

## AN HOUR FROM PARIS

---

I have borrowed the title of this chapter from a book “An Hour from Paris” by Annabel Simms published by Pallas Athene, 59 Linden Gardens, Lindon W2 4HJ; website is [www.pallasathene.co.uk](http://www.pallasathene.co.uk). I had a great deal of difficulty getting the book when I bought it in July of 2003, but it subsequently became widely available on the internet, e.g. at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and probably at bookstores. The 2003 edition is no longer available on Amazon, but they are accepting pre-orders for the 2008 edition for \$16.95; however, no date is given as to when it will ship. This is a marvelous book that really contributed a lot to our recent visits to Paris. It is written by an English lady who had a job teaching business English during the week in Paris. She had no car, but a desire to visit other places within the Ile de France that were accessible by public transportation. Her extensive travels led her to pick her twenty favorites that were all within 80 kilometers of Paris; all twenty are places that most foreign tourists have not found. There is also a section on the places that are on the tourist trail such as Versailles, Giverny, etc.

We took six of her favorite twenty a few years ago and five of the six were among the real highlights of that trip to Paris. This year we repeated three and tried another. I will give a brief description of the seven we took and two more that are on the tourist track.

### Provins

---

This was without question our favorite of the bunch. The train schedule to this village in 2004 was not very frequent with the only reasonable one leaving from Gare de Est at 12:18 pm so we bought a picnic lunch to eat on the train which takes an hour and fifteen minutes, but no changes were necessary. Provins has ramparts similar to Carcassonne that are just as magnificent, but except for a few local tourists you will have it all to yourself; in the Summer on weekends it may be different. It also has an upper hill town and a lower town, 11th and 12th Century churches, a tower, gardens, and the downtown area is charming, sophisticated, and extremely well preserved. The village is about 1,000 years old and except for electricity and autos, not much has changed. Three hours is enough time to walk the ramparts, see the major sights, the town itself, and to get back to the train station in time to arrive back in Paris by 6:30 - 7:00. If you have time for just one journey out of Paris, this one was quite extraordinary. When we tried to repeat the trip in 2007 we found the train schedule much more complicated, so we didn't go. Check at the 'accueil'(information) counter at Gare de l'Est for schedule any time you're nearby before considering this outing.

## Rambouillet

---

The Château here is an official residence of the Président of France, but before modern times this Château which goes back to the 14th Century was a residence of Kings and Emperors. It functions somewhat like our Camp David in that it is used for international conferences such as G8 summits and it is where the peace conference on Kosovo was held in 1999. The highlight of this visit for us was walking the banks of the 17th Century canals that radiate out from the front of the Château. On our return visit the reflections of the trees in the canal on a bed of water lentils, brought in on the feet of ducks swimming in the water was a visual thrill. We walked the entire length of these canals surrounded by beautiful wooded forests where we had magnificent views of the impressive Château. A little detour from the canal takes you to the Chaumière aux Coquillages, a very English thatched cottage from the 18th Century that was built for a friend of Marie-Antoinette. There is also a Laiterie (dairy) that was built for Marie-Antoinette. If you want to visit the interiors of the structures, don't go on Tuesday... which we made the mistake of doing both times! The town of Rambouillet is also quite nice for a stroll because of its village-like feeling.

## Moret-sur-Loing

---

The picturesque qualities of this village of only 3,500 attracted Impressionist painters such as Pissarro and Monet, but its fame comes from the fact that the English painter, Alfred Sisley, spent his last years here painting the old bridge across the river, the tree lined canal, and local landscapes of this beautiful place. This small village has a medieval gateway at each end of the one main street which leads to a bridge over the river with great views of working mill-houses situated on the river below. It is easy to see why Sisley was so drawn to paint the local landscape because it is so very beautiful and charming with a quality of light that must have inspired him. After seeing this wonderful scene we walked two kilometers on a towpath to the next town of St. Mammés which is situated at the confluence of the Loing River and the Seine. Along the way the author of the book points out a little restaurant that has a three course menu for the ridiculously low price of 10€ and a half bottle of wine for 2.50€. We were skeptical so we actually went to the place and looked at the menu and nothing has changed since the author wrote about it. Three generous courses with wine for 12.50€. At the confluence of the rivers there are quite a number of nice looking cafés that overlook the large number of barges on the Seine. A testament to the fact that the barge traffic on the river is still quite active. There is a train station in St. Mammés that will take you back to Paris. We wanted to return in 2007 but transit strikes interfered.

