

Midnight feast:  
 nighttime in the  
 cafe-filled Marais  
 quarter. Opposite,  
 a classic galette  
 aux pêches

Aux rendez-vous  
 des amis

Petits déjeuners

Vins de propriétés

Bières pression

Restauration  
 à toutes heures

Cocktails  
 avec alcool  
 ou sans alcool

Pour le petit creux  
 de l'après-midi

Pâtisseries

Sandwichs

# Toute sweet

You can fill up on Paris's culture, fine art and fashion, but it's the food (or rather the desserts) that will have you coming back for seconds, says **Laura Goodman**



Shades of grey:  
clockwise from far left,  
view of the Eiffel Tower  
from the top of the  
Centre Pompidou;  
Marais street corner;  
tuck into tasty French  
classics at Bistrot Paul  
Bert; fresh clams at  
Bones restaurant  
in the 11th

# 'W

ell, that's just ridiculous.'  
'Absurd.'

My boyfriend, Rich, and I have just discovered something momentous: the Paris-Brest, a baked ring of *choux* pastry containing thickly piped praline cream. With every implausible mouthful, it makes the finest *éclair* look as humdrum as a fig roll. I'm glad I chose it – and doubly so when Rich, who ordered the chocolate fondant, leans over to my side of the table, his face betraying him: he knows I've won this round.

Paris-Brest. To be fair to Rich, the name discloses nothing. Turns out, in fact, that it's taken from a very old cycling race; in tribute, the creation is wheel-like – and probably calorific enough to fuel that 1,200km cycle from Paris to Brest and back again. That's France for you – celebrating *everything* with cake.

This is the first time I've dined in Paris since I was 19. Then I was a student, visiting friends. They lived in bedsits too small to fit me in, so I slept in a hostel with blood-red walls and wonky bunks. As we worked our way through the landmarks, the city failed to make much of an impression beyond the *baguettes* and *falafel* we ate. At the time, I thought it was because Paris was

boring. Looking back, I realise I just hadn't worked out – at 19 – how I like to travel. Since then, Rich and I have demolished approximately eight million sweet things in city cafes across Europe and, gradually, we've discovered what really makes a mini-break for us. It's not the sights – it's the bites.

And through all those years, I hadn't returned to Paris. Which is crazy, when you think about it, because which other town – anywhere in the world – could tickle sweet-toothed taste buds like the City of Light? Paris pretty much owns the pastry; it more-or-less rules chocolate; it's arguably the heart of the *tarte*; and it's the hands-down undisputed world capital of *macarons*. So after years of travelling together, Rich and I twigged that our dream mini-break was right under our noses – or at least only two and a bit hours away across the English Channel.

It was as if our previous travels were all practice for this moment. After all the groundwork, Paris would be our just desserts – quite literally, as both of us are pretty happy to skip the savouries for the sugar-shock of the new when abroad. And that's why we've combed the foodie blogs for suggestions, and booked two places on a suitably themed walking tour tomorrow. What a pleasure it



is, then, to stumble, in advance, upon the aforementioned sweet treat, the Paris-Brest, at Bistrot Paul Bert, the cosiest, most glorious neighbourhood brasserie you could wish for – all burgundy leather, dark wood, bread baskets as table centrepieces and *prix fixe* menu. We came for a first-night quickie – red wine, rare steak and quadruple-cooked chips – to ease us into the city, but with the pud's silky, smooth, sweet praline cream to spoon our way through, we're still here in ecstasy, minutes before midnight. A good omen.

We're too full to think about transport, so we burn a (pitiful) few calories walking back to our hotel room. We amble the residential streets of the 11th *arrondissement*, bowled over by the art-house-movie beauty of everything. Above cheese shops and wine bars (of which we make frantic mental notes) there are the tall windows of Parisian homes. Residents are smoking over tiny balconies, with tumblers of red wine in their hands. Gawping at vitrines of *fromages*, we begin to envy the lives of those people beyond their *balcons*. Imagine if this was our life... I wonder how much an apartment like that costs... Bistrot Paul Bert would be our local!

We are so enamoured that we expend around 50 minutes on such babble when it only takes 25 to reach our base, the trendy but affordable Mama Shelter, where the restaurant and bar are so exclusive that, even to reach your bedroom, you must show the >



**Pomp and circumstance:** looking down on the goings-on in Place Georges Pompidou; a sugar-dusted Paris-Brest pastry; Marais restaurants boast Paris's most elegant facades

doorman your key. The price for this cool is an 'offbeat' location in a northeastern swathe of the city. But if you want to pretend you live here, as we suddenly do, it's perfect – and you can spend all your saved pennies on chocolate, or, you know, art. Our petite room is moodily lit, with cartoon masks hung by their elastic on bedside lightbulbs. I flick Scooby Doo, and Rich switches off Taz, the Tasmanian Devil, but we are too drowsy from delicious things to consider how peculiar this is.

