

# **A Garden in Paris**

## **Book of my heart. . . City of Lights**

### **My personal history with the City of Lights. . .**

It was early in the morning and I had fallen asleep on the tour bus. My friend nudged me and when I opened my eyes the first thing I saw was the Eiffel Tower. I cried. I was beginning a summer in France and there, in the distance, was the proof that finally my dream was coming true.

Taking French in high school was an easy decision. Our school only offered two languages and I chose the one I thought the "most romantic." And so began my life-long love of all things French. That first summer I was only in Paris for a long weekend during which I was one of twenty Americans following our professor through the city not unlike a gaggle of ducklings paddling in single file behind the "lead duck." In this case, the lead duck was Professor Max Delhomme, whom I would affectionately come to call "Papa." After Paris, I crossed France by train and spent a weekend at L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland where Mrs. Edith Schaeffer served high tea on Sunday afternoon and made an indelible impression on my life. After L'Abri, it was on to school in the small port city of Arcachon. Weeks later I would leave Arcachon in tears. How I longed to remain in France. But courage (and money) failed me.

It would be nearly thirty years before I returned to Paris, this time with my four grown children in tow. We were "running away from home" so we didn't have to face the absence of our husband and father, who had died the preceding February after a five-and-a-half year battle against cancer.

In Paris over Christmas, 2001, I was able to share a part of myself with my children that they had never seen. They became the "ducklings" following "mama duck" through the streets of Paris, and the memories from that trip include chocolate waffles and a sincere "wow" from my builder-son as he stared up at the carvings of Notre Dame and contemplated just exactly how long ago that was created, and another "wow" from us all when we realized that we had been walking -- every day -- by ancient Roman ruins. "Romans as in togas?" one of my children asked. Yep. Wow.

The spring of 2002 brought another opportunity for me to show the city I love to three young women -- one my "real" daughter and two I've borrowed from understanding parents. It was bride and bridesmaids. . . and every evening when we returned to our hotel room at the Grand Hotel Saint-Michel in the Latin Quarter I savored the moments listening as these three young women recorded the day's memories in their journals.

If a genie appeared beside me at this moment and gave me one travel wish I would wish for two weeks in Paris, two weeks in Provence, and two weeks in Hawaii every year. But then maybe that's three wishes. . . .

### **My "philosophy of tourism"**

There are some things you can do to enhance your experience in another place and some "ugly American" attitudes that need to be "checked at the door" if you are going to enjoy your time abroad.

- Paris is OLD. The buildings will not be as clean as you would like. Get over it.
- Paris is a big city. In other words, the people are in a hurry to get to work & etc. If someone is rude don't take it personally. It may have nothing to do with the fact that you are American (and yes, they will know whether you open your mouth or not :-)) We don't want visitors to our country judging us all by the grouchy cab driver at the airport. When you are a guest in another country, give them the same leeway.
- Parisians take their dogs everywhere and they smoke wherever they darned well please, so if someone lights up next to you in the restaurant, deal with it. Don't be rude. And you may see dogs in restaurants, too. Again. . . it's their way. Get over it.
- If you don't speak ANY French, try this, "I'm very sorry, but I don't speak French. Do you by any chance speak a little English?" In other words, blurting out "Do you speak English" is a sure way to get bad service because they tend to assume that you think

they SHOULD. Why on earth should they? So try the other approach. If you know even a few phrases like how to say "Merci, pardon, s'il vous plait," it will go a long way towards getting polite treatment. Pimsleur CD's are a good way to learn a few useful phrases before you go. It has been my experience that someone tells you they speak "a little" English may be fluent. (We all get intimidated trying to speak someone else's language). I say this to give fair warning: Never assume the people around you don't know what you're saying.

- I have never had a bad experience in Paris (and I include in that getting my wallet ripped off). I've found Parisians to be kind and extremely helpful. I go out of my way to sincerely let them know that I love their city and have tremendous respect for their culture and history. . . . and I apologize for my bad American accent when I try to speak their language. I find Parisians to be delightful.
- Take some of the individually wrapped antiseptic hand-wipes with you. (I was once running my hand along a bannister leading down into the metro and encountered a moment when I really was glad I could wash my hands :-)) Could have happened anywhere; it happened to me in Paris.
- Millions of people go through the metro every week. It's not always pristine. I've been told it's much better than the New York subway, but never having been in New York I don't know. I much prefer the city buses. The Metro is GREAT for getting there fast. . . but from the bus you can actually SEE the city. And if you only have a few days, you want to SEE it. . . right? Ride the bus.
- If you are the kind of traveler who likes to read about what you are seeing, I like 3 Paris guidebooks for 3 different reasons. The DK book is the one I carry with me because it has "short blurbs" about what I'm looking at. It also has nice walking tours. In my hotel room before and after I see something, I like to read both the National Geographic and the Knopf for the history and the story behind where I am.
- If you are a big water drinker, you might want to tuck a small bottle of water in a pocket or your bag - of course if this is conspicuous that's another TOURIST label. Up to you. I take bathroom breaks at department stores or when I stop to eat in a restaurant. NOTE: You will have to pay to use the restroom. Keep change handy and don't grumble about this. If you want it to BE like home. . . then stay home.
- If you can read you can navigate the buses and the metro. Don't be afraid.
- Prepare to walk your socks off and be delighted at every turn.
- Stay out of McDonalds.

### **Miscellaneous musings**

Decide before you go that you aren't going to be frustrated by what you don't have time to see.

You could move to Paris, live there for years, and still not "see everything." So. . . . decide beforehand that you are going to SAVOR where you are. Take time to sit in a café and sip coffee and just people-watch.

Consider purchasing a museum pass so you don't have to wait in lines to purchase tickets. You can order it online and it will be waiting at your hotel for you.

