

EXPLORING PLANET PARIS

Charles L. Mitsakos, Ph.D.*

Professor and Chair, Division of Education, Rivier College

“Planet Paris” was the caption of a postcard of a painting by Johann Perathoner for sale in a shop at the base of the Eiffel Tower. The card featured Paris as the center of the universe for tourists from around the world. Its international appeal became most evident to us during a recent trip to the French capital.

For several centuries explorers and colonists left Paris and France to “discover” and settle in lands around the planet. French expeditions and explorations spread from Canadian settlements to the Mississippi Valley in the latter part of the 17th century. Other French explorers established colonies throughout the Caribbean. French soldiers helped develop a vast colonial empire in Africa and Asia, second only to Great Britain. Although much of that empire has become independent, the French connection remains politically on islands in the Caribbean and traditionally through language and culture in many other countries.

Those same cultures have a presence in Paris today as do so many other countries and their peoples from around the world who some might say have made Paris the center of the universe. Songs such as “I Love Paris,” “April in Paris,” and “Under Paris Skies” with their lyrics about this special city have contributed to making it a most romantic spot and popular holiday destination.

Our journey began with an intercontinental and intercultural experience on our connecting flight through London on British Airways. We appreciated the relaxing environment and the phenomenally personable and efficient flight attendants through its Club World Sleeper Service. We had a pre-flight dinner at the airport before boarding and then a drink and a light snack before settling into our fully flat bed with truly comfortable pillows and cozy blankets. We had breakfast in bed as we were near getting ready to land. After our connecting flight from Heathrow, it was great to land in Planet Paris and not be exhausted from traveling but rather really be ready to enjoy the city.

We have stayed in three hotels that reflect the art, architecture, history, and culture that make Paris such a popular destination for tourists from around the planet: the classic Hotel Meurice, the popular Hilton Paris just steps away from the Eiffel Tower, and the new Art Deco Hilton Arc de Triomphe Paris.

In the 18th and 19th centuries leading architects and artists, designers, painters, and sculptors left their mark on the city. Contemporary artisans in the 20th century have made a similar contribution that all seem to come together at the new Art Deco Hilton Arc de Triomphe Paris, which has been designed as a tribute to the luxurious transatlantic ocean liners of the era and reflects Art Deco design at its best. Like the upper decks of the Normandie, Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Mary, the corridors are carpeted in a print that draws attention to the ebony and inlaid doors. The design tribute extends from the grand stairway at the center of the Hilton Arc de Triomphe Paris’ lower levels to the décor in the individual hotel rooms.

Stella, my interior designer spouse, was delighted by the charm of the cozy and mellow atmosphere of our room bursting with original touches and great reproductions of the classical Art Deco art work of the period. She was also impressed with how effectively the latest technological innovations and fibre optics provided access to the World Wide Web.

I especially enjoyed relaxing at the Executive Lounge that was akin to traveling “first class” on one of those ocean liners. The opportunity to have a superb exfoliating regenerating treatment at the hotel’s Spa Mosaic by Declor and Carita and use its cardiovascular equipment probably would not have been available. Neither would have been the opportunity of jogging through the nearby Parc de Monceau, the most beautiful park in the world.

Situated on Paris’ left bank, the Hilton Paris was truly only a block and a half away from the Eiffel Tower. It seemed amazing to be able to stand on the balcony adjoining our room and almost touch this most famous landmark. The first of the new generation of grand hotels built in Paris in the sixties, it has recently undergone a complete renovation that combines French elegance with the latest technology such as WiFi access in our room. The service was quite classic. It was impressive to be greeted by name when we walked into the lounge and to continue a conversation that had started the day before. That personalized touch meant a lot when one is traveling in another part of the world.

Hotel Meurice overlooks the magnificent Tuileries Garden on the Rue de Rivoli between Place Vendome and the Louvre. Stella loved this 19th century palace-like building, its regal façade and 18th century antiques with which it was decorated, and the exceptional space, window treatments, marble bath, and overall design of our room. The Meurice has also undergone a multimillion dollar renovation that has made its grandeur even more elegant and added the technology and WiFi/Internet conveniences of the 21st century.

All three hotels seem to attract guests from around the world who come to experience this art, architecture, history, and culture “under Paris skies.”

A conversation with Sabine Freese, the Concierge Director at the Meurice, gave me some interesting insight into what these travelers seek. Sabine, by the way, is one of only 10% of the female head concierges in Paris, and most likely, in hotels around the world. She indicated that indeed the Eiffel Tower and the Museum of the Louvre still seem to be the main attractions regardless where the travelers may call home. However people from around the world who visit “Planet Paris” often look for some different things in addition to those landmarks. Folks from Japan and Russia seem especially interested in shopping and the fashions available. Guests from the United States want to find a place off the beaten track and to discover something that their friends who may have visited Paris before them have not found. Yes, they wish to visit the Louvre and climb the Eiffel Tower and attend a performance at the ballet or at the Paris Opera House, but they also want something of good value that they can talk about when they return home.

The romantic nature of Paris brings with it some special requests according to Sabine. One couple decided to get married there on New Year’s Eve and asked her to make arrangements for the wedding and a special dinner for the two of them. Another man wanted to show his wife how special she was and so stopped by the concierge desk and asked Sabine to get him 300 long-stemmed white roses for that

evening. Another guest got caught up in shopping and decided, as she was preparing to check out, that she wanted to purchase a bag she had seen in a shop earlier in her stay. Sabine helped her identify the store in which she had seen this special creation, called to assure that it was still available, and arranged to have a car drive her to the shop, wait while she purchased her Parisian treasure, and return to the Meurice so she could check out and head for the airport.

