

Paris is one of the great cities of the world; steeped in history, this centre of fashion, art, architecture, and gastronomy offers endless attractions for every visitor. Gillian Handley provides a detailed guide

THE WONDERS OF PARIS

Paris is unlike any other city in the world. The Parisians themselves are unlike any other people, even other French people. Visitors often complain about their attitude, but it's nothing personal – it's part of living in Paris, and being a Parisian.

Trend-setting takes on a new meaning here. Parisians are obsessed with style, and they don't follow trends – they create them. The names roll off the tongue: Chanel, Hermes, Christian Dior, Cartier, Romance-Conti. Watch the women; they invented the term "chic".

Paris can be intimidating, but it is always fascinating. It is pompous and intimate at the same time, with formally designed parks and streets rubbing shoulders with winding, hidden lanes. Weighty monuments contrast with the boulangeries and patisseries that give the city a village feel. Colourful and elegant, even the underground – or metro – has a marvellous sense of style about it.

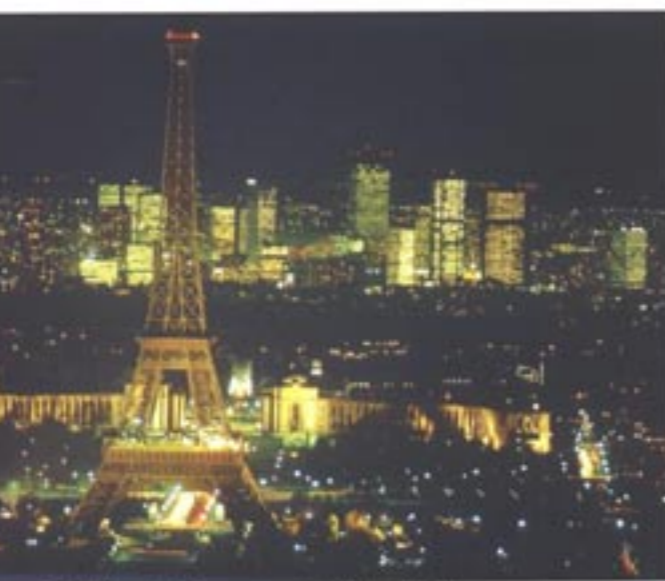
Paris is one of the most expensive cities in Europe, which means it's a real budget breaker for South Africans. But the good side is that Paris has endless diversions that are free, or nearly so. And if you are wealthy, then this is the place to go for designer fashion and fabulous food.

Paris is a magnet for tourists, so you can make yourself understood in English, particularly in a business environment. It may be an idea, though, to buy an English/French phrase book.

The city is built on both banks of the river Seine, and is watched over by the Butte Montmartre. The 20 "arrondissements", or districts, each with its own particular character, are encircled by the Parisian ring road.

Scratch Paris, and you will find traces of its ancient history. In the mists of time France was known as Gaul, and Celtic fish-

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Paris by night ... a wonder to behold
(Picture courtesy Maison de la France)

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Paris is accustomed to a leading role in history. France gave the world the vision of liberty, equality and fraternity for all, and in doing so created the foundations for the 20th century.

Heavy industries have moved out of Paris, but most French corporations are headquartered here. Economic activities are grouped geographically, so you will find the business centre in the 1st, 2nd, 8th and 9th arrondissements. On the right bank of the Seine – or Rive Droite – in the 6th and 7th arrondissements, you will find most of the ministries and state buildings. This side of the river is characterised by formal buildings and spacious boulevards. The left bank, or Rive Gauche, is cosmopolitan and bohemian in character. This is where the Latin Quarter is found – famous for its artistic and intellectual activities.

A good place to start is the Paris Tourist Office, where you can get advice, maps and guides. Contact the French Tourist Office in Johannesburg before you go; it will also supply you with a lot of information. You can explore Paris on foot, buses or boats – or hire a bicycle and brave the terrifying traffic. Luckily, Paris is relatively small, and its major tourist sites are

within walking distance of each other.

Speaking of walking, someone once calculated that in Paris, pedestrians step in dog droppings every 286th step. Be warned!

The sights

You cannot leave Paris without visiting its greatest museum: the Louvre. The museum is divided into seven areas, and it would take a lifetime to examine every treasure housed here. Perhaps the best way is to choose an area that interests you, and concentrate on that.

By contrast, the Centre Georges Pompidou is the trendiest of the museums, and specialises in all sorts of 20th-century creations. This is a great place to people-watch.

There are plenty of specialist museums to visit, as well as art galleries. This is one of the great cultural centres of the world, so time spent investigating the city's treasures will be richly rewarded.

Other musts include the Eiffel Tower, which has come to symbolise the city; the Arc de Triomphe, symbol of Bonaparte's achievements; the Champs-Elysees, probably the most famous and fashionable street in the world; and the serenely beautiful Notre Dame cathedral. If you are fit, make a point of climbing to the top of the tower for a spectacular view of Paris.

The Notre Dame is on the Ile de la Cite, and the best approach is to walk over the Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris. It was completed in 1604. While you are here, visit the Sainte Chapelle, a Gothic jewel built by Louis IX to house the true crown of thorns and other relics.

It is worthwhile venturing out of the city by train to explore the fabulous Palace of Versailles and the Chateau of Fontainebleau.

The Carte Musees et Monuments, or museum pass, gives you free entry and unlimited visits to more than 65 museums and monuments in and around Paris. Its costs 70FF for one day, 140FF for three days and 200FF for five days.

