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Eat Play Stay: The Best of Paris

by Fiona Harper



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Known as the City of Love for good reason, Paris is the kind of city that will embrace you in her fashionably elegant arms, tantalise with food and wine while bewitching you with her architecture, culture and history.

Travel writer Fiona Harper fell captive to Paris' beguiling charm.

Eat

Parisienne baguettes are big business. So big that approximately 10 billion baguettes are consumed annually across France. Walk down any street and you'll come across a boulangerie bursting with enticing displays of baguettes, croissants and tantalising pastries. The local bakery remains the cornerstone of daily life, despite reports that the French are eating less bread. It's beyond me why, as French bread is worth travelling across the globe for. The bakers union, Chambre Professionnelle des Artisans Boulanger's thinks so too, holding an annual contest to find the best baguette. The title is hotly contested with the winner awarded the coveted contract to supply baguettes to the President's residence.

This year's winner was a boulangerie called Aux Delices du Palais, located in the 14th Arrondissement. Baguettes are judged on taste, smell, appearance, crispness as well as the key 'la mie' which describes the fluffy white inner part of the loaf. It's a tough task.

Though I actually think it's hard to find a bad baguette in Paris. I tried. And failed miserably: every single baguette was devoured with abandoned glee. Croissants on the other are a different story. Not all croissants are equal, particularly those dished up on some hotel breakfast buffets. Spare yourself the disappointment and purchase croissants fresh from the local boulangerie. Don't limit yourself to just one though, forget any concept of dieting and indulge in delicate pastries that seem to melt in your mouth.

Play

Parisian's are a social lot and aren't shy when it comes to hedonism. Though they're not typically early risers with most socialising taking place from mid-afternoon onwards. Wining and dining seems to run through their blood so that bistro's are even more prolific than boulangeries. Don't be surprised to find yourself at a minuscule table barely big enough for two plates and a couple of wine glasses, rubbing shoulders with the next diner, more than likely inhaling their cigarette smoke and quite possibly with their dog sitting on your foot for good measure. That's just the way it's done.

As far as visiting the 'sights', there are so many must do's it's hard to narrow it down to a handful. Though missing the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower is a little bit like visiting Sydney without seeing the Harbour Bridge and Opera House. After that, I'd recommend that you take time to simply soak up the atmosphere of one of the world's most delightful cities. Preferably from an outdoor table on a busy boulevard where you can enjoy an entertaining parade of people-watching

Wander the streets, poke around laneways, shop in the market and linger in parks where locales play boules or soccer, start a conversation with a stranger and you'll be well on your way to discovering the soul of this magnificent city. You will definitely improve your French language skills, if nothing else.

Or you could shop. Seriously, this is almost a national pastime and should not be avoided.