Europe also has a grand tradition of private accommodations. We had friends that booked their holiday with *Welcome2France.com*, which offers a variety of luxurious apartment rentals in the top neighborhoods in Paris. From artistic garrets to aristocratic mansions, the web site introduces visitors to the abode of their dreams in the French capital.

Places of worship have a special appeal to people from around the world. We found people from many different English-speaking counties at a Sunday morning service at St. Joseph Church, two blocks from the Arc de Triomphe. It was established by a religious order from Ireland in 1863 that still provides priests for the only Roman Catholic service in English in Paris. We joined a large delegation of folks from Japan who toured St. Germain-des-Pres Romanesque church, which was consecrated in 1163 and a group of tourists from Greece and Italy to visit the historic Notre Dame Cathedral with its flying buttresses and rose stained glass window and later the Byzantine-style Sacre-Coeur in Montmartre.

Three very different popular museums reflected the international dimensions of Paris. Folks from around the world who had read Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" and others who hadn't lined up to gaze at Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" in its new gallery setting at the Louvre. Others journeyed through the galleries to walk around "The Winged Victory of Samothrace" and other Greek, Etruscan, and Roman antiquities. Iranian and Arabian as well as work from India were included in the "Arts of Islam" collection in the new Sackler Gallery.

A visit to the Musee d'Orsay allowed us to view Impressionist, Preimpressionist, and Post Impressionist art from around the world in addition to the classic pieces by Renoir and Van Gogh. As a native of Lowell, Massachusetts it was exciting to see Lowell-born James McNeill Whistler's "Arrangement in Gray and Black of the Painter's Mother." "Whistler's Mother" was the only painting that we found whose caption/descriptor was in English not French.

The National Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Centre had reorganized its collection and presented modern and contemporary works of art based on a thematic, interdisciplinary approach rather than in chronological order. "The Big Bang" exhibit provided a link between creation and destruction of art in the 20th century around broad themes such as Destruction, Re-Enchantment, Archaism, and Sex with a variety of artists from around the world such as Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol.

Two other very specialized museums of French artists of international renown seemed to draw lots of visitors from around the world. The best collection of Pablo Picasso's work is exhibited in the museum that bears his name. It provided a fascinating look at the changes in the artist's work over 70 years. Visitors from around the world paused in the garden of the Rodin Museum to take photographs of one another as thinkers in front of Rodin's "The Thinker" or had someone take their picture as they kissed next to "The Kiss." The museum is housed in the beautiful 18th century home in which the artist lived and worked.



The Restaurant LeMeurice, the main dining room at the Meurice Hotel, provides an elegant setting for breakfast, lunch, or dinner overlooking the Tuileries Gardens. (Courtesy photo)

Dining is still another way in which one can appreciate the international dimension of Planet Paris. We participated in a French tradition that has gone on for almost 60 years when we had dinner and watched the show at the Lido on the Champs Elysees, Paris' most famous cabaret. . It was delightful to enjoy an English tradition, teatime at Laduree, also on the Champs Elysees. We visited Morocco at 404 where we admired the North African décor while nibbling on tanginess, couscous, and stuffed sardines. Home made duck foie gras with vanilla flavored fig querelie was just one of the French dishes at Le Train Bleu, upstairs at the Lyons railroad station. Stella called my attention to the many sculptures and gigantic pieces of art and chandeliers from the “Bell Époque” period that surrounded us there. We sipped a Boutari wine from Thessalonica in Greece as we munched on tarama, tzatziki, tyropitas, and stuffed grape leaves and then danced to the traditional Greek line dance song, “Samiotisa,” played by a trio at the Mythos Restaurant, one of several Greek restaurants on the Rue de la Huchette in the Latin Quarter, not on the island of Samos. Although it felt as though we were in New Orleans as we listened to the blues, swing, and boogie music of the Julie-Brunetaud Quartet, we had to keep reminding ourselves that we were dining at the Biblioquet Jazz Club in St. Germain-des-Pres.

We can understand why head chef Yannick Alleno was awarded two Michelin stars for Le Meurice, the main dining room at the Meurice Hotel, along with a red “rising star watch” in the 2005 guide. His “Lobster from Brittany Cooked with Château Chalon Wine” served on Limoges china was truly

exceptional and made me feel just a little disloyal to the Lobster Pot in Cape Porpoise, Maine. The décor complements the menu with its mosaic patterned floor, beautiful paintings, and shimmering chandeliers.

Paris Planet—there is so much about its art, architecture, history, and culture that attracts so many people from around the world and stimulates others to write songs about how much they “love Paris.”

* A former teacher, curriculum specialist, and superintendent of schools, **Dr. Charles L. Mitsakos** is professor of education and chair of the education division at Rivier College. He is the author or co-author of more than twenty history, geography, and social studies textbooks, workbooks, and multimedia programs for elementary and secondary schools. He has served as educational consultant to schools and school districts in fifteen states, U. S. Virgin Islands, U. S. Department of Defense Dependents Schools, and Ministries/Departments of Education in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, and Jamaica. He is a past president and now serves as treasurer of the Social Science Education Consortium, an affiliate of the National Council for the Social Studies. A freelance travel writer, Dr. Mitsakos has had articles published in periodicals throughout New England.