

Paris Municipal Elections  
 Il Vino Restaurant  
 Resting in Peace  
 Meeting the French  
 Stern Graveur  
 Whistler's Druthers

# PARIS

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## n o t e s

Euro Feb 13: .686  
 Euro Jan 14: .673  
 Rain Days: 14  
 High Temp: 54°F/12°C  
 Low Temp: 39°F/4°C  
 Nat'l Holidays: March 23, 24

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# CHOOSE A CRUISE

By Amanda MacKenzie

There's no better way to get in touch with Paris than on a boat cruise—picking one is another matter

**F**luctuat nec Mergitur," piped up my show-off friends when I told them I was researching this story. You can't live in Paris for any length of time without catching on to the city motto. It translates as "She is tossed on the waves but is not submerged," and, along with an emblem of a ship on choppy water, it's emblazoned on practically everything civic. Nor is it just classical hokum. These three Latin words conjure up the essence of the city, from its medieval origins as a powerful inland port governed by merchant guilds, to today's bustling metropolis of stunning Seine-side set-pieces, 37 bridges and a trio of canals. Throw in a marina or two and a secret underground lake (lapping benignly below the Opéra Garnier), and you get the picture. Paris rides the waves eternal, her gaze lifted up to the Pole Star.

Which is a fanciful way of saying, if you haven't seen Paris from the water, you haven't seen Paris. Contrary to popular opinion, taking a boat cruise needn't be just for first-timers in the city. In winter or summer, in style or in steerage, even the locals have been known to get a buzz out of the unique perspective served up from the water. Little wonder, then, that Paris cruises are such big business. But how do you find one that's right for you, faced as you are with a cascade of leaflets, promotions and websites? Bracing myself to clock up the nautical miles, I set out on an opinionated mission of discovery on your behalf.

Where better to start than with Bateaux-Mouches (Port de la Conférence, 8th; [www.bateaux-mouches.fr](http://www.bateaux-mouches.fr); adults, €9; kids 4-12 and adults 65-plus, €4)? Founded in 1949, the company is the grandfather of the Seine cruises and, for many, the name is as brand-generic as Xerox or Hoover. With its fleet of 14 vessels (five of them up-market restaurant boats) it's the largest cruise operator on the Seine, while its regular sightseeing boats can each carry up to 1,000 passengers. This, then, is the democratic option—at least if the massed ranks of tour buses at the quayside are anything to go by.

Seen from a distance, Bateaux-Mouches are distinctive—even stately—craft. Once you're on board, rudimentary comfort is the order of the day. Still, the heated lower deck, with its aisles of hard plastic seats, provides welcome shelter from the elements, while the all-round glazing ensures that everyone gets an adequate view. Undeterred by today's lashing rain, a



party of plucky Asians has staked out a corner of the partly covered walkway. The postcard views are from the panoramic, open-air deck. Unsurprisingly, there are no takers yet.

This classic 70-minute tour covers a generous sweep of Seine between the Pont de Grenelle in the west to the far tip of Ile St-Louis. The fact-packed commentary is relayed at breakneck speed in five successive languages. It takes steely concentration to catch the English version as it comes round and, even then, I found I lost pieces of it to the engines. Before long, I give up and indulge in fantasies about life on a bobbing houseboat with potted shrubs and stacked bicycles, in the shadow of Notre Dame.

In hindsight, it was a stroke of genius that led Jean Bruel to buy the original "mouche," the Hironnelle, a sturdy old steamboat that first saw service during the 1900 Universal Exhibition. The river's heyday of commerce and transport was long past, but here was

Bruel, one step ahead and poised to exploit the new, post-war climate of leisure and travel. Romantics will tell you that the firm is named after a certain Monsieur Mouche (Mister Fly, to you), innovator of the vessel in question. Others insist—rather dully, I think—that "mouche" was the term for a shallow-hulled boat developed in Lyon for plying the marshes around the Rhône. But it seems a shame to let the facts get in the way of a good story.

