

Precious Paris

You've seen the iconic Eiffel Tower, the romantic River Seine and the swanky Champs-Élysées... but there's a whole lot more to Paris. We join five unique tours to experience the city's hidden gems.

TEXT VIVIAN CHONG PHOTOS PAUL MATTIN



says Betty. And she does mean everything. The shelves – some bending from the weight – are stacked with tins, cans, bottles, jars, boxes, packets and sachets of powders, liquids and dry ingredients to cook or bake with. It's the epicurean equivalent of Santa's workshop!

We make quick stops at Mora and E Dehillerin to check out their fantastic cooking utensils. The latter's feature wall is quite a sight to behold, covered with shiny copper cookware. Betty saves the best for last: Epices Roellinger, a premium spice boutique set up by chef Olivier Roellinger last year after retiring from his 3-star Michelin

restaurant. The spices come in whole, dried and powder form. Chef Olivier also mixes his own blends and those have become his bestsellers.

Epices is also where you'll find the only vanilla cellar in Paris. As vanilla needs to stay as moist as possible, the bulk is stored in metal tins in the temperature- and humidity-controlled cave, accessible by a winding wooden staircase towards the back of the store. In the store, they are sold in glass tubes.

I am sold alright, by the amazing variety and quality of produce and producers I am introduced to. Tasting great French cuisine is part of the Paris experience and this gourmet walking tour, which lets you stroll in the footsteps of the city's top chefs, completes it.

Promenades Gourmandes' walking tours, cooking and patisserie classes are offered from Tue-Fri, but special arrangements can sometimes be made for weekends; reserve your spot up to three months ahead at www.promenadesgourmandes.com

Speedy sightseeing

In 1948, Citroen launched the Bauhaus-inspired 2CV, designed as the first vehicle for French farmers so that they could move on from horses and carts. It was an instant hit, chalking up a three-year waiting list within months and going on to become one of the most iconic cars of all time. The 2CV ceased production in 1990 but you wouldn't think that when in Paris. ▶

(Above) Spices and other gourmet goods at Epices Roellinger; (right) vanilla is stored in the temperature-controlled cellar; (far right) a spread of haute cuisine at Stohrer; (facing page, clockwise from main) copperware and cooking utensils galore at E Dehillerin; Rue de Montorgueil is where Paris' top chefs shop for supplies; a beautiful blue cheese at La Fermette



Gourmet gallop

Plump and glistening with a bright cherry on top, the *baba au rhum* sits invitingly next to rows of chocolate and coffee eclairs inside a glass cabinet. I don't usually fancy a sweet breakfast but my resolution melts at Stohrer. There's an amazing array of pastries, topped off with charcuterie, salads and gorgeous haute cuisine – in fact, this homey store is filled to the brim with food! Open since 1735 and still owned by the same family, Stohrer is a Parisian institution and the first stop on a walking tour that promises to show me the city's top culinary stops.

My guide is Betty Bitton, one half of **Promenades Gourmandes**, a boutique outfit founded by Paule Caillat. For 15 years now, Paule has been conducting walking tours as well as cooking and patisserie classes. The tour begins on Rue de Montorgueil, a cobbled pedestrian street filled with gourmet stores, cafes, bakeries, flower shops, fresh fruit and vegetables stands. The city's epicureans and chefs agree that this is the best place to get the finest produce.

Betty patiently fields questions about French cuisine and cooking while leading me from one iconic providore to another. There's Soguisa with its Label Rouge-ranked (a European quality system) seafood. La Fermette houses an amazing 1,000 varieties of cheeses within its quaint space, including AOC-ranked variants: The Appellation Origine Controllee is awarded to cheeses that are still produced using the same traditional recipes or breed of cows as they have always been. G Detou is where "chefs come to get their supplies for everything,"

Tour

These ‘duck’ (one of its many nicknames) vehicles now ferry visitors on guided tours around the city.

Arthur, my driver-cum-guide from **Paris Authentic**, picks me up from the apartment where I am staying. I sit comfortably in leather seats which look fairly new but the knobs, switches and bulbous gear stick tell me that the car is a classic. And it has a name: Louise.

Louise zips through small alleyways before cruising onto the main boulevards. It’s early (but for the inebriated gentleman who stumbled off the pavement, probably too late) and the streets are deserted, providing uninterrupted views of the city’s stunning buildings. Seeing them up close, you notice all the design details. From inside a passing car, you get the full visual effect of their grand old-world European architecture. As Louise trundles along the cobbled paths and over the bridges crossing the River Seine, I feel a sense of being transported to the Paris of yore.

Arthur points out landmark buildings along the way and I ask to stop at the more iconic ones for photo opportunities: The Paris Opera, Notre Dame Cathedral, Place Vendome, Louvre Pyramid and Trocadero. These are the must-sees of Paris and I had dedicated two days to visiting them, but Arthur (and Louise) have them all covered within an hour. It’s like a hop-on, hop-off service, only better as it comes with a personal driver and a car at your disposal. Sightseeing in Paris from inside a classic French car – it just doesn’t get more authentic than that.

