

Le Rostand, a café with a view of the Luxembourg Gardens that's perfect for people watching.



Paris in a Heartbeat

LEAVE IT TO THE CITY OF LIGHT TO DELIVER A DREAMLIKE ROMANTIC GETAWAY IN TWO DAYS FLAT. *By Jamie Beckman*

I grabbed my fiancé's hand outside the ivy-draped, trellised garden walls of brasserie La Closerie des Lilas, at the tip of a razor-sharp corner in Montparnasse, and half-led/half-tugged him inside, through a gauntlet of friendly "Bonjour!"s from waiters, alongside tables of alfresco diners, over the restaurant's tiled mosaic floors, past the grand piano, and, finally, to the low-lit cocktail bar tucked in the back. >

Save for a few French women quietly sipping white wine and barkeeps in vests and ties hustling to fill drink orders, the glowing red space was blissfully empty—as was the spot at the bar I desperately wanted. It was early, around 4 p.m. That was deliberate. I stepped as swiftly as I could to the curved bar and placed my hands on either side of a small brass plaque nailed to the varnished wood. “Here it is!” I announced, as much to myself as to Neil. He moved in closer to read the engraved script: “E. Hemingway.”

La Closerie des Lilas was one of Ernest Hemingway’s favorite cafés to write in. He called it his “home café” and argues with a nosy acquaintance there in a particularly amusing story in *A Moveable Feast*. Neil and I had both read it prior to the trip.

I hopped up into the red leather seat facing the plaque, and overflowing bowls of complimentary green olives and potato crisps soon appeared in front of us. I ordered a Hemingway Daiquiri, made from pineapple juice, citron vert, and Havana rum; Neil asked for an Americano (Campari, sweet vermouth, and seltzer). Before the drinks arrived, Neil snapped a picture of me at Hemingway’s perch.

“You look so happy,” he said.

Being in Paris, at your favorite place, with your favorite person, following in the literal footsteps of a writer you admire, will do that.

I had only 48 hours to spend in the City of Light, but a single special moment in Paris is enough to justify an entire trip. For me, it was that one.

Clockwise from left: La Closerie des Lilas hides behind a veil of greenery; dapper barmen sling drinks; even the neon sign is chic.



COURTESY LA CLOSERIE DES LILAS (3)



Clockwise from top left: Flaky French croissants; a Paris Metro stop; bookish decor at Les Editeurs restaurant.

Before my fiancé uttered the “d” in “weekend,” I was researching flights online.

Last month, my fiancé was called away on a last-minute business trip to Paris. “Do you want to meet me there for the weekend?” he asked. Before he uttered the “d” in “weekend,” I was researching flights online. Problem was, I had only one summer Friday to burn, meaning I’d arrive at our hotel around 4 p.m. on Friday and leave for the airport at the same time on Sunday. Two days. That’s it.

I still said yes. You always say yes to Paris.

True, Paris has plenty of elegant ways to take your budget, strap dynamite to it, toss it into the air, and shoot it like it’s skeet, but that does not have to be the case. Here’s how we made our trip work on a conservative, hey—we’re-still-saving-money-for-a-wedding budget. You can too, the next time you say yes to Paris.

» **Prioritize location.**

Schlepping from outer neighborhoods to save cash wastes valuable minutes, and I wanted Neil to experience one of my favorite Parisian neighborhoods, centrally located

Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The area can be pricey, but we found a deal on TabletHotels.com for boutique Hôtel Le Sénat, less than a block from the lovely, historic Jardin du Luxembourg (from about \$171 per night, hotelsenat.com; see sidebar for more hotel recommendations).

The moment I walked in, I knew we lucked out: Our quirky duplex room—the WC downstairs, a shower with a steeply slanted skylight upstairs—had air conditioning (not a guarantee in Parisian hotels), first-floor windows that swung open to reveal a sprawling array of warm yellow atelier windows, and a private upstairs balcony where we sipped café au laits in the morning and drank affordable Bordeaux late at night, a view of Sacré-Coeur basilica on the horizon, the needle of the Eiffel Tower poking up in the west.

» **Tear up your itinerary.**

Following your heart, not your head, is essential to immersing yourself in Paris.

DREAMSTIME; DENKYW; NEXUST; COURTESY LES EDITEURS

The minute you start adhering to a strict schedule, you're doing it wrong. When I first visited Paris, on a solo trip in 2011, I created an airtight itinerary of pastry-making classes, day trips, museum visits, and restaurant reservations. Ironically, the activities I enjoyed most—like seeing Marie Antoinette's cell at the Conciergerie (about \$9, conciergerie.monuments-nationaux.fr) and scoring a cashmere sweater on super-sale at Eric Bompard (eric-bompard.com)—weren't on my docket.

This trip, I swore I wouldn't make the same mistake; instead, the first thing I wanted to do was take my sweet time in a café, not writing postcards or scrolling through emails on my phone, but sitting back with Neil, eating ham sandwiches on perfectly baked baguettes, ordering more cheese than necessary, and practicing our French. Le Rostand, a classic café around the corner from our hotel, quickly became

our home base (33/1-43-54-61-58). Thirty minutes after I stepped off the RER train from De Gaulle, much cheaper than a taxi (about \$11), we were seated at an outdoor table, a French feast before us—baguettes, fromage, vin rouge, jambon beurre—with people-watching at the Luxembourg Gardens across the street as our live-streaming entertainment. Nothing expensive, but everything we wanted from Paris.

