

# FRANCE 1981

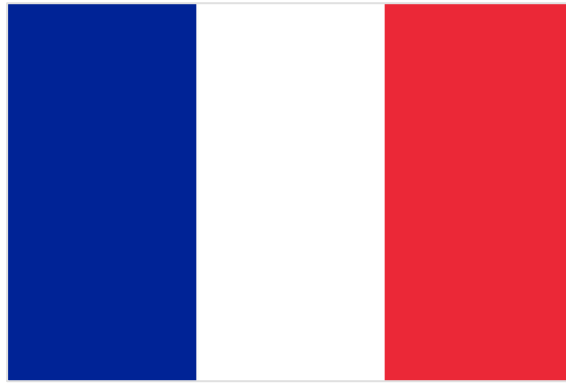
*Paris, the Loire Valley and the Dordogne Valley*



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Images on the cover: a view of the Seine from the roof of Notre Dame (top),  
and a view of the River Dordogne from Castelnaud castle (bottom).

My thanks, as ever, to Andrew Robinson for proofreading this travelogue.

## PART ONE

# PARIS



## 1 – PARIS

Wednesday, 20 May 1981

Having spent the previous sixteen days footing it around Paris and seeing just about everything that could be seen, I was ready to leave the city and explore some other regions of France south of the capital. I rose at seven, breakfasted on some food that I had bought and, having left some luggage with the lady in the hotel, I set off on a journey to Vaux-le-Vicomte, the château that had inspired King Louis XIV to build his magnificent palace at Versailles.

My holiday had begun on Friday, 1 May when I had boarded a ferry in Dun Laoghaire, just south of Dublin, and had taken the evening sailing to Holyhead. In Holyhead I had joined a large group of sleepy young people to wait for the Magic Bus. It eventually arrived at 1.30 a.m. and we set off for London in the dark. I slept fitfully during the journey, which was broken when we stopped at a wayside restaurant at about five o'clock for some food and drink. We eventually arrived in London at St Pancras railway station, where I put my bags in the left luggage department, ate some breakfast and went off to explore the city.

As I had plenty of time to kill until boarding the bus in the evening for the onward journey to Paris, I found my way to Trafalgar Square and Buckingham Palace, visited Westminster Abbey, walked around St John's Smith Square (where I could hear an orchestra rehearsing), visited the Tate Gallery (where I spent some time examining the paintings), and walked to Chelsea in order to visit the beautiful Royal Hospital. However, by the time I arrived, it was closed. On my way back to St Pancras I passed some more famous landmarks, such as Harrods, Hyde Park and the British Museum.

Having collected my luggage at the station and had something to eat, I boarded the Magic Bus at about eight o'clock and sat down beside Janet, a chatty Australian girl (not her real name). However, as I was tired by now, I soon fell asleep and was woken when we arrived at the port of Dover. After a short delay we were driven on to the ferry and set off for France at about eleven o'clock. Janet and I found our way to the cafeteria, where we had something to eat. We then went to one of the 'verandas' to rest. I read for a while and dozed, though sleep was out of the question thanks to hordes of noisy French children. At 2.30 a.m. (French time) we returned to the bus for our arrival at Boulogne. From there we drove at full speed along the dark roads to Paris. Exhausted by this stage, I fell into a deep sleep.

At about 6 a.m., when dawn was breaking, the bus stopped beside the huge church in the Place de la Madeleine, just north of the River Seine. The tiresome journey had finally come to an end and my five-week holiday in France was about to begin. Janet and I, both groggy with sleep, reluctantly got to our feet, gathered up our belongings and stepped out into the bitterly cold



and wind-swept square. With little idea of what to do or where to go, we joined a young couple for breakfast in a nearby restaurant. We were lucky to meet these young people, for they were able to give us some very good advice about where to stay, what to see, and how to travel around the city.

When we eventually left, Janet and I made our way down to the Rue de Rivoli, following the directions in an old *Paris par Arrondissements* booklet that I had been given, and began our search for a cheap hotel. As we plodded along this very long and rather exclusive street, the sun made an appearance and warmed us up slightly. We spent almost the rest of the day wandering around from one place to another in search of somewhere affordable to stay. We eventually ended up in the Saint-Paul quarter, where we booked a room in the Hotel Pratic: a slightly run-down but homely place in a tiny square. The price of a double room was 40 francs per night (less than £5). During the afternoon we fitted in a visit to a musical friend of my father's, the harpsichord player Emer Buckley, where we were able to rest for a while.

