



TRAVEL PARIS

# TÊTE À TÊTE

*There's more than one way to enjoy your visit to the French capital.*

**ELIZABETH FOURNIER** settles into a luxury life, while **CATHY ADAMS** gets real in Paris's Le Marais



## PARIS DE LUXE

I get it: you've been to Paris. You've traipsed round the Louvre to stand in a 15-deep scrum for a glimpse of the Mona Lisa. You've seen the Eiffel Tower do its neon dance from the Trocadero, and you've almost died trying to get a decent picture of the Arc de Triomphe as a procession of Gallic drivers career around Etoile trying their best to take you down.

It's exhilarating, beautiful and very French – but it sure as hell isn't relaxing. Fear not, though: there's another way to see the city and take in the boulevards and bridges that have bewitched pretty much everyone who has ever been cool, from Ernest Hemingway and Gene Kelly to Coco Chanel and Oscar Wilde.

It's time to step back from the tourist traps and do Paris in full-on luxurious style – and the first stop is the newly-opened Shangri-La.

Chanel herself lived for years at the Ritz on the Place Vendôme, while Beyoncé and Jay-Z (and therefore Kimye, of course) prefer Le Meurice. Both are smack bang in the middle of the first arrondissement on the Right Bank of the Seine – home to the Louvre, the Jardins des Tuileries and the Rue de Rivoli. So far, so *touristique*. But head a little further west to the leafy 16th and you'll find the spot where Asian mega-hotel group Shangri-La has chosen to set up its first European outpost in the 19th century former residence of Napoleon Bonaparte's grandnephew, Prince Roland.

Shangri-La doesn't do things by halves (opening the only hotel in the Shard, on floors 34-52), and Paris is no different. The 81 rooms are in shades of duck-egg blue and gold, and many have views of the Eiffel Tower that feel almost inappropriately intimate. My suite even has internal stairs – more than I can say for my London flat – which lead up to a vast private roof terrace where you could spend hours picking out the famous landmarks, from Montmartre to the north-east to the rather less aesthetically pleasing Tour Montparnasse, on the horizon looking south.

Of course, Paris has no shortage of incredible restaurants, but it's worth setting aside an evening to eat at the hotel's own L'Abeille – named after the bee insignia that is dotted everywhere in honour of Napoleon's emblem. Headed by chef Phillipe Labbe, the restaurant was awarded two Michelin stars less than a year after opening, and its cheese selection alone is worth another one.

Combining seasonal, French ingredients with more exotic flavours (torrified locust seed, anyone?) Labbe creates exceptional dishes with all the assuredness of someone who has worked under legends like Eric Briffard and Bernard Loiseau (which he has).

After a tartare of giant langoustine in raspberry vinegar and a classic filet of lamb with sweetbreads and aubergine, we broke from the set menu to tear chunks out of the cheese cart. If you go, do the same. I don't tend to be one of those people who swoons at the sight of a cheese plate, but L'Abeille's Comté was so good that it made me well up a bit. And so did dessert – a humongous bourbon vanilla *millefeuille* 'to remember your childhood', according to the menu – which, if you're anything like me and grew up on butterscotch Angel Delight, will make you instantly insanely jealous of every French child.

Luckily, the hotel also features a gym and pool for burning off those cheese calories, housed in a stunning lower ground floor vaulted room that opens onto a sheltered terrace. Or you can simply choose to believe the Gallic myth that French women (and therefore anyone who eats anything in Paris, obviously) don't get fat, and instead head for the spa or one of the Shangri-La's cocktail or champagne bars to carry on the indulgence.

And if you really must leave the hotel's clutches, head for the Bois de Boulogne. A huge public park to the west of the city, it is more than twice the size of New York's Central Park and home to landscaped gardens and lakes as well as a zoo, the Auteuil Hippodrome racecourse and Roland Garros, the home of the French Open tennis tournament.

In the centre of one of the park's lakes is Le Chalet des Îles restaurant – accessible only by boat – where sophisticated Parisians who lunch tuck into glasses of wine and set menus of foie gras gnocchi and steak tartare, a world away from the brasseries of the Rue de Rivoli.

