loft above a cozy sitting room with comfortable chairs and couches, to suites with four-poster beds and beamed ceilings opening onto the courtyard. You'll find all amenities here. For these prices you can have the extravagant splendor of one of Paris's palace hotels, but Pavillon de la Reine's intimate surroundings are just as appealing.

The Best Food

Mmmmmmm — Paris has some of the world's best restaurants and some of the tastiest regional dishes on the planet. It's no question that one of the greatest things about visiting Paris is finding out for yourself what a high-quality meal *à la française* can be. The following list contains some of my favorite restaurants (the information in parentheses indicates the arrondissement in which each establishment is located). See Chapter 10 for more information on the restaurants listed here.

- ✔ **Ze Kitchen Galerie (6e):** This art gallery and kitchen serving melt-in-your-mouth Asian-inspired dishes has become so popular that First Lady Laura Bush even paid it a visit. The menu is broken down into four parts: soup, raw (usually fish), pasta, and grilled (*à la plancha*), and the innovative combination of flavors and the trendy atmosphere makes this restaurant a memorable one.
- ✔ **L'Ébauchoir (12e):** A mural pays homage to the workers of the neighborhood in this well-worth-the-search restaurant in a part of the Bastille often overlooked by tourists. The superb yet homey food harkens back to the neighborhood's working-class roots.
- ✔ **Le Cinq (8e):** This three-Michelin-starred restaurant in the Four Seasons George V is truly extraordinary from exquisite pull-out-all-the-stops food to its award winning sommelier and fantastic wine cellar. Dining here is a sumptuous experience!
- ✔ **Chanterelle (5e):** The owners try mightily to make you feel as if you're visiting their home in the Auvergne, the rugged, pastoral south-central region of France. Little fonts contain essential oils made from native plants; a sound system incorporates native bird-song, rain, and church bells; and the door even says "moo" when you walk in. The peasant food is hearty and delicious; there's even a terrific vegetarian cheese, mushroom, and egg tart on the menu.
- ✔ **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon (7e):** You can't make reservations at this, one of Paris's hottest restaurants, so get there right as it opens for simple, exquisite French and Asian fusion food where the ingredients are the real stars. Seating is at a 40-person sushi bar that wraps around the open kitchen to give diners a "behind the line" experience. The food here is absolutely divine; the chef was France's most famous before he retired in the late 1990s. This restaurant is his first post-retirement effort — which has truly paid off!

The Best Sights

For most people, the real reason for visiting Paris is to see the quintessentially French attractions for which the city is known. Are the sights really as great as returning travelers say? Yes, yes, and yes. Here are just a few of the best. See Chapter 11 for more information on the sights listed here.

- ✔ The **Eiffel Tower** graces the city skyline with its lacy presence and twinkles for ten minutes each hour at night with some 30,000 bulbs installed in 2003. Upon its completion in 1889, it was the tallest human-built structure in the world. People have climbed it, bungee-jumped from it, and cycled down the tower's steps, but hopefully you'll be content just to enjoy its views!
- ✔ Take a **tour boat down the Seine** and see the towers of Notre-Dame highlighted against the sky; at night, lights from bridges older than the United States cast reflections in the water. English-language commentary is included.
- ✔ **The Musée d'Orsay** is the world's best-renovated train station! Take a moment at the top of the central staircase to envision where trains once pulled into the station under the curved roof. Then enjoy this wonderful museum's real claim to fame — its unsurpassed collection of Impressionist masterpieces (and a terrific collection of Art Nouveau pieces).
- ✔ When you catch your first glimpse of the nearly 900-year-old **Cathédrale de Notre-Dame**, it just may take your breath away. Flying buttresses lend a graceful air to what would otherwise be an imposing structure. Play Quasimodo and climb to the top of the bell tower (get there early — the lines grow huge from late morning through closing) or marvel at the gorgeous rose windows and reflect on its history that included crusaders praying here before leaving for the holy wars, Napoléon crowning himself and his wife emperor and empress of France, and General de Gaulle rushing here to give thanks after the liberation of Paris.
- ✔ The **Arc de Triomphe** is the largest triumphal arch in the world, commissioned by Napoléon to honor his army and its 128 victorious battles, but the real reason people visit is for the view — one that takes in the Eiffel Tower. From the top, 162 feet up, you can see in a straight line the Champs-Élysées, the obelisk in the place de la Concorde, the Louvre, and the Grande Arche de la Défense in St-Denis, a giant open cube built to be the modern equivalent to this arch.
- ✔ Every phase of Picasso's prolific 75-year career is represented at the **Musée Picasso**, which includes more than 200 paintings, nearly 160 sculptures, 88 ceramics, and more than 3,000 prints and drawings. All of it is housed in a beautiful 17th-century mansion deep in the Marais, one of Paris's best neighborhoods.

