

# Perfect Paris Weekend Getaway for First-timers

By Janice Nieder



Here's the problem. My bestie Joan and I were going on Viking River Cruise to Southern France, which certainly was not the problem. The problem was when I found out that she had never been to Paris before, which I found utterly appalling. We needed to correct this grave error, ASAP. But the problem grew much bigger when she told me that she could only take off two more days from work. Covering Paris with a first-timer in just two measly days was the problem. Mon Dieux! This was a serious challenge, but I managed to come up with the following plan.

Paris is made up of twenty distinct districts (arrondissement), which circle the city like a garlic infused escargot. With over 2,000 hotels in the city, choosing where to stay was the most daunting part of the planning process. After endless hours of research, I chose two boutique four-star hotels (both looked perfect for girlfriend getaways), so Joan could get a feel for the different neighborhoods. We also booked a couple of tours, reserved our Paris Passes, packed our most fashionable black pieces and set off for 48 hours in Gay Paree.

Our first night stay was at Hôtel Les Dames du Panthéon, in the heart of the historic 5th arrondissement (Latin Quarter), which overlooks, umh...the Panthéon! Fresh from a recent, nothing subtle about it, face-lift, this glam hotel sports a sexy vibe, enhanced by dramatic red and black accents. Each floor features a different style, inspired by daring independent French women (Les Dames means "ladies"), ranging from George Sand to Juliette Greco; perfect for two independent American women!

Our cozy room offered all prerequisite girlie touches, including plush robes and slippers, comfy duvet covered beds, heated towel racks, magnifying mirror and a chilled bottle of bubbly; also, bonus points for the scrumptious breakfast (crepes and omelets made-to-order), the complimentary afternoon tea and pastries (so welcome after a long day exploring) and the exceedingly helpful staff.

Equally enjoyable was our stay at newbie Hôtel Baume, located in bustling Saint Germain, minutes from Jardin Luxembourg. Color-crayon bright, this chic art-deco

property incorporates luxurious style elements from the 1930s, such as exotic woods, satin and textured silk. Many of its individually themed rooms (and the exceedingly pleasant breakfast room) overlook the calming, leafy courtyard, and have either an Italian-style shower or bathtub, a towel warmer, robes and slippers, luxury toiletries and complimentary Wi-Fi. We made note of the Deluxe Terrace Suites for our next stay, where guests can enjoy an al fresco breakfast overlooking the rooftops of Paris.

Kudos to Maya at the front desk, who could not have been sweeter or more patient as we bombarded her with questions.

If I were writing the screenplay for a classy romantic film, I would have the falling-in-love montage take place on Le Calife, during a (truly) magical dinner cruise on the Seine River. Our absolutely perfect introduction to a twinkly Paris at night began with a glass of champagne after we were shown to our table under the cozy, glass-enclosed roof. The rest of the evening, we just sat back and savored a feast for all our senses, as we dined on a Michelin-caliber four-course French meal (don't miss the "Famous Calife Foie Gras "starter" with crispy gingerbread in caramelized balsamic vinegar), pausing between succulent bites to gaze in wonderment as we glided past illuminated monuments. The



showstopper was a spectacular Eiffel Tower light show.

