

Redefining Travel, Re-experiencing Paris

By Susan Barbour

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I AM IN A GARRET apartment in the ninth arrondissement, a neighborhood where I once lived and where I try to stay each time I come to Paris. I love the *ambiance du quartier* here, the pop-up views of Sacré-Coeur, the boulangerie Delmontel, and the rue Victor Massé with its long row of guitar shops. The woman who lives here is a photographer away at an artist residency. I found her place on Airbnb last year and was happy to see it available again. I like her taste in books and art. There's a smattering of Duras and Borges, translations of Pynchon and Dostoïevski, monographs on Man Ray and Graciela Iturbide — all of them stacked beside me under the slope of an attic window, the kind that opens out at a slant through a blue-gray mansard rooftop. Around me are a kitchenette with a bar stool, a spinet piano, a rocking chair, a lopsided dresser, and a scalloped mirror hanging from a bright piece of ribbon tied to a hook. I like to think we would be friends.

She has emailed me a sheet of helpful information she sends to all her guests. Among her recommendations are my favorite market street, my fail-proof garden restaurant, and a cocktail bar with decent music where I take out-of-town friends. The tips also include some restaurants and shops I hadn't known about, museums I never got around to visiting (or assumed were not for me), and cafés, bakeries, and grocers I hadn't frequented because I'd already had my own. These venues and activities make up her daily experience of Paris, her weekend indulgences, her trysts with lovers or solitude, and her walking tours with visitors and friends. She and I inhabited the same neighborhood at the same time, yet emerged with routines that diverged as much as they overlapped. I suppose her version of the ninth and mine are both authentic in that they derive from daily living. But neither is authoritative; there's no right way to have a real experience. Our senses of our neighborhood are unique outcomes of personality and chance.

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The way we travel and get to know places has changed. Where we once looked to guidebooks to find hotels and relied on concierge to point us to restaurants, we now scour TripAdvisor to get the gist of neighborhoods, book Airbnbs amongst locals, and slip into the life of a stranger for a few days or a few weeks. We have access to thousands of intimate reviews at our fingertips. We can also, in just a few clicks, get keys to an absent host's home, shop at their market, drink coffee from their mug, and stroll around their favorite gardens and museums. We end up getting

not *an* experience, nor *the* experience (which we all know is a fiction), but *someone's* experience.

It strikes me that an apartment owner's highly subjective letter full of tips, a letter from a kind stranger who knows the neighborhood and wants to share his or her favorite discoveries, is precisely the approach one finds in *City Secrets Paris: The Essential Insider's Guide*, which I had the pleasure of reading in situ. WARNING! This book is what it says it is: an insider's guide and not a general travel guide. So please don't throw out your *Rick Steves* or dispense of your *Lonely Planet* or *Rough Guide*. You will not find any summaries of neighborhoods or witty glosses of their general character or ambiance that you can use as shorthand knowledge or framing narratives. This is a book of particulars, not categories, and the venues — as well as the perspectives — are individual and focused. You will also not find any section with information about tipping, transportation, lodging, or customs. Find that in your general travel guide or on any number of amazing websites devoted to Paris (page 9 includes a list of the best ones). And you will certainly not find any pictures or user-friendly colored maps. In fact, the only full representation of the city is hilariously minimalist — a white and gray abstraction of the arrondissements that resembles a chalk scrawl on a blackboard. But this, after all, is the way most Parisians come to know their way around: by memorizing the clockwise “snail” of numbered neighborhoods that curls around the Seine.

There is no over-arching aesthetic judgment in these pages about what the city is meant to be, no voice that emerges as the consensual opinion. Rather, it presents an array of voices that lead you down narrow streets and arcades, through forgotten corners of museums, past garden alcoves, and into cavernous restaurants that even some locals can't claim to know. Think of it as an anthology of Airbnb welcome emails from strangers — people whose names you may have heard but about whom you have only a little context. This makes the book truly unique. For while there have been recent guidebooks similarly devoted to hidden or underappreciated aspects of Paris (*Unexplored Paris* and *Paris Style Guide* are fine examples), they remain like traditional guidebooks in that none indicate who is speaking. *City Secrets* deliberately reveals the identity of its author-guides and moreover includes a brief bio about each one. The series editor Robert Kahn set out to mine the tastes and memories of specific Paris experts — 150 to be exact. Sculptors, poets, directors, fashion designers, and sommeliers are all represented, as are museum officials, academics, critics, and even a few bankers with good taste. All are illustrious without being megastars, meaning we feel we are following real people. By revealing the identity of its authors, *City Secrets* puts the guide back into guidebook, resulting in a whole collection of mini moveable feasts.

