PARIS

Visas: no visas needed for US citizens, but passports are required (just thought I’d start out with the obvious).

Hotels: we stayed at the Shangri-la Hotel, which is located in the 16th arrondissement near the Eiffel Tower. One commenter said of the hotel that it is the only place in Paris where you can get Asian quality of service. Whether that is true or not, we found the service both helpful and welcoming. And we sat out on the terrace every morning having breakfast with a view of the Eiffel Tower. Life is good.

Transportation: We like the convenience of hiring a car and driver, especially for certain situations (see below). Taxis are plentiful, and a surprising number of drivers speak English. Always carry around the hotel’s business card, so that if you get caught needing to take a taxi, the cab driver will know where you are staying. Upon the recommendation of some friends, we used a driver they knew and loved, Hassan. Ping me directly if you want his contact information.

Guides: We used Context Travel for both Versailles and the Louvre (see below) and loved them! They have very knowledgeable subject matter guides. They also have a Philadelphia office so you can explain what you want in detail. Their number is 800-691-6036 and their Philadelphia number is 215-392-0303. Website is www.contexttravel.com.

Packing: bring COMFORTABLE shoes!! Paris is a walking city, even with the subway and cabs. There are beautiful parks to walk through and all of the touristy sites require lots of walking. So make sure your shoes are built for that. Did I mention you should bring comfortable shoes? Oh, don't forget to pack comfortable shoes.

Must-see sites:

Most places don’t open until 10:00, and mornings are generally less crowded than afternoons when planning your visits.

Eiffel Tower: we recommend buying timed tickets beforehand at <http://www.tour-eiffel.fr/teiffel/uk/> to avoid standing in the lines. This is one of the must-do places in Paris. The engineering of the Eiffel Tower is extremely impressive, and the views from the top are breathtaking. Kids, especially, enjoy going up in the elevator and seeing the site very much.

Notre Dame: surprisingly for an active church, the scene inside the church (after waiting in what is usually a fairly long but quick-moving line) is noisy and chaotic. It is more tourist site than house of worship. The Rose Window, is of course, impressive in its beauty. And the magnitude of the power it projects is impressive. I prefer the view of Notre Dame from the rear, with its flying buttresses.

Sainte Chapelle: built by Louis IX (Saint Louis) in the mid-1200s, it is breathtaking in its beauty. Make sure you go up to the 2nd floor, or you will not understand what all the fuss is about. The stained glass windows are beyond words, and the entire church is an engineering marvel. In the 800 years or so since it was built, no cracks have ever been found. I thought it was easily more impressive and beautiful than Notre Dame.

Louvre: we went when there was a custodial staff strike (which resulted in an unusual state in the restrooms) but were told later that some kind of strike is always going on at the Louvre. So roll with it. Here is when the Context Travel tour guide comes in handy. They will make sure you hit the highlights (Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo, etc.), but if you have specific interests, they will make sure to have a subject matter expert as your tour guide. Since touring the Louvre on your own can take as much time as you allow it to take, having someone there to show you things of special interest to you (whether it’s Egyptian antiquities or Italian Renaissance paintings) results in a much more productive and efficient visit. The Louvre is always crowded, especially so in high summer, so plan accordingly. (And see the item on Paris Museum passes below.)

Versailles: we used a Context Travel tour guide here as well. Not only is this helpful for touring Versailles, it is also extremely helpful in navigating the French train system, which is not at all intuitive. The train is definitely the best way to travel to and from Versailles. It is about a 45 minute train ride from Paris.

The lines can be very long to get tickets, and there are lots of tour groups. Imagine how stunned I was to hear more Chinese than French at the entrance to Versailles.

The inside of Versailles is of little interest historically, as none of the original furniture, wallpaper, hangings, etc. remain (the looters during the French Revolution took care of that). So, the only items of real interest inside the palace are the chapel, the King’s Bedroom and the Hall of Mirrors. Slither through the crowds as quickly as possible to see those and then head out to the gardens, which were Louis XIV’s main interest anyway. There are formal sculptured gardens and there are also hidden spots that conceal ballrooms and theatres. Louis XIV wanted the gardens to be a type of palace constructed out of greenery, and he succeeded to a large extent. Also of interest is Le Petit Trianon, built by Louis XV as a discreet place to visit his mistresses and gifted to Marie-Antoinette by Louis XVI. Inside Le Petit Trianon, she created the Hamlet, a rustic-looking village where she could escape from the court. (Note that the rustic-looking buildings, at least when viewing from the outside, contain marble and gilt on the inside. Village life only takes you so far.) We were told that no matter how crowded Versailles is, the Hamlet is never crowded, partially because it is some distance from the palace and partially because fewer people know it exists. It is definitely worth the walk. And there is a tram that will take you back for 8 € a person. (It’s uphill on the walk back, so it can be worth the price.)