Shopping street near Sacre Coeure, Montmartre

Stay

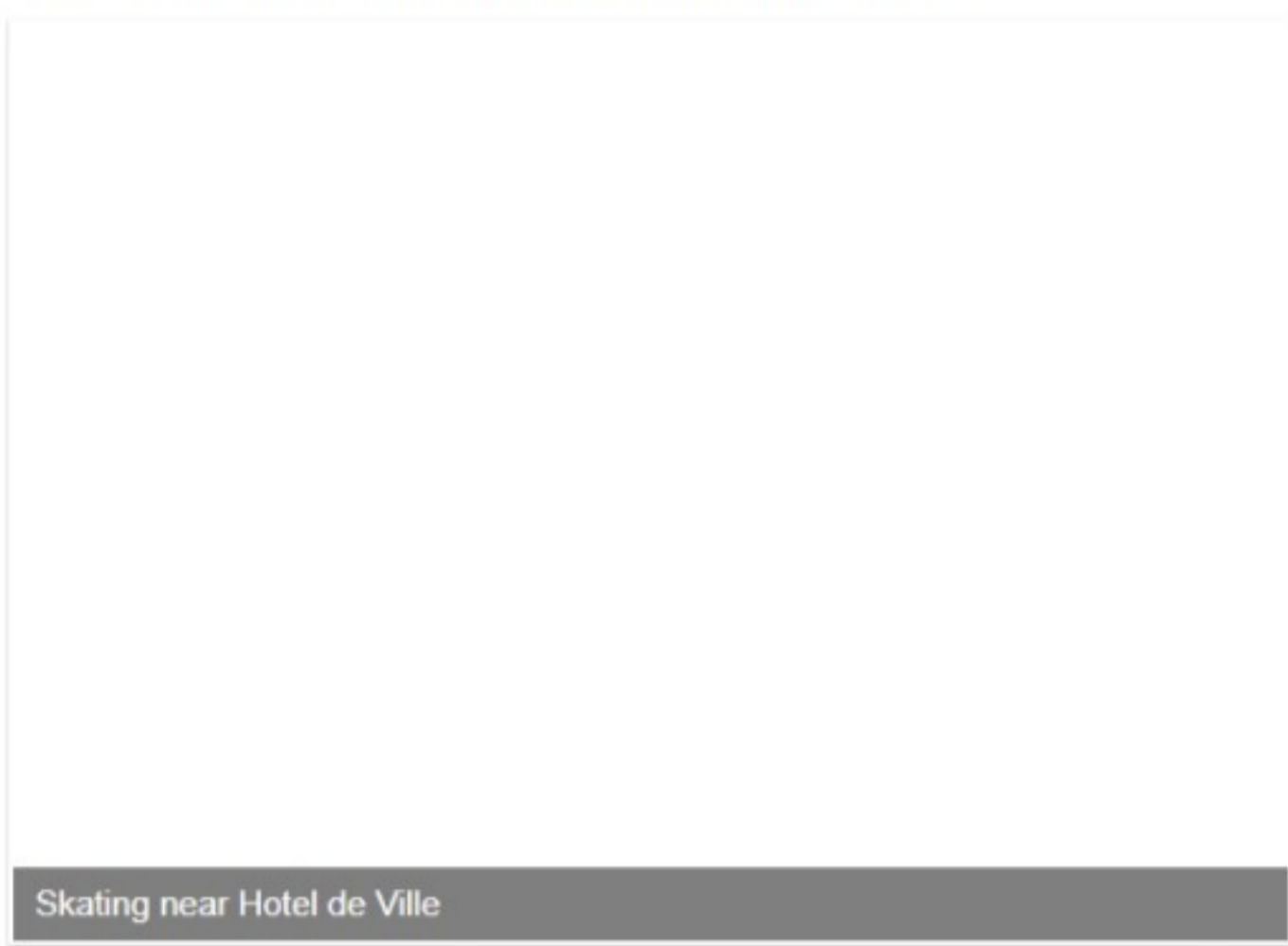
The first thing to know about Paris hotels is that rooms are usually tiny. Paris real estate is ridiculously expensive so don't expect a lavish room with much more space than a bed and teeny ensuite. The good news is that Parisienne style is big on floor to ceiling French-style doors doubling as windows so that rooms generally are blessed with natural light and windows that actually open.

The city is broken up into arrondissements with the first one being central Paris and numbers spiral outwards in a clockwise direction. By the time you get to 20th arrondissements you'll need a packed lunch and a water bag to get to the Champs Elysees.

Recently opened on the main Garibaldi Boulevard in the 7th arrondissement is bespoke Vic Eiffel Hotel. Self-rated with 3 three stars it deserves more. In keeping with tradition, rooms are small, but they're kind of funky and modern and don't feel too cramped. Bathrooms are kitted out with an oversized rain shower head, L'Occitane toiletries and lush fluffy towels. One of the coolest features is a rickety spiral staircase that wraps around a teeny glass-fronted lift wallpapered with Penguin classic book covers. Glass is used effectively in the dining room too with the glass ceiling capturing warm sunlight to create a delightful sunshine-bathed breakfast room.

<http://www.hotelviceiffel.com/en>

Across town where the 1st and 8th arrondissements meet in the lively Opera district, the Mercure Hotel Paris Opera Garnier is in the heart of this lively precinct. Rooms are larger than normal, particularly if you take a take a 'Privilege' class room with the added bonus of a bathtub – a rare treat in this city of compact spaces.



Skating near Hotel de Ville

Within walking distance in any direction are a multitude of Paris' most iconic attractions. The Champs Elysees, Palais Royal, the Louvre Museum and Plaza de la Concorde amongst many others are within striking distance by foot or Metro. Streets are lined with boulangeries, bistros and shops shadowed by classic apartment buildings. You could easily spend weeks wandering these streets and not get bored (while secretly scheming how to take up residence permanently).

<http://www.accorhotels.com/gb/hotel-1913-mercure-paris-opera-garnier/index.shtml>

Landing in a non-English speaking country is a real challenge when you don't speak the lingo, are unfamiliar with the currency and exhausted after travelling for 25-odd hours from Australia. Getting to and from Charles de Galle Airport is made easy peasy by pre-booking a Paris Shuttle driver who will meet you outside Customs displaying an iPad with your name held aloft. Otherwise, getting around on the Metro public train system is pretty straightforward with a Visite Paris pass.

There's a gazillion stories of artists, lovers and travellers falling in love with this treasured city. Allow yourself time to absorb life as the Parisienne do and it's likely you too will fall under the city's spell.

Getting there

British Airways fly direct Sydney – London with direct connections to Paris

www.britishairways.com

More info

Paris Information <http://en.parisinfo.com/>

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