



HIDDEN AGENDA

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My family has always loved discovering new places, cities that inspire dreams and hotels with a soul. I am Chilean, my mother is Scottish and, after my family moved to France, a luxury hotel in Paris was our home for many years. Everyone in my family was always travelling somewhere — my grandparents had a suite reserved for them all year round in a New York hotel — yet Paris has always been their favourite city.

Whenever we wanted to discover somewhere new, my mother would say: “Let’s ask the hotel concierge.” So when I decided to make some new discoveries in Paris, with the aim of embarking on a real-life treasure hunt around the city to unearth hidden cultural gems and rare, beautiful finds, I asked Julie Eugène, art concierge at Le Royal Monceau, Raffles Paris, who gave me some excellent suggestions.

Having lived in many different parts of Paris, I now reside in the Marais district, near the magnificent Place des Vosges. Evocative, intimate, always surprising — this is how I see the Marais. It’s ever changing, with sidewalk cafés always packed with people enjoying a *café crème* or a glass of white wine. During the day, you can discover the opulent courtyards of 17th-century townhouses such as Hôtel de Sully or Hôtel d’Aumont simply by opening a door and the Chinese quarter is only minutes away from the Jewish quarter, rue des Rosiers.

Near here is the Marché des Enfants Rouges on rue de Bretagne. I’ve never seen anything quite like it anywhere else. This covered market, so called because it was built on the site of a former 17th-century orphanage in which children wore red capes, creates its own atmosphere with locals and tourists mingling in a maze of stalls and tiny restaurants.

A stroll around the Marais can prove to be truly inspirational. Having lived in Chile, Brazil, France and Scotland (albeit briefly), when I go for a walk in the area, I recall this sensation of intermingled worlds; I love the mix of different pieces, different styles.



Clockwise from top left: the rich architecture in the Marais district includes these 18th-century buildings with wrought-iron railings; Galerie Da-End has its own distinctive ambience; the old Jewish neighbourhood of the Marais is full of bakeries, delis and restaurants



So one of my favourite spots is Hervé van der Straeten's gallery on Rue Ferdinand Duval, close to the Jewish quarter; you'll only find his showroom by opening a heavy old door leading into a peaceful courtyard that's invisible from the street.

His gold-plated necklaces and bracelets are like sculptures, while his two-tone brass chandeliers are genuine works of art. He once told me that his beautifully crafted work was "hybrid" and it's apparent in his astonishing combinations.

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During the course of my treasure hunt, Julie insisted that I visit [La Galerie Particulière](#), which is near the market on rue du Perche. This intimate art gallery brings together a variety of contemporary artists under its beautiful glass roof. I was especially drawn to Floriane de Lassée's photographic exhibition, celebrating the beauty of Indian women in an original and poetic way.

Julie had also recommended the nearby Galerie Eva Hober as an essential place to discover emerging French talent. This wonderful space is found on rue Chapon, one of the oldest streets in Paris (dating from 1292). It's also a real haven of peace amid the deluge of cool new restaurants and bars that make this part of the city so alive. It's also a great example of the Paris that can only be discovered by those who make a little effort and look beyond the surface.

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Above: The parks in Paris offer wonderful havens

Another of Paris' best-kept secrets is Le Village Saint-Paul, just south of the Marais' bustling streets, between rue Saint-Antoine and the Seine. At the heart of this pedestrianised area, full of old French charm, is a maze of crumbling, cobbled courtyards lined with small shops selling antiques, art and secondhand gems.

My first stop was Cassiopée, a treasure trove of antique tableware and glassware. You can find everything from horn-handled knives and Puiforcat cutlery to vintage Baccarat crystal glasses. I then came across some wonderful contemporary and antique ceramics at Céramiques du Marais, which also stocks interesting porcelain and clay objects. Also be sure to visit [Passion Tapis](#). Behind its unassuming façade is a riot of colour and patterns with beautiful, hand-woven carpets and kilims sourced from all over the world, as well as its own line of new kilim rugs crafted in Iran using traditional weaving methods.

I also enjoyed a look around Au Petit Bonheur la Chance, stacked to the rafters with French *brocante* such as enamelled street numbers, vintage games, café au lait bowls, postcards, all sorts of papeterie fabrics and linens... it is easy to lose track of time in here.

