

Près, Prey, and Pray: 3 Keys to Enjoying Paris

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If you're taking a trip to Paris soon, keep the following 3 words in mind when making your plans.

Près

The word “près” means near in Paris. Stay near to the things you want to see. Consult a map of Paris in advance of making hotel reservations. Most travel sections of bookstores, such as Barnes and Noble, carry good travel books with sights and metro stops marked. Circle the places you want to go. I recommend finding a hotel that is in the city center. Paris is divided into 17 districts, or *arrondissements*.



Montparnasse Metro Stop

I had good luck with hotels in the ritzy 6th *arrondissement*. St. Germaine is one of Paris's nicest hoods, near to Notre Dame and Point Zero, Sainte-Chappelle, the Conciergerie, the Latin Quarter, the Louvre, the Champs-Elysee, and the Seine.



It has wonderful little sidewalk cafés and boutiques, and it is served by metro stops that will allow you to travel quickly and inexpensively all over Paris. A favorite café in St. Germaine is **Zerozero Sèvres** at 46 Rue de Sèvres. The *croquet monsieur* (toasted cheese and ham sandwich) is delectable, and the *escargot de Bourgogne* (snails—come on, you're in France! You've got to try them!) are tasty and moderately priced.



Shopping opportunities abound in St. Germaine. I found a fab boutique called **Karl Marc John** at 42 Rue St.-Placide. It carries clothes inspired by designers Karl Lagerfeld, Marc Jacobs, and John Galliano, but considerably more *bon marché* (cheaper) than styles crafted by those designers.

My favorite dessert in St. Germaine was ironically obtained at a gelato (Italian ice cream) shop called **Grom** at 81 Rue de Seine. There is nothing like genuine gelato in my book, and Grom serves the real thing.

On my trip to Paris in June I stayed in two different hotels in the Montparnasse area. Still in the 6th District, it is a little farther from the sites listed above, but also a little less pricy. Montparnasse is just one metro stop from St. Germaine and just a couple more to Ile de la Cité where Notre Dame Cathedral sits.



Three Star **Hôtel Edouard VI** at 61 Boulevard du

Montparnasse is located right across the street from the large Montparnasse-Bienvenü metro stop. The room was small, but clean and the friendly staff spoke English without an attitude. This came in handy as I was too brain dead from travel to attempt resurrecting my decades-old French language instruction. I stayed there one night before heading for London—long story for another post. On the morning of my departure, I ate breakfast at the crêperie, **A La Duchesse Anne** just out the hotel's front door to the left. Their *café crème* gave me the jolt I needed to power through my jetlag and the *galette jambon* (buckwheat crepe with ham) was *magnifique!*

Upon return to Paris, I stayed down the *rue* in the **Villa Luxembourg** at 121 Boulevard de Montparnasse, near to the Vavin metro stop. I had been bumped from my first [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com) hotel (see “Pray” below) to this one and was rather worried about the less-than-glowing reviews I'd read.



Grâce à Dieu! (Thank goodness!) Those reviews did not apply to my experience. My *chambre* was roomy, and though a bit worse for wear, quite clean. By now snippets of French were popping back into my head and the concierge staff listened patiently as I butchered their beloved language. It is a common experience to receive an answer in English when attempting to speak French. To my delight, the staff at this hotel attempted to converse with me *en Français*, but switched to English without missing a beat when my poor vocabulary made it necessary. They were also friendly and helpful with all matters concierge, such as

recommending restaurants, ordering taxis, placing wake-up calls, and answering metro questions.

Although the **Boulevard du Montparnasse** is lined with sidewalk cafés, I recommend wandering down the many streets that feed into it. This is where locals shop. Pop into each of the following to experience a shopping day in the life of a Parisian: *pâtisserie* (pastry shop,) *boulangerie* (bakery,) *boucherie* (butcher shop,) *fromagerie* (cheese shop,) *magasin du poisson* (fish shop,) and *tabacs* (shops selling taxed items such as cigarettes and liquor.) On second thought, you may want to skip the fish shop. The odor can be powerful. Just look in the window there. Check these streets for clothing boutiques and bookstores too.

I found two favorite restaurants on the Boulevard. **La Rotonde** at 105, which Pablo Picasso frequented, served delicious and filling entrées accompanied by beautiful green salads, seasoned and dressed to perfection.