The best place to eat inside Versailles is La Petite Venise (01-39-53-25-69). The food is quite good, and the service is very quick. They also speak English. (Also, see the item on Paris Museum passes below.)

Musée de Cluny (aka Musée de Moyen Age): this is a lovely museum addressing the Middle Ages. The big attraction here are The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries. Although as our daughter said, the lion is doing just as much work so why does the unicorn get all the attention? The museum is small but well laid out. In addition to the numerous artifacts from the Middle Ages, there are also works from the Roman era, mostly statuary and baths. While most of the signage is in French, there are English audio guides. It will take you 1-2 hours to get through.

Musée d’Orsay: a fabulous collection of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings. Whistler’s Mother hides discreetly somewhere in the museum, but its collection of paintings by Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, Gauguin, etc. is very impressive. It will take you 1-2 hours to go through.

Arc de Triomphe: Paris is a relatively flat city, so you can get incredible views of the city without having to go too high. The climb up the steep spiral staircases of the Arc is well worth the views of the city (there is also an elevator). This will take you about an hour.

Montmartre/Sacre Coeur: As with the Arc de Triomphe, the views from Montmartre, the only high ground in Paris, are stunning. Sacre Coeur is a new church (by French standards, built in the late 1800s) that appeals to French nationalism in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. Despite the newness of the church, Sacre Coeur is quite nice. A little less grandiose than some of the older churches but beautiful. The drive through Montmartre and the church will take you about an hour.

Musée de l’Orangeries (in the Tuileries): the claim to fame for this museum are the 8 floor-to-ceiling Monets mounted in 2 rooms that Monet painted especially for the space. If you like impressionist painting, this is a must see. The paintings are simply stunning.

Musée Marmottan: this museum is most well known for having the largest Monet collection in the world (the artist’s son donated many Monet drawings and paintings to the museum in order to avoid paying estate tax). Some of the drawings are barely recognizable as Monets, but there are many that are highly recognizable and beautiful. There is also a nice collection of other impressionist painters. But this museum also has a fabulous collection of medieval illuminated manuscript leaves, primarily from the 16th century. They are well-curated, delineated by school, and exquisite.

Dome Church: the church itself is nice but nothing special, especially given the other churches in the city. The Dome Church’s claim to fame is that Napoleon’s Tomb is there. It’s a very ugly tomb. Nicer and more touching is the one nearby of Marshal Fochs. There is also a nice Musée de L’Armee with, amongst other things, suits of armor belonging to François I and Henri II. It also has a nice collection of cannons and tanks. This will take you 1-2 hours.

Jardins du Luxembourg: Marie de Medici, wife of Henri IV (he who said that Paris was worth a Mass) had the gardens built. On a nice day, they are lovely to walk through and people watch or watch the play of the water in the fountains.

Pantheon: this version of the Pantheon doesn't have the austere simplicity of Rome's version, but it does have Foucault's Pendulum and memorials to many of France's most revered writers like Rousseau and Voltaire as well as tributes to their fallen military, starting with the French Revolution. They had a moving tribute to those who died maintaining the honor of France in 1870, and it took me a moment to figure out what conflict that was. (It was the Franco-Prussian war.) It will take you about an hour to go through this.

EuroDisney: when in Paris, you must go to EuroDisney, of course. ☺ It takes about 45 minutes to an hour to get there from Paris. Going there is a bit odd because it is both like and unlike Disneyworld. It's almost like visiting your grandparents' house where things are both familiar and unfamiliar. EuroDisney consists of the Magic Kingdom in the main park and a subset of Hollywood Studios in the other park (which we did not go to). The most popular and intense ride in the park is Space Mountain: Mission Space 2. The ride bears no resemblance to Space Mountain in Disneyworld, but, instead, is like Rock-n-Rollercoaster only with space theming and with the intensity of Expedition Everest. The Star Tours ride is the original version, not the updated version that is currently in Disneyworld. The rides that we thought EuroDisney did better than Disneyworld are Peter Pan, It's a Small World, and Buzz Lightyear. The rides we liked better at Disneyworld are Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean. There is no Winnie-the-Pooh or Jungle Cruise. Big Thunder Mountain was closed, but the guidebooks all say the American version is superior.