Late afternoon is the perfect time for a boat trip along the Seine, staying away from the large, flat tour boats (complete with shouty guide) in favour of a private motor craft. From low down in the water, you get a completely different view of the bridges and buildings that define Paris, from the imposing Pont Neuf to the Pont des Arts, which glitters in the sun as the result of a cheesy but actually quite romantic recent tradition (this is the city of love, after all) that sees smitten couples come from all over the world to attach padlocks bearing their names to its metal wires.

Most tourist coaches head straight for Versailles, the vast palace and gardens where various King Louis hung out for most of the 17th and 18th centuries. What people probably don't realise is that the design for Versailles – from the formal landscaped gardens to the interior paintings – is the result of a massive game of one-upmanship between Louis XIV and his finance minister, Nicolas Fouquet. ►

**TOWERING PRESENCE:** Gustave Eiffel's most famous creation dominates the landscape in this view of the city from atop one of the towers of Notre-Dame. Many of the rooms at Shangri-La's new hotel in the 16th arrondissement boast fine views of the tower.



► An ambitious French nobleman, Fouquet celebrated his appointment to court by buying a plot of land 55km south-east of Paris, demolishing the surrounding villages and bringing in an architect, a landscape gardener and a painter-decorator to design his dream chateau at Vaux-le-Vicomte.

Those men were Louis Le Vau, Andre le Notre and Charles Le Brun – the same three who were subsequently hired by the jealous Louis XIV to work on Versailles just days after he had Fouquet imprisoned for throwing an overly ostentatious party at his new pad.

Versailles' country cousin is now owned by members of the aristocratic De Vogue family and managed by a pair of too well-bred to be true twin brothers who have restored the chateau and open it to the public between March and November. Eva Longoria married the French basketball player Tony Parker at Vaux-le-Vicomte in 2007.

The house itself is stunning, from the bell tower to the intricate squirrel decorations that

are all over the place in honour of Fouquet's family crest, but it's the gardens that really give you a sense of Fouquet's ambition. A series of pools, fountains and formal beds draw the eye way into the distance towards a statue of Hercules that looms over the estate – a modest sight from the chateau steps but a towering presence when you get up close. It's no wonder the king felt threatened.

Back in the city, avoid the crowds that flock to the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay and head instead to the 16th arrondissement's Museum of Modern Art – a treasure trove of Picassos, Modiglianis and Dufys – or the nearby Musée Galliera, a recently restored temple to fashion where you can see the actual dresses Audrey Hepburn wore in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

If the sight of all that couture leaves your euros burning a hole in your pocket, it's just a short walk past the Georges V hotel (where those famous photos of the Beatles having a pillow fight were taken) to the Champs-Élysées, home to Guerlain, Lacoste, Hugo Boss and the flagship of flagships – Louis Vuitton.

Honoré de Balzac once wrote: "Whoever does not visit Paris regularly will never really be elegant." Having stepped back from the frontline of the city and experienced the more peaceful side of Parisian luxury, I'm more than happy to live by that piece of advice.

A double room at Shangri-La hotel, Paris starts from €750 per night. SHANGRI-LA.COM

### BEING A BOBO IN THE MARAIS

When it comes to being feted as a new destination area, there's no better combination than being centrally located, having an interesting history and, by dint of this, being stuffed to the rafters with counter-cultural bars and art galleries filled with the work of artists of whom you've never heard.

This is Le Marais – which translates as 'the marsh' – in Paris, the third arrondissement, the Right Bank, the Gallic version of Shoreditch. Whatever you choose to call it, it's having a seriously hot moment right now. It's so central that it has Notre-Dame on its fringes, but it feels suburban enough to ward off SLR-toting tourists. Hipsters wearing finds from vintage emporium Free P'Star rub shoulders with the local Jewish community and the families who live behind intricate, locked gates in grand urban mansions. I don't really fit into either category, but I'm here to check out the swell of bobo (*bourgeois bohème*) culture – and that means a lot of achingly cool restaurants, art galleries, shops and hotels.

