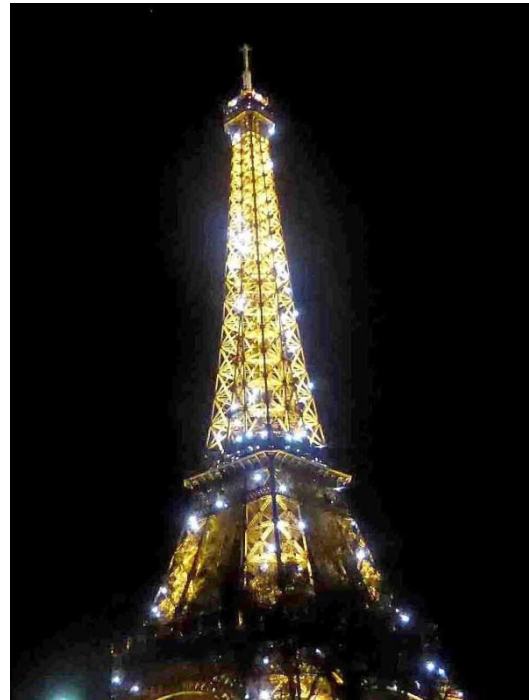


A QUICK TOUR OF PARIS

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Text by John Biggs © 2016

Images by John Biggs and Catherine Tang © 2016

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22 hours and four plane changes see us arrive at Charles De Gaulle Airport whacked out. We have booked on a river cruise down the Rhone but have taken a five day tour of Paris before joining the cruise.

We are met by a girl from the Dominican Republic who came to Paris a year ago with no French and massive ambitions. Four jobs later she is fluent in French, has an excellent job in tourism and is seeking more worlds to conquer. She takes us to a large car with a taciturn driver who is to take us to our hotel but something funny is going on: we have been going for much longer than expected, we pass through the grimmest industrial parts of Paris in silence. At one major intersection, police cars and motor cycles, light flashing, sirens wailing, weave in and around us. We look uneasily at each other: this is the month of the bombings. But wailing police sirens is a sound that is as Parisian as the Eiffel Tower, we are to discover.

After an hour and some we finally arrive at Hotel Duminy-Vendome in the centre of Paris and our driver turns out to have excellent English, which he now uses freely. I had been studying French on line with Duolingo to 52% fluency (try it if you want to learn a language, it's fantastic) but that doesn't seem much use here. No need as it turns out. Almost everywhere, our stumbling French is met with English. Even the sight of us evokes greetings in English. Quite a change from some years ago.

The 1e arrondissement: Tuileries, Avenue des Champs-Élysées

Our hotel is clean, comfortable but with the room the size of a cupboard, as tends to be the case in European cities. It is in the 1e Arrondissement in central Paris, very convenient indeed for access to the main sights. There are 20 arrondissements or suburban districts each with its own council. The arrondissements start in central Paris, where the Louvre etc are, then spiral out like snail shells, in roughly decreasing socio-economic status. Those in the 1e arrondissement consider themselves better than those in the 10th arrondissement and much much better than those in the 20th, while those in 10th arrondissement see themselves as worse than those in the 1st but better than those in the 20th arrondissement, while those in the 20th arrondissement know their place (with apologies to John Cleese).

The hotel is behind the Rue de Rivoli where many businesses occupy large 19th century buildings. A step from there to the Tuileries Gardens, started in 1559 by Catherine de Medici to remind her of



her native Florence. However they have been successively modified since then with grottos, statuary, artwork, ponds, with regularly planted trees just now acquiring their spring leaves. Most French public gardens we see comprise trees planted with geometrical regularity. Plane trees are trimmed flat – because Louis 14 at Versailles, upset that trees obscured his view, ordered all plane trees to be thus

trimmed. Oddly enough, this method of arborectomy was adopted throughout France and still is as we saw in faraway Provence. I hope they look better when fully leafed than they do at present.

A footbridge over the Seine takes us to the Musée d'Orsay, but with long queues to view the largely Impressionist art we don't join the queue. We are accosted by girls waving printed forms claiming donations for the physically handicapped. I dutifully hand over €2. We are later told that these girls are gypsies from Romania or Bulgaria, illegal citizens but under age so they can't be arrested. Our informant said she watched victims more gullible than us even hand over €20 notes: the gypsy kids made €70 in an hour. Beware.

There is a huge Ferris wheel at the end of the gardens, which surely must have brilliant views all over Paris. A wonderful way to get our bearings, and only E6 each. There is the Eiffel Tower, and there, straight as an arrow, runs the Champs-Élysées to end itself at the Arc de Triomphe. We head there.