Cruise through the streets of Paris day or night with Paris Authentic; you can also combine the Citroen 2CV tour with other activities, including a backstage tour of the Eiffel Tower www.parisauthentic.com



(Left) Early morning is when you can see Paris’ stunning streets and architecture in their full glory; (right) the Citroen 2CV makes for a unique and comfortable ride

Bonjour, monsieur!

Fancy mingling with the locals while visiting unique workshops and seeing traditional artisans at work? **Meeting The French** provides exactly such an opportunity, through its ‘Meet the Parisians at work’ visits. From the list of more than 20, I settle on an herbalist and an umbrella repairman.

Healing with herbs The Herboristerie has been open since 1880, doling out herbal cures and goodness to Parisians who prefer a natural approach to wellbeing. Biologist and chemist Jean Pierre Raveneau bought over the establishment in 1993, maintaining the function of the 131-year-old shop and much of its original form.

SIGHTSEEING IN PARIS FROM INSIDE A CLASSIC FRENCH CAR



(Clockwise from left) Thierry at his workshop; Herboristerie is an old-fashioned apothecary in modern day Paris; Thierry’s quirky Eiffel Tower umbrella



The store is warmly lit by an antique chandelier and lined with dark wood cabinets, the shelves filled with small pouches of dried herbs and brown bottles of natural herb extracts. On the L-shaped counter top are baskets of herbs, a couple of antique scales, and books on herbology. There’s all the aura and charm of an old-fashioned apothecary.

Depending on your needs, you will be prescribed one or a blend of herbs from more than 1,000 types or if you want something more potent, try the natural extracts, in liquid form, that are produced in-house.

Anyone can walk in, request for a consultation and take home some herbs or a bottle of extract. But on this specially arranged visit, Jean Pierre also takes me to the back of his shop, where all the dried ingredients are weighed and sorted through, and allows me a peek into his quaint ‘lab’. The visit lasts no more than an hour but it’s an intimate experience and a chance to step into a fascinating time capsule right smack in modern day Paris.

A passion for parapluie A small yellow sign points the way to a quiet, narrow passage – the oldest in Paris, in fact. You’ll see PEP’s the minute you step into the short walkway, with dark green panelling and a couple of brightly-coloured umbrellas hanging at the shopfront. The door opens and Thierry Millet, flashing his ever-ready smile, welcomes us into his little shop where umbrellas of all sizes, shapes and colours hang everywhere. PEP is actually the acronym for Parapluie and

Parasols Service, and the word *pep* is also French slang for umbrella.

Thierry took over this 48-year-old shop nine years ago, after losing his job as the commercial director of a furniture company. He had no prior experience, nor the necessary skills, but learned the tricks of the trade soon enough. Today, PEP’s is still the only such store in Paris and Thierry, who works all by himself, restores 8,000-10,000 umbrellas a year.

Now why would someone restore an umbrella instead of getting a new one? “It could be for sentimental reasons,” says Thierry. “And also, it’s much cheaper to repair a faulty umbrella than to buy a new one.” Besides regular umbrellas, Thierry has also restored antique models that date

back to the 18th century and belong to private collections. He also custom makes umbrellas upon request, and is particularly proud of the whimsical black and white creation modelled after the Eiffel Tower.

Thierry takes us up a winding staircase to his workshop, a tiny room packed to the rafters with umbrella spare parts, sorted by size or length. A specially made round table is his main workspace and using an assortment of tools – electric drill, pliers and even a hairdryer – he deftly turns an umbrella with a broken handle into a perfectly usable one again. How long would it last once it’s fixed? “A thousand years!” he jests with a chuckle. Somehow I believe him. And to think, if Thierry had not lost his cushy job nine years ago, he may never have found his unique calling.

Besides workshop visits, **Meeting the French** also offers a host of other unique experiences, such as dinner with a Parisian family and the opportunity to practise your French with a 90-minute conversation course at a popular café. <http://en.meetingthefrench.com/>



(Clockwise from left) At the Pierre Herme boutique; a box of his luscious ganaches; Pierre Marcolini's chic boutique; his jewel-like creations; take your pick from Jean-Paul Hevin's extensive varieties

Cocoa couture

When it comes to chocolates, the Swiss and Belgian varieties pretty much share top billing. But Carine Beauvisage of **Unique Paris**, a concierge service that also offers guided tours, will prove to you that the French do as much justice to cocoa as they have to haute couture and cuisine. The Chocolate Tour is one of their bestsellers and Carine is the ultimate guide: She loves chocolate, knows everything about it and makes sure that by the end of the tour, so will you.

Our tour takes place around Boulevard Madeleine. Carine sees that I am about to bite into a breakfast croissant and cautions, "You don't want to eat that now, we are going to be having a lot of chocolates." And we do as she leads me through four of Paris' finest chocolateries, starting with Le Maison du Chocolat. Founded by Robert Linxe in the 1970s, it is considered the first successful specialty chocolate boutique in France.

