

EXCURSION

Bon Voyage à Paris, France!

BY SETH SHERWOOD

"Ça fait longtemps!" is what French friends say to each other when they meet up for the first time in years. With the recent reopening of two major Parisian museums after long renovations — and the debut of a third after years of expectations — the phrase could practically be Paris's motto these days. But the wait has been well worth it.

After a five-year expansion project, the Beaux Arts-style Petit Palais reopened its doors in 2005. Like a miniature Louvre (without the Louvre's crowds), the museum houses a diverse collection, spanning ancient Grecian urns, medieval panel paintings, Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait in Oriental Attire," Louis XV-era furniture, French Impressionism, the symbolist works of Odilon Redon and Art Nouveau ceramics.

The world's most famous water lilies — the ones painted by Monet — have a refurbished home at the Musée de l'Orangerie. Reopened in May 2006 after six years of renovations, the space also holds an eye-popping collection of paintings from Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Cézanne, Renoir, André Derain and others.

Chia Pet or a museum? With its exterior wall that

sprouts green plants, the new Musée du Quai Branly is easily the city's wildest architectural concoction since the Centre Pompidou. Inside the strange jumble of angular and colorful buildings — designed by the boldface architect Jean Nouvel — are airy galleries of tribal masks, totemic carvings and other ethnographic works from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania.

The Eiffel Tower is, without a doubt, one of the most recognizable structures in the world. Weighing 7,000 tons but exerting about the same pressure on the ground as an average-size person sitting in a chair, the wrought-iron tower wasn't meant to be permanent. Gustave-Alexandre Eiffel, the French engineer whose fame rested mainly on his iron bridges, built it for the 1889 Universal Exhibition. (Eiffel also designed the framework for the Statue of Liberty.) Praised by some and denounced by others (some called it a "giraffe," the "world's greatest lamp-post," or the "iron monster"), the tower created as much

controversy in the 1880s as I. M. Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre did in the 1980s. What saved it from demolition was the advent of radio — as the tallest structure in Europe, it made a perfect spot to place a radio antenna (now a TV antenna).

The tower, including its TV antenna, is 317m (1,040 ft.) high. On a clear day you can see it from 65km (40 miles) away. An open-frame construction, the tower unlocked the almost unlimited possibilities of steel construction, paving the way for skyscrapers. Skeptics said it couldn't be built, and Eiffel actually wanted to make it soar higher. For years it remained the

tallest man-made structure on earth, until skyscrapers like the Empire State Building surpassed it. We could fill an entire page with Eiffel

Tower stats. (Its plans spanned 6,000 sq. yards of paper, and it contains 2.5 million rivets.) But forget the numbers. Just stand beneath the tower, and look straight up. It's like a rocket of steel lacework shooting into the sky.

In 2004 it became possible to ice skate inside the Eiffel Tower, doing figure eights while taking in views of the rooftops of Paris. Skating takes place on an observation deck 57m (188 ft.) above ground. The rectangular rink is a bit larger than an average tennis court, holding 80 skaters at once — half the capacity of New York City's Rockefeller Center rink. Admission to the rink and skate rental are free once you pay the initial entry fee below.

To get to Le Jules Verne (tel. 01-45-55-61-44), the second-platform restaurant, take the private south foundation elevator. You can enjoy an aperitif in the piano bar and then take a seat at one of the dining room's tables, all of which provide an inspiring view. The menu changes seasonally, offering fish and meat dishes that range from filet of turbot with seaweed and buttered sea urchins to veal chops with truffled vegetables. Reservations are recommended.

Tour Eiffel Bargain—The least expensive way to see the Tour Eiffel is to walk up the first two floors at a cost of 3.80€ (\$4.95). That way, you also avoid the long lines waiting for the elevator — although the views are less spectacular from this platform. If you dine at the tower's own Altitude 95 (tel. 01-45-55-

20-04), an Eiffel restaurant on the first floor, management allows patrons to cut to the head of the line.

To see the Eiffel Tower best, don't sprint — approach it gradually. We suggest taking the Métro to the Trocadéro stop and walking from the Palais de Chaillot to the Seine to get the full effect of the tower and its surroundings; then cross the pont d'Iéna and head for the base, where you'll find elevators in two of the pillars — expect long lines.