The Avenue des Champs-Élysées is a boulevard in the 8th arrondissement, 1.9 kilometres long and runs between the Place de la Concorde, where the Ferris wheel is, and the Place Charles de Gaulle, where the Arc de Triomphe is. We pass many lovely buildings and parks including the Grand Palace and the Petit Palace. They were built for the 1900 Exhibition in glass, like London's Crystal Palace, but unlike London's, these palaces did not burn down.



The Arc de Triomphe honours those who fought and died for France in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. It was commissioned in 1806 by Napoleon after the victory at Austerlitz. It now has the names of all French victories since then and those of the generals inscribed on its inner and outer surfaces: beneath lies the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from World War I.

All that walking is good for sidelining jet lag but on returning to our hotel we collapse early.

Touring in a feral 2CV

We now start on our prebooked tours. First is a wild drive in a Citroen 2CV. Our driver Pierre has a 1973 model 2CV, an amazing vehicle, with a twin cylinder motor generating only 20-something hp, but Pierre sends this rattling underpowered thing through traffic, around traffic, and once into traffic. We stop for a quick walk through an old shopping arcade, race through Pigalle with its Moulin Rouge and streets comprising sex shops, to Montmartre, haven of artists. Pierre parks while we visit the Sacré Coeur that dominates the sky line, while from the top there are sweeping views of Paris. The interior of Sacre Coeur is beautiful. We want to climb to the top of the dome but with Pierre illegally parked waiting for us we decide to return later.



Pierre descends into central Paris rapidly, darting terrifyingly through narrow streets, dashes through the Louvre, left turn to Notre Dame, right to the Latin Quarter, back to Ste Germain des Pres, the remains of a Roman wall flash past in a teeth-rattling loop, a man is struggling to walk through a wall. An excitingly wild ride to be sure, but visibility is not the best from a small speeding car. No matter, we are booked on a more leisurely and informative tour later. The 2CV tour is not for sightseeing but to experience the road equivalent of a switchback ride or real time Dodgem cars.

A quick once over of central Paris by Hop On/Hop/Off Bus

In the afternoon we take the 1st of the four HopOn/Off L'Open Paris bus routes. The Hop On/Off buses are a wonderful thing. You can stay on board and listen to a running commentary on where we currently are and you can get off and on at will. The great thing is that it allows us to get an overview of the whole of Paris.

Our first trip takes through the Louvre (more of that later), beside the Seine, past the golden domed Academie Francaise which since 1805 has 40 'Immortals' from all walks of life who are guardians of the French Language. We then pass the Palace of Justice and La Conciergerie built in 1310 with its



Sainte Chappelle as the former palace of monarchs but served as a prison during the Revolution. Marie Antionette was kept there prior to her beheading.

We pass Notre Dame, to return later, and head west to the Champs-Élysées, round the Arc de Triomphe to the Musée des Hommes near the Eiffel Tower, round the Tower for views from various angles, hence to Les Invalides a military hospital built in 1671 under Louis 14. The tomb of Napoleon is in the Church under the massive gold dome. Sorry about the breathless rush, you really need a map to follow all that. Opposite is the Rodin Museum with *Le Penseur* mooning us from his garden. We pass the French National Assembly, Parliament House in other words.

We end up at the Ste Marie Madelaine, a huge Greek Temple on the outside and inside a magnificent church with a dome that gives it superb acoustics. Camille Saint-Saens was once organist here. The Madelaine is back in the 1^e arrondissement, so while we are there let us look around all short walking distance from our hotel.



There is a small Romanesque church around the corner, and then the Place Vendome with the obelisk to commemorate the Battle of Austerlitz with Napoleon commanding from on top, another French war hero, Jean of Arc (how an arguably demented 16 year old illiterate girl defeated the English is extraordinary), the National Academy Music (once I think the Paris National Opera but the biggest opera house is in the Bastille further east), and some views of the Seine, one bridge has the now ubiquitous love padlocks (Pierre *aime* Charlotte) with the key thrown away: a few, wise beyond their years, use a reversible combination lock.

Next day sees us back on the Hop On/Hop Offs which take us east. The scene changes, modern, industrial, less interesting. The National Library is a splendid modern building, as are a set of



ministries and public buildings. The Place de Bastille is redolent of deep history, so is the Town Hall but I can't go into the intricacies of the French Revolution that these places have witnessed. We stay on board and take photos as best we can, which isn't much. Five days in Paris is not enough.

The fourth and final HO/HO route takes us south, touching the Latin Quarter, which we later toured on foot (the best way), past the Jardin de Luxembourg, and Montparnasse, famous for students, poets and writers. La Coupole is a bar that opened in 1927 and quickly became the watering hole for such as Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and other French intellectuals.