» **Walk. The best thing in Paris is free.**

Clouds are never fluffier and sunbeams never more rapturous than when seen from a bridge over the Seine. After our café outing, we walked hand-in-hand along the river, stopping to wind through the charmingly haphazard bookshelves at Shakespeare and Company (shakespeareandcompany.com) and take a selfie on the Pont de L'Archevêché bridge. I insisted on a photo instead of clamping a love

Trip Tip

The Time Out and interactive Paris Metro apps (both free) are supremely useful for sussing out cool stuff to do and how to get there.



At least one free literary event is held each week at Shakespeare and Company.

STEPHEN BAY/ALAMY



Cain, by Henri Vidal, one of many pieces of art to see at the verdant Tuileries.

Walkability is Paris's great gift to visitors.

lock to the railing, even though I could tell Neil wanted a padlock of our own. We wandered to the Île St.-Louis for a salted caramel ice cream cone at Berthillon, doled out by an impossibly chipper blond woman to each person in line (berthillon.fr).

Walkability is Paris's great gift to visitors. Ambling when the city is quiet is so rich that tossing a coin into the Fontaine Saint-Michel becomes a toll you're glad to pay: a token for looking up to find the soaring architecture of the Notre Dame Cathedral in your sight line, or the simple pleasure of making a mile and a half trek along the Seine, with a brief detour to gaze at bronze Étienne Martin sculptures at the Tuileries, capped off with a long kiss under the filigreed edges of the Eiffel Tower.

» Picnic hard.

By the time I joined him, Neil had already acquainted himself with the local grocery

stores, purchasing brie and Bordeaux from the St. Germain covered food market (4-6 rue Lobineau, 33/1-48-85-93-30) and cocoa-dusted truffles from Patrick Roger to surprise me (patrickroger.com). On Day 2, we packed an inexpensive bottle of red wine, brie, a baguette, a ham sandwich, a slice of duck pâté en croûte, a chocolate croissant, and Badoit sparkling water into a paper shopping bag and toted it to the Jardin du Luxembourg for a picnic. The manicured hedges, incongruous palm trees, and massive fountains were more bustling than peaceful on this summer Saturday, but we swooped in and found a concrete bench, where we spread out our bounty and took in the scene—children pointing at miniature sailboats, teenagers on dates holding hands, an orchestra under a pavilion playing a free concert for everyone within earshot. Total price for the full picnic: less than \$35.

» **Plan one splurge.**

Everyone has a financial weakness in Paris: expensive shows, fine dining, beauty products, pricey shoes... My advice: Budget for one big-ticket purchase and enjoy it. Mine was a classic canvas tote bag from Parisian fashion designer Vanessa Bruno's airy, modern Rue Saint-Sulpice clothing boutique, a sartorial utopia bathed in white, where genial saleswomen assist guests in beautiful French and broken English (totes from about \$93, vanessabruno.fr).

On our last day in Paris, after we'd returned from the Eiffel Tower with a sliver of time to spare before our eight-hour flight, Neil and I made a beeline for Le Rostand for one last glass of red wine. We savored it slowly at a table next to an elderly Parisian couple eating bright-pink sorbet, and we wished we didn't have to go. There is still so much left in Paris we want to share with each other.

But I would do a weekend trip again in a heartbeat. Or, should I say, *un battement de coeur*.

YES, YOU CAN TAKE A WEEKEND TRIP TO PARIS

FLIGHTS TO LOOK FOR: My ticket on France's XL Airways cost less than half the price of a last-minute ticket on Air France. XL, which flies out of Miami, San Francisco, L.A., and New York City, currently offers round-trip tickets to Paris from about \$706. Beverage service in the cheap seats is limited, legroom is tight, and the weird guy sitting next to me was blasting Van Halen's "Jump" through his tinny headphones, but you'll get to Paris, and with a hot meal to boot. Another discount option: Icelandic airline WOW has round-trip flights to Paris out of Boston and D.C. from about \$384.



HOTELS TO TRY: If you decide against an apartment rental—more popular in Paris

than ever before—send an email to the Hotel Du Lys, a 17th-century mansion between the Latin Quarter and St. Germain, to nab unadvertised rooms from about \$116 per night, breakfast included (hoteldulys.com). On the Right Bank, Hotel 29 Lepic's stellar location, near Sacré-Coeur basilica and Moulin Rouge in Montmartre, is tough to beat for the price (from about \$70 per night, 29lepic.fr).

MARKETS FOR STOCKING YOUR PICNIC: Creatively flavored macarons such as "lemon and olive oil" from Pierre Hermé's shops are garnering serious buzz (seven for about \$20, pierreherme.com). Patisserie/boulangerie Gérard Mulot's pastries and petits fours taste



Standing in line for Pierre Hermé's macarons is time well spent.

as good as they look; be polite and use French phrases when paying—the young women behind the busy counter appreciate it (baguettes from about \$1.25; gerard-mulot.com). Le Marché Couvert Saint-Germain (translation: "St. Germain covered food market"), in the 6th arrondissement, kept us in wine and cheese, and hawks everything from fruit to flowers to freshly sliced *noir de bigorre* ham (4-6 rue Lobineau, 33/1-48-85-93-30). Pro picnic tip: Don't forget a corkscrew.