

Can a city go green?



Paris on foot: Passerelle des Arts Seine footbridge. Photograph: David Lefranc/Paris Tourist Office

Paris is rebranding itself as an eco-city of responsible tourism. But, asks **Tim O'Brien**, is it love forever or just a fleeting marketing exercise?

IT WAS ENOUGH TO stir the heart of the most devout sandal-wearing opponent of air travel: a romantic hot-air-balloon trip above the City of Light. The politically correct answer to helicopter rides, in the most romantic and beautiful city in the world.

Who could not be smitten by the romance of soaring above the Eiffel Tower on a summer's evening?

And if we were a little guilty about environmental damage to the ozone layer in getting to Paris, we could be consoled by the prospect of environmentally friendly boat cruises, organic gourmet food, and guided tours of Paris by electronic bicycle.

"Paris is going green," announced an invitation from Paris Convention and Visitors' Bureau, before holding out visions of a champagne cruise along the Seine on eco-friendly cruise boats, and the vaguely revolutionary-sounding mass walks around Paris, which effectively reclaim the streets on one Thursday each month. But there was no further need for a hard sell : they had me at the word go.

Which is probably why it is so difficult to admit much of the promotion of Paris as an eco-city stretches credibility.

The balloon flights above the city are based in Parc André Citroën, in the 15th arrondissement, which is a mere five minutes from the Eiffel Tower by one of the city's Verture hybrid cabs.

But the romance was soon banished. The Ballon de Paris lifts into the sky right enough, but it remains tethered to the ground by stout ropes throughout. The balloon merely ascends and falls along a cable. To cap it all, and despite the anchors, it wasn't going at all when we arrived because of high winds.

There are plans to have the balloon change colour when it is in the air, depending on the air quality in the city. If the balloon appears green the air is good; amber means mediocre and red means poor air quality.

Moving swiftly along, we arrived at the 56-storey Montparnasse Tower, the tallest skyscraper in France, which has a rooftop viewing terrace and from where the views of the city are superb. It is undoubtedly the best viewing site in Paris, if only "because it is the only site in the city where you are not affronted by the sight of the Montparnasse Tower", according to our Parisian guide.

At this stage, questions arising about the "green" innovations were answered by a visit to Vedettes de Paris, which are billed as the only Parisian boat-cruise company accredited with

ISO 14001 certification, "attesting to commitment to sustainable development and respect for the environment". So how does a diesel cruise boat do that?

In fact, the certification relates to plans to bring in a battery-powered eco-friendly catamaran. Next year, perhaps. It would be churlish to say some of the more committed environmentalists snorted. More likely it was a murmur of gratitude for the very excellent champagne as we glided past Île de la Cité.

Having floated along the Seine, dinner at Bio Art, the first French restaurant to be certified under the Ecocert system, was wonderful. The restaurant is on Quai François Mauriac, close to the new French National Library, overlooking the Seine. It is celebrated for the sustainability of its building, as well as the quality of its food. The restaurant is laid out according to the principles of feng shui and uses many recycled materials, while the menu lists only organic dishes. Wild salmon is imported from the west of Ireland (a rather large carbon footprint away).

Over dinner we were introduced to Alex Gourevitch of the alternative tour company City Vibes. It offers a change from the usual things tourists get to see. Guides take people to the Opera House, for example, but highlight the erotic cherubs, the secret stairways between the boxes and the "actresses" dressing rooms, while explaining the history of what was clearly once a bawdy house.

Morning is the best time for Paris Charms and Secrets, an electronic bicycle tour and the best part of an eco-Paris trip. The meeting point is Place Vendôme - close to the Charvet shirts shop beloved of Charlie Haughey - and quickly we were off around the Louvre, crossing the streets in a bunch - "the cars they will kill one but will stop for six", explained our guide as we crossed the Seine and headed for Saint-Germain. Stopping, he pushed at a door and we were in the only monastery in Paris that retains the insignia of Marie Antoinette. It was lunchtime, and the monks' modest repast of bread, cheese, fruit and red wine was laid out in the refectory.

We wheeled along cobbled streets where vines and wisterias cover walls that date back to Joan of Arc, Richelieu and Robespierre. The cycling was done with the greatest of ease, as a slight pedal caused the battery to kick in and the worst of us felt superhuman. An Indian woman who had not cycled in 40 years could not stop laughing as she whirled through the alleyways. The guides are very good, and you get to see a Paris you would never recognise from a tour bus.

Although the Paris urban walks are an excellent way to "reclaim the streets", you need to be in top form to enjoy them, not exhausted after a day's sustainable sightseeing. For this eco-warrior it was time for a seat, a coffee and a croissant. But there was one surprise left as we sat at a typical Parisian café between Gare d'Austerlitz and the river: the coffee costs €1, the croissant €0.90 and the one-way metro tickets €1.40 each.

So if you take a Paris city break, do you find a city engaged in responsible tourism or is it just a rebranding exercise?

Who cares - go. Whatever else, you will always have Paris.

How to be a responsible tourist

Stay at a bed and breakfast. Paris is new to the idea, but the humble BB is now classed as ethical tourism. Four companies are leaders in the development of BBs graded not by stars but by a leaf symbol. They are France Lodge, Good Morning Paris, Alcove Agape and Une Chambre en Ville. Prices from €45 to €150 per night including breakfast. See www.authenticbandb.fr.

Use Vélib, the city's low-cost bicycle hire. Vélib operates from 1,451 stations dotted across Paris, generally only 300m from one another, and there are 371km of cycle lanes. Each Vélib station is equipped with an automatic rental terminal and spots for dozens of bicycles. Maps showing the station locations are available at all kiosks. Subscriptions are necessary but can be bought by the day for as little as €1. The first half-hour is free and any number of half-hour trips can be made in a day. See www.velib.paris.fr.

Take a guided tour on an electric bicycle instead of on a bus. Available with raincoats and even heated jackets for wintertime, the tours operate with English-, French- or Spanish-speaking guides. This is much more entertaining than the average tour, and the electric bicycles are suitable for almost everyone. See www.parischarmssecrets.com.

Shop in the Haut Marais district in the shadow of the Grande Bibliothèque, accessible from the Metro, where alternative, organic, ethnic and fair-trade shops mingle with the city's trendy bars. Designer clothes, jewellery and cosmetics are available. Guides from www.parisupperside.com.

Join the urban walks. Parisians enjoy their revolutions, and once a month hundreds if not thousands of them take to the streets in a democratic reclamation of their right to walk. Young and old, rich and poor. Strangers often offer each other food and drink during the picnic. See www.rando-paris.org.

Go there

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) flies to Paris from Dublin, Cork and Belfast. Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from Dublin and Shannon. Air France (www.airfrance.ie) flies from Dublin.

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This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times