Mid-afternoon we return to Montmartre to climb the 300 odd steps to the top of Sacré Coeur. But the weather is closing in and soon it rains. We wait 50 mins in light rain for the bus. It should run every 15 mins, something must be wrong. It was. It finally arrives but is immediately stuck in gridlocked traffic. Sirens wailing, over 50 police vehicles roar past on the wrong side of the road. Another terrorist attack? No, a huge number of protestors at La Place de la Republique. The government had just introduced the French version of Work Choices, increasing hours of work, cutting wages and giving CEOs more powers of dismissal. Australian protestors are baa-lambs compared to the French.



We get back to our hotel hours later, but at least we do get back. Better protestors than terrorists. And the protestors had a good cause.

The Louvre

On our next tour is for a whole day with our own guide. Now we will get down to the detail that we



missed in previous tours, especially the terrifying blur that Pierre and his feral 2CV had sketched. First, to the Louvre. Nearly 35,000 objects from prehistory to the 21st century are exhibited over an area of 60,600 square metres. The Louvre is the world's most visited museum, receiving more than 9 million visitors in 2014, and is one of the largest.

The museum is housed in the Louvre Palace, originally built as a fortress in the late 12th century under Philip II, and later home for the kings of France until 1682, when Louis XIV chose the Palace of Versailles for his household. The Louvre then became primarily a place to display the royal collection, including from 1692 a collection of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. During the French Revolution, the National Assembly decreed that the Louvre should be used as a museum to display the nation's masterpieces. The collection was increased under Napoleon and the museum renamed the *Musée Napoléon*, but after Napoleon's abdication many of the works seized by his armies were returned to their original owners. In the grounds stands the Arc de Triomphe Caroussel, another monument to Napoleon's modesty, that creates a direct line from the Louvre through the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe.

We had time only to see some ancient Greek works and the da Vinci room. The Venus de Milo is from the Hellenistic period as can be seen on the flowing sweep of the clothing and the curve of the

body. Compare that to a piece from the classical period frieze of the Parthenon a couple of centuries earlier: the clothing is stiff and static. On the way to the da Vinci section we see that largest canvas hung there, the *Wedding at Cana* by Caliari of Verona, in which he included all the bigwigs of the day with their animals. A photo of the Virgin Mary and St Anne and the infant John. But our main focus is the Mona Lisa. She was the wife of a merchant Giocondo who invited da Vinci to paint her. Da Vinci ever the perfectionist took 4 years to do so, which annoyed the merchant Giocondo so much he wouldn't pay da Vinci. Da Vinci went to Paris and took the portrait with him, outraging not only Giocondo but most of Italy. Later it was stolen from the Louvre by a patriotic Italian but once the picture was in his tender care he couldn't bring himself to hand it over to the Italian Government; he kept it under his bed instead, which was where it was discovered. It was restored to the Louvre where it is now, but kept under glass, which makes photography tricky. It is a fine example of Da Vinci's understatement and use of chiaroscuro, light and shade with muted colours.



An interesting painting is by David of the coronation of Napoleon's Josephine. Usually monarchs are crowned at Rheims Cathedral, but Napoleon said that in his case it was to be Notre Dame, and he would crown himself by himself and then he would crown Josephine. The Pope looks on with severe disapproval. Josephine's daughters, and one grandchild look on, yet Josephine looks amazingly young. Napoleon's mother is painted as in the gallery seat but she wasn't there in fact.

In the Louvre we see again some amazingly crass behaviour by many tourists. They visit the Mona Lisa say, or any work of art, and take selfies with the world's best art as the background to – ME! Not only does it show humanity at its egocentric worst, it means the narcissistic clowns stand in front of the work blocking the view of people who want to see the art for what it is.

Same with scenery. We shared the top deck of one Hop On Hop Off bus with two very rich Chinese girls, who took close up selfies every few minutes: so close up that it was apparent that 80 per cent of the photo was of their faces, and in the background one might discern the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Notre Dame. No matter: the important thing is that it is a great shot of – ME! And while I'm grouching about this, we saw at least three different Chinese couples in wedding gear with at least one photographer in tow. This couple have two photographers taking their



lovey pose in front of the statue of Charlemagne – and hey here they are again near the south transept of Notre Dame. Catherine reckons this is the



manifestation of Chinese new money, the couple get married in Beijing or wherever, honeymoon in Paris, and come back with hundreds of top quality photos of the newly wedded couple to show their admiring and envious friends. These new money Chinese are just like oil rich Texans of the early 1900s. So let us

now see Notre Dame without the gorgeous props.