Carine picks out a small box of ganaches and on our way to the second boutique, hands them to me one at a time. Robert Linxe was known as the Wizard of Ganache and they have remained Le Maison's specialty. The treats have incredibly thin and crispy coatings, and are available in a variety of flavours. Carine can differentiate each by sight, but I am to

guess which ones I'm eating. I let each bite melt on my tongue and rack my taste memory to identify the subtleties.

I realise this is not one of those tours where you can be a 'lazy' participant who simply tags along to satisfy your sweet tooth. "I won't be the one doing all the work on this tour," Carine says, "you have to do your homework too!" Still,

she does plenty. Besides sharing a wealth of information and interesting trivia, she brings along a thick hardcover book to do a 'show and tell' on the origins, history and the different types of beans and chocolates. And in case you don't know what a cocoa bean look like, she will show you a plastic one. This is one woman who takes chocolates seriously!

That passion is infectious, fuelled no doubt by the wonderfully decadent sweets she feeds me as we marvel at cocoa creations by Pierre Herme, Jean-Paul Hevin and Pierre Marcolini. Each of these chocolatiers have their specialties, unique flavours (fancy an olive chocolate? Try the Corso at Pierre Herme), ▶





(Clockwise from left) Artistic and charming, Montmartre is one of Paris' most-visited quarters; Karen in front of the sculpture of Dutilleul; the famous Moulin Rouge

outlandish creations (Jean-Paul Hevin's window display has a pair of chocolate stilettoes) and some of the world's most beautiful cocoa blends (Pierre Marcolini travels around the world to source for the best beans).

I say goodbye to Carine after two sweet hours, parting with the silky taste of dark chocolate still lingering in my mouth. She has taught me the delicious, delightful intricacies of one of the world's most favourite beans. I never want to eat commercial chocolates again.

The chocolate tour is part of Unique Paris' specialised luxury services, which includes concierge assistance and customised travel itineraries – think of them as your personal assistants during your stay in Paris
www.unique-paris.fr

Walk the talk

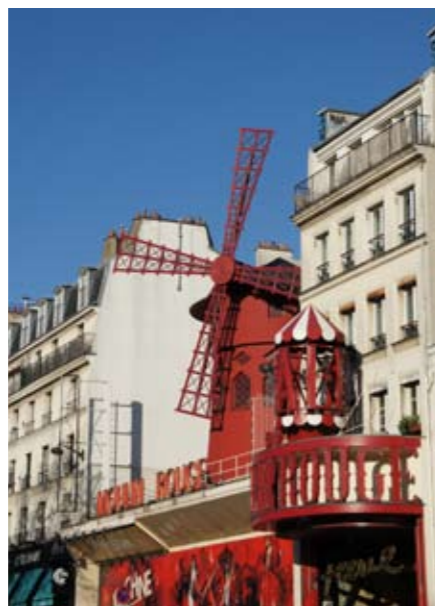
If you're walking around the Bohemian quarter of Montmartre and see a bunch of people listening raptly to a bubbly lady with blonde curls, chances are it's a **Sight Seeker's Delight** guided walk led by its founder, Karen Rudel, an American married to a French who knows Paris like the locals do, or maybe even better.

We start at the famed Moulin Rouge and learn that its recognisable façade is courtesy of the 13 windmills once found in the area. Karen then guides us up and down the hilly terrain, stopping at well-known attractions as well as lesser-known points of interest.

Vincent Van Gogh lived for two years in one of the apartment buildings here, while Pablo Picasso kept a studio not far away. The quaint Lapin Agile was Picasso's favourite restaurant; he would barter his paintings for meals. Karen points out the last remaining windmill and vineyard in Paris, and introduces us to the bizarre sculpture of a man who walks

through walls. It's of Dutilleul, the main character from *Le Passe Muraille*, by famous children's book writer, Marcel Ayme.

In between the more 'serious' facts, Karen also shares interesting anecdotes on the city and its famous inhabitants. Did you know that it was the famous French mime, Marcel Marceau, who taught Michael Jackson the moonwalk? Or that a baguette had to be 30 sugar cubes long and be placed on its flat side, or it would mean disrespect to the bread and also to the French?



Every now and then, Karen holds up a pink notebook, the pages of which are pasted with black and white photos, to provide a comparison of Montmartre then and now. Movie buffs will be pleased that Karen also points out the numerous film locations around the area, including the café made famous in *Amelie*. Most importantly, Karen's tours are fun because she peppers them with witty remarks and funny stories. "The Moulin Rouge sells EUR350,000 worth of champagne a year," she tells us. "The more you drink, the better the show!"

Montmartre is listed in every guidebook, so you can easily find enough information to do a self-tour. But with Karen, you see so much more and get to appreciate the area's significance too. And there are plenty

of good laughs to go around – after all, her website describes going on one of her tours as 'seeing sketch comedy with a bit of French history wrapped around it!'. ☺

Sight Seeker's Delight has made it to the top spot on Trip Advisor and besides Montmartre, offers guided tours to several other arrondissements in Paris sightseekersdelight.com



Malaysia Airlines flies nonstop from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Paris (CDG)