

JACK LING | MY GRAND TOUR

The most unusual way to see Paris — including fencing and etiquette lessons

In the first of a new series, our writer begins a two-week European odyssey with instruction in art appreciation and how to settle disputes, French-style



ILLUSTRATION BY NINA KRAUSE

[Jack Ling](#)

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n garde!” I cry, brandishing an épée I don’t know how to use. I’m at a fencing club in Paris’s Latin Quarter, its walls glinting with

‘E sabres and coats of arms. Club members in armchairs watch me with amusement: a swaggering Englishman about to lunge into a Grand Tour of Europe. It’ll take a master swordsman to cut me down to size. Unfortunately, I’m up against one.

Jean-Pierre de Pinel de la Taule dares me to attack. I spring off the piste; he parries with flicks of his blade. So I advance. “Go back!” the club’s general secretary commands. “To England?” I ask. “Eventually, yes,” she retorts. I’m being skewered on all sides.

I’m on a two-week odyssey through western Europe, taking in Paris, Geneva, Rome, Venice and Vienna. It’s my stab at the Grand Tour, the 17th to 19th-century rite of passage for young aristocrats, such as Shelley and Byron, who wanted to become more cultured. I’m hoping it’ll give me finesse, once I stop tripping over my own feet.



Thankfully Jean-Pierre, spry at 82, corrects my footwork and shows me how to beat and trap blades. Lesson over, we salute and bow. He tells me that the club, Salle d'Armes Coudurier, Paris's oldest fencing hall, is under threat (sallecoudurier.org). I wonder how Parisians will settle disputes without it.

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Starting their journey to Paris, many aristos were sick on the ferry from Dover. I too felt queasy crossing the Channel — I had eaten an ignoble quantity of cheese in my first class carriage on the Eurostar. At Gare du Nord my chauffeur, Alain Cacheux, picked me up in a vintage Citroën DS: stylish and high on horsepower, it was the closest I could find to a Grand Tourist's cabriolet (£137 an hour; getyourguide.com).



Le Bristol lives up to the high standards set by the man it was named after, the 4th Earl of Bristol

CLAIRE COCANO

The roof stayed shut. Black clouds were marbling the sky and Paris was soon strafed by hailstones the size of macarons. “I’ve never seen weather like this!” Cacheux shouted. I watched, monarch-like, as chic Parisians were papier-mâchéd by wet leaves.

We arrived at Le Bristol, named after the 4th Earl of Bristol, a Grand Tourist with exacting standards. The hotel lives up to them, from its courtyard garden to its ancien-régime-style suites. With chandeliers and baroque furniture, mine was so gorgeous I nearly swooned. Good thing there was a chaise longue to catch me.

Le Bristol is on Rue du Faubourg St Honoré, where mansions sprang up when Louis XIV’s court moved to Paris from Versailles in 1715, bringing etiquette with it. These rules still govern France’s elite — now wielded in boardrooms, not ballrooms. To prepare me for my social elevation, Thomas Ka, an etiquette guru, has summoned me to his decorum dojo.

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Only in France can ignoring someone count as good manners and gifting wine be considered an insult. “It’s like saying, ‘Your wine is not good; I’ve brought my own,’” says Ka, the founder of the finishing school En Toute Éléance (from £80 an hour; [en-toute-elegance.fr](#)), drilling me in dinner party etiquette. And if someone sneezes, don’t bless them — blank them. Anything else, Ka explains, would draw attention to the fact it happened.

“I’m teaching you not to jump into traps,” he says as our food arrives. How hard can this be, I think, preparing to slice a tomato. “Your knife will not touch your salad,” Ka snaps. I set my knife down, switch my fork to my right hand, delicately

prong a chip and slowly move it to my mouth. Now I'm in for it. My knife's bladed edge is facing Ka, a signal of hostility. He bears the insult with patience. Two hundred years ago he would have had me horsewhipped.

Ka moves on to feudal foreplay: the baisemain, or hand-kiss. "It's for married women, in private places," he warns (unless the woman is gloved and standing in front of a church).

"You must kiss but not kiss, touch but not touch," he instructs. His voice thins to a whisper. "It takes guts. You've just got to do it."

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And, as we bid farewell, he does do it — kissing my hand so softly I blush like a debutante. Touché, fencers: Ka doesn't need a weapon to disarm a man.

While etiquette lessons prepared aristocrats for leadership, knowledge of art conferred cultural bragging rights. But not all tourists appreciated Paris's oeuvre. "In general rubbish to 'em," harrumphed the English playwright David Garrick of its collections in 1751. I'm more receptive on my private tour of Musée d'Orsay, which opens with a luminous nude (private tours from £266; [takewalks.com](#)).



Musée d'Orsay was once a railway station

ALAMY

“What do you see?” asks my cicerone, Hugo Loyon, as we ponder *La Source* by Ingres: a painting of a damsel with an urn. “Probably not just a naked lady,” I say, sensing intellectual ambush. “*Oui*,” he purrs. “It’s an idea.”

The subject *is* naked, but veiled in allegory. There’s nothing realistic about her: her skin glows like bone china and her posture is classical. She and her urn are symbols of nature and fertility.

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These themes were approved by the Académie Royale, founded in 1648, which insisted art be idealistic, pious, didactic — a *cordon sanitaire* between patrons and the masses they instructed.

But as we near modernity, rebellion brews: artists reject elite ideals for personal expression. The vestal canvas is defiled with lurid strokes of colour; abstract sculpture loosens the elite's monopoly on meaning by inviting the viewer to supply their own.

Life imitates art. By 1789, revolution grips France. The Académie is suppressed and toffs like me are abridged on the guillotine.



But liberty's triumph over superstition doesn't bring heaven on earth. Instead my tour ends at *The Gates of Hell*, Rodin's 20th-century labour in plaster. Human figures writhe, reach, suffer — each representing a torment: lust, rage, longing. It's modern man, stripped of guiding faith. No longer looking upwards, he turns inward.

I leave on the 18.18 to Geneva. In the dining car, I lift my soup spoon ... and pause. Is this the one for consommé? I half expect Ka to burst in and swat it from my hand. But no one is there. Just my reflection in the window, the outline of mountains rising in the dusk.

Jack Ling was a guest of Byway, which has ten nights' B&B from £2,423pp, including rail tickets and accommodation

([byway.travel](#)); and Le Bristol, which has room-only doubles from £1,860 ([oetkerhotels.com](#))

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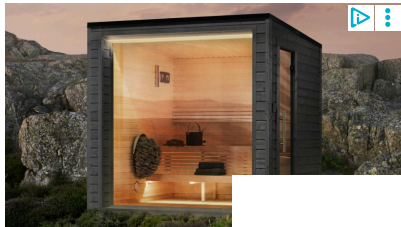


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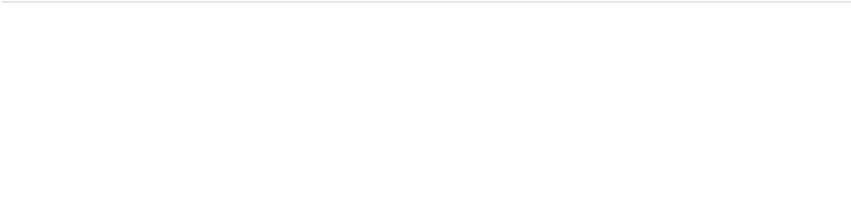
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