The book is divided into 19 chapters devoted to different neighborhoods that spiral around the city map (with a bit of dithering in the sixth). The entries range from a couple of sentences to three pages long. Each author's name and profession is listed beneath their text, and an author index gives bios and page numbers. This added dimension of subjectivity allows readers to project and sympathize with a rationale for each author's respective taste (and so to violate, in exciting ways, that caveat of my literary training that the author is dead). Much like the book titles and artwork in my Airbnb apartment, the bios and professions give a context that encourages me to imagine who a given author is and why they like what they do. Sometimes the entries pertain to the writer's area of expertise (an artist writing about art, etc.), but just as often

the guides write outside their professional sphere, making this a book about subjective leisure rather than critical opinion. A special treat for me was imagining the man behind my favorite pair of shoes, Azzedine Alaïa, frequenting Cahiers de Colette in the fourth, where he likes to go because Colette revels in the smell of paper and recalls his obsession with Madame de Pompadour.

Some of the entries are historical, enlightening readers about Paris trivia (such as the source of the clear water gushing out of the gutters every morning) while others are more pragmatic, advising readers with personal tricks for being treated as a local. My favorite entries read almost like the Fluxus poems from Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*: scores for staging tiny happenings of the senses. Emmanuèle Bernheim instructs readers to go to the "in-between space" of the Avenue du Général-Lemonnier, between the Louvre and the Tuileries, where you can smell the Seine but not see it, where the sky seems immense, and where one can witness a voluminous cloud collision as the city buildings crouch to form a frame around it. This book is also not without its touch of literary soft porn, which seems appropriate for an anthology of secrets. The two most erotic descriptions concern works at the Musée d'Orsay. Here *Paris Review* editor Lorin Stein rivals Anaïs Nin in his eloquently randy description of Clésinger's scandalous *Femme Piquée par un Serpent*, the statue that is actually the cast of a formidable libertine, Apollonie Sabatier, and Turkish novelist Sebnem Senyener follows with her witty history of the misadventures of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*.

Angelenos will immediately recognize the voice of *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan, who writes here about the largesse of international cinema in Paris. In addition to describing his favorite theaters, all incidentally located near Odéon, he also shares a hilarious and unforgettable image of the nearby pointing statue of Danton, which he imagines shouting, "This way to the movies!" In chatting with Turan before I left Los Angeles, I learned that we had both seen *Midnight in Paris* at the UGC Danton, a cinema whose façade was featured in the film's opening montage. It struck us both as appropriate to be reminded we were not only *at* but *in* the movies — or, as he summed it up, in "Paris, the movie set of our dreams."

Los Angeles-based sculptor George Stoll also makes three cameos, with a piece about the Mona Lisa that makes up for her notoriously underwhelming self-presentation with a bit of smut and gossip, a wonderful anecdote about two unsuccessful pioneers of air travel who are buried holding hands in Père Lachaise, and a third entry about the architecture in the unsuspecting area of La Défense. And screenwriter Lea Endres writes about the relatively unknown church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, which is home to Saint Geneviève, Paris's patron saint, who was "something of a rock star, a Jeanne d'Arc sans sword." Finally, photographer, writer and communications specialist Carolyn Campbell does us all a favor by guiding readers through some of the magnificent tombstone sculptures she has discovered in her 30-year love affair with Père Lachaise. It seems fitting that Angelenos should figure so prominently into a book about Paris: while ostensibly the two cities couldn't be more different, they share a love of creativity and downtime, of languorous evenings in gardens and on terraces, of glamour and sensual pleasures.

The book includes no instructions, but certainly the most sensible use — which I eventually applied — is to read the chapter pertaining to the neighborhood where you're staying, and then

any others you plan to visit or discover. In taking the book for a test drive in the ninth, I found myself discovering those museums I'd never visited — including the Musée de la Vie Romantique, which writer Sheila Kohler recommends on account of its lovely garden and the plaster cast of George Sand's hand. I loved Kohler's rendering of Sand: strolling through the Paris streets in a top hat whenever not busy breaking the hearts of de Musset, Merimée, and Chopin. I also walked through arcades I'd simply walked right past before, such as the eclectic Passage des Panoramas which, James Chandler explains, were once flanked by cylindrical panoramas of pastoral scenes, thereby wedding urban and country life. I also set out to explore new food venues.

Few things can come between a Francophile and her boulangerie. Yet one writer in *City Secrets* recommended a different one around the corner. After days of vacillation, I mustered the courage to risk disappointment (or to have my paradigm shattered) and arrived at the address — only to learn that it no longer existed. An odd kind of gratitude overcame me, in which I thanked the author for testing (and validating) my own secret. I also, for the first time ever, set foot into the glorious Mère de Famille candy store on the rue Faubourg Montmartre. I'd noted the beautiful green façade for years but had never entered. Once inside I had the wondrous experience of standing in a candy store that was founded in 1761 and still retained some of the original décor. Another recommended chocolate shop up the street was boarded up. As with any paper guidebook, readers should remember to do their homework online before journeying to food and shopping venues, which are more liable to close than to stick around for 250 years. Still, I wasn't bothered by this; it's a nice reminder that the more Paris stays the same, the more it also changes.