- ✔ The **Musée Nationale d'Auguste Rodin** has to be one of Paris's most relaxing museums. After taking in the sensual sculptures displayed in the beautiful former convent, stroll through the gardens here to see more of the legendary artist's masterpieces like *The Thinker* and *The Gates of Hell*.

The Best Parks and Gardens

From flowers, plants, and city views to puppet shows, pony rides, and museums, Paris has parks for every taste and interest. Here are some of its best. Chapter 11 has more information

- ✔ The **Jardin des Tuileries** (1er) is Paris's most visited park and a great place to rest your feet and catch some rays on conveniently placed wrought-iron chairs surrounding the garden's fountains. In keeping with the French style of parks, trees are planted according to an orderly design and the sandy paths are arrow straight. During the summer, a carnival features an enormous Ferris wheel (with great views of the city), a log flume, fun house, arcade-style games, and snacks.
- ✔ Relax with Parisians in their most beloved park, the **Jardin du Luxembourg** in the Latin Quarter. Children love it for its playground, pony rides, puppet theater, and the Fontaine de Médicis where they can sail toy boats. You can make use of tennis and boules courts (*boules* is a French game similar to lawn bowling and the Italian *bocce* in which players try to be the first to roll their balls closest to the small object ball called the *cochonnet*) or appreciate the art exhibited on the wrought iron fence at the garden's northwestern entrance near boulevard St-Michel and rue de Médicis.
- ✔ **Parc de la Villette** (19e) is a modern park with a series of theme gardens, including an exotic bamboo garden and a garden featuring steam and water jets. Scattered throughout the park are playgrounds and other attractions — this is a must-visit if you've spent time at the huge children's science complex, **Cité des Sciences et l'Industrie**.
- ✔ Located in the Bois de Boulogne on Paris's western edge, the **Parc de la Bagatelle** (16e) is perhaps the city's loveliest park, known for its flower and thematic gardens. A water lily pond pays homage to a certain famous painter (think Monet), and you can visit a chateau and an *orangerie* (a hothouse where oranges and other tropical fruit are grown) where Chopin concerts are held during the summer. But the highlight is the rose garden with 10,000 roses of 1,200 varieties, most of them peaking in June.
- ✔ **Parc Monceau** in Paris's upscale 8th arrondissement, was one of *Remembrance of Things Past* author Marcel Proust's favorite haunts. In the 19th century, he strolled among such oddities as the Dutch windmill, a Roman temple, a covered bridge, a waterfall, a farm,

medieval ruins, a pagoda, and Paris's largest tree, an Oriental plane — all still here.

- ✓ Rock formations and grottoes in the tranquil **Parc de Belleville** (20e) are still around from the days when the hill was a strategic point for fighting Attila the Hun. Watch the sun set over western Paris and take in the wonderful (free!) views of the city. Topped by the **Maison de l'Air**, a museum with displays devoted to the air that we breathe, you can enjoy fountains, a children's play area, and an open-air theater with rock concerts during the summer.

The Best Shopping

An upswing in France's economy and a favorable euro-to-dollar rate has seen many new stores open and others expand. The city has a well-deserved reputation as a bastion of over-the-top luxury. All you have to do to understand why is head for the 8th arrondissement. But discount, re-sale, and overstock stores also abound. Whenever I'm in Paris, a visit to the following stores is a must. See Chapter 12 for more information on the stores listed here.

