



INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE HAS HIS OR HER FANTASY of an ideal hotel, and Paris, being Paris (with everything it symbolizes in the collective imagination), is the object of particularly exalted expectation. We should know better, but many of us—not just romantics and optimists—persist in hoping that reality will meet desire. Fortunately Paris is spoiled for choice when it comes to exceptional hotels. The question is how to choose.

In his book *Paris*, John Russell, former chief art critic for the *New York Times*, cautions: “Hotels, like restaurants, are a subject upon which advice is usually fatal. The choice of an hotel is as private a matter as the choice of a wife.” With this in mind, I gave up on impartiality and set out to find thirty hotels where I’d like to stay.

Because Paris is among the world’s most beautiful cities, aesthetics were a major determinant but whether a décor is minimalist, eclectic, or historic it had to be inherently Parisian. Being quintessentially Parisian is as much about spirit as style and above all describes an environment where you wake up knowing you could only be in Paris—not Sydney, Toronto, or Dubrovnik.

A distinctive hotel reflects the taste and personality of its owner. For this reason, all but two of the selections are family- or sole-proprietor-owned and most are owner managed. Not by chance French creators designed them. An impressive roster of interior architects, artists, and couturiers collaborated with owners on design concepts, yet no hotel feels like a designer showcase. Needs of

OPPOSITE:
View across Paris from
top floor guest room,
Pont Royal.

guests take precedence over creative bravura, and when an element disappoints it is reworked in the interest of creating an environment where clients feel at ease.

My vision of an idyllic Parisian location is a calm side street rather than a broad avenue or busy intersection. Parisian hideaways are discreet destinations often with minimal or no signage—where one’s privacy is protected. Only the Raphael, a favorite with diplomats, made the cut despite flags flying above the entrance. *Hideaway* also suggests a degree of intimacy and personal contact, which eliminates *palace* hotels (all of which are currently owned by international chains) and franchises.

Many of the selections refer to themselves as “boutique hotels,” since the term *small* connotes diminutive room size. The trend in boutique hotels is quite the opposite, and many have undergone recent renovation to reduce capacity in favor of enlarging guest rooms. Maximum capacity is well under a hundred rooms and averages between fifteen and forty.

Wary of labels such as *hôtel de charme*, and “home away from home,” which have lost credibility from overuse, and niches like hip, romantic, or design that can overlook the importance of comfort and service, I tried to include a cross section of ambiances representative of the many facets of Paris and its inhabitants. Hotels are grouped by theme rather than arrondissement, permitting a search for a destination by décor, special interest, or passing fancy.

I expected to discover broader geographic distribution, but prime hotel real estate remains central, with Saint-Germain in the 6th on the Left Bank of the Seine and the “golden triangle” in the 8th between the Champs-Élysées, Avenue Georges V, and Avenue Montaigne on the Right Bank having the highest concentration of hotels that met my criteria. The Marais is also well represented, and there are a number of selections in the teens, particularly the sixteenth. Many close contenders were omitted in the interest of diversity. After visiting close to two hundred hotels I feel satisfied that despite the subjectivity of personal bias, it is a fair selection.

The most gratifying dividend of extensive shoe-leather reporting was getting to know the people who operate these wonderful hotels. They are a dedicated and good-natured group. Contrary to the popular myth of French arrogance, staff is consistently warm and welcoming. Exceptions were inevitable, but I concluded that hotel personnel enjoy a high level of job satisfaction. Not only do they like what they do, but much of their pleasure is derived from yours.

Another bit of encouraging news is that despite a strong euro, Paris hotel rates remain good value compared those of many capital cities. Because of fluctuating exchange rates and seasonal modifications, room rates are listed on a comparative basis as either *moderate*, *mid-price*, or *luxury*. Only the Raphael, with suite accommodations for a head of state, is classified *deluxe*. Services are improving all the time. Air conditioning, wi-fi, mp3 speaker stands, and flat-screen televisions are becoming standard features, and even hotels with fewer than fifty rooms are likely to have a fitness room and sauna. Most small hotels do not have a restaurant, but those that do tend to have a great chef. The Pont Royal, l’Hôtel, and Relais Saint-Germain are worth staying at just to guarantee a dinner reservation. Lounge bars are another welcome trend, as is twenty-four-hour room service.

The most valuable resource a Parisian hideaway has to offer is the knowledge and rich culture of its owner and management. They know their neighborhood and relish sharing its secrets with guests. Because staff turnover is low, you will find that everyone is a possible source for tips and recommendations. There is a good chance your stay will engender an ongoing friendship, as these hotels, like the city they encapsulate, foster fidelity. It’s hard to find someone who has visited Paris and doesn’t dream of returning.

NOTE ON PRICING

Room rate categories are based on the range for a double (standard to superior), though the charge is usually lower for a single person. Many hotels straddle categories.

MODERATE: between 100 and 190 euros

MID-PRICE: between 190 and 370 euros

LUXURY: between 370 and 600 euros

DELUXE: 450 euros and above.

This is a rough guideline and it is best to consult hotel web sites for a complete list of rates and services. Most hotels have seasonal rate adjustments and many offer promotional packages and online booking discounts. Rates and complete contact info are included in Hotel Index, pages 210–213.