Their *petit chocolat* (hot chocolate) is simply to die for. My second, and pricier, fav is **La Coupole**, across the street at 102. Its culinary highlights were the *Fraicheur Avocat* (crab and avocado appetizer), *Magret de Canard* (sauced duck breast tenderloins), and for dessert, the Crème Brulee delighted. Dinner lasted almost three hours and each course was perfectly timed.

Prey



Tourists in general, and American female tourists in particular, are always at risk of falling prey to pickpockets. Targeted areas are ones highly populated by travelers, like train stations and busy metro stops—especially the ones combined with RER trains (those going to outlying areas such as Versailles, Charles de Gaulle Airport, and Disneyland Parc Paris), the Eiffel Tower, and Ile de la Cité. Be advised to keep your hands in your pockets or on your purses in these areas! Men, I highly recommend keeping your wallets in a front pants pocket, and women, wear a small shoulder bag slung across your body, keeping the bag in front of you, and for heavens sake keep it tightly zipped!

Pickpockets specialize in distracting their victims. If anyone gets into your face, leave your manners behind and brush them right off. Do not stop to sign any petitions, put your finger onto a string to help someone tie a knot, or even try to understand anyone who comes out of nowhere to ask a question. You will

almost certainly be a wallet or passport lighter after your interaction.

Pray

One huge tip for anyone selecting hotels in Europe: whatever your expectations for roominess, luxurious fixtures, or cleanliness, lower them by half. Don't assume equivalency with the American starring system and you won't be disappointed. If you want to lounge about an opulent hotel room you may want to stay stateside. Your time in Paris is better spent out and about, soaking in the sights and the culture.

I learned the hard way to pay a little bit more and get the cancelable reservations when booking on line. Even with a confirmation, be aware that you may arrive to find the hotel overbooked with literally no room for you at the inn. When this happens, most services provide you with an alternative hotel, close to the one you selected and in the same ranking, for the same price. So be sure to read all of the terms of agreement before making a reservation. Then pray you haven't been dumped.

Part of the fun of trying on a new culture is speaking the language with the locals. Paris is one of the least friendly places for trying to do so. Many Parisians seem to feel it is easier to cut to the chase. And virtually everyone working in the Parisian hospitality industry speaks English. Nevertheless, if you persist you will find friendly natives who are willing to speak with you in French, no matter how pigeon yours may be.

If you have studied French at some point in your past put your memory to work reconstructing introductions. If you have no past experience with the language, I highly recommend learning a few introductory phrases. French residents will respond to you more politely if you begin with a polite introduction in their language. After all, you are a guest in their country and shouldn't expect them to know how to communicate with you in your

language.

I always started my communications by saying hello, stating that I didn't speak French, and asking if the person spoke English. Every person who I asked to speak English did so without hesitation. This exchange is typical of those I had:

ME: *“Bonjour, monsieur. Comment t’allez vous, aujourd’hui?”*
 (“Hello, sir. How are you today?”)

MONSIEUR: *“Bonjour, madame. Je vais bien, et vous?”*
 (“Hello, ma’am. I’m fine. And you?”)

ME: *“Je vais bien, merci. Désolé, je ne parle pas Français. Parlez-vous Anglais?”* (“I’m fine, thank you. I’m sorry, I don’t speak French. Do you speak English?”)

MONSIEUR: Yes, of course...

And we would then proceed in English. I guess those endless conversations I had to learn in high school French class really did have a useful purpose.

As I got my bearings and became bolder, I ordered food at restaurants and asked directions out on the street in French. I found I remembered enough words that I could understand the bulk of directions and answers to my food questions. Speaking a bit of the language made my experience feel more real. I encourage readers to give it a try. I’ve been to Paris a few times, beginning in 1978, and each time I have found the natives warmer and more interested in pleasing tourists. But, in the metro, the level of detail needed for changing trains, especially between metro and RER ones, may necessitate English interactions.

You don’t have to pray when you go, but the stained glass splendor of Sainte-Chapelle and Notre Dame should not be missed.



Notre Dame

You may have to pray that you make it through the chaotic security and boarding process once back at the airport, though. So make sure to leave plenty of time for travel to the airport and pat-downs once inside. I had to show my passport in five different places and was patted down as they searched my tiny purse twice. But I was allowed to bring my *café crème* with me through the security process, so...

Bon Voyage!

Notre Dame Photo Courtesy of Vichaya Kiatying-Angsulee / Freedigitalphotos.com