

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Paris

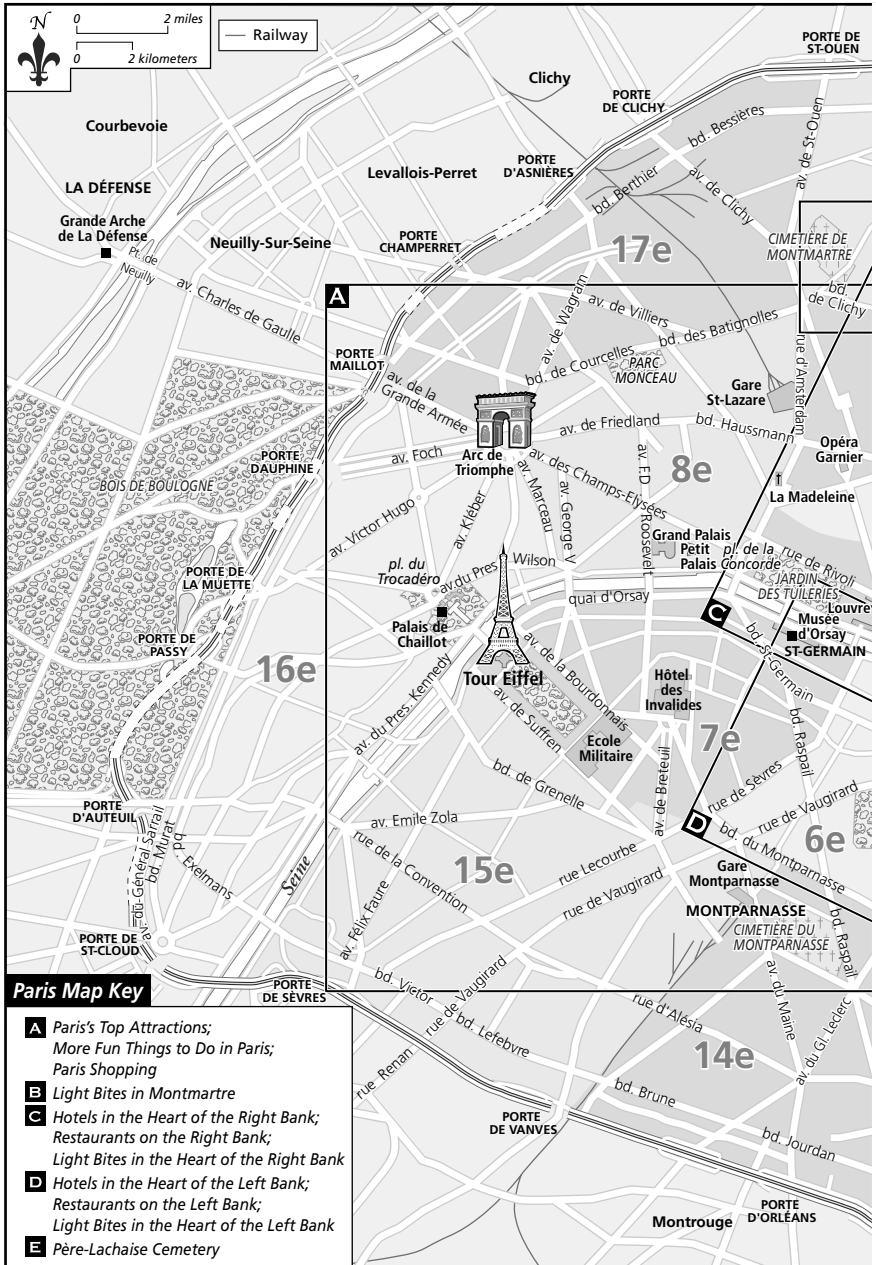
In This Chapter

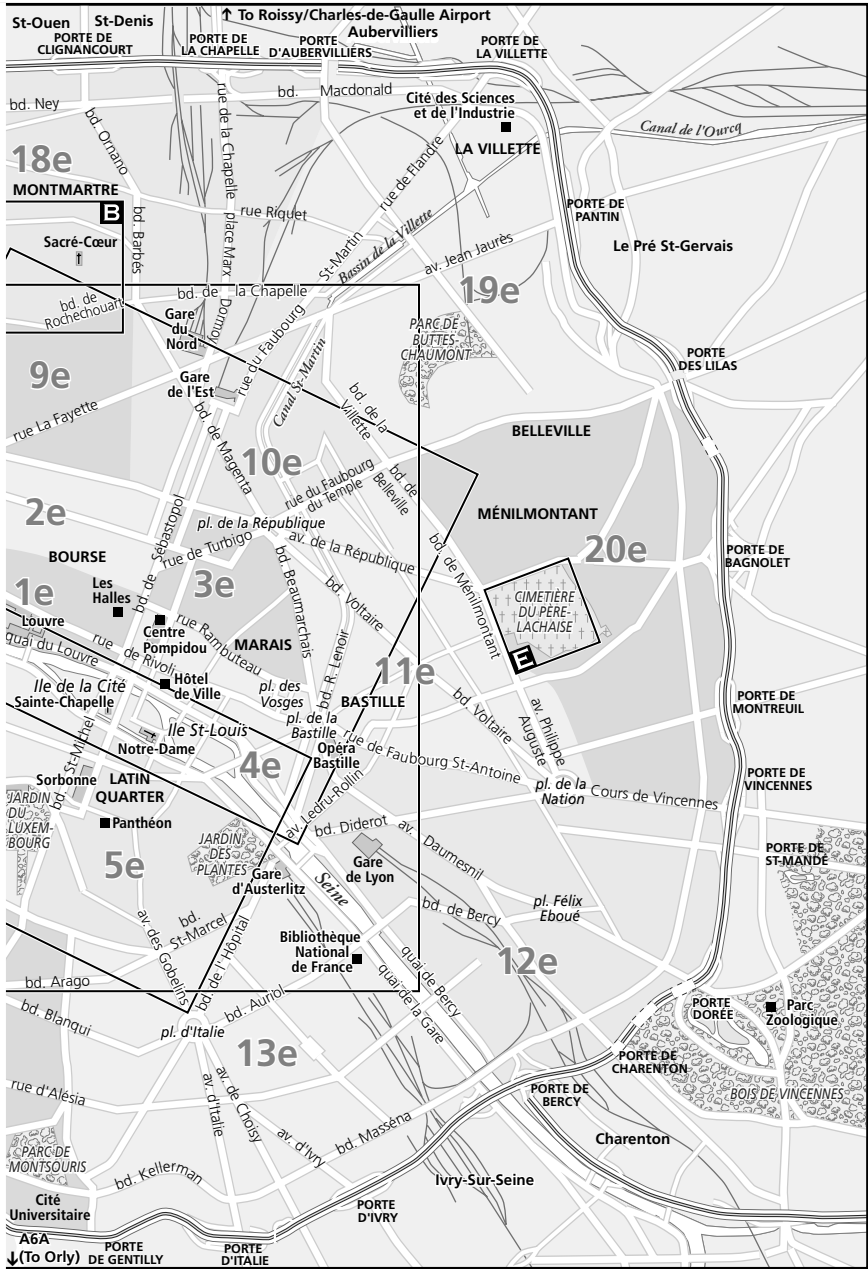
- ▶ Discovering Paris's best sights
 - ▶ Finding Paris's best accommodations for every price range
 - ▶ Indulging in glorious food, the best bars, a shopping nirvana, and the best culture, parks and gardens
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You've chosen one of the world's most beautiful and celebrated cities to visit — congratulations! There is so much to do and see that perhaps you feel a bit overwhelmed. Are you wondering what you should do first, and frankly, what's a waste of time? How long should you spend at the Louvre, and if you miss the Arc de Triomphe, will you always regret it? Are you concerned that a language barrier may prevent you from doing some of the things you'd like? Just how small are the hotel rooms at budget establishments? You know you want to taste the delicious food for which the country is renowned, but who knew there were so many types?