- ✓ **Monoprix** is a reasonably-priced department store with branches around the city that has stylish and reasonably-priced clothing and is also great for accessories, low-priced cosmetics, lingerie, and housewares. Many locations also have large grocery stores. The one at 52 av. du Champs-Élysées (8e) is chock-full of goodies.
- ✓ **Le Bon Marché** (6e) is Paris's only Left Bank department store. Elegant, but small enough to be manageable, much of the store's merchandise is exquisite; The third floor is particularly renowned for its large shoe selection and lingerie department (where dressing rooms have phones to summon your salesperson!).
- ✓ Although it isn't cheap, Le Bon Marché's next-door grocery store, **Le Grand Épicerie** (6e) is one of the best luxury supermarkets in Paris and a great place to look for gourmet gifts such as olive oils, home-made chocolates, or wine. It makes for wonderful one-stop picnic shopping, too, offering a wide array of prepared foods and cheeses.
- ✓ Bi-level gift shop **La Chaise Longue** (3e) is simply bursting at the seams with cool gifts such as silver cufflinks in the shape of computer mice, dinnerware, designer teapots, three-dimensional picture frames, and glasses, among many, many other things. It's reasonably priced and open on Sunday.
- ✓ **Du Pareil au Même** is *the* store to buy clothes for every child on your list — clothes are practical, *très mignons* (very cute), and very reasonably priced.
- ✓ **Déhillierin** is for amateur and professional chefs alike — filled with high-quality copper cookware, glasses, dishes, china, gadgets, utensils, ramekins, and pots — all at a discount.

The Best of Culture

With more than 100 theaters, competing opera houses, ballet at the **Opéra Garnier** and chamber music concerts in many churches, getting “cultured” is not a problem in Paris. Even if your French is rusty or not up to par, many avant-garde productions and English-language theaters serve as alternatives to French-language plays. In this section, I list some of the best places to see theater, watch a ballet, or hear a symphony. See Chapter 15 for more information.

- ✔ You can see dazzling performances by the national opera and ballet troupes that perform at both the radiant **Palais Garnier** (9e) and the ultramodern **Opéra National de Bastille** (11e). The Palais Garnier conducts more ballet performances, and the Opéra Bastille puts on more opera.
- ✔ A good mix of modern and classic tragedies and comedies comes alive in wonderful performances in the **Salle Richelieu** of the **Comédie-Française**, 2 rue de Richelieu, 1er.
- ✔ For popular, contemporary plays, the **Théâtre National de Chaillot**, place du Trocadéro (16e) is your place.
- ✔ Whatever your choice of the classic arts — opera, ballet, concerts, recitals — you’ll find it performed at the **Châtelet, Théâtre Musical de Paris** (1er) by local and international performers of the highest caliber.
- ✔ For comedy in English, try **Laughing Matters**, in the historic Hôtel du Nord (10e). This company is thriving, and the lineups are always terrific, featuring award-winning comics from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia.
- ✔ More than a dozen Parisian churches regularly schedule relatively inexpensive organ recitals and concerts. The most glorious, where the music is nearly outdone by the glorious stained glass windows, is **Sainte-Chapelle** (4e).

The Best Clubs

Paris is a perpetual party, and each neighborhood makes a different contribution to the nightlife scene. Listed here are some of the best places to dance the night away. See Chapter 16 for more information.

- ✔ **Barrio Latino** (11e) has three bars, private areas where you can see (but not be seen), a lounge complete with pool table, a second floor restaurant serving Latino food, a top-floor private club with a kitschy Che Guevara mural, and energetic Latin music that sets everyone to dancing. It’s pure fun!

- ✔ **Batofar** (13e), an Irish light ship docked right in the Seine, is one hot, sweaty, and ultimately fun time right on the Seine, with all types of music represented, from drum-and-bass to British pop.
- ✔ **Elysée Montmartre** (18e) serves the dual function of disco and major concert hall, and is home to twice-monthly nights that pull in more than 1,000 clubbers. Dance music is usually house; the monthly *bals musettes* (dances) usually have live local bands.
- ✔ **Le Wax's** (11e) decor is very *Clockwork Orange*, with plastic bubbles on the walls, yellow plastic couches, and lots of crimson and orange. The music is house, and best of all, it's free.
- ✔ **La Nouvelle Java** (10e) is where Edith Piaf made her debut and is said to be the oldest club in Paris. Here you dance with a diverse crowd of Cuban and Brazilian music lovers.
- ✔ **La Locomotive** (18e) is a huge, tri-level space where people dance to rock, heavy metal, and techno. Check out the basement, the coolest of the three levels, where you can see the remnants of an old railway line.
- ✔ **Rex** (2e) opened in 1992 and is still going strong. It has been one of the most popular clubs — if not *the* club — for house and techno music with Paris's best sound system and its most famous DJ, Laurent Garnier.
- ✔ **Le Pulp** (2e) is one of Paris's hippest lesbian clubs where all are welcome. Reminiscent of a 19th-century French music hall, this venue is très cool, with all types of cutting-edge music.