



Our man in Paris

Paris may be known as the city of romance, but to **ROB GARRATT** it had always conjured images of pokey jazz clubs and quaint café chanson. He hopped the Eurostar in search of music.

Paris — a city of love. A city of food and art, of culture, of romance against a cinematic backdrop. A city of a thousand clichés, even to those who have never set foot on its wide streets. But also a city of music. And this is the Paris I set out to find.

My goal was an uncomplicated one. Amongst all the other Parisian images rattling through my brain was the image of Paris as a thriving hotbed of music, and especially jazz.

From the aching standard April in Paris, to Dexter Gordon's spell as a fulfilled expat (caught at his best on the *Our Man In Paris* LP), to Miles Davis' iconic soundtrack to Louis Malle's *Lift to the Scaffold*...to Django Reinhardt and the Quintet Hot Club de France themselves; jazz and Paris have gone hand in hand.

Every June France celebrates Fête de la Musique, a nationwide public holiday where it is the streets, not the hills, which very literally come alive with the sound of music. Busking is not only allowed but encouraged, while every bar or café worth its salt has booked a live act.

My 2010 festival experience started in the best possible way. As a visiting journalist, I was lucky enough to wangle an invite onto a celebratory boat cruise run by a national radio station. Cruising the Seine and with an open bar, there were sets from a half-dozen fantastic bands blasted out from the open deck, in front of sweeping iconic views of Paris, the whole thing broadcast across the nation.

Keeping the music vibe alive I dined at an utterly unique restaurant, Alcazar, where a trio of opera singers walked amongst the tables theatrically bellowing memorable arias, backed by a pianist in the centre of the room.

The problem with trying to absorb Fête de la Musique in Paris was the sheer scale of it. Handed a programme writ-ten in French, every district of the city hosted dozens of acts and in a bid to see a lot of it, I ended up seeing little at all. Instead of happening across swinging jazz groups on street corners and crooning chanson in quaint café-bars, I trawled the wide, packed streets, each one lined with bad teenage rockers liberated by the one night of the year they could turn up as loud as they liked.

In a bid to be more selective, the next night I hit a jazz club. Duc des Lombards is small and poky, packed with couples cowering on tiny stalls just inches from the stage, while mediocre food is served with plastic cutlery. But I hit the jackpot, catching an early set by the Baptiste Herbin 4tet, an assured group of hard-boppers not afraid to stretch things out, wringing each of the tunes dry, Herbin's alto sax blasting out just metres from my face.

There's more to music than gigs. I went backstage at Le Lido, a legendary cabaret venue, and saw the remarkable work that goes into making its show happen. I wandered around the breathtaking national opera house, a building of great extravagance that came from a turbulent time. I visited a trendy new nightclub hosted on a moored tall ship, the rocking of the ocean no doubt a delight for queasy drinkers.

I checked out the Musée de la Musique, which charts the development of Western instrumentation with historic finds and hundreds of audio clips. I even let out the rocker within and had lunch at the Hard Rock Café, the walls lined with guitars that once belonged to legends like BB King, Bill Wyman, Angus Young and Slash.

My best musical experience though was a visit to one of the world's most treasured stringed instrument makers. Holed up in a tiny Parisian workshop, "master luthier" Liberto Planas painstakingly crafts some of the most exquisite acoustic guitars on the globe. Retailing at well into the five-figure mark, the bandana-clad Spaniard tells me he has made at least three for flamenco godfather Paco de Lucia, with another reserved for collection.

Jazz legend John McLaughlin bought one, but sold it on at a profit — only after a courtesy call to him. And while we chat, I notice a guitar case branded with a postit which reads "Réserve pour les Gipsy Kings".

It's a long waiting list, with the average guitar taking him more than a decade to complete, while some orders are still hanging on his wall unfinished more than 15 years after customers have placed an order. "You can't rush it," he says simply through a translator.

The night before heading home I climbed up the Basilique du Sacré Cœur at midnight. Perhaps my quest to get under the skin of the city's music scene was always going to fail — a place of this size, culture and history. Staring down on the irregular peaks and domes of the Parisian horizon, contemplating all the music I'd heard, I was already sure the trip had dealt me a handful of unforgettable experiences.

