

feature

The French connection

Julie Hosking falls for Paris in the spring time, while Katherine Fleming meets some West Aussies creating their own adventures in France.

Some say bad luck comes in threes but it's a case of third time lucky for this Francophile.

The closest I got to Paris proper on my first visit was one of those roundabouts that are almost impossible to get off without a few near misses and even more choice words. We were fleeing Disneyland with what was left of our bank account, but without so much as a bonjour to the Eiffel Tower or a tete-a-tete in one the super-chic cafes I had imagined myself sitting outside ever since I heard the dulcet tones of Edith Piaf. (Not to mention "riding through Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in my hair" – thanks Marianne Faithfull.)

The second time I fared a little better. But with 24 hours in a city so full of things to see and do it seemed ludicrous to try anything more than the obvious: Catch the metro to take the one trillionth photo of the Eiffel Tower, wander along the shores of the Seine and, yes, sit on the footpath with a glass of red, and pinch myself.

But third time around, I hit the jackpot. Not only did I have four days in the city, I had my own French guide. Well, given the lovely Aurelie is here to look after an Australian media contingent, in Paris for the Longines Future Tennis Aces tournament, that's probably stretching the truth but when you only have a few windows in a work schedule to be a tourist it sure helps to have some inside knowledge.

Which is how I find myself on night one on the terrace of Monsieur Bleu, a restaurant that would have been lovely enough without the knowledge that just a few steps away is a premium view of La Tour Eiffel (it sounds far more romantic in French).

Even the rain that sends us scuttling inside – anticipating the change in the weather, a waiter has

already given us a number for our new table – can't dampen our spirits. This is Paris. There is the Eiffel Tower. And it's putting on a light show. How magical. Another in our group is so entranced she tries escargot for the first time. I'm happy to leave the slippery snails to someone else but find plenty to devour on a menu that requires a little translation. Still, the tomato salad, ceviche and spicy steak taste great in any language. Dessert is tempting but by then jetlag is kicking in and all we long for is bed.

My room in the uber-elegant Intercontinental Le Grand is in Les Capucines, which I thought was an odd name for a hotel wing until Google informed me it was not, in fact, a monkey (capuchin) but French for nasturtium. The luxury hotel in the centre of Paris boasts one of the best breakfast buffets I've ever had, made all the more enjoyable for the sumptuous setting in Café de la Paix. I recommend sitting on the terrace, so you can watch the world go by.

The hotel is in the middle of renovations, though the only real inconvenience seems to be getting in and out of the front entrance, particularly for buses ferrying guests to and from Roland Garros, where Rafael Nadal is on track for a record 11th French Open.

Mind you, driving in Paris seems to require a set of skills I can't imagine ever acquiring. At peak times bumper-to-bumper cars defy commonsense to converge from every direction at roundabouts, indicating – without indicating – lanes are a conceit beneath French drivers. More than once I am thankful for the relative safety of a bus.

When you're surrounded by historical landmarks, it's easy to be distracted from the chaos on the roads. The Arc de Triomphe, built in 1806 to feed Napoleon Bonaparte's expansive ego. Les Invalides, the army museum initially created by Louis XIV to shelter disabled soldiers. Place de la Concorde, with its ornate fountains. The spectacular Palais Garnier, home to the Paris Opera, right outside our hotel (book a room overlooking this beauty for added romance). And looming large in the distance from so many vantage points is the 312m Eiffel Tower.

The best views of the city itself are, of course, from the tower, built in 1889 for the World Fair. This scaredy cat can only go as high as the first floor, where the draw for the prestigious Longines junior tournament takes place (surely one of the most spectacular spots for a tennis draw ever), but it's high enough to spot many of Paris' famous landmarks. Notre Dame, Trocadero, Les Invalides, Sacre-Coeur Basilica, the Seine. It is, quite simply, breathtaking.

Thanks to Aurelie, I get a closer look at one of the city's most visited buildings one lunch time. The Louvre is the world's biggest museum, attracting more than 10 million people a year – many of whom seem to have lined up outside on this grey day. With more than 35,000 works on display, this is a place to spend days, not mere hours. As time permits neither, I am content to sit overlooking the glass pyramid entry that caused so much controversy when it was built in the late 1980s, so inconsistent was it with the Renaissance building it serves, and that is now impossible to imagine without. I tuck into possibly one of the more expensive omelettes ever made and pinch myself again.

On our final day, we're whisked to Roland Garros, at once the most glamorous and most curious grand slam I have had the pleasure of attending. Being guests of luxury Swiss watchmakers Longines, we eat like tennis royalty in the tres chic Chelem private dining room, before heading up to catch some of Rafa's match against Frenchman Richard Gasquet. Someone is in my seat. The spectator behind spots my confusion, shrugs her shoulders, and says in perfect English "Someone is in mine, too, just sit anywhere, that's what they said to me". So I do, just a few seats down from someone dressed inexplicably as a banana. C'est bon.

In the evening, the dress code is rather more upmarket. I may not have made it inside the Louvre, but Longines doesn't do anything by halves. The soiree to celebrate the company's 10-year partnership with tennis greats Stefanie Graf and Andre Agassi is in the gardens of Musee Rodin. The renowned sculptor





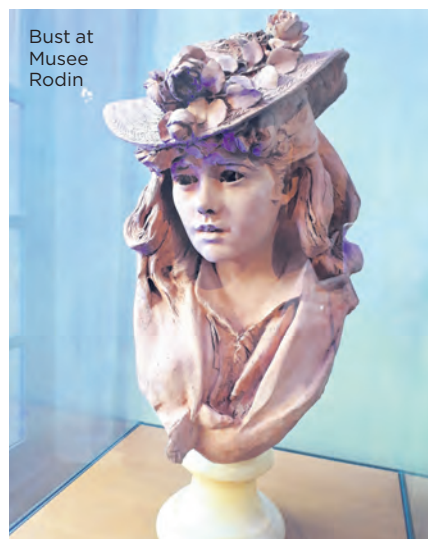
InterContinental Paris Le Grand



Eiffel Tower



Monsieur Bleu



Bust at Musee Rodin



InterContinental Paris Le Grand

Auguste Rodin donated his collection to the people on the condition Hotel Biron, where he worked in the early 1900s, was turned into a museum. (The other half of the collection is housed in a second museum in Rodin's old home outside Paris.) Here, you can see masterpieces such as *The Thinker* and *The Gates of Hell*, as well as the work of his muse and mistress Camille Claudel. To be able to peruse the collection with the smallest of crowds is a real privilege.

In the gardens a pianist is tinkling the ivories, and champagne is being served with canapes. We nestle into one of the white couches, awaiting the arrival of the most-loved husband and wife combo in tennis. They aren't the only retired champs on the guest list; I exchange a few words with fellow Aussie Pat Cash, having practised my Spanish earlier with Arantxa Sanchez and Alex Corretja, before we sit down for a three-course menu befitting our location. As the night draws to a close, there's one more surprise. Fireworks at the bottom of the garden. *C'est magnifique.*

As I head to Charles de Gaulle airport the next morning Cole Porter's words are ringing in my brain. "I love Paris in the spring time, I love Paris in the fall..." Will I be lucky enough to experience all the seasons in this most enchanting of cities? 🍷

The author was a guest of Longines.

Palais Garnier



Chelem private dining, Roland Garros