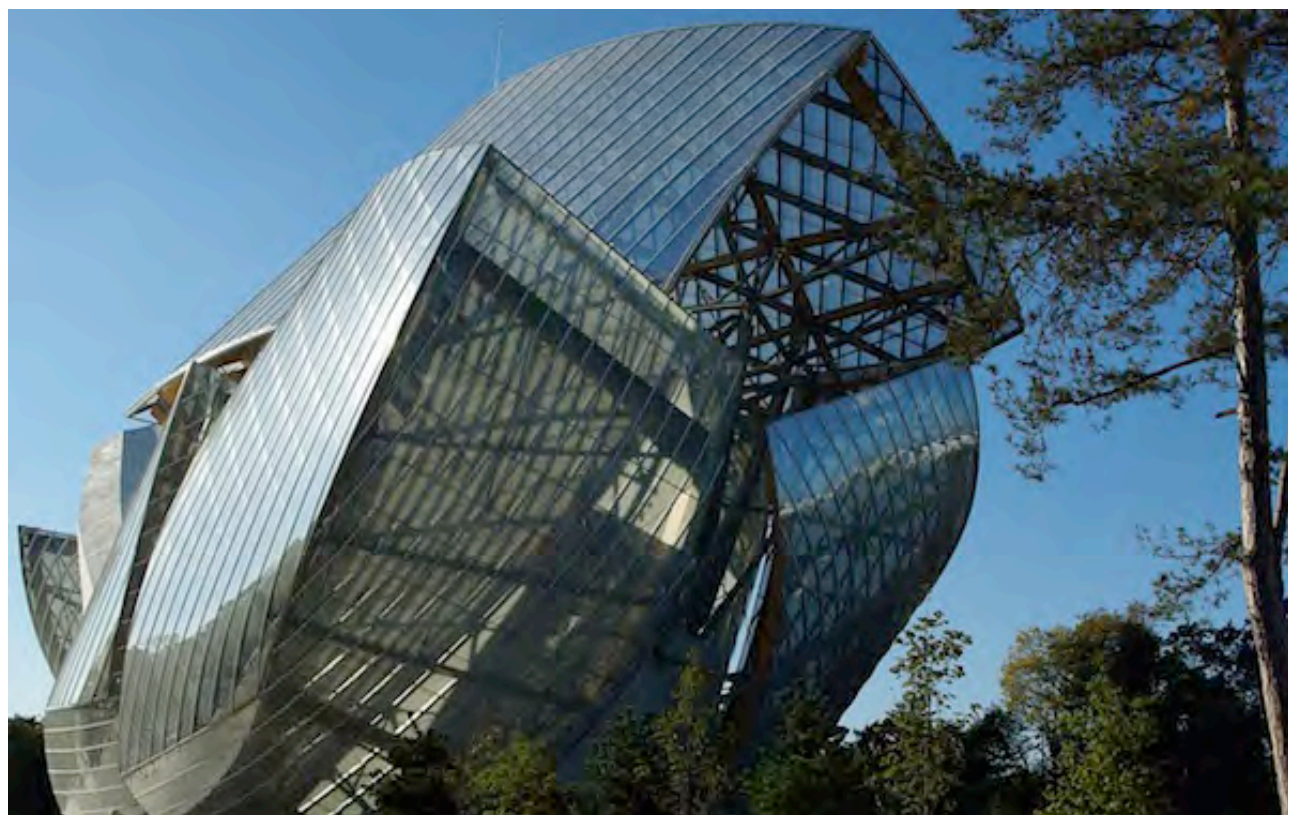
Le Calife is a gorgeous boat, owned by Nicolas Gailledrat, a quirky world traveler, collector and musician, who painstakingly restored the vessel (which was once used to transport cereal), turning it into a recording studio and jazz club.

After dinner, you can head downstairs, where you'll find the sound studio, a scattering of musical instruments including the last Steinway Grand to be produced at

the original workshop, a polished mahogany concert room with bronze ceiling, huge brass doors from an old pharmacy and many other eclectic artifacts from Gailledrat's travels. The delicious food, caring service and beauty of our surroundings provided a très magnifique evening.

The Paris Pass offers the perfect answer for time-challenged visitors. It's easy peasy, plus you'll save big bucks, which you'll need for #5, and included everything we wanted to see and do.

**Insider Tip:** before getting started,





grab a seat at a sidewalk cafe and review the informative 120 page Paris Guidebook, which is chock full of information about the city to help you plan the perfect day. Circle museums, art galleries and historic monuments that strike your fancy. The pass provides free entry to over 60 attractions, including The Louvre, Arc de Triomphe, the Orsay Museum, and a Seine River Cruise. They even throw in a wine tasting class held in a historic wine cellar, where the sommelier will teach you basics of French wine. Since we were so short on time, we really appreciated their exclusive Fast Track Entry, which allowed us to jump straight to the front of the line at a handful of

popular attractions.

Do-it-your-selfer types can take advantage of the free Travelcard, that covers all sorts of public transport to help you navigate the city with ease.

Since map reading has never been part of my skill set, we were delighted to board the "Hop-on-Hop-off Bus," which provided a fab overview of the top attractions. We would hop off for photo ops, a quick neighborhood walk -about or just exchange self-satisfied smiles with the Mona Lisa.

We timed our last hop-off for





a stunning sunset pic of the Arc de Triomphe, before shopping along the posh Champs-Élysées -- one of the world's most beautiful avenues, and a shortcut to heaven for fashionistas. It was almost impossible to drag Joan away, but after seeing the endless queue snaking around the Louis Vuitton store, I was finally able to persuade her to join me for a glass of champagne at the as-elegant-as-ever Four Seasons Hotel George V. There, we marveled at 18th century French antiques, extravagant objets d'art and spectacular flower arrangements.

After seeing the wonders of Paris by



boat and getting a great overview from the "hoppy" bus, we decided the next best way to get some local flavor would be to join a walking tour. We chose two: Culinary Tours of Paris -- Montmartre walk and the Jewish History Tour of Marais by Sight Seeker's Delight. Both were top-notch picks providing hours of incredible fun, lots of interesting history and some much needed exercise to burn off our plural morning pain au chocolat(s).