Take some Euros with you so you don't have to exchange money there the first day. You can hit the ground running :-). My local bank ATM card worked just fine in Paris and honestly it felt so very "cool" to slide that card and get euros. (OK, so I'm easy to entertain :-))

GUARD YOUR WALLET/PURSE. Americans are a great target for pick-pockets, as are visitors to any big city in the U.S. I had my wallet TIED inside a straw shipping bag when a student (I know who did this) whipped out a pocket knife, slit the strap, and was gone with my wallet and passport before I knew what hit me. The police were extremely helpful and it was all taken care of in half a day. . . but I still lament the quilt I was going to buy that day. . . and didn't have time to go get because I spent the morning at the American Embassy. Take copies of your passport, credit cards, etc. and keep them at

the hotel so that if you do get ripped off you can very quickly get it all taken care of. Maybe keep an extra credit card at the hotel "just in case" so you have a back-up. If you intend to wear a jacket or sweater, have a small shoulder bag that you wear tucked between your arm and your body INSIDE your sweater/jacket. No visible pocket to pick.

### **What if I only have two days in Paris?**

Day 1: pick ONE museum and ONE cathedral for the morning/afternoon. Ride the bus so you see things on your way there. Around 7:00 p.m. head for Little Athens and eat dinner at Les Argonauts.

Day 2: go out to Versailles Take your picnic cloth. Buy some cheese/bread/wine/bottled water and have a picnic somewhere. When you get back into the city, go see the Eiffel Tower after dark, have a chocolate waffle by the Seine and walk along the river OR if you can get to the Samaritaine observation deck, do that after dark. Don't leave Paris without seeing the city at night!

### **My children's favorite memories (they were 12, 15, 17 & 19):**

**The Louvre** Interestingly enough, none of the four mentioned the Mona Lisa. What they did cite was **Napoleon's apartment** (for the opulence) and the special tour "down under" which shows you the origins of the palace complete with dungeon.

**The Eiffel Tour AT NIGHT** (not going up in it. . . but looking at it from close up)

If you do this, buy chocolate waffles from the little stand over by the river.

**Bateau Mouche** ride

**Crypte Archeologique.** The archeological site accessed from the plaza in FRONT of Notre Dame cathedral.

**Versailles** (but NOT on Sunday -- too crowded).

**Sacre Coeur** IF you pay to climb the narrow winding stairs all the way up to the dome. The boys LOVED this experience. The interior of the church itself isn't all that much by comparison to other cathedrals, but of course there is that view of Paris from the top of the hill. . . . sigh.

**Musee d'Orsay** IF you love the impressionist painters (Monet, Degas, etc.) The building itself is a work of art, too.

### **Some of my personal favorites**

**Little Athens.** . . a neighborhood across the river from Notre Dame near St. Severin. Go in the evening after say 7:00 p.m. Any kind of food you can imagine and a lively area. We loved just walking along. . . the restaurant owners stand outside and vie for customers in a friendly way. Wonderful crepes at the creperie on the Rue de la Harpe just off the Boulevard St. Germain. Sorry. . . can't remember the name but it's on the left side of the street. You can't miss it. Big sign about Crepes.

**Les Argonauts** (12, rue de la Huchette) provided our family's BEST memory food-wise. It's Greek and they grill your choice of meat while you wait. . . live music, folk dancing.. . just great fun and great food. We also had Italian Ices at a stand in Little Athens one evening and when the owner heard about my wallet-stolen experience (my daughter had to pay for my purchase) he insisted I take a bunch of candy for free "so you have a good memory of Paris."

**Jardin du Luxembourg**-- great place to just relax and maybe eat bread and cheese and "just chill." If you like the idea of picnics, stick a light blanket or a length of cloth in your suitcase. We had a picnic at the Eiffel Tower one day and again. . . a lovely memory just sitting and watching kids play soccer and soaking up the idea of where we were! (This is THE garden from my book [A Garden in Paris](#).)

**Flower market** on the Isle de la City (where Notre Dame is). I like to buy fresh flowers for my hotel room first thing. . . I pack a small vase for this purpose

and leave the flowers for the maid when I leave with a thank you note and a tip. I also pack a gift to leave the room maid that's VERY American. A Christmas tree ornament from my state, etc, along with euros (but of course).

**Clignancourt.** You have to walk several blocks PAST the outdoor market to get there but then there is a wonderful maze of tiny shops selling old books, dishes, etc., etc. You could get lost happily here for days

**Opera Garnier,** It's a magical, magical building --- inspired the Phantom of the Opera -- although the theatre in the movie is NOT the true Opera. We saw a ballet there and I will never forget it. [www.opera-de-paris.fr](http://www.opera-de-paris.fr) (Now you know why I sent Mary and Liz Davis here for New Years Eve)

**La Samaritaine** Lovely art deco ironwork inside. Some fair prices if you're a shopper (I'm not). This is the building you see Matt Damon atop of in The Bourne Identity. There's a panoramic view of Paris from the restaurant on the top floor and an observatory accessed by a winding staircase that provides a 360 degree view of Paris. At night. . . . wow.

**A market.** Ask at your hotel where the local one is and when it sets up. Rue Mouffetard is awesome but there might be a good market closer to where you are staying. Get your courage up and buy food and have a picnic. By the way. . . DON'T TOUCH THE FOOD. You point and ask. THEY touch.

### **Recommended Books:**

*French Toast: An American in Paris Celebrates the Maddening Mysteries of the French* by Harriet Welty Rochefort

To keep with you wherever you go: *Eyewitness Travel Guide* published by DK

To read for background and history and culture: *Knopf* and/or *National Geographic* (I read both)