One of the best features of *City Secrets*, I soon realized, is its discrete appearance. Unlike other guidebooks it has no garish cover, just a solid turquoise binding with faint title script and a slim dust-jacket that can be removed. One can carry this book at all times without ever risking looking like a tourist. But while I enjoyed taking the book out into the streets and using the entries to guide my stealthy tour, I'm also convinced it can be enjoyed cover to cover, as a kind of polyphonic, picaresque novel, or an *Arcades Project* of travel memoirs. Enjoyed after one's visit, it can also function as a series of transportive souvenir postcards. You might allow yourself to flip randomly to a single adventure, in a kind of armchair travel stichomancy, trusting that whatever page you land on will guide you to the corner of Paris you need most at that particular time.

Most travel guidebooks are designed to sate our desires for conquering and totalizing a destination, for imposing summaries that leave us with the satisfying feeling of having gleaned an overarching savoir-faire of the locale. This book offers no such solace. Reading it I had the sense that Paris was more unknown to me than ever. But it also gave me an overwhelming urge to discover and sing more of my own encounters with Paris. It models appreciation and discovery, the art of sniffing out mystery and magic. If we could manage to fall in love with a few corners of our own, it would be no small thing. To form secrets with a city is to treat it like a lover, to imagine you know it better than anyone, but to still expect it to surprise you for years to come. It is the secret to all rewarding travel and to inspired living.

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City Secrets Paris: The Essential Insider's Guide

By [Robert Kahn](#)

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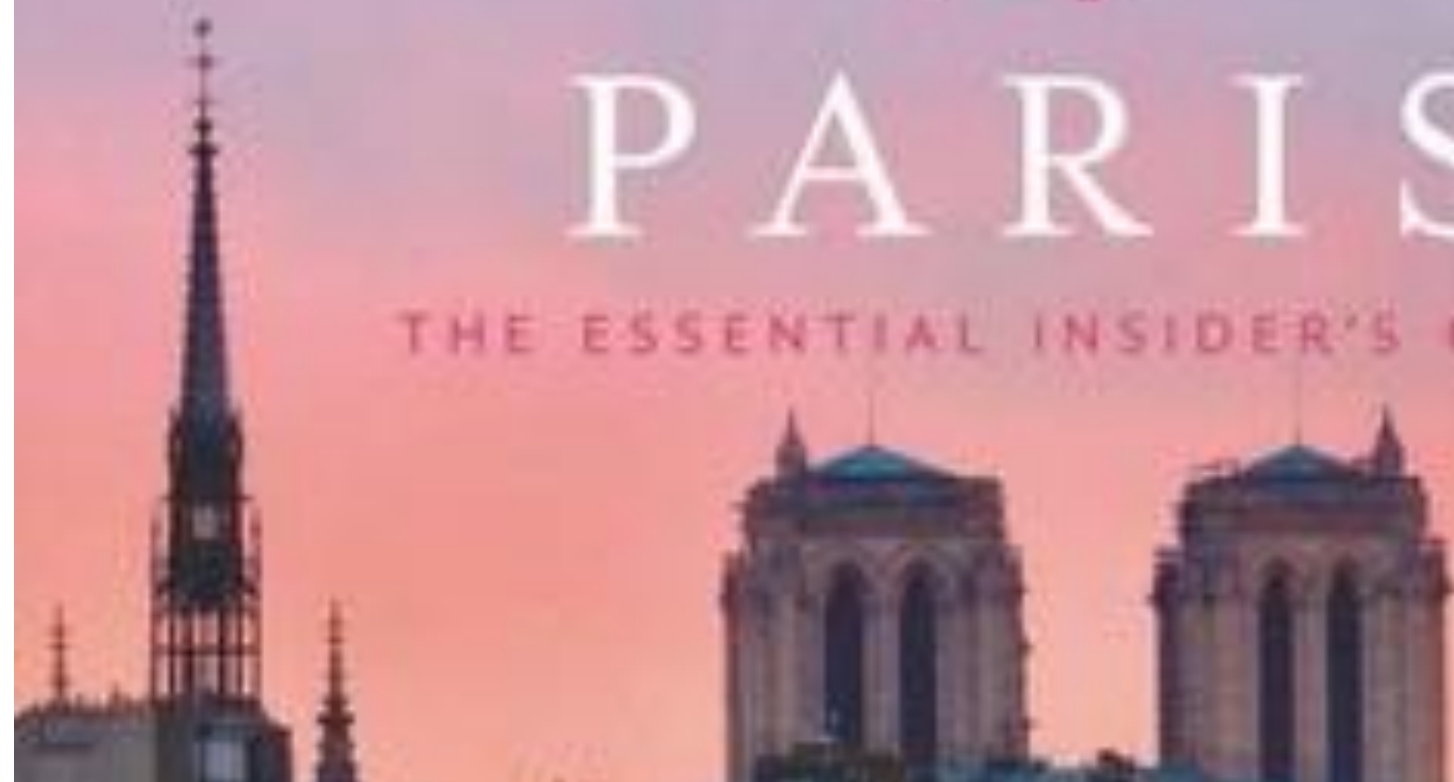
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"Packed with information not easily available elsewhere.
It should be everyone's pick to supplement
any guide more devoted to the travel basics." —*Booklist*

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PARIS

THE ESSENTIAL INSIDER'S GUIDE



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