

Paris aiming to produce sporting legends

Paris less than one year out from the Olympics followed by the Paralympic Games, is currently in-Seine-ly gripped by Rugby World Cup fever, fired by France's sensational opening night victory over the mighty All Blacks.

French fans crave their first Rugby World Cup win but, while the oval ball circus continues, construction is going ahead at pace for Paris 2024, and the world's media are being invited to tour installations, including the badminton and power lifting arena, the only new building being constructed inside the city for the Olympics. It is around 5k from main tourist attractions.

Test events are due at the end of this year at the impressive stadium and concerts featuring world stars are also on the agenda to bed the building in.

The Rugby World Cup takes centre stage currently. The impressive fans village in the Place de la Concorde, the largest public space on the French Capital, and it was packed with thousands of beer-swilling fans but, if you are coming over for games, bring a big wallet.

Small glasses of beer are 8.50E and, for those with more discerning tastes, a champagne bottle is around 70E and food is not cheap. Bread and cheese or a meat platter is 17E, for

example, but if you head for The Bullion stand, a gazpacho soup is 5E and well worth the investment. Tasty and ideal in the heatwave which is currently engulfing the city.

Steak with potatoes and a bearnaise sauce was good value at 17E but beware, the area is boisterous and noisy and if you want a quiet meal then perhaps go elsewhere.

There are hot dog and other take away options in the area which is dedicated to rugby and the space also highlights an extensive entertainment package. A super-charged Maoris group showcased their culture then invited the audience to take part in a haka. Good fun.

Popular music is also on the menu and the fans loved it even in the temperatures which topped 35c at 7pm. Beer was popular. Surprise, surprise.

Elsewhere in the city, Rugby World Cup posters and flags can't be missed, and there are pop up merchandise shops dotted around the city.

Getting around is possible in taxis but they get snarled up in the jams. It's like dodgems and heaven knows how drivers put up with traffic light jumping which is prevalent at many major junctions.

It's like a maze at some and how accidents don't happen is a miracle. You can hire bikes, if you are brave, and there are specific bike routes away from the traffic, but you do come across copious quantities of metal at a number of locations and why some locals ride their bikes minus helmets is beyond me.

Segway scooter tours and electric scooters are also available, but the same rules apply, watch your step.

If you want to escape then heat and traffic head for the River Seine which, we were told, will host the opening

ceremony for the Olympics, an occasion normally hosted in a stadium. This brings the public to the heart of the event we were told.

The Olympic triathlon is said to be taking place in and around the famous river and engineers are working to clean up the water. It is complicated, we understand, but the word is they are making headway. Word of warning, the clock is ticking chaps.

Shopping is a major attraction for many visitors and there are very few vacant sites unlike city centre locations closer to home in Scotland.

There are well-known brand names around, Etam, for example, and Foot Locker, along with chic international brands. Shopping is not my bag but air conditioning is and a quick jaunt into a shop on the pretext of a quick browse, was a merciful relief.

Eating out is easy. Cafes and restaurants are open everywhere and for long hours. Service is usually slick and food we tasted was good. Le Jaja, tucked away discretely in a small but busy side street in the Saint-Gervais district, was exceptional.

It was up a close and you could miss it. Not sure I would want to be a neighbour, but it was quality. My seared tuna was memorable- sidestep this if you like it well-cooked. My knife sliced through with ease.

The Mediterranean vegetable accompaniment was tasty, but the green beans with a hint of pesto remained on the plate. Not to my liking but one of my colleagues enjoyed them. The steak and cabbage with potatoes was superb and the shared T-bone was enjoyed.

A mark of the quality of this superb restaurant was the waitress who came to table with a side dish of cabbage. She

felt it was unsatisfactory and immediately replaced it.

Lunch at the Hotel de Ville, the Town Hall, was an event. Pave of salmon with a twist, a creole sauce, was served with luscious mash potatoes and haricots verts.

The fresh fruit salad was packed with finely-chopped goodness and the grilled courgette salad with parmesan was interesting. The Chateau Fayau Bordeaux 2019 red was spectacular. Yes, I know red does not normally go with fish, but this did due to the crusty skin and the creole twist.

