

Paris With the Family (Part II)



The Garnier Opera House

The third day in Paris was spent gallivanting along Boulevard Haussman where Printemps and Galleries Lafayette are located. Those hoping to shop at Marks and Spencer will be disappointed as the famous English shopping centre has shifted out from Paris and its old premises have been taken over by Lafayette. Singaporeans will definitely have a good time here as the choices seem endless and their stores are so huge. I estimate, Printemps and Galleries Lafayette can take easily take three full days for the serious shopper to explore.

The venerable couture houses are found at Avenue Montaigne and Faubourg St Honore where famous brand names such as Christian Dior, Lanvin, etc and auction houses such as Christie and Sotheby's are located. But these will probably cost an arm or a leg and are probably meant for the discerning few. This is definitely one of the few places in the world for fashion shoppers with deep pockets to visit.

Generally, we found Parisians to be a well-dressed lot, chic and very fashionable. Some say the Parisian lifestyle can rub off on you and, indeed, we found this to be true. A few days into our stay, we began to feel that our John Little's warm clothing was a little out of place!

If shopping is not for you, you can explore the nearby Opera Garnier, a premier place for dance and opera in Paris. The opera house was designed in 1875 by Charles Garnier and is adorned with marble and sculpture throughout its structure. Its ceiling is famous and controversial because it's designed by Marc Chagall and his style is a marked contrast to the sombre gold and red opulence of the opera house. One thing we noticed inside the majestic waiting halls of the Opera Garnier were huge panels of mirrors. I guess these must be meant for patrons to admire themselves in their best costumes or suits on a night out at the



The ceiling by Marc Chagall inside the Garnier Opera House.



Artist corner at Place du Tertre, Montmartre.



The Glass Pyramid by IM Pei amidst the traditional Louvre ambience.

opera or ballet. We were hoping to catch a ballet or theatre show on one of our nights there but the timing was not right.

After much walking during the last two and half days, we could see that the strain was getting to our children. So we decided to hop onto an open-air bus tour which took us to the Louvre. We bought a three-day bus pass (tickets can be purchased directly from the driver). One unanticipated activity while on the open-air bus tour is viewing the Parisian sky. On a clear day, one can count up to 10 air flight streams in the sky, depicting how busy the Parisian air traffic can be with its two airports, the Charles de Gaulle and the Orly Airport.

The Louvre needed no introduction. It has the world's largest collection of paintings and other artifacts. One could easily take four days for a complete visit of the more than 30,000 exhibits. After hearing and reading so much about the famous painting, our children saw the Mona Lisa for the first time, protected by a glass panel. Throngs of people were milling around to see what all the fuss was about. I am not sure, after having passed through and appreciated the exhibits at the galleries of the other French and Italian masters leading to the Mona Lisa, whether they were visibly impressed by the masterpiece. But her ever so mysterious smile maintains its mystique. At a certain angle, you are not even sure if she had actually winked!

We spent some time taking pictures outside the Glass Pyramid, the entrance to the Louvre. The Pyramid was designed by IM Pei, the famous Chinese architect, and was quite controversial when it was first launched for its very courageous futuristic design amidst the classical ambience of the Louvre.

After the Louvre closed for the evening, we headed (on the open-air bus) towards the less glitzy parts of Paris — the Place de la Bastille and the Latin Quarter. The Place de la Bastille is a traffic roundabout and is named after the Bastille Fortress, a building that was stormed by the Parisians on 14 July 1789. That event marked the start of the French Revolution.

The open-air bus also passed the recently completed Bibliotheque Nationale (the national library), a futuristic four-glass-shaped building by Dominique Perrault which looks like opened books, erected in honour of their late President Francois Mitterrand.

The bus also took us past the Sorbonne, a world famous academic institution, now a precinct of the Universite de Paris. The Sorbonne was founded by Robert de Sorbon and was originally meant for poor students to pursue theological studies. This place is also known as the Quartier Latin, named



The Place de la Bastille.