Leaving Janet to do her own thing on the following day, I set off to explore some of the city. First of all I walked to the Louvre, where I joined crowds of people to view the palatial rooms and the fine paintings that they contained; naturally I stopped – though briefly – to glance at Mona Lisa peering out from the back of her glass case. After lunch I returned to the gallery, where I enjoyed looking at some Dutch paintings. What pleased me most, however, was a collection of exquisite French paintings, most of which were by Corot. The fact that the pictures were smaller and that there were fewer people about in this part of the building meant that examining them was a much more pleasant experience.



*The Cathedral of Notre Dame*

Later in the afternoon I made my way to the Île Saint-Louis, which I found very pleasing. After I visited the Church of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, I crossed over to the Île de la Cité, passing the magnificent cathedral of Notre Dame on my way to the smaller and, to my mind, more interesting Sainte Chapelle. The spectacular upper chapel, with the evening sun streaming through the tall stained-glass windows, was somewhat spoiled by scaffolding and sheets of

polythene draped around the altar. Nonetheless it was with great satisfaction that I stood here, admiring the fine architecture and revelling in the beauty of the stained glass.

Afterwards I returned to the Cathédrale Notre-Dame. Although very dark, gloomy and stark inside, the atmosphere was magical. A priest began to say Mass in a side chapel at the back, his voice echoing in the stillness of the huge building. As a group of tourists had just left, I had the place almost to myself. Only a few local women were attending the Mass. Feeling tired by now, I sat down to admire the statue of Notre-Dame de Paris. A young man with a waxed moustache and a serious expression came along, stopped, stood still in meditation for a while, then unwrapped a solitary red flower, which he placed among some others at the foot of the statue.

When I made to go, I discovered that it was pouring rain outside. When the rain had eased off, I sallied forth and made for the Latin Quarter, where I stopped to have a look at the church of Saint-Séverin. Although much plainer than the previous two churches, it was very pleasant to behold. Outside again, I went into a little supermarket nearby, where I bought some bread and cheese. I sat down by the church railings to eat my improvised meal, but discovered that I could not open the packet of cheese. After I munched some of the bread, I moved on.

I then found my way to the Sorbonne – quite an elegant building – and looked into its picturesque courtyard. From here I continued to the Panthéon which, of course, was closed at this time of the evening. I then rambled around some narrow streets, passing curious little shops and many restaurants, some of them with reasonably-priced menus. Finally I returned to the hotel, where I rejoined Janet.

Both of us spent the rest of the evening writing our diaries. We found it difficult to go to sleep later because of the noise in the little square outside. At some unearthly hour of the morning a drunk began to howl like a wild animal.

I spent the following fifteen days in like manner, walking the streets or taking the Métro to the various places that I wanted to visit, stopping to eat improvised picnic meals that consisted mostly of bread, cheese, fruit and something to drink: in short, Paris on a shoestring budget. I quickly discovered that Paris is a veritable cornucopia of fine architecture, museums, art galleries and churches.



*Montmartre*

Among the places that I visited was Montmartre, with its narrow streets and its famous basilica, the Sacré-Cœur – though I was more interested to see the older and more important church of Saint Pierre de Montmartre, where Dante had once worshipped. As expected, the area was full of tourists, artists and restaurants. Not far away was the famous Moulin Rouge and the red-light district; walking down the notorious Rue Pigalle, I encountered several prostitutes who shamelessly made eyes at me. On the other side of the river I visited the very grand and impressive Les Invalides complex where, purely by chance, I managed to attend an official religious service in the Dôme des Invalides, which turned out to be the annual ceremony marking the death of Napoleon I. I therefore found myself seated in the crypt under the magnificent church, surrounded by ordinary French people, soldiers and dignitaries. Although the Mass, which included a long sermon and lots of singing, was rather tedious, it ended with a great flourish when the priest, dignitaries and soldiers marched out to the accompaniment of music performed on the mighty organ.



