

soul wanderlust



A DAY OUT IN PARIS

Aimlessly wandering through the French suburb of Butte-aux-Cailles made me realise that sometimes the best plan is to have none at all

words by **Nainaa R Rajpaal**

Travellers will find colourful frescoes across this neighbourhood



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CHARMING PARISIAN SOUVENIRS

You'll find gourmet treats as well as beauty and fashion buys in the French capital. Look for skincare at Caudalie or L'Occitane, macarons at the iconic Pierre Hermé or Ladurée, and check out cheese, mustard, and jams at supermarkets like Monoprix and Galeries Lafayette. For fashion, besides the iconic Champs-Élysées, explore vintage shops and local designer stores.

I was someone who always believed in planning both my life and travels meticulously; but destiny had other plans when my 'forever' relationship fell apart overnight. A lifelong fan of irony, I decided to nurse my broken heart in Paris—the city of love.

It was here that I discovered the French art of *flânerie*, at a time when I needed it the most. *Flânerie* means a leisurely ramble taken to soak up beauty in the details, as you wander without an aim. The tradition traces back to gentlemen with plenty of idle time or the 'flâneurs' of the 19th century. It is said that French poet Charles Baudelaire even saw them as "connoisseurs of the street".

For me, it was the first time I was in a city without a curated itinerary. I hadn't

looked up restaurant reviews, stores or marked the 'must-do' spots on my map. On my first day, I found myself looking up at a random street sign and realised I was in the 13th Arrondissement (arrondissement refers to a district in France). Of course, it was the 13th. Luck hadn't really been on my side. How wrong I was.

I was about to lose myself in one of the most charming districts in Paris, Butte-aux-Cailles. It suddenly felt like I was dropped into a countryside village hidden from the rest of the city.

Pierre Caille, the first owner of this little hill, bought it in 1543 to harvest grapes for wine. I imagined it was covered with meadows, woods, and windmills. In fact, its hilly location made it an ideal spot for the first-ever successful landing of a hot-air balloon.

LEFT AND RIGHT

You'll find authentic boulangeries in this hidden corner of Paris; Butte-aux-Cailles is located in the 13th Arrondissement.

Over 400 years later, I don't think Pierre would have been disappointed with how the area has developed. I spotted elderly residents sipping wine on outdoor tables, the spring sun reflecting the giddy glint of their eyes as their spaniels and poodles lounged at their feet. There were also little brasseries, secret *boulangeries*, and colourful cafés, but not a tourist or chain store in sight. In complete contrast to the traditional homes, one could also spot frescoes of dancing bears, little children with flags, and rebellious women on the walls here.

My wanderings brought me to Floral

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TOP AND BOTTOM
Butte-aux-Cailles is a great place to practise the French art of flânerie; Macarons are a preferred souvenir to pick up from here.

City (the Cité Florale), a charming part of the district, where every street was named after a flower. I peeped into artist studios whose clothes were stylishly drenched with splashes of paint. I followed the twists and turns of the aromatic wisteria vines draped over pastel-hued cottages. There were little white balcony ladders overrun with pink and purple blossoms, almost as if they were waiting for a Romeo to make his way up. Long-time residents stood at their balconies looking down at the street below, as if they were posing for a painting or a photo.

Realising my throat was parched, I turned another corner in search of sustenance. Almost on cue, Butte-aux-Cailles decided to bring me not just a glass but an entire artesian well of water. For over 100 years, a natural hot spring has been quenching Parisian thirsts at the Place Paul-Verlaine fountain. I took a swig of cool water and watched two excited children in swimming trunks do the same before disappearing into a beautiful old building across the street.

I followed them, to find myself outside the Butte-aux-Cailles swimming pool, one of the oldest in Paris, boasting three pools—an outdoor one, an indoor one, and a Nordic one that is open all year round. After another careless turn, I arrived at the Librairie du désordre, a charming bookstore with a bright red façade. I walked in and inhaled the air, thick with the scent of ageing paper and chanced upon a first-edition Simone de Beauvoir novel, bringing back memories



of my university days. She wrote, "I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties, through my love for truth." It felt like a serendipitous encounter, a whispered message of strength from a literary icon.

Not far away, a window full of rainbow-coloured macarons caught my eye. I sat at the café and took a bite. The delicate almond meringue gave way to a burst of creamy raspberry. I savoured it slowly, serenaded by the melodic lilt of French spoken all around me. As the sugar touched my lips, everything around me somehow felt sweeter. I allowed myself to get out of my head and be present, for the first time in months. It was as if Paris was talking to me, asking me to get back on my feet. More importantly, it helped me trust that sometimes the best plan is to have none.

WHERE TO STAY

Maison Albar - Le Pont-Neuf

Designed as a plush residence, this is nestled near the Seine river in central Paris. Its Michelin star awarded in-house restaurant, Odette, offers a warm yet contemporary vibe.

Hotel Monte Cristo

Inspired by Alexandre Dumas' colourful life, the hotel imagines what the French author's home would be today. Choose from rooms, suites, and boudoirs with 19th-century themed décor.

Hôtel JoBo

Short for Hôtel de Joséphine Bonaparte, this charming property was built on the remnants of a 17th-century convent. Now hidden behind a flamboyant courtyard, it features reprints of old Parisian wallpaper.

GETTING THERE

Air India flies non-stop to Paris from Delhi.