There, the supremo for major sports events in Paris, former French rugby star, Pierre Rabadan, who played for Stade Francaise and who only a few hours later unlocked the gleaming Rugby World Cup trophy from a special box in front of a world-wide TV audience of millions, outlined why the city have hosting the event and the Olympics. They co-hosted the Rugby World Cup with Ireland and the UK in 2007, for the record.

He stressed legacy, he stressed giving young people role models as legends, and he also stressed the importance of getting more young people into sports and France, he added, had a young population which, potentially, has a large pool of future talent to tap into.

Sadly, we were told, it is not taught in schools, leaving rugby clubs to harness any raw talent which emerges and victory in the Rugby World Cup in late October could be a catalyst for change, perhaps.

The city Mayor, Socialist politician, Anne Hidalgo, the first women to hold the lofty office and she has been in power since 2014, popped in to underline the importance of sport to the community of Paris and the nation.

She attended the opening night in the fans village and it was a privilege to be there and drink in the atmosphere. No hassle, no obscenities just good-natured banter, language

allowing, between fans of many countries. I even heard Scottish accents.

The 984-foot Eiffel Tower, built in 1889 for the Exposition Universelle, oversees everything in this intoxicating city. The sun scorched down, reflecting off the concrete on the Place du Trocadero, one of the best vantage points, even at 9.30am.

Souvenir sellers mingled but were polite and moved away after a firm "no" as we took souvenir pix. That is in contrast with the taximen at Gare du Nord Station. They are aggressive and don't fall into the trap of engaging with them. Locals say they charge well, I stress well, over the odds. Walk past and follow the arrows to the taxi rank, but the queue can be lengthy so get off the Eurostar quickly.

Check in at St Pancras was easy and quick. I had a small, amount of liquid in a water bottle and forgot to remove my plastic bag from my holdall, but I got through. Same in Paris which I checked with the security people.

Piece of advice, on arriving at Gare du Nord, enter the station by the front door, turn right and go up the escalator. Beware there are not many seats there if you arrive early and if you want to change your ticket to another train be prepared to fork out £50.

Eurostar is convenient, city centre to city centre and clean. The only hitch I had was on the return journey when there was no water in the toilet. Seats are snug, but it is a great way to cross the Channel.

I was fortunate, sitting next to an absolutely delightful British Airways, long-haul hostess, and the journey flew by. Merci for that.

The outward leg was totally different. I wanted to close my eyes after a 4am alarm to catch the 7.01am and I did although

I woke up to see the parched landscape then the outskirts of this vast city with blocks of concrete flats predominating. Graffiti, some of it not particularly artistic, was on walls and the side of buildings and the side of the rail track. A modern and unsightly problem.

Overall, a 36-hour, whirlwind trip packed with interest, but that heat, it was oppressive. I stayed at the really comfortable Mercure Prelude Opera Hotel in the bustling Opera district, and it really clean.

Breakfast offers a selection of meat and cheese plus cereal, yoghurt and fruit plus fresh, crusty bread and croissants. Beware, I picked up an egg and thought it was hard-boiled. Wrong, it was raw.

Beds are comfortable, the bathroom small but perfect for single occupancy and the wardrobe space more than adequate.

TV does not have SkySports that I could find but they do show Champions League and Premiership games. I watched Rangers at PSV and Liverpool hosting Aston Villa replays for example.

Overall, it has been over 40 years since I last visited Paris. The return journey was memorable but spoiled because of the heat, the ferocity of which has even surprised locals.

The Metro also provided much-needed coolness, but you need a guide. Rebecca did a great job piloting us around to tourist traps including the Quai d'Orsey, Les Invalides, Point Alexandre III, the Grand Palais where some Olympic sports will be held, and to hosting much-needed drinks at the Petit Palais.

I have no problems negotiating London, in fact I don't even take a map, but I was baffled by the Metro system. Tickets are accessed from machines and the instructions are in English if you select the Union Jack flag of course.

You can buy a block of tickets or single tickets but they have a time limit on them and you must complete your journey inside that limit. There are also trams.

So, do visit and we look forward to the future to see if the massive investment in three major sports events does actually produce sporting legends.

PICTURE: The world-ramous Seine in the sparkling summer sunshine captured by ***Nigel Duncan***