

CITY OF LIGHT

Paris' world-renowned cuisine, arts and history

By Eric Lucas

» Shafts of hazy sunlight dapple the grass where sheep graze next to a copse of beech trees. Songbirds chitter; daffodils poke their heads out of the ground; and happy couples stroll hand in hand along a wooded path past the meadow.

One of those couples is us, Nicole and me, and the meadow is the king's—Louis XIV's, that is—though it now belongs to the people of France. We are in the Paris suburb that holds one of the world's most famous palaces, the Palace of Versailles, enjoying the fine weather with a walk through the gardens. These are “gardens” in the sense that Yellowstone is a “park.”

As the Sun King, Louis XIV expanded his father's old hunting lodge, declaring the area his “gardens,” and enhancing it with paths, meadows, flower beds, forests, hedgerows, decorative patios and plazas and walkways. In fact, at more than 2,000 acres, the Gardens of Versailles are almost 20 times larger than the world's smallest country (Vatican City) and four times larger than the next smallest, Monaco.

I use these numerical contrasts as a way of demonstrating that, from our hotel at the edge of the gardens, we can go for really, really long walks on extremely quiet paths, which we do during a sojourn



The Gardens of Versailles feature more than 2,000 acres, with fountains, pathways and hedges.

in the City of Light. We're staying at the Waldorf Astoria Trianon Palace Versailles, a luxury hotel opened in 1910 whose facade resembles that of Louis XIV's nearby Grand Trianon.

Given that luminaries ranging from Sarah Bernhardt to Marlene Dietrich to Queen Elizabeth II have stayed here, elaborate facilities are de rigueur. Thus, at a special fixed-menu dinner at the hotel's Michelin-starred Gordon Ramsay au Trianon restaurant, Nicole and I are seated in an overstuffed cream-colored leather banquette at a table with a silver candelabra and porcelain dinnerware

settings. Foie gras with mango; sea bass in a shellfish-Champagne sauce; veal fillet with truffle butter ... We'll need every degree of cushiness in the banquette's seat to buttress our soon-to-be satiated selves. Periodically the waiter comes by.

"All is well, madame et monsieur?"

Yes, all is very well.

This is our third trip to Paris, and the area remains a premier travel destination for us and for the world because, however much the city's virtues may seem clichéd, they are also gloriously true and undeniably special. The food is indeed fantastic. The museums are marvelous—and mas-

sive, in the case of the Louvre Museum. The Eiffel Tower is not only amazing, it's one of the most iconic structures on Earth. The promenades and plazas and boulevards are both grand and welcoming. The sheer emotional exhilaration of a visit to Paris is matchless. And, for every world-famous layer of attraction, there is an easily discovered lesser-known delight.

Seeing the *Mona Lisa*, for example, is pretty simply done by buying tickets online in advance—which guarantees entry to the Louvre within 30 minutes—and heading directly to the relevant gallery to have a look.





» Clockwise from top left: The Seine River offers beautiful views, including of the Pont Alexandre III; visitors gather to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre Museum; the Eiffel Tower, built in 1887, has become one of the world's most famous landmarks.

Wandering just 30 feet away from the famous portrait, we find Tintoretto's 1564 sketch *The Coronation of the Virgin*, a depiction of Mary ascending to Paradise. The gorgeous masterpiece, recently relocated to a nearby room, due to construction, is a dynamic composition of texture, palette, perspective and human emotion.

To raise this example up one dimension, we need only cross the Seine River from the Louvre to find the Musée d'Orsay, a user-friendly, less crowded and equally memorable facility, devoted mostly to Impressionists. Here, Renoir's *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* (1876) portrays a cheerful, vivid, engaging Paris scene that perfectly captures the city's peerless ambiance, then and now.

I wonder whether Renoir ever wandered the riverfront promenade, noticing the way that sunlight filters on cobblestones beneath sycamore trees, or if he paused on the Left Bank to glance back in awe at the Eiffel Tower, a high candle of light above the city. These moments form "snapshots" forever stored in Nicole's and my memories. We treasure real snapshots, too: We stop one evening for a self-portrait—Eiffel Tower behind us—that is one of our all-time favorites.

Our explorations reveal many equally delightful discoveries. Once, as we walked along the Seine's Left Bank promenade on an early autumn evening during another trip, we came across a free concert at The American Church in Paris. A classical guitarist was performing Joaquín Rodri-

go's famous *Concierto de Aranjuez*, as well as pieces by Bach, Vivaldi and Albéniz.

On this trip, we walk along the river, passing book stands and kiosks with proprietors in berets selling 50-year-old issues of *Paris Match* with Brigitte Bardot on the covers. A dozen artists suggest our suitability for chalk portraits.