## Conflans-Ste Honorine

---

Conflans has some very nice 11th Century monuments, an interesting Musée de la Batellerie (barge museum), and a very nice park next to the museum with great views of the river below, but it is its situation on the Seine and the large amount of barge traffic on the river that provides the interest (less activity on the river in 2007 than in 2004). After exploring Conflans, we took a five kilometer walk to the next town which is Herblay. This walk along the river was very

pleasant. Part of it is closed to car traffic, so you really have the feeling of being in the country without the distraction and noise of automobiles. Herblay has a train station on the same line as Conflans so you can take the train there back to Paris.

## Crécy-la-Chapelle

---

This is a moated medieval village of 3,300 people situated on the Grand Morin, a tributary of the River Marne. There are many small canals and moats with very old houses located on them, many with drawbridges. Quite a few medieval towers still exist in the town. And there is a walk the tourist office has a map of that takes you to all the spots on the canals that were painted by resident artists of the past centuries. There is a one and a half kilometer walk in each direction to a magnificent 13th Century Gothic church called Eglise de la Chapelle that was definitely worth taking. Along the way there is a short detour to an old water-mill with a very picturesque setting on the Grand Morin that has been converted to a restaurant. The first time we visited, the canals were drained, and we assumed it was due to drought, but we learned on our recent visit that the canals are cleaned twice a year, and we had come between the 1st and 15th of Oct. in 2004. The other time of the year is mid spring. So check with the website or tourist office before going in April/May.

## The Islands of Creteil

---

Only a 20 minute metro ride on the # 8 Line takes you back in time to an idyllic part of a Paris suburb, where you can stroll in a quiet residential area along canals that come off the Marne River. Victor Hugo lived here in the 1860's and wrote a novel from upstairs in one of the houses that was then an inn. The métro stop Creteil-Université leaves you off in a bustling busy suburb, and as you find your way to the canals, there is also a lovely park to stroll in that was the grounds of a grand old mansion, once the home of a doctor who made his fortune from inventing digestive tablets.

## Luzarches

---

This is another small medieval village of only 3,800 people with a very large 12th Century church and a beautiful 12th Century bell tower and its 16th Century façade. You can also see the place where the composer Erik Satie lived for his last 20 years. Besides this we did not find much of interest in the town itself so we took the three kilometer walk to the next town of Seugy. A small part of the walk was very nice along a wooded area and a golf course, but too much of it was on a well traveled road; Seugy had a train station that took us back to Paris. This was the only one that we would not recommend.

## Giverny

---

Claude Monet, the great Impressionist painter lived and worked here for 43 years until he died in 1926. If you have any interest in Monet's work or gardening this is not to be missed, and it can be done in a half-day after lunch in Paris. We have been many times, and the key to seeing

the gardens in all of their glory is to visit before the first hard frost in the fall. You will get to see not only the gardens, but his house, and the water gardens with its water lilies and the bridge that he often painted. Trains leave from Gare Saint-Lazare and you get off at Vernon where a connecting bus will take you to Giverny in about ten minutes. It is best to go by train because you avoid the traffic problems often encountered getting back into Paris. Trains run often and it took us only 48 minutes to come back from Vernon to Gare Saint-Lazare. It is open daily (except Monday) from April 1 till November 1 from 9:30 till 6:00.

## Auvers-sur-Oise

---

Although this village attracted many painters such as Cézanne, Daubigny, Corot, etc. it is the short time that Vincent Van Gogh spent here in 1890 that provides the reason to visit this small village. He lived here from May until July when he committed suicide, but during this short time had a tremendous burst of creativity that produced seventy-seven paintings. There is a lot to see here, but we managed to see the major places of interest in an afternoon after starting our visit with lunch at Auberge Ravoux. We did not have high expectations for lunch here because the restaurant is actually on the grounds where Van Gogh lived in a very Spartan room in a building next to the restaurant which was built in 1855, and one would expect tourist fare. It very surprisingly turned out to be one of the best lunches of our 2003 trip. The restaurant offers a 26€ two course lunch consisting of a first course and a main course. All four items we had here were excellent, as was the half-liter of Bordeaux rouge for 10€. I would expect prices to be somewhat higher now.

After lunch we saw the small room where Van Gogh lived for the short time he was here. The places of interest are quite spread out through the town so if you don't have a car you can expect to do a considerable amount of walking. After seeing where he lived we visited the Daubigny Museum, house, and gardens; then Doctor Gachet's house and garden, the Château, the church that Van Gogh painted, and finally the cemetery where he and his brother are buried side by side. It was a wonderful visit that we had been putting off for years because the transportation is a little complicated and infrequent on weekends. However, during the week trains leave the Gare du Nord every fifteen minutes; it takes about an hour and twenty minutes with a change of trains. Unfortunately the various places to see are not coordinated as far as their closing days are concerned. Weekends are not good because of the infrequency of the trains; we found that Thursday was the best day to visit because everything (except the Absinthe Museum) was open.