



Grown-ups in Paris



On page 163 you'll find Karen Renner's story on visiting Paris with children. In our last issue, we published young Chris White's account of his World Cup Rugby trip to Paris with his dad. This iconic city clearly has something for everyone – but to my mind, it is mainly for grownups.

by Verne Maree

**"I love Paris ev'ry moment,
ev'ry moment of the year"**

Cole Porter



I love Paris in the winter, when it drizzles

Roy and I spent a chilly weekend there about five years ago, tramping for hours along the river paths and boulevards, soaking up the atmosphere, practising our putrid French on those who had no choice but to listen to it in order to earn their daily baguette. It was enormous fun.

My sister and her husband joined us from London, travelling on the Eurostar train, but got so elegantly wasted on First Class free-flow champagne that they were largely confined to their Holiday Inn room for most of the weekend – with, granted, a lovely view of the Eiffel Tower.

I love Paris in the fall

In October 2007, I returned with Roy for a four-day extended weekend before our trip to Bordeaux (for that story, see the December issue of **Expat Living**). Just in time for us, a grey and miserable summer had made way for perfect, blue-skied autumnal days and crisp, clear nights ... and that's how it stayed.

Roy had booked a tiny, 30-sq.m apartment on the second floor of Number 60 Rue St Louis en L'Île. Isle St Louis is the smaller of two atmospheric islands adjacent to each other in the middle of the Seine – the other, Ile de la Cite, is home to Notre Dame cathedral – and linked to both the left and right banks by a series of bridges. It is famous for its straight, narrow lanes, its old-world village ambience and the architecture of its 17th-century houses, uniformly four-to-six-to storeys high and largely unchanged for more than 400 years.

I love Paris in the summer, when it sizzles

I first went to Paris when I was 22. In a small tent in a campsite in the Bois de Boulogne on the outskirts of the city, I misbehaved dreadfully with an irresistible Australian fellow-traveller, despite the existence of a faithful boyfriend back home. And if you've ever been to Paris in the spring, you'll understand why. It's a city for lovers.





The apartment was perfect for the two of us: a little bigger than the average city hotel room, and with kitchen facilities including at least three ways to make good coffee.

What's more, at US\$250 a night, it's a lot cheaper than said hotel room; and if you wanted to, you could accommodate at least three ecstatic children in the galleried sleeping-area.

They'd just love scaling the cute ladder to get there. But they'd

wake you at six, demanding *pain au chocolat* (chocolate bread) and the Disney Channel, and you almost certainly wouldn't have the opportunity to make love on a romantic island in the River Seine.

We stocked up on ground coffee, milk, fruit, butter, jam and stinky cheese at the nearby supermarché, and early each morning – well, early-ish – Roy nipped out to the boulangerie next door for croissants and one

of a variety of superb breads. To my mind, croissants are crap almost anywhere but in France, but there they are like manna from the gods.

We sat at our tiny table, the aroma of our drip-filtering Lavazza wafting out through wide-flung shutters to the early-bird tourists in the our picturesque street, and pitied them for having had to travel in shiny buses from big hotels to get here.



Getting Around

There are all sorts of options for getting around this huge city, including the Metro underground train system, but if you're a good walker and you're located centrally, as we were, you can see many of the iconic sights on foot.

On our first day, we crossed a bridge to the left bank of the river and the Rue St Germaine, through the Latin Quarter, up the Rue de Montagne to the Place de Pantheon. After stopping for a *pression* (draught beer) at Le Bombardier pub, we strolled back riverwards down Boulevard St Michel, lingering at Notre Dame before returning to the apartment.

In blissful sunshine, not only did every boulevard have lovers, and every couple have a bench (kissing shamelessly) as the old song goes, but every bridge and street corner seemed to have its buskers. They weren't just strumming the odd guitar, either – one group had even rolled out a piano, which was accompanied by a double bass!

The next day, we headed off in the general direction of the Arc de Triomphe, along the Rue de Rivoli and its plethora of shops. We passed the long queue outside Le Louvre and headed down the



Jardin des Tuileries, stopping intermittently for an alfresco coffee. But be warned – you'll pay 8.40 euros (about \$17) for two leisurely *cafés au lait*. It's much cheaper, or so they say, to chuck back an espresso at the bar.

On Day Three, we braved the Metro. Our two-day travel cards for buses and trains cost 14 euros each and made doing the longer distances a breeze. The Metro took us a couple of stops to Luxembourg station and the famous Luxembourg Gardens, teeming with picnicking and sun-worshipping lovers and families.

But on our last day, we called a taxi to take us to Montmartre, knowing

it was a bit of an uphill hike. We were wise to have headed out early on such a perfect morning; sipping a hot chocolate from a sidewalk café we watched the throngs of tourists becoming steadily more impenetrable. The food at Montmartre cafes tends to be mediocre; you go there to absorb the bohemian atmosphere, enjoy the art for sale, and perhaps – if it's your first time – be persuaded by one of the artists to let him do your portrait. Admire the splendour of the church of Sacre Coeur, shining like an icing-sugar palace against a cerulean sky. Then wind your way down narrow streets past the Moulin de la Galette, to the Moulin Rouge and the red-light district.



If you want to feel the wind in your hair, you can hire semi-motorised bikes from various depots around the city, picking them up and dropping them off at will. It looked easy and convenient, and 15 years ago – when I was braver – I might have given it a go!

Food

We ate divine smoked salmon salad at a pavement café, within spitting distance of passing cars; and mouth-watering pork hock washed down with Hoegaarden at an Alsacienne restaurant called La Forge in Montparnasse.

But the culinary highlight was Sunday lunch at La Closerie des Lilas, at 171 bd de Montparnasse (call 01 40 51 34 50). We were surrounded by well-dressed, middle-aged Parisian couples; there was no sign of Pierce Brosnan, Lauren Bacall, Johnny Depp, Rod Stewart or any of the other celebrities whose signatures were scrawled across the menu. Tea for Two and similar nostalgic tunes tinkled across the room, sunlight dappled through the brasserie windows, and the food was superb. The cholesterol content of my *terrine de foie gras* alone – not to mention the *crème brûlée* I finished with – was enough to cause instant heart-failure in anyone not protected by his or her French genes.

That's three seasons down, and one to go. I have no doubt I'm going to love Paris in the springtime, too. **3**