

# Paris: City of Impressions

**There seem to be only two possible opinions to have on Paris.** Either it is the archetype of sophistication, the city of romance and culture, or a rat-infested, overblown dump that erupts into a wild inferno of tear gas and smoke if the government so much as breathes.

As a tourist, sympathizing with the former impression feels impossibly naïve. There is even a name for an extreme form of culture shock that occurs here: Paris Syndrome. A psychological condition, where tourists arriving in the city are so disappointed by what they see that they have a nervous breakdown. In this instance, expectations that fail to live up to your starry-eyed fantasies of nights spent watching the lights of the Eiffel Tower shimmering the Seine can quite literally drive you insane.

When living somewhere for an extended period of time, your experience is a little different. It is as if there is an invisible barrier separat-

ing you from the outside world. You are never quite a part of it all, but you also get a taste of the trials of bureaucracy and routine irritations that the average citizen must contend with.

**There is also a fierce beauty, not only in the physical surroundings of the city itself, but in the mundane and unexceptional, because everything is new to you.**

There is beauty in the way that Parisian commuters will studiously ignore the many eager musicians who clamber onto the metro – anything from a single guitar player to a twenty-piece brass band – with contempt etched onto every line of their faces. Or the way that there is always a hive of activity around brasseries and cafés, no matter what time of the day or night. Wandering down cobbled streets, these strange, picturesque scenes increasingly take on an air of familiarity, even as the very bones of this place seem to hum with possi-

bility, a moment in time suspended while a single word, a glance, could set it ticking into motion.

Once, on strike day, the metro flew past three of the stops that I needed to get home and I went on foot from Place Denfert-Rochereau. I passed through a line of policemen carrying riot shields to be greeted by a heaving mass of protestors, meticulously organised, marching with the sense that they were fighting for something bigger. Even coming from Bristol, collective action on this scale felt like nothing I had seen before, and here it was, in real time, on a grey Tuesday afternoon in October.

**However, first impressions like these are not formed in a vacuum, but are inevitably based on various subconscious biases.**

Recently, an American student wrote a viral article about the negative experiences she had while spending a semester in Florence. While I shared the annoyance of readers who derided her depiction of the enormous privilege of being able to travel solo around the world as an act of martyrdom and, more broadly, her efforts to disdain a culture which she felt had rejected her, I also felt a pang of empathy for the author. How many of us, lonely and in a place that feels unwelcoming, would not inevitably start to project their resentment onto the region as a whole?

Paris has its own problems with crime and poverty, just as every major city does, and intense culture shocks à la Paris Syndrome occur because the foreign media consistently romanticises or turns a blind eye to these societal issues, or else solely consigns

them to the suburb of Saint-Denis. Perhaps I regard it with more than a fair share of sentimentality because compared to life among the isolated hills and haughty villagers of rural England, it is a different world.

While discussing my impressions of Paris with another person from the UK, we agreed that because we have experienced a different culture, the atmosphere of despondency back home has become particularly noticeable. Here in France, there is a tangible sense of passion, a population that has not yet been ground down by years of declining standards of living and bills that cannot be paid. On the other hand, the controversy around the retirement reforms has once again revealed a country that is exceptionalist, willing to fight for its rights but less sure of how to do it in a constructive way.

**First impressions can be deceptive, and it is difficult to say whether you can truly experience a culture, in all of its extravagance and its ugliness, without leaving your cultural biases at the door.**

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