Despite all of that, we spring out of bed the next day, keen to see as much as possible of the city we are suddenly so in love with. We are not hungry. We want to do some aimless wandering. 'If we walk to Gambetta we can just hop on line 3 to République,' says Rich, eager to appear as someone who knows his way around. It's a seamless plan and, from République, we walk vaguely south through the 3rd *arrondissement*, aware that our afternoon tour kicks off somewhere near the Seine.

We might not be hungry, but we're overjoyed to happen on the Marché des Enfants Rouges, a maze of Moroccan tagines, Japanese bento boxes, Italian truffles, Parisian hamburgers and Breton *crêpes*. We join an inquisitive crowd drawn to an eccentric old dude with a medley of hotplates, busy causing a stir with swollen sandwiches and crisp, caramelised *galettes*. Every now and then he looks up from his work, selects a person in the queue and mouths 'miam miam' at them. It's weird, but it works. We order his organic, vegetarian *galette*; it's loaded with salad, avocado, carrot, raw mushrooms, lemon zest, goat's cheese and a drizzle of honey. Next stop: dessert.

La Cuisine Paris, where we meet Karen, our guide, and fellow sweet-tooths, is an English-speaking cookery school that lays on

gourmet tours of Paris – in our case, the 'Sugar Walk of the Marais'. Taking a walking tour of a specific neighbourhood is a super way to break the ice in Paris. Beyond the age-old postcard sights – the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, Sacré-Coeur – it's a deliciously confounding mosaic of contemporary and classic neighbourhoods, as absorbing as any in New York and London. You don't have to devote three hours to sugar, as we did. Simply pick something you adore, and you'll find an expert to help you find your stride.

I know we've struck gold when we enter our first port of call. Pralus is a *chocolaterie* on Rue Rambuteau, close to the Pompidou. The shop is narrow, with a neat, unremarkable-looking selection of ornamental truffles and tins of sweetened cocoa. If we weren't with Karen, that's all we'd see. But the door to the bakery out the back is slightly ajar, revealing a silver trolley loaded with loaves. This, says Karen, is the Praluline: a sweet, buttery *brioche* orb, laden with pink pralines (almonds and hazelnuts coated in rose sugar, then cracked). This sweet, nutty, buttery cloud is more fodder for our pretend Parisian life. Imagine dipping this in coffee! On our balcony! With a (French?) newspaper! And just like that, we've discovered another preposterous, sweet French thing.

Karen weaves smartly through the crooked streets of the Marais, past intimidating-looking wine shops, corner cafes with bottle-green awnings, aristocratic mansions now home to mini-museums, and boutiques housing the fanciest high-street names. I realise how deliciously deep we're in when we wander down the lively Rue des Rosiers, the centre of the Jewish quarter, where I once contented myself with falafel eight years ago.

Along the way, Karen helps us select *macarons*, *éclairs*, swirly pastries, custardy tarts, frou-frou chocolates, super-soft marshmallows, praline this and salted-caramel that. Returning to the school, we scent brewed coffee. Karen divvies out the swag. Among our glut of good things is an *éclair* from L'Eclair de Génie, a little boutique I would have overlooked without guidance, due to its strictly co-ordinated cabinets. This particular pastry is passion-fruit-and-raspberry-flavoured, and it looks like a fine jewel. >

**We came for a quickie – red wine, rare steak and chips – but with the Paris-Brest's silky, sweet praline cream to spoon through, we're still here in ecstasy as midnight approaches**





Tray délicieux: macarons on display in a Paris patisserie; chefs in the Jewish quarter take a break from the kitchen

Then there's the Kouign-Amann, a Breton tart of layered dough and butter, all caramelised and bronze. We find it at Maison Georges Larnicol, another place you could take for a simple *chocolaterie*, with its brittle *rochers* and chocolate lollipops. But the Brittany region, I'm told, is all about the *beurre salé*, or salted butter, and between the sheets of the Kouign-Amann is the best place to find it. As I squeeze the crispy, buttery bite between my teeth, I understand.

Sugared-up, we're ready for Paris à la nuit. It's Friday night, after all, and we want in on it. We're not energetic, but we're curious; not hungry, but peckish. So we embark on a very adult evening of wine bars and small plates, exactly the kind of thing I did not do eight years ago. From Mama Shelter, we head for the 11th, our new favourite place on Earth.

L'Entrée des Artistes is a dark little cocktail bar that wouldn't be out of place in New York's East Village. It's busy, but we score a corner table and get the red wine in. Groups of friends huddle over plates of *saucisse*, wedges of silky Saint-Nectaire cheese and loads of crusty bread. This is truly the life. We are animated. 'When can we come back? How quickly do you think I could improve my French? Write down the name of this cheese.'