*Ceremony at the Church of the Dome, Les Invalides*

Later that evening I foolishly kept an appointment to meet a man whom I had met at Les Invalides, and who came to collect me in his car so that he could 'show me around Paris by night'. As soon as I got into the car and shook hands with him, I realized that I had made a serious mistake. In order to let him know what type of person I was, I immediately let him know that I was sharing a hotel room with a young lady. He drove through Montmartre, which I had seen earlier in the day, then around in circles when I kept changing the subject of conversation in order to evade answering his questions, which became increasingly more personal and embarrassing. We finally stopped at a restaurant, where I was treated to a simple meal of an omelette, some bread and a glass of wine, then returned to the hotel. Janet was very relieved to see me again when I rejoined her.



The Marais area, which was close to our hotel, proved to be very interesting, especially when I wandered into the Jewish quarter. My visit to the Musée du Jeu de Paume proved to be fascinating, for it contained a wonderful collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masterpieces; here I stopped to admire works such as Monet's famous picture *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, his series of paintings of Rouen Cathedral, and various wonderful works by Manet and Sisley.



*The Eiffel Tower and the view from the top*

In the morning of the fourth day I said farewell to Janet and headed off for the Eiffel Tower, walking along the Champs Élysées and stopping en route to look at the famous Arc de Triomphe. From here I turned down the Avenue Kléber and walked to the Place du Trocadéro, from where I could see the Eiffel Tower clearly. I then crossed the Seine and approached the massive supports of the tower. Deciding to do what Janet had done, I paid just 6 francs (about 60p) and climbed up the staircase to the second floor. As the weather was poor, the view was not as dramatic as it should have been, but at least there were few tourists here as it was now approaching lunchtime. When I reached the second floor, I decided to pay an extra 7 francs and go up in the lift to the very top. I was glad that I had done this, for the view was quite stunning, despite the mist. I stayed here for a while, munching some bread that I had brought with me, returned to the second floor, where I had another good look around, then walked down the staircase to ground level.

On my way towards Les Invalides, the sun finally made its appearance and I had to slow down because of the heat. I eventually found my way to the rue de Varenne and stopped at the Hôtel Biron or Rodin Museum: a charming château with a delightful garden, where I rested. The house was full of fine



statues created by Auguste Rodin. I viewed the collection of powerful sculptures with interest, though I noticed that many of them looked similar. The one that really thrilled me, however, was the head of a young lady, entitled *Jeune fille au chapeau fleuri*, which I photographed.



*The Hôtel Biron (Rodin Museum) and Jeune fille au chapeau fleuri*

As the weather was poor on the following day, I set off for the Musée de l'Orangerie, which I discovered was now closed for five months. Accordingly, I went to the Petit Palais, where I was able to examine the fine paintings in a peaceful environment. I paid special attention to the bright and carefree pictures by Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, then went on to revel in the works of Gustave Courbet, Alfred Sisley and Claude Monet. There were also some splendid Dutch paintings, including a self-portrait by Rembrandt dressed in an oriental costume. After lunch I had a look at an exhibition of Japanese art, which I found very interesting, then returned to the Dutch paintings. On my way out of the gallery, I stopped to look at some items in the Tuck and Dutuit collections. As it had stopped raining when I left, I returned to the Left Bank and Les Invalides, where I walked along the rue de l'Université and the rue Jacob. Here I was able to enjoy some fine examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture, with the sun now shining on the shutters and white façades. On I rambled, eventually reaching the impressive Church of Saint-Sulpice and then the Luxembourg Garden, where I sat down by the pond to gaze at the palace glowing in the light of the setting sun. Here I picnicked on some food that I had bought in a nearby supermarket and watched two young girls feeding the birds.

A visit to the Musée du Conservatoire on the following day proved to be both interesting and mind-boggling due to the amount and variety of musical instruments on display: lutes, theorbos, chittarones, guitars, mandoras, mandolins, citterns, viols, violins, spinets, harpsichords, square and grand pianos... and so forth. Reeling, I finally left and made my way to the Nissim de Camondo museum, where I was able to admire the palatial architecture, a

collection of fine furniture, an exhibition of French costumes, and some delightful paintings. I then spent the rest of the day ambling around the city, visiting various churches and gardens.