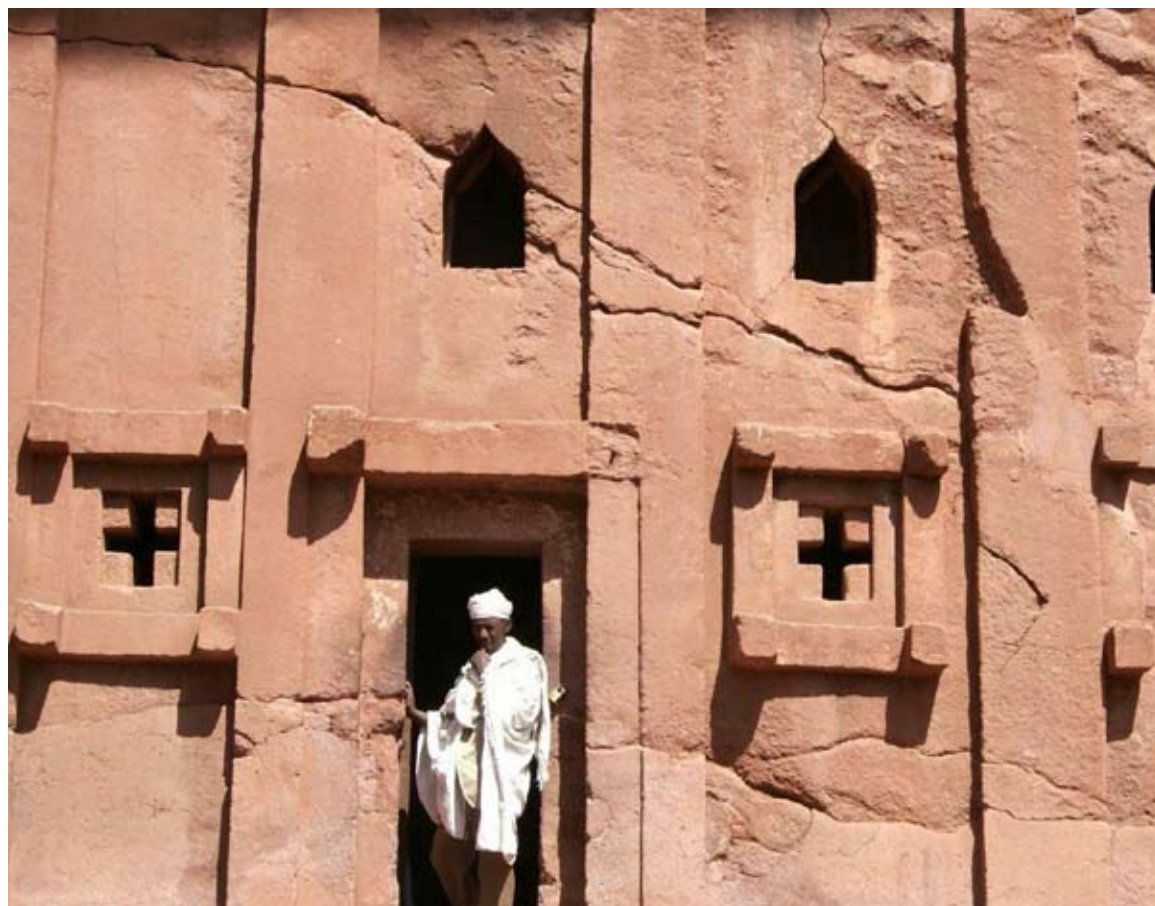


Get Packing

Rob Garratt travelled from London St Pancras International with Eurostar, who operate up to 18 daily services to Paris with return fares from £69. Tickets are available from www.eurostar.com or 08432 186186. He stayed at the Hôtel Joyce, 29

rue de la Bruyère Paris 9e (www.astotel.com/hotel-joyce-paris.php)

For more details about Duc des Lombards jazz club visit: www.ducdeslombards.com. The visit to Liberto Planas was arranged by Meeting the French (www.meetingthefrench.com). www.fetedelamusique.culture.fr



Rock churches are

Despite their magnificence, the volcanic rock churches of Lalibela are virtually invisible at first glance. **PETER BEAL** heads beneath the surface of Ethiopia to discover a true wonder of the world.