Notre Dame from the outside has three large doors depicting from left to right: special saints who were condemned to death including poor Benedict, who picked up his head and walked five miles with it before dropping dead. An abbey was built on that spot, and the order of Benedictine monks was founded. The second is dedicated to Christ on the day of judgement and we can see those weighed in the balance and found wanting tumbling into hell. The right portal is dedicated to St Anne, who also was the subject of a da Vinci painting in the Louvre. The traditional Virgin and child is against the west window. On the other side of that window is the celebrated organ. The nave and south transept with another lovely rose window, and outside John Paul II; some fancy roof work and some of the famous gargoyles: their purpose is to divert damaging rainwater away from the walls usually by a groove along the back of the monster. They are therefore elongated and made into frightening animals to remind people they need the protection of the church otherwise they might be gobbled up or worse by an evil demon.



Eiffel Tower by Day and Night

A Batobus river boat takes us from Notre Dame to the Eiffel Tower. The Eiffel Tower was designed and built by engineer Gustave Eiffel on the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution for the 1889 World's Fair. From the start it was heavily criticised. A group of artists wrote:

We, writers, painters, sculptors, architects and passionate devotees of the hitherto untouched beauty of Paris, protest with all our strength, with all our indignation in the name of slighted French taste, against the erection... of this useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower. To bring our arguments home, imagine for a moment a giddy, ridiculous tower dominating Paris like a gigantic black smokestack, crushing under its barbaric bulk Notre Dame, the Tour Saint-Jacques, the Louvre, the Dome of Les Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, all of our humiliated monuments will disappear in this ghastly dream.

The tower was meant to be temporary, but here it still is, the tallest building in Paris and at its time the tallest in the world at 324m. It cost \$400 million to build in today's money and is worth \$672 billion to the French economy. It takes 60 tonnes of paint to repaint it every 7 years. It has attracted daredevil acts, parachute jumping (one died), tight rope walking, the most famous in 1989 by Phillipe Petit from the second story to a building 700 m away. It is the third most popular place in France for suicides, two were spectacularly unsuccessful. In 1964 a jilted young lady jumped from the first floor and fell onto a Dauphine car which broke her fall and a leg. In 2008 another jilted young lady did the same, landing on a car and surviving with minor injuries. The myth arose that one or other of these lucky ladies married the car owner, but the marriage part of either story is untrue.



The Tower has 3 decks, the first with a good restaurant which we reached by the original mechanical lift, hauled up an incline. After lunch we climbed the 320 steps to deck two. The wind was high and cold, some quick shots to compare this deck with the first level (not much difference). We didn't take the lift to the top on the advice of our guide: a waste of €15 she said, all you see is a mass of unidentifiable buildings. As you can see, the extra height doesn't do anything a zoom lens can't do with much less trouble.

At night we take a 24 km river dinner cruise with Bateaux Parisienne. We have an excellent dinner with much wine; here is the French food that we had been significantly missing so far, a melting beefsteak for mains. The advertised 'light music' is tasteful and nonintrusive, the woman singer especially good. We sail down the Seine in dusk turning to night. Returning we pass the Eiffel Tower and continue downstream to, good God, the Statue of Liberty! Yes Eiffel also helped to design the Statue of Liberty in 1886 and a copy was offered to Paris by the American community in Paris in 1889, and here it is. We return to the Eiffel now lit in glorious gold. Suddenly, 20,000 light bulbs sparkle away, which they do for five minutes on the hour. Cameras out. What we don't know is that the sparkle display is considered artwork and copyright, so to photograph it is illegal and you can be fined. We along with thousand, millions, of others, weren't.



Latin Quarter

A gourmet tour of the Latin Quarter, which is so called because the Sorbonne was established by Robert de Sorbon in 1257 as a college of the then University of Paris. It became a world famous place of study, and as all teaching was in Latin, that language became the lingua franca of the area –



hence it was called the Latin Quarter. We are met at a market by Violette, outside the best cheese shop in France. She has us taste different cheeses and bread and then walks us through the Latin Quarter. This is what we feel Paris should be like: narrow cobble streets, interesting little shops, homely folk and finally a wine and foie gras shop, where we sample various cheese, rustic bread and foie gras: I am a little squeamish about eating the diseased

livers of force fed birds but when in France etc. Not that I like it all that much. We buy a bottle of 2010 Bergerac, a Bordeaux-like red for about \$8. In and around our hotel you would pay almost four times that for a half litre of pretty basic wine. So once out of the 1e Arrondissement, food and wine are cheap and good. Remember that!

We walk back home along the Seine, past the statue of the Henri the Good (good in bed mostly) and the famous riverside antiques, bookshops, a lively mixture of kitsch and another impromptu brass and drum band.

