

LEISURE & TRAVEL

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City of Lights brings out the romantic in everyone

BY STEVE MACNAULL
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

We didn't want our vacation to become a cliché, but it did.

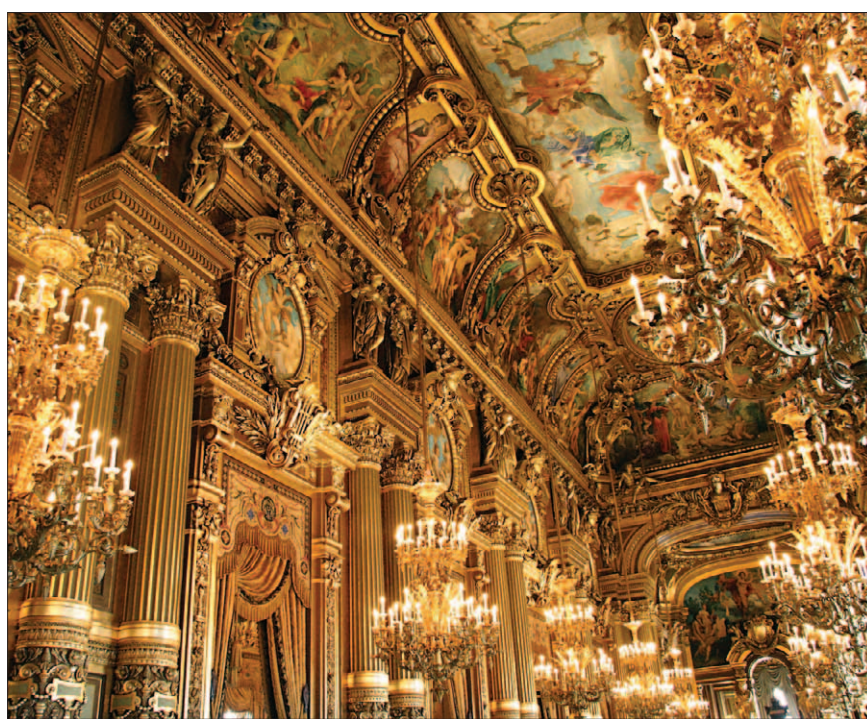
After all, summertime in Paris is, well, summertime in Paris.

And the visiting hordes inevitably end up doing all the same touristy things, albeit with the romantic and stylish flair the City of Light brings out in all of us.

Which is how my wife and I find ourselves strolling hand-in-hand down the famous Avenue Champs-Élysées; stealing a kiss at night on the magnificently lit up and embellished Alexander III Bridge; cruising the River Seine on a Bateaux-Mouches dinner and sightseeing boat; dropping by the Louvre Museum to catch a glance of the Mona Lisa; nibbling foie gras and sipping Champagne in an endless string of cafes; and, of course, gawking at the Eiffel Tower from every direction, day and night.

"As a hotel with a lot of international guests we know that Paris attracts all kinds of people from all around the world for its incredible joie de vivre," says guest relations assistant manager Vandana Gudivada of the Hilton Arc de Triomphe, where we stayed for three nights.

As evidence of my wife and I's accommodation split-personality,



The golden interior of the Opera Garnier.

