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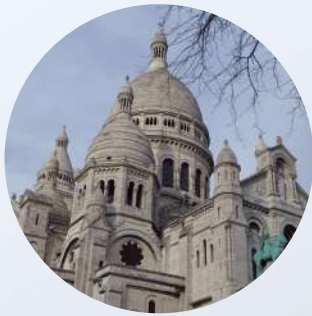
Montmartre: A Hilltop Haven Full of Centuries-Old History

By Wendy Leth-Steensen

Set high on a hill in the northern Paris, Montmartre began as a rustic village with picturesque windmills and quaint vineyards. By the turn of the 20th century, it grew into a working-class quarter. Thanks to inexpensive rent and wine, an abundance of cafes and a bohemian atmosphere of colorful dance halls and cabarets, this neighborhood attracted struggling like-minded avant-garde intellectuals and artists from all over. Notable residents included Italian painter Amedeo Modigliani, American playwright Gertrude Stein and French composer Claude Debussy. Many living in this mecca would go on to create works of art that would profoundly influence the world.

Ascending Montmartre Hill

The most popular way to explore Montmartre hill is by foot. But I took the easy way and hopped on a sightseeing tram, Le Petit Train de Montmartre. It goes to the top and back in a 40-minute loop. So, off I went!



The tram's recorded narration and classic Parisian songs set the mood as I bumped along the steep and narrow cobblestone streets. Nowadays, the streets are lined with tightly packed apartment buildings, boutiques and trendy bars and cafes, but in days gone, they were unpaved and scattered with ramshackled buildings. Take, for example, Pablo Picasso's shabby studio at Le Bateau-Lavoir, a former piano factory. Yet, amid this squalor, in 1907 he painted "Les Femmes d'Alger," a compelling expression of early cubism.

Up and up I went, passing by 19th-century Restaurant Le Basilic and Au Lapin Agile, which was built in 1860 and still features cabaret-style song and dance. The tram stopped at the top of the hill, the highest point of the city and the heart of Montmartre.



At the Top, the Historic Heart of Montmartre

A short walk brought me to the hill's most dominant landmark, Sacre-Coeur basilica. Dating back to 1876, this Roman-Byzantine monument was built in white stone so it could be visible from anywhere in the city.

As I stood at the base, I took in sweeping – almost hypnotizing – city views over the rooftops. Looking from left to right is the Church of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, Louvre Museum, Pantheon, Montparnasse Tower, Palais Garnier and Eiffel Tower. If you forgot your binoculars, you can check out the view with a coin-operated telescope.

Once I got my fill of the view, I strolled to the shaded Place du Tertre. This busy square has been the gathering place of artists and their easels for more than 100 years. Within steps is Escape Dali museum with a permanent collection of over 300 surrealist-inspired pieces by Spanish-born Salvador Dali.

Around the corner on Rue Norvins, you'll find Le Consulat. This delightful cafe was a favorite rendezvous for Picasso and his contemporaries.

Down the block is Musee de Montmartre, a centuries-old building surrounded by gardens and known to be home of French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Today, it features a large selection of items relating to the turn-of-the-century bohemian life in Montmartre.

I had time to take Funicular de Montmartre at the base of the basilica to Square Louise Michel. For a few euros, I squeezed in a ride down and then back up while savoring unique views from the cable car's vantage point.



Descending Montmartre Hill

The sightseeing tram was tooting its horn for passengers to get back on. So I continued my journey downward, past the Wall of Love, a large colourful mural with the phrase "I love you" written in more than 300 languages – that's a lot of amour! The tram bounced down rue Yvonne le Tac, past Halle Saint-Pierre, a museum displaying art brut and naive art, to Abbesses metro station, which features an art nouveau-style entrance designed by Hector Guimard.

The tram ended where it started, in the Pigalle district with the red windmill of the Moulin Rouge cabaret house. Built in 1889, this legendary venue became famous for the cancan, a chorus line of dancers performing synchronized, energetic high kicks. Today, it hosts the show "Feerie."

A trip to Paris is not complete without a visit to Montmartre. Whether you walk or ride, be sure to take in the sights of this incredibly historic part of the city.