So what is Paris in the Spring like?

Paris in the spring may romantic but it can be very cold. It was 6 degrees on arrival. The Duminy-Vendome hotel was reasonably priced and superbly placed in the heart of Paris. The staff were very helpful and the breakfasts great. But no other meals, which brings me to the downside of staying in the 1st Arrondissement. Meals in very ordinary cafes ranged from \$25 a serve of basic stuff – stewed pork and rice, leg of chicken with mashed potato – that tended to leave me with indigestion, or posh restaurants with mains starting from \$70 and up and up, and up. I put up with dyspepsia. Baguettes are safe. We were shocked to see so many people smoke; young women seem to see smoking as a fashion statement. I don't understand.

Doing business with French people one-on-one we found to be pleasant, often quirky, but en masse don't expect a 'sorry' when someone bangs into you, however painfully.

Traffic is horrendous, motor bikes and scooters dart in and around cars. The traffic jams force people to use unusual modes of transport. We saw suited business men whizz past on little toy scooters. Lights at pedestrian crossings are advisory only. Several times, walking on a crossing at a green light we were closely buzzed by cars that carried right on across the zebra lines. For E70 a year you can get a card which allows you to pick up a bicycle from a bike rank, which you leave at the next convenient rank. Hobart's Art Bikes are a move in that direction but a long way to go yet.

The traffic had different problems in the provinces. The streets were very narrow yet cars insisted on parking on one side, leaving cms for passing cars to negotiate. We watched transfixed as one delivery van was just a few cms too wide: it sideswipe the side mirror of a parked car, then with a nonchalant shrug and a *merde arrive* (trs: shit happens), he drove over it with a loud *crack!* After that we noticed that wise drivers when they parked their cars pushed the mirror alongside the car not sticking out from it. Narrow as Hobart streets are, I have yet to see that here.

We could also do with much more of French sophistication. Despite the crummy cafes, or the ferocious traffic, there is an underlying consciousness of an ideal way of living. Respect for buildings, posters for concerts and art exhibitions, historical events surround you; the use of leisure, like sitting in cafes talking with friends, is part of a relaxed lifestyle.

Rather like in Hong Kong, where apartments tend to be very small, Paris apartments can be very small – in this building they are one room thick. People thus go out for entertainment, which adds to the buzz, the public climate, of Paris. I have



mentioned the loud brass bands, trombones braying, drums thumping; they don't so for money but because it is fun to play and be listened to. So many museums, all those stalls beside the Seine offering old and rare books (at a price of course), the splendid churches with wonderful acoustics, now concert halls of great charm and taste. In the city, amidst the dirt and chaos, you feel the culture and sophistication. Perhaps part of that sophistication is French quirkiness, seen in advertisements, even the French news (watch the last 15 minutes or so of SBS' French news at 8.40 each morning). One example was in Avignon: our guide was leading us back through the central place to the ship holding high her guidely flag, when a girl suddenly leaped out, snatched flag and holding higher said 'Follow me, the asked the guide 'Where are you going?' 'To the waterfront.' 'Too far' the girl said, handing the flag back. 'Oh is she a friend of yours?' I asked. 'Never seen her before,' the guide laughed. I just can't imagine that happening in Australia, not without the exchange of strong yours.

After Baron Haussmann redesigned central Paris elegantly (at the enormous cost of displacing hundreds of thousands of people), no buildings over six stories were allowed and still aren't. While in Paris I read with horror that the blue-tied bogans who run Tasmania have allowed developers to

build on small blocks at double the number of stories currently allowed; no permits needed, no questions asked. These are the same bogans who refused to support Hobart Baroque, a world class cultural event that Brisbane Council had the foresight to snap up, while we were pouring squillions into V8 racing cars, mainland football teams, cricket and horse racing. Not to be an elitist, I'll say that we could have had all of the above, with some prioritising, but world class cultural events are simply not on the agenda of neoliberals, at either state or federal levels.



Tasmania could well have been Tasmanie, but the French explorers who preceded the English were explorers, naturalists and humanitarians, as indicated by their very positive relations with the indigenous Tasmanians at Recherche Bay. The English, alarmed at the presence of the French, swiftly annexed Tasmania in order to empty their prisons, and to add a new notch in the English territorial belt before they feared the

French would. (The painting, depicting aborigines farewelling d'Entrecasteaux's ships in 1793, is by Ian Hansen and donated by Bob Brown to TMAG).

I wonder: what if the French had indeed got in first, they nearly did. Dare I say that Tasmanie would be a nicer, more interesting, place than Tasmania?