If you have children with you, or perhaps just for the child in you, the controversial Disneyland Paris is worth a visit – if only as a marketing case study.

If you are in a morbid frame of mind, explore the catacombs. Over 200 years, the bones of six million people have been brought here from overcrowded cemeteries. You can also visit the cemeteries, where some famous people are buried. The Cimetiere du Pere, for example, is the last resting place of Jim Morrison of The Doors.

When the budget bites, eat a picnic lunch in one of Paris's beautiful parks or gardens. Some of the more famous ones are Bois de Boulogne, Bois de Vincennes, Jardin du Luxembourg, Jardin du Palais Royal, Jardins des Plantes, and Jardin des Tuileries, which has the most beautiful perspective in Paris.

Best buys

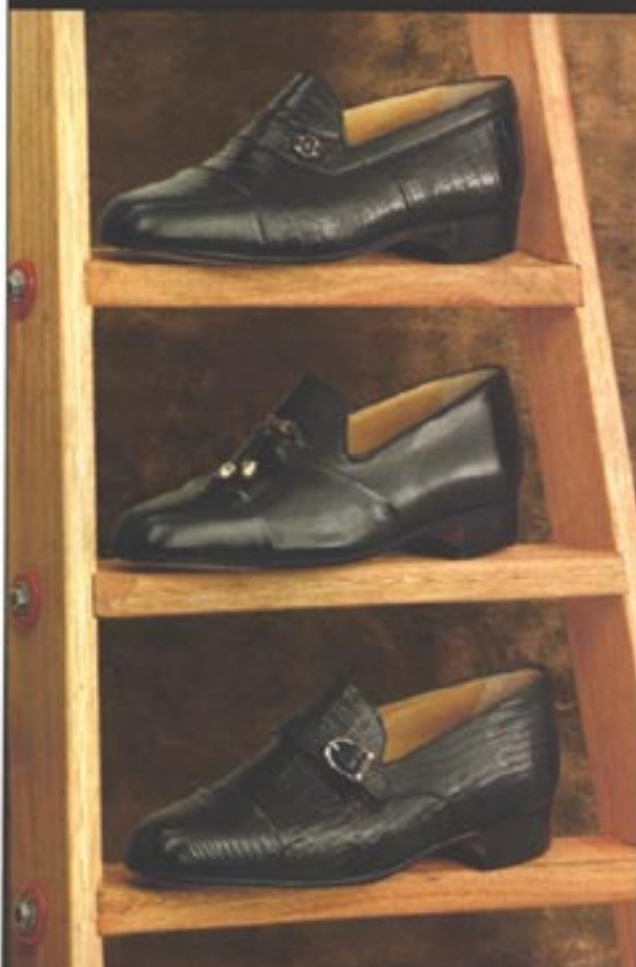
Paris and shopping – need we say more! Given the precarious position of the rand, it is likely that most of your shopping will be of the window variety.

However, if you want to see how the other half lives, the winter collections of the great couturiers are shown in July, and the summer ones in January. Most couturiers have set up around the

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Shoes that reflect
your position in life.



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Champs Elysees, while the best jewellery houses are found around the rue de la Paix and the Place Vendome. For the perfumers, look in shops and department stores. The department stores are the easiest way to shop if your time is limited. The main ones are Le Printemps, La Samaritaine, Les Trois Quartiers and BHV.

Fashion boutiques are grouped in certain areas. The left bank is particularly good to walk around. There are a number of flea markets dotted around Paris, and if you love old books you will enjoy strolling along the banks of the Seine and visiting the quaint bookstalls.

Eating out

Paris is the international capital of cuisine. Unfortunately, the prices more than match the reputation. It is worth saving up to have just one special meal, or put it on the company expense account – you won't regret it. As a famous Frenchman said:

"Animals feed, man eats. But it is only the man with soul that knows how to eat".

The Paris Guides Pass (a brochure provided by the tourist offices) lists restaurants and cafes that offer good value for money, ranging from famous high temples of gastronomy to inexpensive bistros. Top restaurants can cost 700–1000FF per person, including wine. Some of the most famous restaurants are booked up months ahead. You can buy a very decent lunch for about 69FF, off a fixed menu. Menus are displayed in the windows with prices.

Getting around

The Metro is the quickest and easiest way to get around Paris. It links up with the RER network. These trains travel rapidly between Paris and the suburbs as a sort of super-Metro. There is one standard fare for the RATP and RER networks no matter how far you travel. The ticket costs about 7.50FF, but it is better to buy a "carnet" of 10 tickets for about 44FF. There are also various other travel cards that can be

used on the RER, bus and Metro.

A river ferry service – the Batobus – is a pleasant way to traverse Paris by river, avoiding the traffic. It runs from April to September, has five stops, and costs 12FF for each stage or 60FF for the whole trip.

If you are brave to the point of lunacy, hire a car and drive in Paris. If you have money to burn, you can hire a chauffeured car, or even a helicopter.

Night life

Buy a copy of the weekly review entitled "Pariscope" (published on Wednesdays) to find out what is happening in the city. Otherwise, enquire at the tourist office (an English-language bulletin is offered on 49 52 53 56).

Half-price tickets for same-day shows are available at Kiosque, 15 Place de la Madeleine 75008, and from l'esplanade de la tour Montparnasse 75014. There are 115 theatres in Paris. Le Cafe de la Gare: Paris 75004-41 rue du Temple is the "in" place. ♦

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