A few hundred yards past the Louvre, we chance upon a small cafe in the Tuileries Gardens, a ribbon of park on the Right Bank, where we order a lunch of croque-monsieurs. Taking the food with us to the park's Bassin Octogonal, a large reflecting pool, we sit on a couple of lawn chairs and enjoy a leisurely early afternoon snack. Parisians are all around, sunbathing or reading. Dogs frolic; kids wade; and it's fascinating to contrast this experience with the \$250-a-person formal dinner we had at the restaurant in Versailles.

Even the shopping is sublimely exotic but easily accessed. I learn about this on a midday excursion from our favorite in-city hotel, The Westin Paris—Vendôme, in the First Arrondissement near the Louvre. While the city's best-known shopping street is the bustling Champs-Élysées, The





Westin is just a block from the Place Vendôme, whose center is marked by the column Napoleon erected in 1806 to celebrate his victory at Austerlitz.

Despite all that weighty history, commerce is often at hand in Paris, and the plaza's perimeter is lined with tony stores. While I'm studying the column's 425 bas-relief plates depicting Napoleonic battles, Nicole emerges from the nearby

Louis Vuitton store with some footwear. Not just any shoes, these: They are designer boots worth about as much as my first car was. They look like army boots, but they are made with tawny suede and strips of glimmering ebony patent leather, embellished with subtle wraparound designs incorporating flower blossoms, stars and the iconic LV logo. They include sturdy rubber treads that would serve well on a tank, and if all that sounds very complicated for boots, well, it is.

"Perfect for the farm," Nicole declares, referring to our Puget Sound homestead, where she will surely be the only person wearing Louis Vuitton boots. Ever.

But I discover that by Paris standards, this is not so exotic. At the Alexandre de Paris shop, Nicole peruses the collection of extremely fine hair clips and brushes. A salesclerk approaches to ask if I need help.

"I didn't even know you could have a store selling only hair accessories," I replied. "So I've acquired fascinating new information."

I step outside to people-watch, and see numerous stylish women attired in, yes, designer army boots and crystal-clad tortoise shell hair clips, not to mention black-leather leggings and brass-bauble handbags.

That evening, we walk to the Eiffel Tower for dinner in the second-level Le

AT A GLANCE



Popular attractions:

The Louvre Museum is one of the world's largest art museums, with famous works such as the *Venus de Milo*.

- Musée d'Orsay (above) offers a quiet, intimate look at one of France's most famous artistic innovations, Impressionism.
- In Versailles, the Palace of Versailles contains 2,300 rooms, including the nearly 250-foot-long Hall of Mirrors.

Lesser-known attractions:

Yves Saint Laurent Museum, near the Arc de Triomphe, displays designs by the famous couturier.

- Marmottan Monet Museum houses one of the world's largest collections of Monet canvases, with more than 100 works.
- In Versailles, the Petit Trianon was Marie-Antoinette's country "cottage."

Where to go if you're a ...

... Romantic: Walk along the Pont des Arts at dusk. Don't attach a lock to the bridge; just enjoy the setting, which was the scene for the famous kiss between Carrie and Mr. Big in *Sex and the City*.

... History buff: The Place Vendôme's Napoleonic column has been raised, destroyed and raised again.

... Lover of pop culture: The Quai de Montebello's riverside walkway across from Notre Dame has been featured in at least two famous films—*An American in Paris*, with Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron, and *Charade*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant.

... Family: Given to the city of Paris by Napoleon III, Bois de Boulogne is a 2,088-acre park with a zoo, rowing ponds, horse and pony rides, and innumerable picnic spots.

... Foodie: Visit almost any neighborhood bistro (such as the one at left) for steak-frites, a dish so universally beloved that philosopher Roland Barthes wrote a famous essay about its mythical status.

Distinctive dish: The croque-madame, a variant of the croque-monsieur, is essentially a grilled ham-and-cheese sandwich with a fried egg on top. Talk about comfort food.

Best time of day: Dusk, along the Seine. —E.L.





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» **The impressive Arc de Triomphe was commissioned by Napoleon in 1806.**

Jules Verne restaurant, which might have one of the best views in the world. (The restaurant will re-open in late May after renovations have been completed, with a new chef, Frédéric Anton.)

We must look like *les amoureux* worthy of a sensational experience in Paris, because the maître d'

smiles conspiratorially and leads us to a window-side table overlooking the Seine. Across the river, the Arc de Triomphe and the Sacré Coeur are bathed in warm light. The prix fixe menu adds seven courses to that.

This time, it's foie gras with a dried-plum compote; roasted sole, salsify and sorrel; and a nut-crust chocolate

“tower” whose depth of flavor is unsurpassed. Good thing we have a half-hour walk back to the hotel.

“And are you celebrating anything this evening?” our waiter had asked to start the meal.

“Well,” I mention, “we just got engaged.” We had, in fact, done so the day before in Versailles.

Many, many facets burnish a decision such as getting married, and key among them is the delight of shared experiences.

So, blame it on Paris? Sure, why not. ✈

Eric Lucas lives on San Juan Island, Washington.

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