Three words: 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 "Griswold Syndrome" (think of the family in the movie *European Vacation* who rush to see all of Paris and suffer the consequences!), and enjoy 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. You'll discover that the **Louvre** Museum is as incredible as its reputation, but did you know that the **Musée du quai Branly** has opened up near the Eiffel Tower and displays some of the Louvre's former treasures? And what a great time to visit — the **Orangerie**, closed for nearly a decade, has reopened, and Monet's *Water Lilies* here are spectacular! You'll find that taking a **boat tour of the Seine** is one of the best ways to see Paris, but renting a bike for a few hours can take you to such places as the **Bois de Boulogne** and the **Bois de Vincennes**, two big, beautiful parks on each side of Paris that are a haven from the city's bustle. Whatever you do, you'll quickly discover that Paris (see map "Paris at a Glance") is more of an experience than merely a city, and each visitor experiences it in an entirely individual way.

Paris at a Glance







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 chain hotels, deluxe palacelike 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 that, in our opinion, you'll want to return on your next visit (because no one can see Paris just once!). We only list hotels in the first eight arrondissements, the most central locations in Paris. See Chapter 9 for more information on the accommodations listed here.

- ✔ We love the **Hôtel Minerve** (5e), a welcoming, budget, kid-friendly hotel in the Latin Quarter. With wood-beamed ceilings, exposed stone walls, carved mahogany wood furnishings and decent sizes, rooms are a great value and the location is terrific! (Ask for one of the ten balconied rooms complete with a table and chairs overlooking rue des Ecoles.) Just around the corner from the Cluny Museum, this is a true Paris treasure.
- ✔ Located on a street full of art galleries, the pretty **Hôtel de Seine** (6e) in St-Germain-des-Près is a few blocks from the Seine and the pedestrian bridge Pont des Arts that leads to the Louvre. For just a few more euro, you can stay in this hotel where each room is distinctly decorated with French provincial furniture and flowered wallpaper or Provence-inspired jewel-toned paint and Louis XVI-era reproductions.
- ✔ Rooms are simply divine at the gorgeous deluxe **Pavillon de la Reine** (4e) right off place des Vosges, and this is THE place to celebrate anniversaries or honeymoons. The large standard rooms are decorated with gingham wallpaper and Louis XIII-style furniture, superior duplex rooms have modern beds located in a loft above a cozy sitting room with comfortable chairs and couches, and suites boast four-poster beds and beamed ceilings and open onto the courtyard. You'll find all the 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

It's no question that one of the greatest things about visiting Paris is eating the delicious food! No matter where you decide to dine or what kind of food you choose, you can count on having some memorable

meals! The following list contains some of our 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.

- ✔ **Chez Casimir (10e):** This restaurant near the Gare du Nord and far from the more touristy sides of Paris packs in loyal customers because Chef Philippe Tredgeu works magic in his kitchen, cooking with ingredients he finds at the market that morning or the night before. This is French comfort food at great prices!
- ✔ **Le Cinq (8e):** We have never been disappointed in Le Cinq (when we can afford to eat here!). 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!
- ✔ **Chainternelle (5e):** You will feel as if you're visiting the Auvergne, the rugged, pastoral south-central region of France. Little fonts contain essential oils made from native plants; a sound system incorporates native birdsong, rain, and church bells; and the door even says "moo" when you walk in. A pretty, walled outdoor garden is a respite from Paris's bustle, and the peasant food is hearty and delicious.

The Best Sights

What's a visit to Paris without seeing the view from the Eiffel Tower? 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? Mais oui! Here are just a few of the best. See Chapter 11 for more information on the sights listed here.

- ✔ The city's most famous landmark, 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. 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** at night and see lights from bridges older than the United States cast reflections in the water. English-language commentary is included.
- ✔ **The Musée d'Orsay** has an unsurpassed collection of Impressionist masterpieces (and a terrific collection of Art Nouveau pieces). It's also 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.
- ✔ When you catch your first glimpse of the nearly 900-year-old **Cathédral 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.