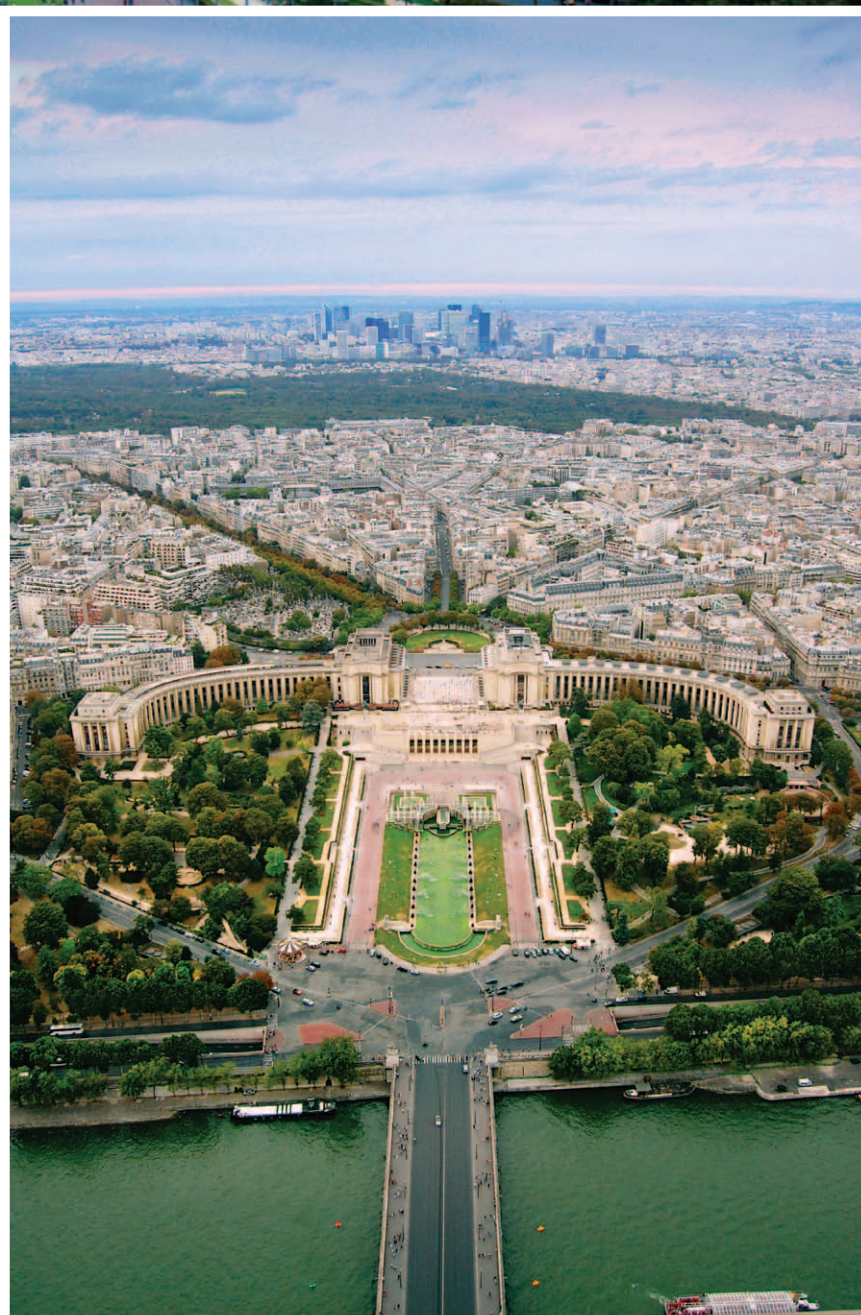
we move on for the rest of our stay from the big American brand Hilton to the 25-room Hotel Gramont in the Opera neighbourhood.

"We are a true Paris boutique hotel with smaller, but modern and cozy rooms in an historic building

► See PARIS, G1

Getting there

■ By plane: While there are no direct flights from Moncton to Paris, several airlines offer trips via cities such as Montreal and Toronto. Book several months ahead to secure a good fare.



Palais Chaillot in Trocadéro, viewed from the Eiffel Tower.

Saving money and sanity in Paris

■ You don't have to break the bank to explore City of Light

BY CATHY DONALDSON
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

If you've ever considered a trip to Paris, you've probably discovered that the City of Light is not a cheap destination, especially for a family.

But there are ways not to break the bank — or your sanity — when exploring the French capital with the clan.

One key to cutting costs is choosing an apartment-style hotel, better known as an 'aparthotel'.

During a June visit to Paris, my husband, daughters, parents and I stayed at such a property: the 189-apartment, fully air-conditioned (and surprisingly quiet) Citadines Les Halles, one of many Citadines across Europe that offer a unique 'home in the city' concept to travellers.

The seven-floor aparthotel we chose, located in Paris's 1st arrondissement (district), is currently undergoing a massive renovation to make it Citadines Prestige Les Halles Paris. The 'Prestige' label will identify it as a residence in a prime city centre location with an exceptionally comfortable living space and flexible, personalized hotel services.

My parents opted for a roomy studio apartment with lovely contemporary décor, one of those just completed as part of the refurbishment project, which wraps up at the end of August.



A great way to trim family travel costs in Paris is to bunk down at an 'aparthotel.' Cathy Donaldson and her family chose a Citadines property in the Les Halles area that proved ideal.

In addition to a well-appointed bedroom area, along with flat-screen TV and loads of storage space, the studio offered an ultra clean, well-stocked kitchen, used daily by my folks for light breakfasts as well as lunches and tea breaks (they are Maritimers after all!)

Just down the hall, my hubby, two daughters and I picked a one-bedroom apartment that featured a separate bedroom adjacent to a large living area with a sofa bed. (Yes, the girls got the sofa, but nary a complaint since it was so new and comfy.)

As for the bathrooms, the hotel's designers were smart and separated the toilet from the

shower room, making it easy for a family of four to get ready in the morning.

And, similar to my parent's room, our compact kitchen was extremely functional. While we didn't labor over any four-course meals, it was a great spot to slice up the fresh berries we purchased at the market just down the street, warm the decadent treats bought at the bakery around the corner and store the drinks (including wine, bien sûr!)