There are also some interesting quirks. Popcorn at EuroDisney is sweet, like kettle corn. Some of the dialogue is in English, other parts in French (Buzz Lightyear is half and half, Star Tours is almost all in French as is Haunted Mansion.). The layout is more spacious than Disneyworld or Disneyland, making the crowds seem much less and some of the rides longer (like Pirates and Small World). There is more attention to detail at EuroDisney, both in the rides and in the little stores and pseudo-stores and exhibits throughout the park. We think that attention to detail gives EuroDisney some charm and atmosphere that Disneyworld lacks. Fastpass does exist for most of the same rides in EuroDisney that it does in Disneyworld. (See the Disneyworld tome for Fastpass explanations.)

While it may seem fiscally idiotic, we do recommend having a car and driver for EuroDisney. Getting there by train is straightforward enough, but at the end of a long day, it’s really a pleasure to be able to hop into a car that’s waiting for you and head directly to your hotel.

Restaurants: these are some of our favorite restaurants, although we are not certain that there is such a thing as a bad restaurant in Paris.

Le Troquet (21 rue François Bonvin, 75015 Paris; 01-45-66-89-00): eating at Le Troquet is like eating at a neighbor’s dining room (but a neighbor who can really cook). We had the tasting menu that night, which was fabulous! And unlike many restaurants, they exempt children from the “everyone-must-do-the-tasting-menu” requirement. This is a mom-and-pop place where the service is friendly and helpful and the food is delicious.

Le Stella (133 avenue Victor Hugo, 75016 Paris; 01-56-90-56-00): we were delighted with this brasserie, which is well known in its upscale neighborhood as a good place to eat. Service is polished and friendly, and the food is very good. The staff speaks excellent English.

Le Bistrot de Halles (15 rue des halles, 75000 Paris; 01-42-36-91-69): one of the great secrets of Parisian brasseries is that many of them are corporately owned and the number of mom-and-pop places is dropping. This place is owned by a couple and is quintessentially Parisian. They don’t serve a lot of dishes, but what they do serve is excellent. The duck confit is a must, if it’s being offered. Service can be a little slow due to the limited number of waitstaff, but it’s worth the wait. English is a little limited, but they know enough to get you through your order.

La Closerie des Lilas (171 boulevard du Montparnasse, 75006 Paris; 01-40-51-34-50): another excellent brasserie with memorable steak tartare (although I’m not sure whether it was the steak tartare that was memorable or whether it was the waiter asking to make sure I knew what it was that was memorable). Good English by the staff.

Chez Francis (7 Place de l’Alma, 75008 Paris; 01-47-20-86-83): we ate here our first day in Paris. It was a late lunch (around 2:00), and there aren’t many brasseries that serve lunch that late. (You can order a coffee and sit there for 3 hours, but you can’t order anything to eat—go figure.) The lunch was excellent, and service was friendly and English-speaking.

Julien (16 rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, 75010 Paris; 01-47-70-12-06): a casual brasserie that serves excellent French onion soup (amongst many other things). Service was friendly, and the staff knows enough English to get by. We even saw someone propose during dinner here (fortunately for everyone, she said yes).

Koetsu (42 rue Sainte Anne, 75002 Paris; 01-40-15-99-90): Japanese is a popular cuisine in Paris, and we very much enjoyed our dining experience here. In addition to excellent quality sushi, the restaurant also serves difficult to find dishes such as shabu-shabu and sukiyaki. Sushi can be a nice break from the butter and cream-intensive French meals.

Taillevent (15 rue Lamennais, 75008 Paris; 01-44-95-15-01): one of the best restaurants in the city (which is saying something). The food here is spectacular, and the service is intimate, welcoming, and friendly. The wonderful discovery we made here is that children are not just tolerated—they are welcomed, even fêted. Jackets are required. And the homemade caramels are to die for.

Guy Savoy (18 rue Troyon, 75017 Paris; 01-43-80-40-61): another spectacular restaurant with even better service, if that’s possible. The food is probably slightly better at Taillevent (but it’s close), but the service was incomparable, especially with the kids. They were more than willing to serve half-portions so that you could try more dishes. And if you’re really polite about asking, they might even let you see their (microscopic) kitchen at work.