We head on to Bones, a high-ceilinged affair with a whiff of Brooklyn, all swanky cookbooks on the shelves and pretty people at the tables. It's minimalist and – if I'm honest – a little blurry. I feel, delightedly, as if we've stumbled on something wonderful.

It's bettered only by Eggs&Co, a Saint-Germain cafe we encounter next day, where a tiny kitchen turns out restorative brunch eggs a million different ways. We go *en cocotte*, and are

reborn, although more broadly speaking, Saint-Germain fails to woo us, with its posh *macarons* and haughty humans. Back across the Seine, we make for our beloved Marais. The sky is grey, so we choose to lose a few hours inside the mighty Centre Pompidou. There is a beautiful tempo to this airy gallery, and the view from the top is a smasher.

When we emerge, it is bucketing and our brains are full of everything we've seen. We pace through puddles and find salvation in Jacques Genin, a *chocolaterie* like a creamy beige cuddle: shiny wooden floors, bare stone walls and one grand spiral staircase. There are a few counters, and a cluster of cosy tables and chairs.

Two hot chocolates arrive in individual teapots, thick, rich and soupy. We are blasé about shipshape *millefeuille* and such, but fascinated by 'six pieces of caramel'. It's one more revelation on an eye-popping weekend: 'the caramel' as a thing – an individually wrapped thing. They are presented to us on an oblong plate, lined up in a row, and we work through them systematically. The passion-fruit-and-mango caramel, I decide, is one of the single greatest morsels available to mankind. I buy a bag of 10, which I intend to hand out to my friends, one at a time.

A weekend is not enough to do justice to the culinary thrills of this city. Perhaps next time we'll go savoury. I'm dreaming of snails, while Rich is gasping for Breton cider. Paris is a sinful feast, whether your vice is architecture, shopping, fashion or sweets. The way to its heart is through your passion. Before the Eurostar has even glided to a stop in London, we're already hungry to return. ■

## Get me there

### GO INDEPENDENT

**Eurostar** (08432 186186, eurostar.com) runs daily trains from London St Pancras to Paris Gare du Nord; returns from €69. **EasyJet** (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com) flies to Paris CDG from Luton, Gatwick, Liverpool, Bristol, Glasgow and Edinburgh from €77 return. **Jet2** (0843 538 8059, jet2.com) flies from Leeds, Manchester and East Midlands from £24 one way.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Mama Shelter** (00 33 1 4348 4848, mamashelter.com) has doubles from €75, room only. To be central, try **Hotel Ecole Centrale** (00 33 1 4804 7776, paris-marais-hotel.fr; doubles from €80, room only), which is a short walk from the Pompidou, or **Hôtel Duo** (00 33 1 4272 7222, duo-paris.com; doubles from €222, room only), in the heart of the Marais.

### GO PACKAGED

**Lastminute.com** (01483 909007) has three-night breaks in central Paris from €239pp, room only, with Eurostar transport. **Kirker** (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com) has three-night breaks from €498pp, B&B, with flights or Eurostar, Métro tickets and a museum pass.

### SHOPS

For the Praluline: **Pralus** (35 Rue Rambuteau; chocolats-pralus.com; €5). For the Kouign-Amann: **Maison Georges Larnicol** (132 Blvd Saint-Germain; chocolaterielarnicol.fr; €6.50). For the éclair: **L'Eclair de Génie** (14 Rue Pavée; leclairdegenie.com; €4). For hot chocolate and caramels: **Jacques Genin** (133 Rue de Turenne; jacquesgenin.fr; hot chocolate €6, caramels €6 for six). For macarons, go to **Ladurée** (laduree.com) or **Pierre Hermé** (pierreherme.com); both have shops in several locations.


**RESTAURANTS & BARS**  
**Bistro Paul Bert** (18 Rue Paul Bert; 00 33 1 4372 2401; prix-fixe dinner €30). **L'Entrée des Artistes** (8 Rue de Crussol; 00 33 950 996711; small plates around €6). **Bones** (43 Rue Godefroy Cavaignac; 00 33 980 753208, bonesparis.com; small plates around €6.50). **Eggs&Co** (11 Rue Bernard Palissy; 00 33 1 4544 0252; dishes around €10).

### FURTHER INFORMATION

**La Cuisine Paris** (00 33 1 4051 7818, lacuisineparis.com) runs various gourmet walking tours, as well as cookery classes. The three-hour 'Sugar Walk of the Marais' costs €80pp. Every few months, **David Lebovitz** – master of Paris's sweet things – runs special chocolate and gastronomy tours. For details, see davidlebovitz.com/tours.

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