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Paris: An Introduction

THE VERY WORD “PARIS” CONJURES UP SUCH A POTENT BREW OF IMAGES and ideas that it is sometimes hard to find the meeting point between myth and reality. There is no doubt that it is a magnificent city, worthy of all the superlatives that have been heaped upon it for centuries. Its graceful streets, soaked in history, really are as elegant as they say; its monuments and museums really are extraordinary; and a slightly world-weary, *fin-de-siecle* grandeur really is part of day-to-day existence. But this is also a city where flesh and blood people live and work, where wheels turn, and there is a palpable urban buzz. Museums are lovely, but no one wants to live in one. Paris is so much more than a beautiful assemblage of buildings and monuments; it is the pulsing heart of the French nation. This is no exaggeration: not only is it the capital of the country, if you include the suburbs, it is the home of 18% of the population. The majority of all French jobs are to be found here; Paris is France’s financial, artistic, and cultural center. In

“When Paris sneezes, Europe catches cold.”

—Prince Metternich (1773–1859),
Austrian statesman.

short, in terms of importance on a national scale, Paris is a little like New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles all rolled into one.

Not all that long ago, Paris was not only the navel of France but the shining beacon of Europe. All the continent’s greatest minds and talents clamored to come here: the

city seduced Nietzsche, Chopin, Picasso, and Wilde, just to name a few. Since the end of World War II, the city has lost some of its global luster—other countries and other capitals have since stolen a lot of its thunder, and there is a certain wistfulness in the air. If you speak with Parisians, you’ll hear a lot of moaning about France’s place in the world and whether or not globalization is a good thing; behind the hand-wringing are some very legitimate concerns about a disappearing way of life.

But despite these concerns, or maybe because of them, Paris is still a bastion of the best of French culture. The culinary legacy alone is enough to fill several books; you can eat your way to nirvana in the city’s restaurants, gourmet food stores, and bakeries (see chapter 4). The architecture ranges from the lavish opulence of place Vendôme, (p. 149) to the contemporary madness of Musée Quai Branly, (p. 147). And speaking of museums, some of the world’s greatest are here, including the legendary Louvre (p. 139). And let’s not even get into the city’s concert halls, night spots, parks, gardens, and cafes—at least not just yet. In the pages to come you’ll find ample resources for the above and more. Even if you have time to see only a fraction of what you’d like to see, in the long run, it really won’t matter; what counts is that you’ll have been to Paris, sampled its wonders, and savored the experience—and that counts for a lot.

Don't Always Believe What You Read in the Papers

In 2005 and 2006, an extraordinary amount of ink was spilled about the supposed dangers of visiting France. First there were the riots, complete with vivid images of cars burning and rocks flying. Then there was the avian flu and the fear of a global pandemic. Finally, there were the student protest marches, featuring videos of angry young people roaming the streets. Without minimizing the seriousness of what happened, as someone who has been living here for several years, I'd like to point out that a lot of the overseas coverage of these events was highly sensationalized and often downright off-base. Most importantly for travelers, despite the nasty visuals, there was absolutely no risk to tourists visiting Paris. The riots happened in distant suburbs that would require a serious effort to get to, if for some reason you felt so inclined; the student marches were overwhelmingly peaceful, with one or two minor exceptions that were endlessly hyped; and unless you are partial to chicken sushi, eating poultry was never a problem, as the virus is passed through air-borne particles and cooking reduces the risk to zero. Granted, traveling in these crazy times is, unfortunately, more anxiety filled than it once was. But that doesn't mean there is danger lurking behind every corner cafe.

SIGHTS YOU'VE GOTTA SEE, THINGS YOU'VE GOTTA DO

Fortunately, the most obligatory Parisian sight, the **Eiffel Tower** (p. 128), is visible from many points in the city, so you don't really have to go out of your way to see it, though a trip to the top up to one of the observation decks really is a memorable experience. The cathedral of **Notre-Dame de Paris** (p. 129), one of Europe's most splendid examples of Gothic architecture, is a must-see, as are the exquisite stained glass windows of the nearby **Sainte Chapelle** (p. 133), a small, jewel-like church tucked into the buildings of the Palais de Justice. The **Seine** (see Walking Tours 1, p. 229), the river that divides the city into the Right and Left Banks, is an essential reference point for your visit, and a walk along its banks, or at least across one of its more lovely bridges, like the **Pont Neuf** or the **Pont des Arts**, is one of the finest ways of really "seeing" the heart of the city. A visit to at least one of the city's majestic *places*, or plazas, like the **place de la Concorde** (p. 134), or the **place des Vosges** (p. 147) is not just a treat for the eyes, but a trip back in time, to the days when kings used the urban environment as a way of expressing their power.

