

Doing Paris Differently

With 27 million foreign visitors annually, Paris and its surrounding area represent the most popular tourist destination in the world. Even people who have never been to the "City of Light" are familiar with key cultural and natural landmarks by sight as well as names of famous districts through generations of movies, songs and artistic works. What could I discover to add an element of surprise to a four-day visit?



To make the most of limited time, I enlisted the services of **My Genie in Paris** (mygenieinparis.com), a tour agency that customizes itineraries based on the insider knowledge of the two native Parisian owners and their team of artists, designers, journalists and trend-spotters ideally positioned to recommend those illusive surprises.

An itinerary for any number of days is delivered to your Paris hotel with vouchers, maps and brochures that reflect each client's personal interests. During earlier email discussions from Canada, I had selected an Electric Bike Tour of Paris's back streets (49€), a Paris Bakery Class (85€) and a Paris Chocolate Tour and Tasting (85€) a guided walking tour which visited five chocolate makers. These seemed like original ways to discover Paris.

For example, let's consider the Bakery Class at Miss Manan Boulangerie, a 15-minute walk from the landmark Notre Dame Cathedral. It offered an authentic three-hour glimpse behind the scenes on three floors where beehive-like activity produces tens of thousands of those famous French breads and pastries daily, ranging from baguettes and croissants to pain au chocolat and mouth-watering pastries. At every station, expert bakers and their apprentices stopped their tasks to patiently demonstrate their specialties and then invite us to try our hand at making our own creations. We

finished in the bakery's popular storefront eatery with a welcome café au lait and a souvenir of our own creations to sample and take away. Not hard to tell the amateur versions, but all the more delicious for being our own!

The other Paris-based operator I felt sure would deliver some surprising ways to experience the city was **Walking the Spirit** (walkingthespirit.com) which offers guided walking or bus tours that present the rich heritage of African American influences in Paris. Nowhere else in the world were Black writers, artists, musicians, and intellectuals able to nurture and display their talent, unfettered by the racism they experienced in the United States. The brainchild of African Canadian, Julia Browne, these story-telling tours are full of compelling human dramas and insights into the creative exchanges that have influenced the city over more than a century.



This white Anglo-Saxon blonde immersed in all things Black Paris with two guided walking tours of the Latin Quarter and Montmartre, a night of jumping music at the famous but tiny Duc des Lombards Jazz Club, and participation in a genuine Paris soirée, all of which may be arranged by Walking the Spirit.

Though lacking the luxurious boudoir backdrop and aristocratic attendance of historic French soirées, my thoroughly modern Paris soirée was definitely an insider experience, hosted by US native Patricia Laplante-Collins for over ten years. These weekly evenings of cultural sharing bring together resident expats living in Paris, nomadic internationals like myself, and French intelligentsia. Popular with adults of every age, conversation quickly flows around Patricia's living room which is up several narrow flights of worn wood steps in an antique stone building over the bridge near Notre Dame.

Visit Parissoirees.com for listings of year round Sunday evening events and to book attendance directly. Entry is €20 per person, including an abundant buffet of home-cooked dishes, unlimited wine and non-alcoholic beverages, and a special guest performance or challenging lecture. Even

with 23 guests at my soirée, Patricia captured the intimate salon atmosphere, providing an informal relaxed meeting place for strangers to become quickly acquainted and stimulate the little gray cells.



Looking for an accommodation surprise to round out my Paris visit, I discovered the whimsical boutique **Hotel Mayet** (mayet.com), which brings a smile the moment you cross the threshold. With 23 small rooms on six narrow floors, each room is decorated in office furniture style, from filing cabinet bedside tables to lighting and even the ceiling fan. Conversely, the public spaces reflect no office decor at all, jumping with colourful wall murals, comfy furniture and red plush carpets. The vaulted cellar with its rough-stone walls and ceiling makes a distinctive gathering place for the included continental breakfast.

Staff are exceptionally helpful, all speaking English, and volunteering information about every aspect of Paris as well as providing helpful free services including WiFi, a lobby computer for guest use, and free photocopying.

Serving the independent traveler, Hotel Mayet has a large repeat clientele, mostly from the UK, the US and France itself. Located in the neighbourhood of Les Invalides, 6th arrondissement, it is just three blocks from the subway/metro. Five stops later you are whisked into the heart of the old city, Notre Dame Cathedral and Ile de la Cité in a matter of minutes.

By Alison Gardner

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