*The Place des Vosges (top and centre), and the Hôtel Carnavalet (bottom)*



As it was raining on the Sunday and entrance to the Louvre was free of charge, I returned to examine the Dutch and French paintings, and also Picasso's personal collection of works. I finally left, exhausted, listened to some students playing music outside and returned to the hotel, where I had some lunch. Afterwards I made my way to the Place des Vosges, where I found the place full of artists' stalls. From here I made my way to the Victor Hugo museum, which I visited and found mildly interesting. Nearby was the Hôtel Carnavalet, in the rue de Sévigné; it too was open to the public free of charge. An exhibition about the history of Paris on the ground floor was mildly interesting, but I was enchanted by the magnificent furnished rooms upstairs; most of them dated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were delightful. Fortunately there were not too many people here. Afterwards I visited the former Hôtel de Rohan, in which there was a mildly interesting exhibition dealing with old postal and telegraphic services. I had gone there to see the Baroque architecture, but it turned out that very little of it actually remained.



*The Georges Pompidou Centre*

My day ended in the extraordinary Georges Pompidou Centre, which I found quite fascinating. I wandered around the various areas – the reading room, the listening centre, the film and television centre, the exhibition spaces, the art gallery, the library – and made my way up to the very top of the

building, using the exterior lift, to enjoy a panoramic view of the city. I came back to earth (metaphorically speaking) when I returned to my small hotel room for something to eat. In the next room a drunkard roared and shouted, but mercifully this did not last for long. However, there was quite a cacophony from the main street nearby: car horns blaring, people whooping, shouting and chanting, then car crashes, police whistles and ambulance sirens: excitement about the fact that François Mitterrand had been voted president of the country. Later I heard thunder and lightning.

Because of bad weather the following morning, I walked to the Hôtel de Cluny: a fine museum of early craftsmanship that should have made a good impression on me, but failed to do so as the place was full of schoolchildren and I was not in a particularly receptive mood. I was at a loss to know what I should do afterwards, but eventually decided to return to the Louvre following some lunch. Noticing a large group of Spanish students entering without tickets, I went in with them. Once again I examined the paintings by Corot and later stumbled across Whistler's wonderful portrait of his mother. I then concentrated on some of the Impressionist works and finally left for the Georges Pompidou Centre, where I had something to eat and relaxed. Afterwards I looked around the *Actualité* centre, where I discovered that there was going to be a lecture on Greek music. However, when I learned that it would be all talk and no actual music, I left. Instead, I helped myself to a photographic magazine, asked to hear a record of Bach's organ music which was already playing, put on headphones and sat down to listen to the music and look at the magazine. Later I moved to another seat, put on headphones and listened to a concert of music by Beethoven and Ravel on a radio station.

Thankfully the weather improved on the following day. I travelled on the Métro to the Musée Marmottan, where I greatly enjoyed the excellent collection of paintings by Monet. It was quite an experience to look at the numerous *Nymphéas* (water lily paintings), but even more exciting was the pleasure of seeing Monet's masterpiece *Sunrise – An Impression*, the picture that had started the Impressionist movement. I was also very interested in the collection of photographs of the artist. Among works by other painters, I enjoyed a snowy boulevard scene by Pissarro, a Sisley work, and some excellent little watercolours by Jongkind. Having seen what I wanted, I hurried off and joined Emer Buckley at her home. When ready, we left and walked to a local restaurant where we had an excellent lunch washed down with beer. We spent quite some time together chatting both in English and French; I was delighted when Emer very kindly complimented me on my command of the French language. We then went back to the place where she was living: a complex that included a large workshop in which harpsichords were being made. I was very interested to see how things were done here. Later in the day I returned to my lodgings, had a brief look at some strange modern sculpture that was displayed outdoors along the Quai Saint-Bernard on the Left Bank, then walked to the Georges Pompidou centre, forgetting that it closed on Tuesdays. All I could do at this hour of the evening was return to my little hotel room, stopping for a while to look inside the large church of Saint-Gervais, where a Mass was in progress. I finished the day seated in my room, writing my diary.