The Other Side of Paris

So, you’ve picked up this book for a reason. Perhaps you want to know more about the beautiful cafes in Paris or maybe you want to know the fastest route between the Arc de Triomphe and the Louvre? If that’s the case, you obviously didn’t read the title because that’s not what I’m here to tell you about. I’m here to tell you about the “other side of Paris,” the side you don’t read about in *Lonely Planet,* the side that isn’t on the front cover of *Traveller*, the side that I experienced. So, I’d like you to close your eyes (not literally because then you wouldn’t be able to read) and immerse yourself in my somewhat surprising and very dramatic journey to Paris.

There I was. Sitting peacefully on a wooden picnic bench surrounded by leafy plane trees. The leaves were peacefully falling around me. Chatter was wafting toward me from Parisians walking by. Their soft accents bringing with them the taste of a crusty baguette dripping with melted cheese, paired with a small strawberry pastry filled with crème brulee that made my stomach growl. I could talk about the food in Paris forever. Little did I know what heinous calamity was about to befall me. I heard the soft coos of pigeons fluttering about, so I lifted my head to look up at the tree above me, closing my eyes to appreciate the soft sounds of their rustling wings. Then a cacophony of coos met my ears and a substantial amount of thick, sticky liquid poured over my face, into my ears and down the front of my shirt. I was covered in pigeon poo. I sat there for a moment, wondering whether life was worth continuing to live. I’ll admit chocolate ice cream was the deciding factor for me to finally stand up and start down the paved street.

As I walked down the street, the bird poo started to form somewhat of a volcanic crust over my body. I resembled a carved stone statue. I saw a grassy park just ahead; it was nestled between two tall skinny apartment buildings with twisted black balconies and window boxes overflowing with small purple fleur-de-lises and pale pink poppies. The park consisted of a pristine pond filled with brown feathery ducks and a few picnic tables. I sat down on one of the benches, crossing my fingers that one of the people nearby would take pity on me and offer me a hot shower and a warm baguette. As I sat there, a girl with long blonde hair and a brightly coloured puffer jacket ran past me. She opened her mouth so wide when she saw me her earbuds fell out. I resigned myself to the fact I was going to have to get out of this pickle myself (did I mention? I’m very lazy).

The moment this thought walked unwanted into my bird-poo-coated head, hordes of people started to rise from the bushes where they were hiding (don’t ask why) carrying multi-coloured Eiffel Tower keyrings that glinted in the sun. They all started yelling over one another, advertising their wares to whoever would listen. I laughed. Never had I heard mention of this in all the travel books I’d read about Paris. They ran around the park holding their keyrings over their heads. *Clink clink clink*, they went. As I watched, I began to refer to the people as ‘clinkers’ and I fondly felt as if I was getting to know them.

Then, In the distance, I heard the blare of police sirens. At the sound of the sirens, the clinkers went flying back into the bushes and left a few tarnished Eiffel Tower keyrings on the trodden-down grass. Two police cars pulled up to the verge of the park and six police officers leaped out of the cars and started towards the park. I laughed as I watched the last clinker scarper into the bushes and the police fruitlessly chase him. Getting up with a spring in my step, I started to appreciate this display Paris was putting on for me.

Now, you may think my story ends there. Trust me it gets worse. You may never have heard but Paris is one of the dirtiest cities in the world and I was entirely unaware of this. As I walked down the street, I was distracted by a mangy cat running down one of the gutters on the other side of the street. Then, because it seemed that today was my very unlucky day, I tripped, quite literally, into a trench that came straight out of the Vietnam War. It was filled with used cigarette butts, mud, animal corpses, diseased rats, dead birds and miscellaneous food trash. If that isn’t graphic enough for you, let me know, and I’ll do a reprint of this book.

I had just shakily climbed out of the trench and cursed Paris to the darkest corner of hell when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw a rotund lady with her brown curly hair pulled up into a messy bun. I smiled weakly at her, and she said, in a heavy French accent, “Sweetie, come with me, you look like you need to get cleaned up”. My heart filled with warmth, and I followed her to a quaint little café. There, she let me use her shower and wrapped me in a warm towel with a cup of hot cocoa. Hope started to seep through my veins again and I smiled. Things were starting to look up.

So, what I’m trying to emphasise here is, Paris isn’t the perfect city everyone thinks it is (sorry to burst your bubble) but I’m content with my experience of it as I made long-lasting friends (the messy bun lady) and saw another side of Paris that no travel book has ever described. Enjoy your stay!

**Word Count:** 986