- ✔ The **Arc de Triomphe** was 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, 49m (162 ft.) 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.
- ✔ The **Musée Picasso** constantly rotates its exhibits that represent every phase of Picasso's prolific 75-year career. All of it is housed in a beautiful 17th-century mansion deep in the Marais, one of Paris's best and most interesting neighborhoods.
- ✔ The **Musée Nationale d'Auguste Rodin** is one of Paris's more 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 such as *The Thinker* and *The Gates of Hell*.
- ✔ The **Musée de Cluny** is one of the jewels of Paris museums and is home to the famous tapestry series *The Lady and the Unicorn*. It houses ancient Roman hot and cold baths, the original statues pulled off Notre-Dame in 1790 by furious revolutionaries, and so, so much more, as well as a terrific gift shop to boot.

The Best Parks and Gardens

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

- ✔ The **Jardin des Tuileries** (1er) is Paris's most visited park, where visitors to the Louvre next door like to revive in the fresh air and rest their feet 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) and some other thrill rides, a fun house, arcade-style games, and snacks.
- ✔ The **Jardin du Luxembourg** in the Latin Quarter is Parisians' most beloved park. Children love it for its playground, pony rides, puppet theater, and the Fontaine de Médicis where they can sail toy boats. Make use of the tennis and *boules* courts (*boules* is a French game similar to lawn bowling or 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. Courses are offered here in bee keeping, and the park's orchard grows apples and pears that end up on the plates of staff at the French Senate, which is housed in the garden's Palais du Luxembourg.

- ✔ **Parc de la Villette** (19e) is a modern park with a series of theme gardens, including an exotic bamboo garden and one featuring steam and water jets. Scattered throughout 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**.
- ✔ 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 that holds rock concerts during the summer.

The Best Shopping

A favorable euro-to-dollar rate has seen many new stores open and others expand, though sadly, department store Samaritaine is closed for the next few years while it brings up to code its antiquated fire system. Though the city has a well-deserved reputation as a bastion of over-the-top luxury (to understand why, head for the 8th arrondissement), discount, resale, and overstock stores also abound, as well as the wonderful Monoprix (see below). Whenever we're in Paris, a visit to the following stores is a must. See Chapter 12 for more information on the stores listed here.

- ✔ **Monoprix**, a reasonably priced department store with branches around the city, has stylish clothing and is also great for accessories, low-priced cosmetics, lingerie, and house wares. Many locations also have large grocery stores good for gift buying. The one at 52 av. du Champs-Élysées, 8e, is chock-full of goodies and open until midnight.
- ✔ **Le Bon Marché** (6e) is elegant, but small enough to be manageable, and is the Left Bank's only department store. You can find the top designers here, as well as more affordable pieces, too, and the basement toy store has great gift selections. 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 Epicerie** (6e) is one of the best luxury supermarkets in Paris and a great place to look for gourmet gifts such as olive oils, homemade chocolates, or wine. It makes for wonderful one-stop picnic shopping, too, offering a wide array of prepared foods and cheeses. If you're staying in an apartment or your hotel has a kitchen for guests, come here to purchase fixings for dinner.
- ✓ **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.

The Best of Culture

Getting “cultured” is not a problem in Paris. There are more than 100 theaters, competing opera houses, and ballet and chamber music concerts in many churches. 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, we 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

Each neighborhood makes a different contribution to Paris's vibrant 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 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.
- ✔ At **Red Light** (15e) — with multiple raised platforms above the floor for those who dare to dance — you can see the trendiest kids in town wearing the newest fashions available.
- ✔ **Le Wax's** (11e) décor is very *Clockwork Orange*, with plastic bubbles on the walls, yellow plastic couches, and lots of crimson and orange. The bathrooms are very psychedelic, too, especially after your second drink.
- ✔ **Le Mix** (15e) boasts spinning provided by music gurus Ministry of Sound and David Guetta (a holy name among Parisian clubbers). Come groove with the fashionistas.
- ✔ **Le Pulp** (2e) used to be one of Paris's hippest lesbian clubs, but everyone comes here now. Reminiscent of a 19th-century French music hall, this venue is très cool, with all types of cutting-edge music.