



The mob scene of people trying to get close enough to take photos of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre.

Paris: Part III

The 'must stops' in the French capital

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

PARIS – Headed to Paris? If you are only there for a week like my family was then you cannot see everything. Here is what I suggest you place on your priority list.

NOTRE DAME DE PARIS

Notre-Dame de Paris (<http://www.notredamedeparis.fr/-English>), a masterpiece of faith, art and history, is the cathedral of the Catholic archdiocese of Paris. It is one of the best-known symbols of the French capital, and the most-visited monument in France, ahead of the Eiffel Tower. The cathedral is on UNESCO's World Heritage List and attracts 13 million believers, pilgrims and visitors each year. It is stage to major celebrations for the diocese and the French republic. Access to the cathedral is open and free

of charge every day of the year, during the opening hours. Parts of the cathedral are accessible to reduced-mobility individuals: the nave, side aisles and transept, more than two-thirds of the building. There are three steps to access the choir and the Treasury. There is a small step at the entrance portals to access the main floor.

ARC DE TRIOMPHE

Located at one end of Paris's most famous avenue, the Champs Elysees, the Arc de Triomphe Paris (<http://www.arcdetriompheparis.com>) triumphal arch is older than the Eiffel Tower, but is somewhat new in the tradition of building arches to celebrate victories. The Romans did it much earlier. In fact, the Arch of Titus had inspired Napoleon to build this 19th-century tribute to his 'Grande Armee.' The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was added in 1921. The 'eternal flame' is re-lit every

evening at 6:30 p.m. You can admire the arch from below at the ground level - either on foot while you're window-shopping on the Champs Elysees - or by automobile if you're lucky enough to get caught in the swirl of traffic that plays dodge around its base. If you choose not to brave the crowds visiting the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe is a great alternative. It's also less expensive if you're traveling with students or children. Kids and teenagers, age 17 and younger get free admission. The top can only be reached by climbing up its 40 stairs. But before you get to the stairs, you have to get to the monument itself (which isn't as simple as you'd think). Do not try crossing the traffic circle. There is an underground tunnel on the Avenue de la Grande Armee side of the circle. You can access this tunnel from the Wagram exit of the Metro. This structure was built between 1806 and 1836. Even though there were many

modifications from the original plans, reflecting political changes and power struggles, the Arch still retains the essence of the original concept which was a powerful, unified ensemble.

The Centre des monuments nationaux (www.tourisme.monuments-nationaux.fr/en) has almost 100 historical monuments all over France open to the public. Its properties include Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel, Château of Azay-le-Rideau, Arc de Triomphe, Sainte-Chapelle, Pantheon and Abbey of Thoronet. The diversity of sites, from abbeys to châteaux, prehistoric caves, and archaeological sites, and more, is testimony to France's incredibly rich heritage from all eras. With nine million visitors, 400 events per year, the Centre des monuments nationaux is a unique operator in the cultural tourism sector. Log on to

THE WORLD FAMOUS OPERA HOUSE

Everyone told me not to leave Paris without at least taking a tour of the Palais Garnier (<http://visitepalaisgarnier.fr>), a magnificent 1,979-seat opera house, which was built from 1861 to 1875 for the Paris Opera. It was originally called the Salle des Capucines because of its location on the Boulevard des Capucines in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, but soon became known as the Palais Garnier in recognition of its opulence and its architect, Charles Garnier. We visited on a Saturday afternoon. The cost is 10 and six Euros for adults and children/students respectively. You can also rent an audio guide, which comes on an Ipad and is good for two people. We were mesmerized by what we saw. This is said to be the most famous opera house in the world, partly due I am told to its use as the setting for Gaston Leroux's 1910 novel *The Phantom of the Opera* and, of course its subsequent adaptations in films and musical stage productions. This facility also houses the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra de Paris (Paris Opera Library-Museum). Although the Library-Museum is no longer managed by the Opera and is part of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the museum is included in unaccompanied tours of the Palais Garnier.

