



# outlook

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# Gay Paree and Its Strollable Neighborhoods

by Aaron Leventhal  
Photo by Beth Ervin Leventhal

Paris is universally acclaimed as the world's most beautiful and cosmopolitan city. Its classical architecture, broad boulevards, sidewalk cafes, fashionable boutiques, exquisite gardens and public squares, art galleries, museums and icons such as the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe are legendary. However, it's Paris's colorful historic neighborhoods that have kept me returning to the "City of Light" for more than three decades.

My wife Beth and I had the good fortune to discover a "Paris Walks" brochure in the lobby of the Hotel du Vieux Marais ([www.vieuxmarais.com](http://www.vieuxmarais.com)) when we checked into the economical boutique hotel in the heart of Le Marais, Paris's most lively historic quarter. The flyer informed us that the company offered two daily walking tours led by professional English-speaking guides through many of Paris's most fabled neighborhoods.

"Paris Walks" was founded in 1994 by Peter and Oriel Caine, an English couple from Cornwall. They fell in love with Paris and decided to introduce visitors to the history, architecture, major sights and off-the-beaten-track neighborhood landmarks in an informative and often humorous manner. All of the walks last about two hours, cost 12 euros (about \$20), require no reservations and usually attract small groups of 15-20 persons. The guides meet you at the neighborhood Metro entrance, where all tours begin at 10:30a and 2:30p, rain or shine every day of the year.

During our nine-day stay we took three walking tours. Before or after the tour we enjoyed a festive lunch at a sidewalk café or bistro and spent the remainder of the day in the neighborhood strolling along the narrow streets and broad boulevards, taking photographs, shopping and visiting museums, churches and sights pointed out on the walk. Each day was a mini-vacation to a new, distinctive and memorable place.

Listed below is a sampling of our experiences with "Paris Walks." Other walks include St-Germain-des-Pres and Le Marais, as well as specialized tours through Hemingway's Paris and

the French Revolution.

Ile de la Cite (Tours on Mondays at 10:30a). The island and birthplace of Paris was settled by the Parisii, a 300 B.C. Celtic tribe and later was a Roman garrison called Lutetia before becoming the seat of power for the Frankish monarchy for almost 1,000 years. French elite such as Voltaire, Balzac and Cezanne built grand mansions on the island. Bridges links Ile de la Cite and its companion Ile St. Louis to the mainland.

Major sights include the incomparable Notre Dame cathedral; the fashionable Champs Elysees boulevard; the jewel-like stained glass windows of Ste-Chapelle; the Louvre, possibly the world's greatest art museum, built on the foundations of a medieval castle occupied by four French kings; Jardin des Tuileries, landscaped gardens designed in the 16th century to link the palace to Place de la Concorde; and the Palais Royale, originally constructed in the 15th century for Cardinal Richelieu and now filled with cafes, boutiques and government offices.

**The Latin Quarter** (Tours on Mondays at 2:30p) On the Left Bank of the Seine, the Latin Quarter has been a student neighborhood since the founding of the Sorbonne in the Middle Ages. We enjoyed wandering through the quarter's tangle of narrow streets filled with hip boutiques, cafes and restaurants radiating out from Place St-Michel Square. Churches of note are St-Etienne-du-Mont, with its mix of 16th century Gothic and Renaissance architecture, and St-Severin, celebrated for its palm tree style columns and religious depictions in its ancient stained glass windows that share space with seven 20th century windows by Jean Bazaine.

**Village of Montmartre** (Tours on Wednesdays at 10:30a) Montmartre was once a rural village with vineyards, windmills and wheat fields built outside the city walls of Paris. Originally a sacred Roman hill dedicated to Mercury, it became home to the Benedictine monks when they built an abbey there in 1133. Annexed to Paris in the 19th century, Montmartre always has stood apart from the city. Its beauty, country atmosphere and low rents have at-

tracted poets and artists such as Utrillo, Modigliani, Renoir, Matisse and Picasso.

You can spend tranquil hours wandering through Montmartre's narrow streets filled with funky art galleries, boutiques, sidewalk cafes and artists' and writers' studios. Be sure to tour the all-white Basilique du Sacre Coeur at the top of the butte overlooking the city; La Galette, the last surviving windmill; and the historic Musee de Montmartre, where the atmosphere of the village's early days is captured.

A short walk will take you to sleazy Pigalle, loaded with sex shops and prostitutes where you'll find the fascinating Musee de l'Erotisme, open daily 10a - 2a, and the can-can girls at the flashy and pricey Moulin Rouge.

## Gay Paree

If you want to be totally out and feel completely free to hug, kiss and hold hands with your partner, head to Paris's historic neighborhood of Le Marais. This predominantly gay district in the Right Bank's 3rd and 4th arrondissements (quarters) has emerged in recent years as the hippest and most provocative in the French capital.

Le Marais is celebrated for its mix of the old and the new. The neighborhood has a bohemian ambiance with historic 17th century buildings, the famed Place des Vosges public square and the Musee National Picasso comfortably surrounded by intimate gay bars, cafes, restaurants and sex clubs along narrow cobblestone streets.

According to Brice Nice, the young and savvy manager of Le Cox (15 Rue des Archives), a popular gay bar open daily from noon to 2a, there is absolutely no problem living an open gay life in Paris. He points to Bertrand DeLanoe, Paris' gay mayor for the past seven years, and the passage in 1999 of Pacte Civil de Solidarite, or PACS, that made France the first traditionally Catholic country in the world to legally recognize same sex unions. These unions and those of unmarried opposite sex couples have complete legal equality in such civil matters as taxation, insurance

and inheritance.

Brice points out that dozens of gay bars are open in Le Marais until 2a, but the sex clubs start getting busy around midnight and rock until 6a. These clubs feature bars, DJs, expansive dance floors and small private rooms where hedonism runs rampant. In fact, gay life has become so popular in Le Marais that the chic straight crowd has recently joined in the erotic good times.

When I inquired about the issue of AIDS, Brice immediately pulled a condom from his pocket and handed it to me with a smile. He told me the government and various other organizations supply free condoms for gay bars and sex clubs to hand out to clients.

## The Hot Gay Life

Amnesia Cafe (42 Rue Vielle du Temple) attracts a young professional crowd with its relaxed atmosphere, DJs and dance scene.

Le Depot (10 Rue Aux Ours) is reputed to be Europe's biggest sex club with a packed dance floor and multi-level rooms for both singles and couples to carouse.

L'Open Café (17 Rue des Archives) is the city's first gay bar with sidewalk seating year round. Very sophisticated. Bear's Den (Rue de la Verrerie), a friendly venue for bears and their friends with a busy happy hour scene that spills onto the street.

Le Raidd (23 Rue du Temple) is famous for its gorgeous topless waiters and go-go boys shower shows.

3W Kafe (8 Rue des Ecouffles), which means "Women With Women," is a popular lipstick lesbian lounge with DJs in the Cellar Bar on weekends until 4a. Open Wednesday - Sunday. Boys are welcome if they come with a girl. The club also manages Les Jaccasses, a lesbian tapas bar across the street.

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