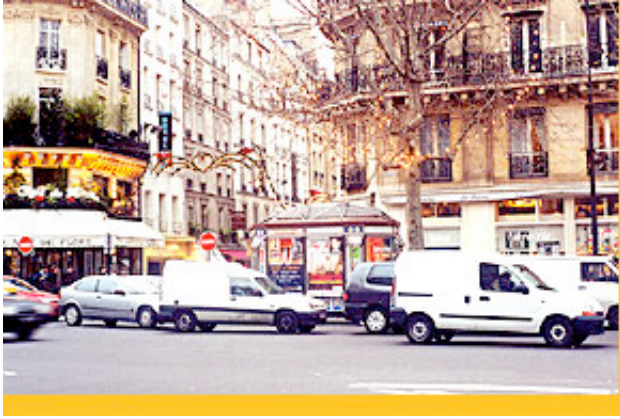


The Grandeur of an Ordinary Day - in Paris

Story and photos by Rex Oppenheimer



Whether we are travelers who have watched the sunrise on the Ganga, waded across the Mae Sai from Thailand into Burma and seen the green mountains mingle with the clouds on the magical island of Bali, or jet-setters who enjoy the games in Monte Carlo and the yacht parties in Cannes, there is nothing to compare with Paris - the eternal capital of romance.

The city that can cradle our soul - in style.

Maybe it's the light that rests upon my eyes so softly it opens them to new realms of artistic appreciation, maybe it's the revered antiquity and elegance that grace the city's streets, or maybe it's the French attention to detail, but Paris draws my soul to the surface. Its landscape penetrates me to touch my innermost feelings. I am enthused and inspired by everyday things. It's a wise, old city with a young lover's heart.

Wandering the Paris streets is like a joyful journey into movie-set perfection. Each balcony, balustrade, curbstone and column seems as though it was just placed by the art director. The city's humanity and its human-scale, rather than the large impersonal, automobile scale landscapes so prevalent in modern suburbs, soothes the senses and opens the heart.

It's like being in love. Everything tastes better. Not just the elaborate dishes of haute cuisine, but even a simple sandwich. When I crunch into a fresh baguette filled with thin slices of delicate ham while walking the sidewalks of Paris, I'm filled with the same wonder that captured generations of artists and expatriate dreamers.

Although famous for its elegance and extravagance, and home to some of the world's finest and most expensive hotels, Paris also offers a larger selection of reasonably priced hotels than most other European cities.

Rather than a compromise that detracts from my trip, my economical charmer embraces me with the alluring warmth of the city's artistic soul. The ghosts of Hemingway, Joyce and Fitzgerald join me in the Renoir-soft morning light for a breakfast of baguettes, brioche, crescent and coffee, as I gaze out over the balcony rail to the cobblestone street below.

The streets of Paris offer an inspirational tableau. I walk and my spirit brightens as I take in cultural icons such as the Louvre, constructed around 1200 as a fortress, rebuilt as a palace in the 1600s and opened as a public museum in 1793, and Notre Dame, one of the greatest achievements of Gothic architecture, which was begun in 1163 and completed around 1345. I feel both dwarfed and ennobled by their majesty.



My thoughts are graced by the silent aura emanating from the ancient stone and shift from the grandiosity of modern accomplishments, the stock market's ups and downs, the man or woman

of the year or the flavor of the month, to the grand struggle of humanity throughout time. A journey comprising the footsteps and heartbeats of individuals, who like myself, also walked these streets.

I see figures of a bygone age engraved into the buildings' facades and think of generations standing on the shoulders of generations. I am part of history yet completely of this moment. This is Paris, and the distillation of all this culture effervesces from the shapes and textures of the city's face.



The winding cobblestone lanes, fashionable boutiques, shops and restaurants of the Marais district bubble with the joy of life. It's a romanticist's dream. So perfectly fantastical it seems it may have sprung from some designer's imagination. In reality, Marais, situated in the city center just north of the Seine, was transformed from a swamp into a residential area for Parisian aristocrats in 1605, when King Henry IV built Place des Vosges and placed 36 symmetrical houses around its perimeter. Here I visited the

home Victor Hugo occupied from 1832-48, which has now been turned into a municipal museum.

Paris's parks are living museums. I stroll through the Tuileries Gardens, where Louis XVI and his family fled an angry mob during the French Revolution, and I picnic al fresco on cheese, bread and pate at the Champ-de-Mars, which rests in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. The green trees, shrubs and grass, cobbled paths and bright flowers, all bathed in ethereal Parisian sunlight, lighten my heart. History mingles with the modern like clouds braiding in the wind. I walk and watch silently and timelessly.

I may be on a budget, but in Paris I feel like I have all the money in the world. Absorbing the grand sights of a city first founded in the third century BC, with a culture so refined it connects the senses and the soul, is a priceless adventure.

The architectural wonders spanning centuries speak of a historical significance unknown in the new world. Yet for me, it is not a pedantic, informational or studious voice, but the tones of visual, textural poetry that flow from the ages of human aspiration and achievement, triumph and travail, beautiful, graceful and grave.

It is a song that resonates within me, yet it is greater than I. Relishing the glory of the moment, I simply stand surrounded by the grandeur of an ordinary day in Paris.

About the photo:

Top: A street in Saint Germain de Pres.

Middle: The famous Moulin Rouge

Bottom: In Montmartre

Rex Oppenheimer is a California-based freelance travel writer. Follow more California stories on this Travelwise website.