But Paris is not all monarchs and might, as a trip to **Montmartre** (see Walking Tour 3, p. 245) illustrates: this historically working-class, villagelike neighborhood nurtured some of the finest artists and writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And one shouldn't leave Paris without at least a short ramble in one of its famous gardens, such as the strictly symmetrical **Tuileries Gardens** (p. 214),

a masterpiece by legendary garden designer André Le Nôtre, or the **Jardin du Luxembourg** (p. 136), a stunning ensemble of fountains and flowerbeds.

THE CITY'S BEST MUSEUMS

The density of museums per capita is one of the highest in Europe. Paris has some 130 museums, many of which are world-class, including of course, the fairest of them all: the **Louvre** (p. 139). You could probably spend your entire trip here and not have seen all there is to see, but that would be a shame, since so many other wonderful museums just wait to bewitch you. The **Musée d'Orsay** (p. 141) has the best assemblage of Impressionist art on the planet; the **Musée Rodin** (p. 145) not only has a fabulous collection of the great sculptor's works, but one of the prettiest gardens in town; and the **Musée Jacquemart-André** (p. 146) offers a chance to revel in a stunning assortment of 18th-century French art and furniture, as well as an opportunity to visit a 19th-century mansion with its original decoration. The entire history of Paris is on display at the **Musée Carnavalet** (p. 150), housed in another fabulous mansion, this time a Renaissance *hôtel particulier* in the Marais; nearby another stately *hôtel* holds the **Musée Picasso** (p. 148), perhaps the finest collection of the artists' work ever assembled. They can't seem to stop building museums here—the most recent addition to the cultural landscape, the **Musée du Quai Branly** (p. 147) boasts an extraordinary collection of traditional arts from Africa, the Pacific Islands, Asia, and the Americas.

UNCOMMON LODGINGS

Many tourists feel the need to shoe-horn themselves into cramped hotel rooms in the very center of town, but because Paris is a relatively small city, there is actually no harm in staying a little farther out, where you'll find higher quality lodgings at lower prices. And by "lodgings" we're not necessarily talking about hotels—some of the best places to stay in Paris are in private apartments, hundreds of which can be rented out by the week. An airy artist's loft with original artwork near the Bastille that can accommodate a family of four or more could cost you less than a couple of tiny hotel rooms near the Louvre. Your choices are many: you could camp out in a one-bedroom flat with exposed beams in the middle of the Latin Quarter, or rent an enormous room with sky high ceilings and a private terrace in a mansion the Marais, or cuddle up in an antique-filled bedroom in a 19th century town house near the Grands Boulevards. You'll find resources for finding these sorts of alternative accommodations in chapter 3.

If you'd prefer to stay in a hotel, Paris has no lack of options, though I encourage you to stay away from the cookie-cutter chain hotel lodgings and opt for more original accommodations that reflect both the personality of the owners and of the city itself. At family run hotels like the **Hôtel Vivienne** (p. 40), **Hôtel Jeanne d'Arc** (p. 42), and the **Hôtel de l'Espérance** (p. 49), you'll enjoy a high comfort level at rates that are largely under 100€ per night. Small, off-beat hotels like **Hôtel Eldorado** (p. 68) and **Hôtel les Degrés de Notre Dame** (p. 45) offer unique decors created by local artists—lush colors, unusual mosaics, and interesting art objects are all part of the design. The owners of **New Orient Hôtel** (p. 60) and **Hôtel des Bains** (p. 65) are both inveterate flea-market browsers; the former have

personally refurbished the antique furniture in the rooms, while the latter uses unique objects from the local open-air arts and crafts market to perk up the decor.