In the remote hillside town of Lalibela, almost 400 miles north of Ethiopia's capital of Addis Ababa, a new communications mast and the odd tumbledown shack advertising internet access are rare indications that the 21st century has arrived.

Otherwise, life in these dusty streets in the shadow of the distant Bugna mountains seems almost Biblical.

Many of the 25,000 inhabitants still dwell in turkuls - traditional round two-storey thatched mud and wood houses, with their livestock on the ground floor. Most homes lack electricity, and water is fetched from standpipes, often some distance away.

Donkeys are still the beasts of burden, cars rare. Yet in the midst of these humble surroundings, an astonishing piece of medieval history is widely acclaimed as the eighth wonder of the world.

Twelve rock churches, painstakingly hewn by hand in the 12th and 13th centuries from unforgiving volcanic rock, are sunk into the ground and surrounded by networks of 40ft deep trenches, virtually invisible from the surrounding hills.

There are some 1,000 rock churches in the country but none as breathtaking as these, now part of a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Church of the Holy Saviour, or Bet Medhane Alem, is the largest monolithic rock church on Earth.

Legend and myth surround their construction but it is documented that a 40,000-strong workforce - helped by angels - laboured for more than 25 years to complete these buildings, clustered closely together in two groups and hidden below ground level. King Lalibela of the Zagwe dynasty (later Saint Lalibela) wanted to hide them from pagan raiders who destroyed other early Christian churches.

Guided by God, he aimed to create a new Jerusalem in an Ethiopia that remained largely untouched by the surrounding world for hundreds of years.



Our group ventured down the steep rock steps and tunnels in the volcanic tufa (one more than 100ft long which we braved with the help of lighted tapers) that link the churches, many of whose surrounding walls contain graves and hermits' caves.

The churches, among the most extraordinary architectural creations of human civilisation, are easily reached on foot, although a certain nimbleness is needed to negotiate rocky mazes around them.

All are active churches and visitors are likely to find a service under way, accompanied by atmospheric chanting and the steady thump of the kebero, the church drum. There are said to be 1,000 priests in the town.

To spend time in these surroundings, almost 50ft below ground level, among edifices almost 800 years old, feels like being in another world.

Most impressive is the Church of St George,



Travel Notes
with Derek James



● Bag a bargain in Boston or Mingle in Miami. BA is offering from good value packages to the USA in March. You can get 3 nights in Boston with accommodation and flights from Heathrow for £429pp or three nights in Miami, room and flights, from £659pp. There are also deals in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Philadelphia. Three nights from under £500. Call 0844 493 0758 or visit ba.com and then add the name of the place you are interested in visiting.

● There are big savings on holidays in a bid to tempt tourists back to "old" Egypt. Charters out of Gatwick to ancient Luxor started again this week and tour operator Discover Egypt reports that business is brisk, especially for Nile cruises. There are some good deals around. For all the latest offers call 0844 880 0461 or visit www.discoveregypt.co.uk

● Save £500 on a visit to "new" Egypt - from Norwich. A week, all-inclusive, in a 3* hotel in Sharm El Sheikh, leaving on April 6 now costs from £369, saving £510 per couple. Call 01603 428700 or visit travelnorwich.com

● Family fun in the sun. Good value holidays to Northern Cyprus are available from £529pp with Mosaic Holidays staying at the popular 4* Oscars Resort in Kyrenia. A week's b&b stay leaving from Stansted in April costs from £529 per adult and £289 per child. For more details on this and other offers call 020 8574 4000 or visit www.mosaicholidays.co.uk



● Save big money on Italian getaways. If you are looking for a last minute break in Rome, Florence or Puglia, the specialist company Citalia, may have the answer. There are a number of deals on offer - three nights in Florence from £199pp, including flights from Gatwick, and Rome holidays start from £249. Perhaps the best deal is 7 nights half board at the 4* del Levante Hotel in Puglia leaving on March 30 from £479pp, a saving of £379 per couple. Call 0844 415 1956 or visit www.citalia.com

● Easter in Bournemouth with half-price for children. That's the offer from April 16 with Daish's Holidays and includes five nights half-board accommodation at the Sands Hotel close to all the attractions. Up to three children aged between five and 15, and sharing a family room with two adults - or an adjoining bedroom - pay £84.50 each. Call 0844 8464680 or visit www.daishs.com

● Nearer to home. How about a short break in a beautiful Norfolk hotel? From now until March 27 The Hoste Arms, Burnham Market, has a low season weekend offer. Spend two nights, Friday and Saturday or Saturday and Sunday, from £233 per room based on two sharing. Dinner is included on either the Friday or Sunday. Call 01328 738777 or visit www.fihotels.com

true wonders of the world



which from afar appears as a giant stone cross carved into the flat rock. As you approach, you realise this is the roof, surrounded by a 50ft gap forming the chasm in which the church stands.