Berthillon (31 rue St.-Louis-en-I’lle, 75004 Paris; 01-43-54-31-61): some of the best ice cream we’ve ever had. Salted caramel is a favorite for part of our family, and the wild strawberry ice cream is a favorite for the other part. There are several locations, including right behind Notre Dame. Warning: they are closed in August (another unfathomable Parisian concept).

There are numerous bakeries and chocolate shops, and some of our favorites is Angelina’s for macaroons and hot chocolate (French style is dark chocolate with intense flavor—very different from Nestle’s Quik) and Fouquet for chocolate. Fauchon and Hediard are close together and definitely worth visiting for chocolates and gelees. But you can’t go wrong anywhere.

Shopping:

Most of the main designer stores (Dior, Armani, Louis Vuitton, etc.) are located on one of two streets—the Avenue Montaigne in the 8th arrondissement and the Rue Saint- Honoré (and its extension, the Rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré) in the 1st arrondissement).

Unlike U.S. stores, stores in Paris, because of their limited space, will put out a single item of each style rather than the entire inventory. You will have to ask for your (European) size if it’s not on the rack.

Antik Batik (18 rue de Turenne, 75004 Paris; 01-44-78-02-00): located in the Marais, a well-known upscale shopping district, it is the store for ethnic chic, French style. One of our daughter’s favorite shops in Paris. Staff is friendly and speak enough English to get by.

Swildens: two stores down from Antik Batik is a chic teen-oriented clothing store. The style is definitely hip and young.

Hermes: the flagship store on Avenue Montaigne is worth visiting, if only to gawk at the breadth of merchandise offered (and the prices charged) and the beautiful building.

E. Dehillerin (18 et 20 rue Coquillière; 51 rue J.-J. Rousseau, 75001 Paris; 01-42-36-53-13): if you are interested in French cooking supplies, this is the place for you! Any kitchen item you can imagine is sold here. Of particular interest are the metal covered copper pots and pans, which you cannot find in the U.S. They ship as well.

Currency: the standard currency is Euros.

Travel Tips:

Arrondissements: Paris is broken out into 20 arrondissements (districts). They are numbered in a spiral pattern, so that the 1st arrondissement is the city center and spiraling out in a clockwise pattern. The last 2 digits of the Paris postal code will tell you what arrondissement the place is in (so, for example, an address with a postal code of 75004 is in the 4th arrondissement).

Audio guides: rent audio guides whenever possible. Some of the more well-traveled tourist sites will have decent English translations of the French exhibits, but many will not. At any rate, the audio guides give more in-depth information and, more importantly, keeps kids busy and entertained.

Museum Passes: you can buy Paris Museum passes that are good for consecutive days for the vast majority of the city’s major tourist sites (Versailles, the Louvre, etc.) and have them delivered to your hotel before you arrive (www.parisinfo.com). The advantage of the passes (in addition to the money saved if you’re efficient) is that you do not have to stand in the (often) long ticket lines. There are special lines for passholders that bypass the normal lines and save a significant amount of time.

Restrooms: all of the brasserie and other public restrooms we used were clean but small. And a word of caution: in many brasseries, the men have an open urinal near the facilities for women. Perfecting the art of not looking is key here. ☺

Electricity: most of your electronics will be able to cope with the 220 volts of French outlets. Check your power units, which will state whether they are compatible or not. Our Apple products and Nintendo DS players worked fine with 220 volts. You will need to get an outlet adapter since the French outlets do not work with American plugs.

Cell phones: your cell phones will work in France (at an astronomical price, but they will work).

VAT: the French charge a value-added tax for each purchase (included in the price) that people living in a non-EU country can get refunded to them. You will need your passport and mention that you want to apply for a VAT refund when you make the purchase. (Most stores accustomed to dealing with Americans will offer.) The VAT refund counter is at the airport before you check baggage. You will have to check in first so that you have your boarding pass. Make sure you have all your purchases handy (they have the right to see the merchandise you bought). There is a mailbox near the VAT counter so after the forms are stamped, you can just drop the envelopes into the mailbox. But be forewarned—the lines are extremely long and can easily take over an hour to get through.

Overall, we found the Parisians, contrary to stereotype, to be friendly and warm and helpful. It is a fabulous city!