Thanks to another top recommendation from Julie, I cross over the Seine to the Left Bank and the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighbourhood, where I find another unexpected gem; [Galerie Da-End](#) on rue Guénégaud. Its moody interior of reds and blacks and almost invisible dark corners give it an otherworldly atmosphere for its carefully curated artworks; pieces by Satoshi Saikusa and Nieto are particular highlights.



Above: browse through all manner of bric-a-brac at Au Petit Bonheur la Chance; the French capital has many contemporary art galleries

There is so much to enjoy in this area, including [Cinq-Mars](#), a French bistro loved by locals on rue de Verneuil, where I stopped for lunch. The *pot au feu* (French beef pot roast with bone marrow) was delicious, although I was tickled by the description of the “nice runny” omelette.

In Saint-Germain, I’m always reminded of the atmosphere of the 1950s and 60s and the films of Jean-Luc Godard. The heroine of his film *Vivre sa Vie* was played by Anna Karina, who lives here, and it is easy to imagine how the area was then, attracting filmmakers and artists of the French New Wave.

Walking down rue de Verneuil to Boulevard Saint-Germain will take you past places that inspired such New Wave musicians and artists as Juliette Gréco and François Truffaut. It’s easy to imagine the area in black and white, like an old film, with Bohemian couples strolling down the streets or along the river.



Above: Ceramiques du Marais has an interesting array of ceramics, porcelain and clay objects; lose yourself in a good book at Librairie Galignani

I walk to the delightful [Kin Liou antiques](#) shop near the Bon Marché, with its thousand-and-one rare and poetical items. I can’t resist purchasing a silver Egyptian box and superb 19th-century art nouveau carved wooden mirror, which will both make pretty additions to my desk at home.

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Crossing back over the Seine, I head to the [Tuileries Garden](#). This part of Paris is enchanting in winter and summer, although it's especially lovely in springtime when the garden awakens after winter and Parisians return to sit on the chairs around the large fountain.



Above: The Grand Basin at the Tuileries Garden

Further on at rue de Rivoli, I spend time browsing the new arrivals at my favourite bookshop in the city, [Librairie Galignani](#), which has the warm and intimate atmosphere of a family home. Full of wonderful books, with elegant dark wood panelling and wonderful little nooks and crannies to sit in, it's reminiscent of Professor Higgins's cosy living room in *My Fair Lady*. A perfect place to come and go as you please, many an hour can be whiled away reading in peace and quiet.

From here I walk to Place Vendôme and on to nearby [Bistro Volnay](#) on rue Volney — another recommendation from Julie. This art deco-inspired bistro serves delicious traditional food; its *agneau de l'Aveyron* (Aveyron lamb) and *ris de veau croustillant* (crispy sweetbreads) are simply delicious.



Left to right: the sidewalk cafés are always packed with people; Cassiopée in Le Village Saint-Paul is a treasure trove of vintage glassware and tableware; the Seine always has a special magic

With the day drawing to a close and my bag bulging with newly acquired treasures, it's time to head back to the Marais across the Seine on the Pont des Arts. This is where I spent my very first evening in Paris with my parents after we had just arrived. The bridge offers the most beautiful view of the city, particularly in the evening when the old buildings along the river are lit up as the *bateaux mouches* pass by. It resembles a film set designed by Alexandre Trauner for such classic films as *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Paris is just like that — made for dreaming, wandering, or simply admiring the incredible beauty all around.

I continue along the riverbank with a host of marvellous memories of the years I lived on Quai des Grands Augustins. Back in the Marais, though it's late, I can't resist stopping by [Empreintes](#), a concept store on rue de Picardie dedicated to distinctive French arts and crafts and creations from its own workshop. There I find some magnificent turquoise vases by ceramicist Marc Uzan and stunningly beautiful porcelain wine glasses by Marie Verlet Nezri.

Finally, I meet some friends at [Beaucoup](#) — another of Julie's excellent choices — on rue Froissart. Sipping cocktails in this elegant bar has to be the perfect way to end my Parisian excursions. For a foreigner like myself, such places are what make the French capital so special. They epitomise the essence of this fabulous city — a mix of old and new, sophisticated and trendy.

Julie's exhaustive knowledge of the city means I have many more fantastic suggestions to experience next time. They include [Benoit](#), a classic 1912 bistro on rue Saint Martin, where I can't wait to try the *cuisse de lapin à la moutarde* (rabbit legs in mustard sauce), and Chez George, a legendary family-run restaurant on rue de Mail that has such timeless classics as ratatouille and oeufs mayonnaise (devilled eggs).