

Two Americans in Paris

by Tom McCaleb

This year, my wife and travel companion, Lynda, and I traded our usual living-out-of-a-suitcase routine for a more settled existence with a week in Paris. Well, it's not quite as settled as our two months in Barcelona last year, but it's still more settled than most of our trips.

Unfortunately, as we discovered, it was the week of the Paris Air Show. You wouldn't think any single event could completely dominate the hotel market in a city the size of Paris, but it did. I had some difficulty finding a hotel room in the city at a "reasonable" price. Reasonable turned out to be north of \$300 a night, although admittedly I did upgrade to a larger room. Still, it was no luxury hotel—a perfectly acceptable, but also quite ordinary accommodation in Montmartre.

We had previously visited all the major tourist sites—Notre Dame, the Louvre, Musee d'Orsay, Saint-Chapelle, Eiffel Tower, Sacre Coeur. Our strategy for this trip was to spend time walking Paris neighborhoods with some day trips out of Paris. We found an outfit named "Paris Walks" on line; I highly recommend it. We took five of their tours with three different guides, all very good and two of them were not only highly informative but also hugely amusing. We walked through Montmartre, of course, but also St. Germain, the Left Bank or Latin Quarter, home to the Sorbonne, and the two islands (Ile de la Cite, the original Paris, now home to Notre Dame, and its upriver mate, Ile de St. Louis). We also took a walk through the 16th Arrondissement, a turn-of-the-(20th)-century neighborhood, that contains Paris's few specimens of Art Nouveau architecture.

There are numerous well-known paintings and photos of the traditional Art Nouveau Paris metro entrances. But we

learned on our tour of Montmartre that the entrance canopy at the Abbess metro stop is one of the few remaining original canopies, although its original location was the Hotel de Ville in the center city.



The Abbess canopy is unique in that it has a glass roof. We also learned that the movie *Amelie* (French with English subtitles) was filmed in Montmartre. After we returned home, even though we are not movie buffs, we found a copy in the library and watched it—strange movie, very French (whatever that means), I liked it, not so sure about Lynda.

A century or two ago, Montmartre was home to a number of working windmills, not surprisingly as it is truly a "mont". But the (in)famous Moulin Rouge was not one of them, even though it translates into "red windmill". However, it was inspired by the Moulin de Galette, a real working windmill further up the hill. A popular bistro grew up around the Moulin de Galette and it became famous as a subject for many impressionist and post-impressionist artists who spent time there. And finally, I learned that gypsum from Montmartre was the basis for a common paste known as (what else?) plaster of Paris.

On our Latin Quarter tour, we visited St. Severin's Church, perhaps the most interesting church in all Paris. It began in the 13th century, was burned and rebuilt in the 14th, and expanded over succeeding centuries. Viewing the interior from back to front allows one to see the evolution of architecture and building techniques through the centuries with changes in the columns and arches and the size, shapes, and design of the windows. The 19th century apse was built with the contributions of rich parishioners who paid to have their faces on the images of the saints in the stained glass windows.

Another interesting Parisian church is St. Julien le Pauvre, which sits on the Left Bank across the Seine from and within sight of Notre Dame. St. Julien was built at the same time as Notre Dame, using rejected materials from Notre Dame's construction. But in contrast with Notre Dame's then more modern, almost pure, Gothic style, St. Julien was built in the more traditional almost pure Romanesque style.

On our tour of the two islands, we came across a small building with ancient iron bars across the front. The bars were crowned with the shape of a grape vine, signifying that the building was in its 17th century heyday a wine bar (surprise, wine bars actually are not a 21st century yuppie invention). In the 17th century, the king decreed that all wine bars must have their facades protected by iron bars to prevent rowdy Parisians from becoming even rowdier. Today, the iron bars still exist even when the premises are no longer used by purveyors of drink because they are protected by historical preservation ordinances.



In St. Germain, we visited St. Sulpice Church, the second largest church in Paris, only slightly smaller than Notre Dame. It is especially famous because of its great pipe organ and its succession of famous organists. The prominent 20th century French composer, Marcel Dupre, was the organist for over thirty years. Before him, Charles-Marie Widor, composer of many well-known organ pieces, presided over St. Sulpice's organ for an astonishing sixty-three years, and Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély, also a noted composer for organ, served for six years.

St. Sulpice's south tower lacks the adornment of its north tower twin. That wasn't the original plan, but the south tower was never completed, and like the wine bars, it is now protected in its unadorned state by historical preservation

laws. If you like Roman columns, St. Sulpice is for you; the columns on the facade are stacked Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian in ascending order.



