

Travel

Paris

Francophile *Kate McAuley* revisits the city of lights and is pleased to discover that everything, from the exquisite art to the absurdly rude service, is just the way she left it.



'Je voudrais l'agneau, s'il vous plait.' My order sends a crinkle up the waitress' ski jump of a nose, which she then proceeds to look down with disgust and haughtily demands that I repeat myself. She's not to blame. Coming from my mouth, the words and phrases of her beautiful language, are apparently bruised, battered and whittled into something altogether indecipherable. And besides, if she'd been all smiles and had made an effort to understand my stilted request for the lamb, I'd probably have been disappointed. It's simple, when you visit Paris, you expect Parisian things, and ill-humoured waiting staff are all part of the experience – and, surprisingly, the allure.

So, is playing the 'who can spot the **Eiffel Tower**' [www.tour-eiffel.fr] first' game, which is something everyone does on a trip to the city,

whether they realise it or not. On this visit, we get our first glimpse from the **Centre Pompidou** [www.centrepompidou.fr]. The building, which houses modern and contemporary art by the likes of Miro, Picasso and Matisse, divided critics when it was first unveiled in the 70s because of its unique 'inside out' design. Nowadays, it's become a modern icon, but for me, as we ascend via the external escalator, it also becomes another place where I lose this location-specific game of I-spy.

My defeat is not because I don't love the steely Eiffel – in fact, I get a little star struck each time I see it. So handsome and famous is the tower, that I can only describe the feeling as the architectural equivalent of meeting George Clooney. No, invariably I lose because I get

caught up in the street-level minutiae of what makes Paris so unique and special. It's all about the sartorial elegance of the locals; the metro with its clunky trains, wall papering of bill posters and faint whiff of ammonia and sweat; the changing fashion of pedigree pooches (last year was the Jack Russell, while this year it's the pug's turn on the leash); the street hawkers carrying an eruption of bonafide fake Louis Vuitton bags; and, of course, all the glorious food.

As you'd expect in a city with such a long and impressive history, not much has changed since my first visit some years ago. For me, on the other hand, it's an altogether different experience. When money was scarce, we stayed in one of the budget TIM hotels scattered across the city centre [www.timhotel.com]. To eat, we would pick



The Eiffel Tower from the Champs de Mars

up some baguettes, cheese and a cheap (but very drinkable) bottle of plonk from the nearest Monoprix before then settling down for a picnic on the **Champs de Mars**, where we'd take pictures of ourselves with the Eiffel tower at funny angles, or the Jardin des Tuileries by the Louvre. Here we'd wait until 6pm for the cheap tickets to go on sale (€6) and line up to see the Mona Lisa. Gratis trips through **Notre Dame** [www.notredamedeparis.fr] and a thigh-burning walk to the **Sacre-Coeur** [www.sacre-coeur-montmartre.com] in Mont Martre were all part of the self-made tour. To get around on short visits we'd ride the hop on/hop off bus that stops all over the city, but mostly we'd just walk until our blistered feet couldn't take it anymore.

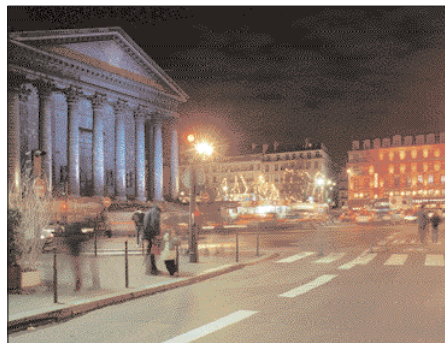
This trip, however, we've treated ourselves to a stay at **Le Grand InterContinental** [www.paris-le-grand.intercontinental.com], an impressive exercise in luxury snuggled up to Opera Garnier [www.operadeparis.fr]. This 1862 landmark hotel is the chain's European flagship – but, given its size, perhaps 'mother ship' would be more appropriate: the hotel occupies the entire block (three wings, almost 500 rooms) next to the opera house. In addition to a stylish allure and technical convenience bestowed by a recent multi-million-euro refit – the work of illustrious decorator Pierre-



Centre Pompidou



The Louvre



The columns of the Madeleine

Yves Rochon, who also did up the George V – the space under the vast verrière is one of the best oases in town. Window shopping in this area is amazing, with all the high-end designer boutiques that populate the narrow streets. But, while the hotel is a special luxury, these posh threads are way out my price range. Instead, I head to the Latin quarter and hunt for bargains among the smaller boutiques and independent shops.

When it comes to eating, it's hard to get it wrong in the gastronomic capital of the world, whatever your budget. But, it's better to stay away from the restaurants on the Champs Elysee and those near the other big tourist attractions as they tend to be overpriced. It's in the **St Germain area**, close to the Latin Quarter, that I find **Le Relais de l'Entrecote** (014 549 1600), which has become my favourite restaurant of anywhere in the world – and it's not just because of the ease of ordering. Here there are only a few dishes on the menu – a salad with walnut and vinaigrette dressing to start, steak cooked to order served with golden French fries for your main, and a smattering of desserts. It all sounds simple enough, but the secret cream and pepper sauce that they generously spoon over the meat is what melts me into a puddle of goo. Another favourite is Chartier in

the **Mont Martre** (047 70 86 29). The restaurant is housed in a converted stable and the rotund waiters are so exceptionally rude it's comical. You would be hard pressed to find a better place to sample your first bowl of frog's legs or escar-got braised with butter, garlic and parsley.

This time around, sightseeing has also become a little more selective. For the first time, I walk past the long queue of people snaking to get into the Notre Dame, and head instead for the impressive **Sainte Chapelle** [sainte-chapelle.monuments-nationaux.fr], which is located in the Palais de Justice just a few streets away. The external architecture, with its flying buttresses and greying stone bricks, belies the stunningly beautiful interior. Once inside,

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I'm privy to rows upon rows of the most striking stained glass windows I've ever seen. It's a sunny day and a cacophony of colour dances across the walls onto the blank canvas of my upturned face. From here I walk along the right bank of the river Seine, marvelling at the houseboats – some are basic, while others are decked out with every affordable luxury – before crossing back over to visit the **Musee d'Orsay** [www.musee-orsay.fr]. Converted from a railway station, this museum houses France's most extensive collection of impressionist masterpieces, including works by Monet, Renoir and Gauguin.

When the trip comes to an end, I once again find myself sad to be leaving the city. As my taxi whisks me towards the airport, I pass the **The Madeleine** [www.monument-paris.com/madeleine], watch the brutal artistry of old men playing pétanque in an unknown park, and stare helplessly as a bunch of gypsy kids attempt to pickpocket a pair of Japanese tourists.

Of course, I'm not embarrassed to admit that I love Paris, but I am a little shy to disclose that every time I leave I want to yell 'Paris, Je t'aime', which is something I'm sure even that moody waitress would understand.

Essentials

Getting there

Air France (04 602 5400, www.airfrance.ae) fly direct to Paris Charles De Gaulle from Dubai from Dhs3,650 around.

Getting around

The city centre is easy to navigate on foot. The metro and trains are efficient and reasonably priced. Taxis are plentiful.

Currency

€1 = Dhs5.2.