THE LOUVRE

The Louvre Museum (www.louvre.fr/en), a former residence of the kings of France, has for two centuries been one of the biggest museums in the world. Its collections are spread over eight departments: Near Eastern Antiquities, Islamic Art, Egyptian Antiquities, Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities, Paintings, Sculptures, Decorative Arts, and Prints and Drawings dating from the Middle Ages to 1848. The Louvre in figures: 35,000 works of art in 60,600 square metres of rooms devoted to permanent collections, with 2,410 windows, 3,000 locks and 10,000 steps. The Louvre is open every day (except Tuesday) from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. On Wednesdays and Fridays you can go until 9:45 p.m. This place is gigantic and takes a long time to visit.

It is best to do your research first so you have a game plan. We were fortunate to have Coralie James from the Louvre's top-notch communications team lead us through the true "must" stops. Thus included the museum's three great ladies — the Venus de Milo, the Victory of Samothrace, and Mona Lisa. There were an incredible 20,000 people there the day we visited.

More than just a meeting place, it is now clearly a forum for sharing, open and generous, where the exceptional is accessible to all. You can pre-search the entire collection online, including the famous Mona Lisa. This portrait was doubtless painted in Florence between 1503 and 1506. It is thought to be of Lisa Gherardini, wife of a Florentine cloth merchant named Francesco del Giocondo - hence the alternative title, *La Gioconda*. However, Leonardo seems to have taken the completed portrait to France rather than giving it to the person who commissioned it. It was eventually returned to Italy by Leonardo's student and heir Salai. It is not known how the painting came to be in François I's collection.

The history of the Mona Lisa is shrouded in mystery. Among the aspects which remain unclear are the exact identity of the sitter, who commissioned the portrait, how long Leonardo worked on the painting, how long he kept it, and how it came to be in the French royal collection.

The portrait may have been painted to mark one of two events - either when Francesco del Giocondo and his wife bought their own house in 1503, or when their second son, Andrea, was born in December 1502 after the death of a daughter in 1499. The delicate dark veil that covers Mona Lisa's hair is sometimes considered a mourning veil. In fact, such veils were commonly worn as a mark of virtue. Her clothing is unremarkable. Neither the yellow sleeves of her gown, nor her pleated gown, nor the scarf delicately draped round her shoulders are signs of aristocratic status.

MUSEE D'ORSAY

Internationally renowned for its rich collection of impressionist art, the Musée d'Orsay (<http://www.musee-orsay.fr>) also displays all western artistic creations between 1848 and 1914. Its collections represent all expressive forms, from painting to architecture, not forgetting sculpting, decorative arts and photography. You're sure to be dazzled by the beauty of the place: a palace-like station, launched for the 1900 Universal Exposition. At the end of 2011, the museum reopened all of its entirely renovated spaces as well as some new rooms: an additional 400 square meters for the Pavillon Amont, post-impressionist artists at the heart of the museum, the restructuring of the Galerie des Impressionnistes, a new space for temporary exhibitions, and a new aquatic decor in the Café des Hauteurs, designed by Brazilian designers, the Campana Brothers. The museum is open every day but Monday. You can check out a 90 minute guided tour for those aged 13 and up. We rented three Ipods for five Euros each. Through a very simple system one needs only to punch in the number of selected paintings and an interesting commentary will be provided.

There is free entry for disabled people and an accompanying person on presentation of written proof. Adapted activities and workshops take place and wheelchairs can be loaned. There is priority access without queues at entrance C. The museum is entirely accessible and the auditorium designed to welcome up to three people in wheelchairs. For the visually impaired, guide and assistance dogs are allowed around the collections in the museum and exhibitions. The museum does not have tactile walk ways All year round, there are visits available in sign language and the auditorium is equipped with a hearing loop.

Bookings can be made at <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/espace-particuliers/particuliers/visiteurs-handicapes/bienvenue.html> and by calling + 33 (0) 1 40 49 48 14



The Louvre