What appears to be true is that in his entrepreneurial haste, Bruel failed to spot a glaring syntactical error in his sign—"quelle horreur!" With no room left to paint in a remedial "s" at the end of "Mouche," he made a gaffe that proved such an affront to Gallic sensibilities that even an "académicien" weighed in to lambaste the company in the press. Bruel got the last laugh, however. There was no error, he countered, since the sign referred to a surname, that of Baron Haussmann's illustrious associate, Jean-Sébastien Mouche. A grand old bust was procured from the flea market, adding weight to the bogus biography and, lo, a legend was born. And, indeed, a brand.

The rain stops at last, a signal for everyone to troop up to the top deck. United in our foreign-ness, we stand immobile and silent as if on the lookout for icebergs. Clearly audible now, the commentary resonates magnificently under every bridge (confirming my theory that it's broadcast really just to wind up the locals). The seats are wet and the air may be damp and chilly, yet for a few, brief moments, there truly is magic in the mix. Out come the tripods. Pretty girls pose expertly against a backdrop of the Conciergerie and, when the Eiffel Tower starts to shimmy in the twilight, we know the old girl is performing just for us.

In search of a more intimate experience, I steer a course for the Vedettes du Pont Neuf (Square du Vert-Galant, 1st; [www.vedettes-dupontneuf.com](http://www.vedettes-dupontneuf.com); adults, €11; kids, €6). The cheerful-looking (continued on page 7)

landing scores immediate points for its central location, by the prow-shaped tip of the Ile de la Cité. Boarding at dusk, I have the impression of stepping off one boat and onto another. Appealingly, this cruise comes with the promise of a live commentary, delivered in only French and English.

That, alas, is where the good news ends. Unforgiving seats on the lower deck give fresh meaning to the term “no frills” and, though the window seats yield up excellent views, any stragglers unlucky enough to be seated in the middle row see substantially less. (No doubt everyone decamps to the top deck in summer, anyway.) Over the next hour, our hostess—let’s call her Pauline—delivers a bravura performance of circular breathing that would have left Charlie Parker gasping. It’s all reasonable stuff. It’s just that we have so much to wade through that nothing quite stands out as interesting. The tide of information doesn’t cease until we reach the Eiffel Tower, where Pauline, apparently exhausted, falls silent and leaves us to our reveries.

By night, the river has a different persona. Look up, and you’re privy to glimpses inside crystal-chandeliered apartments with scarlet walls. Gorgeous in black and gold, the buxom nymphs of the Pont Alexandre III smirk down as you pass. The Musée d’Orsay is a blaze of light, the Grand Palais a great gather of glass topped by a fluttering tricolor. Even the pigeons take on a silvery glamour. Pauline takes up the baton once more, and the spell is broken. “The Pont Marie has a very old tradition,” she hurries on. “When you go under it, you must close your eyes and give the keys to your baker.” Or, at any rate, I thought that’s what she said. As we take our leave, she reveals that she’s still a student, not a qualified tourism professional. I feel bad and tip her extra.

So it’s with some slight misgivings that on a blustery January morning I join the small crowd waiting to cruise with Vedettes de Paris (Port de Suffren, 7th; [www.vedettesdeparis.fr](http://www.vedettesdeparis.fr); adults, €11; kids 4-12, €4). I needn’t have worried. Forget the down-at-heel quayside café and the dour young mariner who tears your ticket, lit cigarette poised between his lips. Vedettes de Paris has been spending money, and the results show handsomely.

One of a brace of new vessels launched last year, the *Iéna* is recognizably boat-shaped. With a maximum capacity of 250 passengers, it provides a pleasantly human scale. Aloft is a spruce sun deck complete with canvas chairs. The lower deck boasts smart red seats, striped carpets and a small bar equipped with high stools that allow you to toast the city without having to forgo the view.

The recorded commentary comes up trumps, too. Delivered in three languages, it strikes a nice balance between detail and data-overload, between the miscellany of things you’d

forgotten and things you never knew. Coming soon, the flat screen will run subtitles for passengers who are audio-impaired, along with an airline-inspired chart of the boat’s progress along the river. The Vedettes de Paris’ one-hour “Discovery Cruise” costs—and covers—more or less the same as its competitors’ offerings, but I come away feeling that I’ve gotten value for my money. It’s worth noting, too, that the company periodically teams up with other tour operators to offer discounts on other attractions around town.