Operated by the same group that gave Paris the very white, Stanley Kubrick-esque Murano in 2004, the 41-room Kube, which opened in November, is another playful retro-futuristic package. A large transparent cube in the courtyard of the building, a stony 19th-century edifice, immediately recalls I. M. Pei's pyramids at the Louvre. (It houses the hotel's reception desk.) Just beyond, the building hides a low-lit universe of geometric interiors, faux-fur surfaces, electronic gadgets and furnishings by brand-name designers — as well as France's first ice bar. Is that Barbarella in the corner?

The Kube boldly goes where no Parisian luxury boutique hotel has gone before: a remote, rough-edged section of the 18th arrondissement that's known for cheap Indian and Turkish restaurants. By pioneering this other-side-of-the-tracks location, the Kube effectively throws a litchi martini in the face of its up-market rivals.

Dark and outfitted with furry black sofas, furry black columns, black mirrors and hanging spaghetti-like strands of red light, the multipurpose lobby-restaurant-bar has the pleasingly decadent feel of a sci-fi bordello. A Tuesday evening in February found it surprisingly happening. As a D.J. spun house music and plasma-screen TV's flickered with computer-generated images, a diverse crowd that included many unshaven guys in sport coats and Pumas and their dates sipped Champagne and munched tapas-like "aperifood."

On the mezzanine level, hanging rows of Aarmio Eero's transparent plastic bubble chairs accommodated people waiting for 30-minute shifts in the Ice Cube. Sponsored by Grey Goose vodka, the chamber, constructed of 22 tons of ice, serves colored vodka drinks that have been chilled by the room itself. Each drink

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WHERE TO EAT



L'As du Fallafel's famous sandwich. Richard Harbus/New York Times

BY MARK BITTMAN
THE NEW YORK TIMES

A good falafel sandwich is enough to make you a vegetarian, at least for one meal. That's my feeling, anyway, and at L'As du Fallafel — on Rue des Rosiers, in the heart of what was once Paris's most vibrant Jewish neighborhood — that feeling is compounded, because the falafel is so good that this is the one culinary destination in town I never skip.

The sandwich contains the requisite super-crisp, garlicky chickpea fritters, with creamy hummus, lightly pickled red cabbage (something between slaw and kraut), salted cucumbers, fried eggplant and just-hot-enough harissa. This is all piled into a pita in such quantities that eating it is an adventure in napkin management.

You can make for a slightly neater experience by eating in, but aside from the cramped tables and the brusque though not unfriendly service, there is something about this sandwich that begs for it to be eaten outdoors. So I eat my falafel standing, ducked into a doorway down the street; and as I look around, it's clear that I'm not alone in this.

Therefore: You chomp on your pita, harissa and hummus dripping down your cheek — tilting your head to get a good bite, as there's no attacking this gargantuan sandwich head-on — and juggle as many napkins as you can grab, and marvel at the neighborhood.

Although the Marais has been highly gentrified in the course of the last generation — the building of the Pompidou guaranteed that — the Rue des Rosiers and its offshoot streets remain central to a lively district, with its kosher butchers and boulangeries, bookshops and synagogues. From a food perspective, it's unusual in that it features the Jewish food of Eastern Europe alongside that of North Africa and the Middle East. It is the latter, of course, on which L'As du Fallafel bases its cuisine, and although you may find it done better in the southern or eastern Mediterranean (I haven't yet), this is the falafel destination in Paris.

You have to order from and pay the cashier on the right (a falafel is 4 euros, about \$5.35 at \$1.34 to the euro) before offering your receipt to the guys on the left, who produce your sandwich — a fun process to witness.

You could pretend to be a European teenager and get fries on top, but then you would definitely need extra hummus and harissa. You might also think about a shwarma — a similar sandwich with lamb — but this is your chance to go meat-free and love it, so why not?

L'As du Fallafel, 34, rue des Rosiers (Métro: St. Paul); (33-1) 48-87-63-60. Closed Saturday.

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36 HOURS IN DOWNTOWN PARIS

BY SETH SHERWOOD

"The chief danger about Paris," T. S. Eliot wrote to a friend, "is that it is such a strong stimulant." That wasn't merely the overcaffeinated ramblings of a Left Bank café habitué. Few cities thrill visitors with such a beguiling multiplicity of personalities. There is the devout Paris of Notre Dame's Gothic solemnity, and the naughty Paris of Pigalle's red-light bars. Sophisticated Paris radiates from the vaulted galleries of the Louvre and the gilded Opéra Garnier, while bohemian Paris emerges in the art galleries of the Marais and gritty rock 'n' roll nightclubs. For every Gallic gastronomic temple, there's an Asian, African or Middle Eastern restaurant brimming with exotic flavors. And for every Jean Paul Gaultier, there's a fledgling fashion student opening his first boutique. In the words of Henry Miller, another American drawn to Paris's manifold pleasures,

lofty and low: "To know Paris is to know a great deal."