Lalibela is a centre of religious pilgrimage - up to 40,000 people arrived on January 6 to celebrate Christmas - and is the most visited of Ethiopia's tourist attractions.

It is a welcoming place: children follow you through the streets and mountain lodge-type hotels accommodate visitors.

After touring the churches we enjoyed the peace of a quiet garden for a traditional coffee ceremony. Coffee was first harvested and drunk in Ethiopia and this formal affair can take up to two hours.

Sitting under a eucalyptus tree, we sipped local honey wine (Tej) and the fierce spirit arake - small measures only are recommended

- while charming townswoman from Alem slowly roasted the beans, before grinding them with pestle and mortar and boiling them over a charcoal burner as the smell of incense from a machesha burner wafted over us.

We flew 15 miles from Addis Ababa to Lalibela's small airport and then took an exhilarating drive across sparse, open hillsides from the town.

The trip is part of the two-week Discovery Tour by operators Cox and Kings. It also takes in Axum, Ethiopia's early centre of civilisation and reputed home of the Queen of Sheba and the Ark of the Covenant, the first capital of Gondar at the foot of the Simien mountains, and Bahir Dar, near the source of the Blue Nile on Lake Tana, with its historical island monasteries.

By chance, our arrival in Addis Ababa coincided with the major Ethiopian Orthodox Church festival of Timkat, celebrating Christ's baptism by St John in the River Jordan.

With nearly 60% of the population being Christian, there are three days of flamboyant and colourful celebrations. Congregations from every church carry their tabots, the symbol of the Ark of the Covenant, the original of which is said to be held in a northern Ethiopian church, to a central area

nearby, covered by lavish cloths so they will not be viewed by unbelievers, to be blessed at a special mass before being returned.

We watched Addis Ababa's largest ceremony at the Jan Meda racecourse, a vast area which welcomed the noisy arrival of elaborately-clad priests, church choirs, and singing, dancing followers.

After the mass next morning by the local patriarchs, many of a crowd estimated at up to 100,000 pressed forward to be doused by priests with Holy Water from the central baptismal font in frantic but joyful scenes.

In an Addis Ababa restaurant, a traditional meal for our group of six was served on one huge platter on a central low table.

The platter is entirely covered with a layer of the staple Ethiopian bread injera, a sort of sourdough-like fermented pancake, and the dishes of peppery chicken and meat stews, cheeses and yoghurts, are piled on top.

You break off pieces of the injera - there is no cutlery - and use it to scoop up food. It takes practice and can be messy.

Tourism in this often troubled country is still in its infancy, halted entirely for more than three years from 1998 during the Eritrean War.

Now 400,000 visitors a year arrive mainly from the UK, France, Italy and Germany. The total grows annually by 25%, and a five-year drive aims to increase that to a million, to earn targeted revenue of \$2bn.

Construction, including new hotels, is booming. Ethiopia boasts one of the lowest crime rates in Africa, far lower than many Western European countries.

Tourism chiefs know the country has deep-rooted image problems of war and famine, with some border areas still out of bounds. But 40% of first-time visitors, mainly keen to see historical sites, return.

The vice-president of the Ethiopia Tours Operators Association, Assefa Azene, says: "We did have a bad name but that is now forgotten history for us.

"People are beginning to understand this country is very safe. Forget the image and experience the reality. When people see it for themselves, they happily to come back."



Get Packing

Peter Beal was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 78735000, www.coxandkings.co.uk), which arranges group and private travel to Ethiopia. Its Ethiopian Odyssey is a 14-day/11-night escorted group tour from £2,950, including return flights with BMI, transfers, guided excursions and full board. Private tours start at £3,760. BMI (0844 8484 888, www.flybmi.com) flies to Addis Ababa three times a week, via Amman, from £505 return incl taxes and charges.