My bobo initiation starts at the Hotel du Petit Moulin, a former bakery on Rue de Poitou that's now a boutique set-up. Designed



**SEINE OUTLOOK:** The river snakes its way around the magical Île de la Cité and Notre-Dame as night falls. Indoors, the Shangri-La dining room (BOTTOM LEFT) provides an impressive setting, while (TOP LEFT) Christian Lacroix designed the Hotel du Petit Moulin in Le Marais, the bobo area of Paris.



by Christian Lacroix, it ranks as the sexiest hotel I've ever stayed in – its 17 rooms are furnished with unique design touches, and my bolthole for the weekend comes with leopard-print cushions, naive art wallpaper and plastic colour block chairs, with the Hermès toiletries and a giant white round bath adding a touch of real luxury. It's a maze-like hotel, with random steps up and down to the individual rooms, and the atmosphere is super cosy. Being right in the middle of Le Marais means I wake up each morning to the clatter of shop shutters being wound up for the day and the chatter of people (although, in a post-cocktail haze, I'm unable to work out whether it's hipsters returning from a night out or the more civilized of the bobos heading to work).

The Marais isn't exactly short of innovative, trendy places to eat, and I head to vintage-wallpapered Pamela Popo in the lower Marais, which does a storming weekend brunch (and brunch is a big deal here), to enjoy some bona fide French food with a twist (think delights such as sea bass with quinoa or breadcrumbed







snails), all of it served in near-darkness to the constant soundtrack of a dance beat.

But what really keeps the Marais moving, according to Cedrik Verdure, a local boy with an unironic beard and a fixie bike who walks me around the area the next morning, is coffee and fresh croissants. That, he says, is what the area does properly, explaining that some people walk 19 blocks to get croissants from La Reine des Blés in the north Marais, a place that does pastries so well that it has an official mark to show it (and in case you don't want to walk a long way for them, you can learn to bake at La Cuisine Paris, just down the road from the landmark Hotel de Ville).

As proof of the neighbourhood's arty roots, there's a space invader motif pasted to the side of a building every few blocks, while you don't have to look too far to spy a Banksy-esque cat and sketches on the brickwork.

Boutique shop after boutique shop can be found on street after street: places such as Etat Libre d'Orange, an independent fragrance store that sells outre perfumes called 'Rien' (nothing)

and 'Je Suis Un Homme' (I am a man), or the newest addition to the area, Le Café des Chats – a cat café where trendies (and me) can sip lattes among a collection of placid felines.

Saturday night, though, is very much a social affair. Derriere, a place so clandestine that its courtyard home isn't even visible from the street, buzzes with a crowd that makes a beeline to it for the menu of solid French grub and the secret Alice in Wonderland room upstairs. It's meant to be a *fumoir* for smokers, but I push through the wardrobe door, Narnia-style, and try not to choke on the dense Gauloises fug in order to admire the

**At the cat café, the trendies can sip lattes among a collection of rather placid felines**

ramshackle furniture and the mirrors around the walls. Maybe I'm not cut out for this.

But even bobos need to get out of town occasionally, so where do they head? To the formerly down-at-heel flea market at Porte de Clignancourt to pick up vintage furniture for their fancy atelier apartments. After all, this seven-hectare site is known as the largest antique market in the world, and although it still has its share of standard knock-off sportswear sellers it also has had a facelift in the form of Philippe Starck's Ma Cocotte, a cafeteria-style upstart restaurant in the middle of the site. Eat there before delving into the market, where all the furniture sold is sourced from within 80 miles. Honestly, some things could hardly be more bobo. ■

Hotel du Petit Moulin offers overnight stays from €195pn, based on two sharing on a B&B basis;

HOTELPETITMOULINPARIS.COM

Context Travel leads 2.5-hour bobo walking tours of The Marais from €80pp; CONTEXTTRAVEL.COM

Return fares with Eurostar start from £69;

EUROSTAR.COM