It may sound cheesy, but for postcard views of Paris's icons — and a crash course in the city's geography — float down the lazy Seine on a sightseeing cruise from Bateaux Parisiens (Port de la Bourdonnais; 33-825-01-01-01; www.bateauxparisiens.com; 10 euros, or \$13.50 at \$1.35 to the euro). Time compresses like an accordion as you pass the gargoyles of Notre Dame Cathedral, the latticework of the Eiffel Tower and the Luxor obelisk at the Place de la Concorde, where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette met their grisly end at the guillotine.

With some 10 miles of galleries housing a collection that spans every corner of the globe and every era of human history, the Louvre (Rue de Rivoli; 33-1-40-20-53-17; www.louvre.fr) calls for wise planning. (On Fridays, the museum stays open until 10 p.m. and admission

drops to 6 euros from 8.50 after 6 p.m.) Start on Level 1 at the Denon Wing. After a splendid welcome by the Winged Victory of Samothrace, you'll encounter Italian Renaissance masterpieces by Titian, Botticelli, Raphael and Da Vinci, culminating in the Mona Lisa. Next hit the Apollo Gallery, a Versailles-like chamber that houses the 140-carat Regent Diamond and the 2,490-diamond-studded crown of Empress Eugénie. Wrap up at Richelieu Level 2, with Bosch's "Ship of Fools," Vermeer's "Astronomer" and the Rubens-filled Medici Gallery.

Bourgeois Left Bankers are packed elbow-to-tweed-elbow at the Comptoir du Relais (9, carrefour de l'Odéon; 33-1-44-27-07-97) for good reason. Opened by Yves Camdeborde in 2005, the très petit bistro serves simple, delicious and surprisingly affordable classics like creamy slices of foie gras with chunky prune sauce, a juicy chop of suckling pig and a debilitatingly

rich pot de crème made with Valrhona chocolate. The ever-changing six-course tasting menu — for a mere 42 euros — may include creations like veal sweetbreads in yellow wine and poached pear with saffron. Otherwise, a three-course meal for two, without wine, runs about 70 euros. Book your reservations well in advance.

Not all baguettes are created equal. At the bakery of Gérard Mulot (76, rue de Seine; 33-1-43-26-85-77), the bread and croissants (1 euro) are sublime, and the jewel-like pastries — like the ruby red raspberry tarts and jade green pistachio macarons — are as finely wrought as Fabergé eggs. Eat them as you stroll to the belle époque Café de Flore nearby (172, boulevard St.-Germain; 33-1-45-48-55-26), the former hangout of André Breton and the Surrealists, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Existentialists, and a who's who of screen stars like Brigitte Bardot. Trotsky and

Hemingway may be gone, but the French intelligentsia still stops in to slurp café crème and exceptional hot chocolate (5.50 to 7 euros).

"I wish to dig my own grave, wide and deep," Charles Baudelaire wrote in "The Joyful Corpse." Roughly a century and a half later, the final resting place of France's greatest poet can be seen at Cimetière du Montparnasse (3, boulevard Edgar-Quinet; 33-1-44-10-86-50). This ocean of gray stone is Paris's most literary cemetery, holding the graves of Maupassant, Beckett, Duras and Man Ray, as well as arrivistes like Susan Sontag and Serge Gainsbourg.

Rather than go bankrupt buying Dior and Chanel on Avenue Montaigne, spend an afternoon discovering upstart talents in the Haut-Marais, a newer, edgier fashion and design center. The fast-rising designer Gaspard Yurkievich makes

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WHAT ELSE IS INSIDE THE CITY OF LIGHTS?



Parisian Libraries ~ 4D
Their stylish forms are as impressive as the contents stored inside them.



The Camera Lens ~ 3D
Celebrating a city's ongoing love affair with its own amateur photographers.



Her Little Black Book ~ 2D
Film director Sofia Coppola opens her black book of addresses in Paris.