As I said earlier, in addition to our walking tours of Paris, we made several day trips out of the city. We had not previously been to Versailles, although it's a short, easy train ride from Paris. We arranged for an "extended" guided tour of the palace that included some areas not open to the general public as well as the public spaces. The palace is, of course, huge, sprawling, and magnificent—in fact, almost obscene.

As it was a Tuesday in June, the fountains in the gardens (they actually call it a park, and that is indeed a more apt description) were operating and piped-in music was playing throughout the gardens. At first, this hardly seemed to justify the extra fee for the day. But, after wandering for a while, we discovered an out-of-the-way set of fountains had been programmed to put on a water-cum-music show, a set of "dancing fountains" well worth the admission fee.

In the lake in the middle of the gardens, we spied a Chinese couple having wedding pictures made in a rowboat. Wedding pictures on location, so to speak, seem to be quite popular in China, most notably at the Great Wall, and in a riverside park in Yichang. It may not be much of a journey for couples in Yichang to bring themselves and their wedding clothes and their friends and the photographer and the photographer's assistant and all the photographer's

equipment to the park. It is something more to bring all that to the Great Wall, which is at least an hour removed from even the outskirts of Beijing (and the photographer has to carry the equipment uphill to the wall). But it really seems far-fetched to bring the clothes and the photographer and the equipment all the way to Versailles.

About an hour by train from Paris lies the town of Chartres, home to Chartres Cathedral, one of the finest examples of French gothic architecture. No doubt about it, the cathedral is an impressive sight, little changed from its 13th century architectural form. The cathedral is renowned for its stained glass windows, which have survived in their original form mostly intact. They are not to be missed if you're a stained glass window fan.

But the most impressive sight in Chartres is "Chartres en lumiere". During the summer, the facades of some twenty-nine buildings are illuminated with multi-colored lights, some with animated displays. The lighting takes place from dark (around 10:00 pm when we were there in late June) until 1:00 am. Without a doubt, the most spectacular is the cathedral. One segment of the cathedral show, displayed on the front façade, is a stylized animation of the construction of the cathedral itself. Little figures scramble up and down the wall, putting various pieces in place, which are then lit up as they are completed, until finally the entire façade is illuminated with "Chartres" spelled out across it. On the south transept wall, I watched a pipe organ being built to the tune of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D. Once the pipe organ was completed, the scene morphed into flowers, which in turn were transformed into the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. This was truly an amazing spectacle, well worth the extra money we paid to spend the night in Chartres while keeping our original hotel room in Paris.



Our last day trip was to Mont-St.-Michel. Mont-St.-Michel is on the Normandy coast, about a four-hour bus ride from Paris, but it is a pretty unique place. It is a high rock, once standing off-shore surrounded by water. Now, it is surrounded by mud, although work is being done apparently to excavate the mud and return the water. The abbey church is at the very top of the rock. The other abbey buildings are just below it, and the town winds around and down from the abbey to the sea. When it was a real working abbey, I suppose, it was a real working town. Today, it's a Disney-esque tourist attraction. Nevertheless, once you've seen all that Paris has to offer, Mont-St.-Michel is definitely worth a day's trip.

We concluded our summer vacation with a week in southern France on a Rhone river cruise, but that's a story for another time. I'll conclude my Paris saga with a few tips for tourists. Paris is big and sprawling, so public transit is often the best choice. The Paris metro is old and few of the stations are equipped with elevators or escalators. Changing trains requires lots of long walks and ascending and descending of steps. But buses, if slower, are frequent and you get to see some of the city above-ground, rather than the tunnels beneath.

As on our past visits, we found Paris to be a very English-friendly city, quite in contrast to its reputation. It helped occasionally that I could speak a bit of French, but it definitely was not essential, and generally, they understood my English much better than they understood my French (French with a Tidewater Virginia accent!). Even many cabbies and metro employees have some basic ability in English, and the French national railroad (SNCF) employees were very helpful and well-versed in English. However, announcements and signs—trains, historical sights, museums—are not in English so my basic reading knowledge of French did come in handy for that. But even Lynda, who knows no French, is often able to piece together the meaning of signs because, by my estimate, fifty percent or more of English words are derived from or clearly related to the French equivalent. So contrary to myth, if you want a foreign language that will help you with English, take French, not Latin.

Finally, I must recant my many previous negative comments about Charles de Gaulle Airport. I once said that Frankfurt was terrible, but I gave it a D because F was reserved for CDG. It is still a sprawling, complicated airport, but the signage is adequate, although it definitely helps to determine from the on-line websites where you need to go before you get there. On arrival, we breezed through passport control; even the Germans could learn from French efficiency in that department. It was a quick ride from the terminal to the CDG train station for a fast trip into the city and a short cab ride to the hotel—plane to the hotel in under 1.5 hours. So neither language nor transportation nor CDG is a barrier for two Americans to enjoy a week in Paris.