The Bibliotheque Nationale de France (the national library) in honour of the late French President Francois Mitterrand.



The Basilique du Sacre Couer.

after students and professors who spoke Latin in the classroom and on the streets at one time.

We alighted at the Left Bank and checked out a famous bookstore, the Shakespeare and Company, a recommended tourist destination. It was apparently frequented in the past by literary greats such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Stein.

Like any typical Chinese family on holiday in a western country, after the third day, we needed Chinese food and headed towards Mirama, a Beijing-run Chinese restaurant, for its well-

known duck and roast pork rice. We discovered that red wine goes well with Chinese food!

We ended our itinerary for the day by visiting Montmartre to see the Basilique du Sacre Couer which is perched on a hill and is well known for its imposing Byzantine Domes and bell tower. At the foot of the Basilique, we had a good view of Paris by night and that gave us an idea of what the city of lights was all about. The famous artist square known as Place Du Tertre is nearby. One has to be pretty discerning in selecting an artist to do a sketch portrait. Both our children had their portraits sketched by a French artist. That night, we stayed out past midnight, the latest we had ever been out in Paris before catching a cab back to our little apartment at Rue de Berri. We found cab fares to be reasonably priced and not any more expensive than those in Singapore, barring a currencies comparison.

We headed to the Chateau Versailles the following day. Versailles was easily accessible by a 20-minute train ride. There are various tours available but after cost comparison, we thought it more practical to take a train direct and make our own way to the Chateau. After all, the Chateau is merely a 20-minute walk from the nearest train station.

The Chateau is a palace of unspeakable French grandeur and opulence that can be matched probably only by the Chinese Emperor and Egyptian pharaohs. It was built in 1661 by King Louis XIV who deployed about 40,000 workers to drain the marshes and move the forests to create the spectacular Versailles garden which is featured in all the tourist guidebooks and documentaries. It became the envy of Europe and was never quite duplicated anywhere else in the world.



Taking a picture with Sulley, a loveable monster character from the cartoon movie Monster Inc at Disney Studios.

A famous chamber to visit is the Hall of Mirrors where the Versailles Treaty which ended World War I was signed. Ironically, this was also the place where the German empire was proclaimed in 1871. The mirrors of the chambers reflect the views from the windows overlooking their spectacular gardens. A tour of the various chambers and the Garden of Versailles will give one a clearer understanding of the opulent lifestyles of the French kings which probably led the people to revolt against the King (then King Louis XVI and his Austrian born queen, Marie Antoinette) in October 1879.

The following day, we spent two nights at Paris Disneyland (which opened in 1992) for our kids' sake. According to Frommers Paris 2004, though initially met with lacklustre response, the park (formerly known as Euro Disney resort) is now the number one attraction in Paris in terms of numbers and accounts for four per cent of the tourism industry foreign currency sale.

We found, much to our surprise, that Disneyland is not meant only for kids. Various rides, particularly the Pirates of the Carribean, were enjoyable for all the family. We found the Space Mountain roller coaster ride not for the faint hearted. It had several corkscrew loops and spirals, all in dark space. Really scary!

Picture taking with various Disney characters is definitely a must. We met Sulley, the lovable monster character from the Disney movie, 'Monster Inc', who was a favourite of both our younger children at home who could not join us for the trip. The daily parades of Disney characters, including a night parade, make the carnival atmosphere in Disneyland almost surreal and definitely provide good opportunities for photo shoots.



A daily parade of favourite Disney characters at Disneyland Park.

The next day was spent at the Disney studios where film-making processes were depicted. A ride on a tram which took us to a fire and flash flood set where we found ourselves, together with 200 others, acting as victims trapped in the tram, was memorable.

That marked the end of our vacation in Paris. Paris is definitely a place for the family to visit. There is something for everybody. The old Paris still holds a certain charm that cannot possibly be found anywhere else in the world. It is definitely a romantic place. I would highly recommend it as a place to go, at least once in a lifetime. We wish we had had more time, but then again a good holiday is one which makes one want to return for more. Au revoir!

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