For a sense of days of old (without old-fashioned inconveniences), **Hôtel St-Jacques** (p. 48), **Hôtel des Grandes Ecoles** (p. 50), and **Ermitage Hôtel** (p. 68), have all carefully, and tastefully, conserved historic detailing and decor. Some hotels manage to seamlessly blend the new and the old; **Hôtel Lindbergh** (p. 53), for example, has sleek modern rooms, designed by architect Jean-Philippe Nuel, with a vaguely Art Deco feel (and most doubles are only 116€).

For those looking for a clean, comfortable place to sleep that will go easy on the pocketbook, the **Tiquetonne Hôtel** (p. 40), **Hôtel du Séjour** (p. 41), **Port Royal Hôtel** (p. 50), and **Perfect Hôtel** (p. 61) are all excellent options, though you should be willing to forgo certain kinds of amenities, which may include elevators or in-room toilets. A step or two higher on the comfort scale, **Hôtel Chopin** (p. 62), **Hôtel du Champ de Mars** (p. 56), and **Hôtel Résidence Alhambra** (p. 63) are also terrific values.

DINING FOR ALL TASTES

As mentioned above, Paris is the promised land for traveling gourmets. What's more, you won't have to spend a fortune to eat well here—though you will need to know where to go. Do take advantage of the recent “neo-bistrot” trend; a bevy of top chefs, tired of the pressure of haute-cuisine, have opened dressed-down bistros where they can cook as they like (and where you can eat without getting a second mortgage). **Le Comptoir du Relais** (Yves de Camdeborde, p. 95) and **Café Constant** (Christian Constant, p. 100) are two excellent examples; other good ways to eat gourmet and let your bank account live to tell the tale include the Delacourcelle brothers' **Le Pré Verre** (p. 88) and Alain Ducasse's **Aux Lyonnais** (p. 82). But a good restaurant doesn't have to have a famous chef's name attached to it; you can eat extremely well at some lesser known places like **La Robe et Le Palais** (p. 78), **La Table d'Hélène** (p. 120), and **Au Bascou** (p. 86). Sometimes the decor is almost more of an event than the food; for the full-on Belle-Epoque experience, try **Le Train Bleu** (p. 115), or **Le Grand Colbert** (p. 82), both of which had supporting roles in films, *La Femme Nikita* and *Something's Gotta Give*, respectively. Personally, I have a thing for tiny, mom-and-pop operations—there's a certain authenticity in these establishments that simply can't be found anywhere else. **Le Rendez-Vous du Marché** (p. 94), **Chez Nenesse** (p. 87), and **Le Temps des Cerises** (p. 87) are all good examples of this genre. Finally, Paris is home to some of the best North African (Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian) restaurants in France, from the elegant **Mansouria** (p. 114), to the funky but fabulous **Chez Omar** (p. 85).

THE FINEST “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

Looking for ways to get off the heavily trampled tourist track? Put on a pair of roller blades and skate through the city with 10,000 or so other Parisians when **Pari Roller** (p. 208) takes to the streets on Friday nights. Or dance to the rhythms of Argentine Tango on the banks of the Seine on a moonlit summer night during **Paris Danse En Seine** (p. 204). Learn about French wine in a nonthreatening environment (and in English, yet) at **Ô Chateau** (p. 202) with Olivier Magny, a

young French sommelier. Now that you know about wine, learn about cooking with chef Marie Naël at her **Atelier Saveur et Savoir** (p. 201). Don't feel like cooking? Sign up for dinner at **Jim Haynes'** (p. 209), an American expatriate who has been welcoming strangers to his Sunday dinners since the days when bell-bottoms were considered a new innovation. For a more dressy—or make that dressed-up—party, drop by the **Taverne Medievale** (p. 210), where the Knights of St-Sabin welcome anyone dressed up in Medieval garb for feasting, music, and fun, in an ancient, but nicely renovated, stone cellar. Take a tour of a working tapestry factory that has been around since the days of Louis XIV, the **Manufacture des Gobelins** (p. 206), or visit artists' studios during **Portes Ouvertes** (p. 206). These and other out-of-the-ordinary activities are detailed in chapter 6, where you'll find many opportunities to see sides of the city that outsiders rarely have a chance to see, and, most importantly, to encounter real, live Parisians.