**One important tip:** Come hungry, VERY hungry, to one of Jean-Paul Fortney's Culinary Tours of Paris-- and it's a good idea to wear baggy pants and comfy shoes. We joined Jean-Paul for his half-day tour of the picturesque Montmartre Movable Feast. Although J.P. is an American ex-pat, this captivating, food-loving Francophile could not be more in touch with the local culinary scene -- even going so far as to marry a French cider-maker's daughter.

The food focused around traditional, French home-style cooking, which we enjoyed at three atmospheric bistros. We started our food frenzy with a huge platter of homemade Charcuterie and Fromage, and some rather obscure but delicious wines (J.P. is also extremely knowledgeable about wines and shared with us the names of some excellent wines that could be purchased for under \$10). We moved over to the family owned A la Pomponnette, a cornerstone of the neighborhood for over a century. There I ordered pig trotters, which were every bit as good as Thomas Keller's at Bouchon. We waddled down to a charming creperie for dessert where I indulged in a flaming Calvados crepe with apple sorbet,

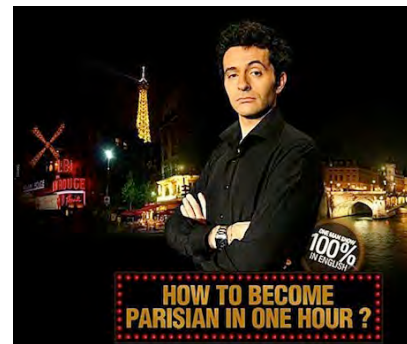
served with fermented cider.

In between feedings, J.P. would point out various spots of interest, such as where Van Gogh and Picasso lived, or the bakery that won 6th place in last year's baguette contest, which is no small feat since there are over 800 contenders! There are many other walking tours, but we would follow Jean Paul anywhere.

We wanted to learn more about the trendy Marais area, the center for Paris' Jewish community (the third largest in the world), so we picked this nabe for our other walking tour. While researching different tours here, Sight Seeker's Delight Unique Walking Tours, particularly those led by owner Karen, scored one rave review after another, with many comments on her wonderful sense of humor. After our thoroughly enjoyable tour, it came as no surprise to find out that this dynamo had won Tripadvisor's 2014 Certificate of Excellence. Her company offers six tours, ranging from a tasty sounding "Tickle Your Tastebuds" tour to a spooky one that divulged the "Secrets of the Night".

Originally from Philadelphia, Karen had studied drama at Temple University, which is just one reason why her tours are so mesmerizing. She's extremely passionate about her topic, is as funny as Jackie Mason, and has amassed incredible knowledge about Jewish history in France. We were thoroughly engaged, as she brought the turbulent history of Jews to life through her spellbinding stories. She told us that many Holocaust survivors have been on her tour, including one client who had been a patient of Josef Mengele, and another who had been on the same train as Elie Wiesel. Over the years, Karen has developed personal connections with local rabbis, so we were able to visit synagogues that are not open to the general public.

We broke for a yummy falafel lunch at the renowned L'As du Falafel.



There is always a line out the door, but thankfully, they are also friends of Karen's, so we had a table waiting for us. After she guided us through this historic old neighborhood, down secret alleyways and hidden gardens, we emerged onto the bustling main drag filled with designer boutiques, high-end cheese shops, and expensive art galleries. Joan and I exchanged slightly smug smiles, feeling a little sorry for those shoppers who had no idea of the real stories behind the Marais.

Exciting chance encounters are par for the course in Paris. It just so happened that during breakfast, we overheard two French women discussing the soft opening of the highly anticipated Louis Vuitton Foundation, scheduled for that morning. So we immediately scrapped our plans and hailed a cab to Jardin d'Acclimatation. Towering above the park's trees, like immense silver beetle wings flying over rolling waters, was the new \$143 million art museum/ cultural space. It was designed by Frank Gehry, who designed it for L.V. billionaire Bernard Arnault, France's richest man, to showcase his vast collection of contemporary art.

This is a Parisian double-header for Gehry, since there is also a major retrospective of his career going on at the Pompidou Center.

**How to become Parisian in one hour.**

This hilarious comedy will teach you everything you need to know about how to pass for a Parisian during your stay. The wildly successful, one-man show is performed in English, albeit with a charming French accent, since this cutting satire about the snobbiness of the French is put on by a Parisian. Comedian Olivier Giraud's gift of mimicry will have you howling with laughter, as he teaches you how to shop, order food, hail a cab with complete rudeness AKA the Parisian way! It's so fitting that the name of Olivier Giraud's company is La French Arrogance Productions.