For those on a really stringent budget, it would be easy to prepare all meals in the unit, especially with the good shopping nearby,

► See METRO, G4



Notre Dame is Paris' most visited church.

STEVE MACNAULL/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Metro offers convenient and inexpensive way to get around city

► Continued From G1

everything from a small grocer next to the hotel to a large Monoprix at the Forum des Halles underground shopping centre, a short walk away.

Another plus for family travelers at the hotel is the availability of a laundry room for clients' use, as well as ample reasonably-priced restaurants in the vicinity that suit kids and adults alike.

Step out of the Citadines and you are immediately in the city's biggest pedestrian area, surrounded by hundreds of boutiques, eateries, theatres and jazz clubs. In this part of town, on the right bank of the Seine River, you're also not far from major attractions like the Louvre Museum, Notre Dame Cathedral and Centre Pompidou. No need for expensive cab rides!

The front desk staff at the Citadines, a friendly bunch who were able to communicate in English despite my attempts to use French, gave us some great suggestions on places to eat and other points of interest.

They were also extremely helpful in locating our luggage, missing in action for two days. (Go carry on if you can!)

Prices at the Citadines range from \$220 CDN and up per night for a two-person studio to \$314 CDN and up for a four-person, one-bedroom apartment.

Longer stays can generate even better rates.

Our routine, after a good night's sleep, was to skip the yummy-looking buffet breakfast at the hotel and relax a bit longer in our jammies, savoring a store-bought petit-déjeuner of local fruit and chocolate-filled or cream-lined croissants in our rooms, along with tea or café. Then the five of us (my husband was working in the area) hit the streets to see the sights.

Fortunately for our feet, the Châtelet-Les Halles metro station is a three-minute walk from the hotel's front door.

We entered directly via Forum des Halles, strolling past various trendy stores to reach our train.

This arrangement sometimes resulted in spontaneous purchases, not necessarily cost efficient but fun nonetheless!

While initially intimidated by the fact that Châtelet-Les Halles is considered the world's largest underground subway stop, it didn't take us long to feel at ease with the place. Despite the throngs of people, we eventually came to appreciate the metro, especially the savings we garnered compared to taxis.

Almost all subway lines pass through Châtelet-Les Halles, making it a very practical — and fast — way for a family to get around.

Depending on the length of your stay and if you plan to take day trips to places like Château de Versailles or Disneyland Paris (we chose the former), you can select between single metro tickets or save with one of a variety of passes.

We each bought a multi-day Paris Visite pass, good for unlimited travel in the city and surrounding area via metro, bus, and other modes of public transportation. It also provides special offers at some museums, attractions and restaurants.

Another budget friendly idea: Take note of the monuments and sites in the city, including Notre Dame and Sacré-Coeur Basilica, that can be visited free of charge. Other museums, like the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay, offer free admission the first Sunday of every month.

Also keep in mind that those under 18 are admitted to many attractions for free.

A significant way my parents and I saved a bit of money — and a lot of aggravation — was by purchasing a Paris Museum Pass, a discount card that comes in two-, four- and six-day versions. Consider buying it at the airport when you arrive or at the first museum in your travels.

The pass gives adults free entry to more than 60 museums and monuments in and around the city. While you need to visit many sites to make the pass really worthwhile, the savings in sanity are what made this the most valuable for us since it allows you to bypass ticket lines, which are potentially huge at places like the Louvre and Versailles.

In addition, you can make an unlimited number of visits to each attraction. (Note that the Eiffel Tower is not covered on the pass.)

Other good deals? If you can hit the city during one of its many

Paris, France

► Continued From G1

in a bustling district," manager Sandra Buhler tells me.

"More and more people expect their hotel to be part of their European experience and nothing does that like a traditional French boutique that provides a personal touch."

Beyond just simply being in Paris, my wife and I didn't have any set itinerary.

So we set out walking, which is, in itself, an itinerary of sorts.

We know we will hit some landmark sooner or later — Paris is full of them.

But in the meantime we'll just revel in the walk past outdoor cafes; ornate buildings with those signature wrought iron balconies; and people watch.

It's easy to tell the tourists from the Parisians.

Besides carrying maps and bewildered expressions, tourists tend to have a uniform of slightly slouchy and comfortable garb with sensible shoes.

Parisians walk with an attitude and a cigarette, gaze focused straight forward in high fashion and inappropriate, but beautiful, shoes.

In cafes Parisians strike a similar pose.

Cigarette in one hand, drink in the other, staring nonchalantly at the street from behind oversized sunglasses, encased in a scarf with lap dog.

Men favour the same look, with only slightly smaller sunglasses..