Bateaux Parisiens (Port de la Bourdonnais, 7th; [www.bateauxparisiens.com](http://www.bateauxparisiens.com)) has also been laying out an investment. The company (which, incidentally, also runs the hop-on, hop-off Batobus fleet, the City’s floating equivalent of the Métro) now boasts a swanky, new pier. It has thoroughly overhauled its budget sight-



seeing formula. If you’re looking for a classic cruise, the company’s 600-person trimarans serve up an interesting blend of individual audio guide plus music, supplemented by updates from the hostesses. But by now I feel I’ve earned a splurge, and a leisurely lunchtime cruise of an hour and three-quarters on board “Le Diamant” sounds more like the ticket.

Ever wondered who takes restaurant cruises? Why, it’s the French, of course—anniversary couples, family get-togethers or just “entre amis”—and they far outnumber foreigners on today’s spree. Seating is generous; I can’t remember when I last had a private table so far out of earshot of my neighbors. Soft lighting and attentive service lend a sense of occasion; the three-course meal with wine, music and genuinely panoramic views does the rest. The vessel’s engines hum rather than growl, a blessing since the live commentary from our hostess is upbeat and interesting, not obtrusive.

As we glide under the Pont Marie, she also clears up a lingering mystery. “According to tradition,” she reveals, “you should close your eyes and give your neighbor a kiss.” As the boat rounds a replica Statue de la Liberté on the Ile des Cygnes, the singer gives a slick rendition of “New York, New York” in seductively accented English. A trifle fey, perhaps? Yes, but who’s complaining? Certainly not the native contingent at the stern; they break into a sing-along to the “chansons” on the home stretch. Cost-

ing €52-72 for a three-course meal with wine (expect to pay more if you’re having dinner), this is a convivial option for anyone planning to push out the boat on that next trip.

But the Seine is not the only excuse to get carried away. Running along the eastern flank of Paris, the Canal St-Martin transformed city trade when it opened in 1825 and linked the river with the Ourcq and St-Denis canals. By the early 1980s, however, it had become a picture of neglect, until an unlikely tourism venture helped revive its fortunes. Though it’s no longer the only kid on the block, Canauxrama (13 Quai de la Loire, 19th; [www.canauxrama.com](http://www.canauxrama.com); adults, €15) is still something of a standard-bearer, serving up a compelling formula of “atmosphère, atmosphère.”

If you’re a fan of vintage French movies, you’ll recognize the line. It was spoken by the incomparable Arletty in the 1938 classic “Hôtel du Nord.” If you’re not, relax; you’ll soon get into the swing of things. Not only are Canauxrama’s two boats named after the movie’s director and its leading lady, you’ll most likely get to hear a clip from the movie as you pass the hotel in question. Cinematic homage apart, the cruise follows a passage that’s remarkable in its own right. Through ferny tunnels, gushing double locks and swing bridges, the boat crosses some of Paris’ most captivating quarters. Over the two and a half hours it takes to reach La Villette, you’ll climb a total of 80 feet.

This time, the bilingual commentary comes courtesy of one man and a mike. That’s reassuring, because within minutes of sailing from the Port de l’Arsenal, we’re plunged into an eerie vaulted crypt, the final resting place of the 504 victims of the 1830 Revolution. When we emerge, blinking, among the plane trees and pretty iron footbridges, the personal touch pays dividends, too; the route is brimming with unexpected history and anecdotes. Some are nostalgic; others embrace the ghoulish—like the infamous Montfaucon Gallows, whose stones were re-used to build the locks.

As the chansons fade and the last lock fills, I’m already an old hand, adept at beating a retreat inside the cabin to avoid a drenching. It’s all part of the fun on a boat ride through popular Paris. It also adds up to the perfect foil to the “grandeurs” of the Seine.

And I’d say that earns me—and you—the right to quote with the best of them. “Fluctuat nec Mergitur.” N’est-ce pas?

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