
France / Paris

Like a magnet, Paris has always attracted visitors and exiles from all over the world. At the same time, it remains not so much an international city as a very French one, and a provincial one at that. Paris has its own argot, and each neighbourhood retains its peculiar character, so that the great capital is still very much a city of twenty villages. But the main attraction of the "City of lights" is, of course, its beauty. When you speak of the ultimate European city, it must be Paris. If only for the view from the Place de la Concorde or the Tuileries towards the Arc de Triomphe or similar striking sights beside the Seine.

Here is the fashion capital of the world and the center of gastronomic invention and execution. The Seine divides the city into its northern Right Bank (Rive Droite) and southern Left Bank (Rive Gauche). To really see Paris you need at least a couple of weeks. If you only have a couple of days the best thing to do is to make a bus tour of the city first, so that you get some idea of what Paris is about, and then decide which areas to concentrate on.

Telephone and time difference

Access code to USA: 00 (dial tone), USA Direct: 19 (dial tone) 0011 (a special AT&T service). To phone France: 33; time difference (Eastern Daylight) plus 6 hours.

Climate

Paris has about the same weather as the middle Atlantic States, though it's usually not warmer than 75°F (24°C) or colder than 30°F (-1°C). It rains frequently all year round. Air conditioning is still rather rare, and thermostats are usually set relatively low in winter.

Sights and Museums

The Arc de Triomphe ordered by Napoleon and completed in 1836, is the world's largest triumphal arch and a symbol of France. Climb to the top for a grand view. There is also a small museum dedicated to the history of the monument. The Eiffel Tower or Tour Eiffel is no longer the world's tallest free-standing structure as it was upon its completion for the 1889 World Fair but certainly another symbol of France and Paris. There are three levels which can all be reached on foot (it's a long climb but cheaper) or by elevator. The third level closes earlier than the other two. High on Montmartre you will find the Romanesque-Byzantine Sacré Coeur, from the steps you get a marvelous view of the city, for an even better view climb to the top of the dome. The Opera, Place de l'Opéra, is the largest opera house in the world. The luxurious interior can also be seen without actually going to see an Opera, it is open to visitors most days in the early afternoon.

Theatre and Nightlife

It is not really necessary to speak the language to enjoy the opera, dance or musical comedy at L'Opera. Salle Favart-Opera Comique, or the Theatre Musical de Paris. When going to see a film, make sure it is subtitled in French and not dubbed. Most music halls offer a package with dinner, dancing, and half a bottle of champagne. Nightlife in Paris is never cheap. Remember that in most establishments prices vary depending on where you sit, usually it's cheapest at the bar. The best-known area of Paris for nightlife is probably Pigalle, however, it is not the safest of areas so it's best to go there in a group. For free entertainment, stroll around Place St. Michel. Place St. Germain can also be relied on for good music and sometimes even street theatre.

Shopping

Shopping hours vary; Most stores are closed on Sundays, (except some food stores which are opened on Sunday mornings), and Monday mornings. The big department stores are open every day except Sunday from 9.30 am to 6.30 pm. The big department stores are excellent places to go and see what is available. They include Galeries Lafayette, 40 Bd Haussmann; Au Printemps, 64 Bd Haussmann; Aux Trois Quartiers, 17 Bd. de la Madeleine; La Samaritaine, 19 Rue de la Monnaie. The New Forum des Halles Shopping center is quite close to the Center Pompidou Museum.

Excursions

Versailles, by far the most magnificent of all the French châteaux, is 13 miles (20 km) southwest of Paris. Louis XIV, called the Sun King because of the splendor of his court, took a small château used by Louis III enlarged it and really outdid himself. The vast intricate formal gardens contain 600 fountains for which a river had to be diverted. At one time the palace itself housed 6,000 people. Don't miss the Hall of Mirrors, the Royal apartments and the Chapel. On the grounds are also the Grand Trianon and Petit Trianon, two smaller palaces and Le Hameau (the hamlet), a model farm where Marie Antoinette and her companions played at being peasants. The gardens are open every day, but the palaces are closed on Mondays and holidays.

Fontainebleau. On the left bank of the Seine, at a distance of 45 miles (65 km) from Paris you will find Fontainebleau, famous for its castle and forest. Fontainebleau is older than Versailles, and more appealing in many respects. For eight centuries, all sovereigns contributed to the widening of what started out as a medieval castle. Napoleon called it "La maison des Siècles" (the house of the centuries), an allusion to its rich mixture of styles. The park and forest beloved by the impressionist painters, are especially beautiful.

Chartres. About 45 miles to the southwest of Paris you will find the town of Chartres with its famous cathedral. The unforgettable Cathédral de Chartres, spared by bureaucratic inefficiency after being condemned during the Revolution, survives today as one of the most sublime creations of the Middle Ages. The dark vaults glow with rich "Chartres Blue" stained glass, which relates human history from Adam and Eve to the Last Judgment.

Boat trip on the Seine. Near the Eiffel Towers you can board one of the big "Bateaumouche" ships for an interesting trip on the Seine. All the important sights of Paris can now be seen from a different angle.