Actually, the rampant smoking becomes an issue when you're sitting at an outdoor cafe.

While we like to sit in the periphery of the French's sophistication, we don't want to sit in their smoke.

The highlight of our trip would be the Bateaux-Mouches dinner.

It's not cheap at \$135 each, but it's not just dinner — it's an experience.

Designed with sightseeing specifically in mind, the glass-domed elongated boats have elegantly set tables placed to maximize the view.

And what a view it is.

While we dine, we glide by Paris' greatest hits lining the Seine — the Grand Palace, Louvre Museum, Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower, timed perfectly for its 10 p.m. flashing lights show.

Now it's time to visit some of the attractions in person.

All roads, bridges and crowds seem to lead to the Eiffel Tower, which is not just Paris' No. 1 destination, but the most famous monument in the world.

Approaching the tower on foot, we encountered a festival atmosphere with street vendors hawking food and drink and souvenirs and excited people milling around everywhere.

This is where you have to decide if you're going to stand in the long line-up to buy tickets to climb the 670 stairs part-way up the tower or the extra-long line-up to catch the elevator to the top.

We opt for the shorter line up and climb, which is still a thrill and provides incredible views of the city.

The smartest apparently book ahead online and show up at their appointed time to bypass the line-ups.

Speaking of line cutting, we were able to do so legitimately with the two-day \$140 Paris Pass.

Good for free admission to dozens of the city's attractions (excluding, unfortunately, the Eiffel Tower) the pass allows us to go the front of the line to climb the 252 steps to the top of the Arc de Triomphe.

The line jumping comes in particularly handy at the Louvre Museum on a rainy Saturday afternoon when it seems like every tourist in Paris converges on the place.

We do our expedited entry and head straight to Salon 6 off the vaulted Grand Gallery to see the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci.

As Mona is the most famous painting of all time, the scene at Salon 6 is like walking into a rock concert during the encore.

Everyone is crushed toward the barricade — mosh pit-style — n craning to get a better look and taking pictures.

When you've had enough time at the front, the burly security guards move you on.

■ **Air Transat flies non-stop to Paris from more Canadian cities than any other carrier — Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City. More information at AirTransat.com, FranceGuide.com, Hilton.com, Hotel-Gramont-Opera.com and ParisPass.com.**



Consider purchasing a Paris Museum Pass if you're headed to the City of Light. In addition to providing entry to many attractions, it allows you to bypass long ticket lines, a real sanity saver. Here, Cathy Donaldson, pointing, explores the Louvre with her family after using her pass.

Budget tips

Still not convinced you can do Paris on a budget?

Here are some other tips:

- Spring and summer are considered the best times to explore Paris from a weather standpoint but the low season has its perks, such as reduced rates on airfare and accommodation.
- In addition to its excellent subway, Paris has an inexpensive public bus system, with many picturesque routes like #42 and #69 — a great alternative to higher-priced tours.
- Take a long stroll or have a family picnic in one of Paris's many beautiful parks and gardens. Pick a spot near the Eiffel Tower for an awesome view.
- Looking for some tasty morsels for that picnic? Paris is home to some of the best outdoor food markets in the world, so grab

some goodies at the market nearest you and enjoy your feast!

- If your clan needs a break from intense sightseeing, take a relaxing — yet informative — trip down the majestic Seine on one of Paris's boat cruises. For \$15 per person, we took a one-hour-and-15-minute trip with the Bateaux Mouches line, seating ourselves in an upper, open-air deck. The journey, narrated in English and several other languages, is a super way to become familiar with the city's most stunning buildings and bridges.
- Invest in decent footwear for you and your brood before your visit. You'll save money on Band-Aids!

annual free events, you're in luck! From parades and fireworks during July's Bastille Day celebrations to a multitude of no-charge offerings during European Heritage Days in September, Paris strives to be accessible to all.

One of the highlights of our visit was the wide range of musical gatherings we encountered during La Fête de la Musique (World Music Day), created in 1982 by the French government.

Held annually on June 21, the celebration of all genres of music has inspired many other cities around the world — including Moncton — to mark the occasion.

We found gaggles of musicians playing everywhere, from street corners in Versailles to apartment

balconies overlooking busy streets near our hotel.

Our music-loving family couldn't have been happier!

No matter what your budget, don't miss out splurging on a few relatively inexpensive items during your stay in Paris — like ice cream! Our top pick was Amorino's, which sells gelato (Italian ice cream) at its various outlets.

They'll serve as many flavours as you like in a cup, waffle cone or other treat.

I nearly died and went to heaven eating a delicious waffle topped with hazelnut gelato on one side, cherry on the other, all covered in chantilly cream.

Who needs haute couture? Life doesn't get better than this!



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