

Boutique Chic On A Budget

The last time I was in Paris it was as a one-year-old. Twenty five years later my French has improved (marginally) and I'm embarking on only my second trip to the French capital with a well-earned mini-break in the very centre of Paris

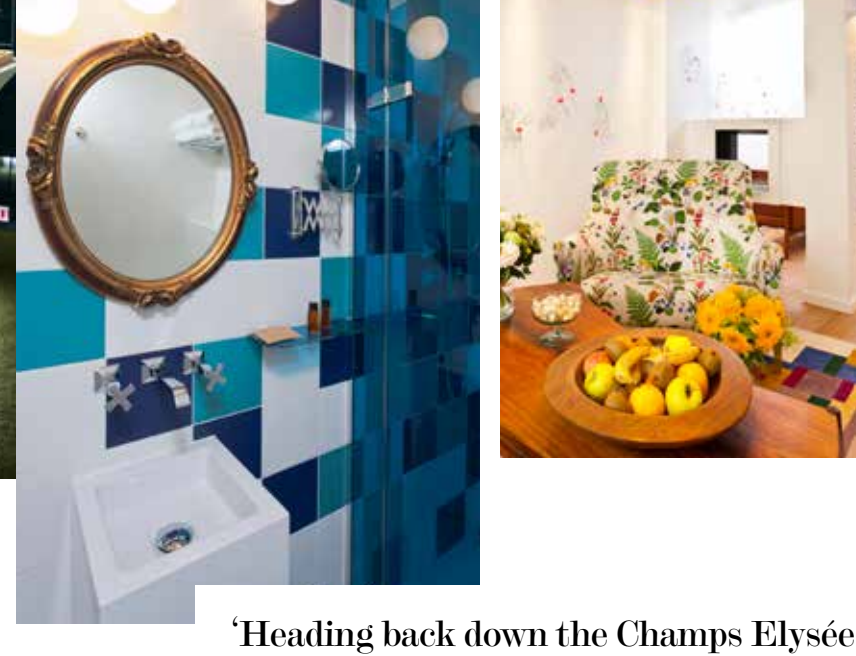
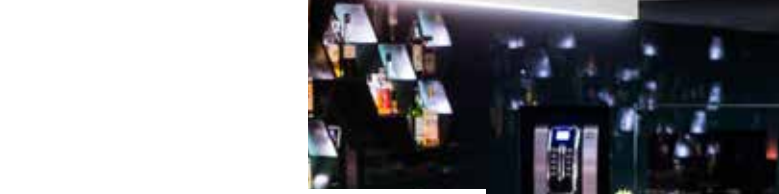
Despite it being June, we arrived on a rainy and gloomy Parisian summer's day – the short trip from Gare Du Nord to Hotel O, in the Les Halles district, was a wet one. Our welcome, however, was far from tepid as we were warmly greeted by the hotel staff who were more than happy to help and eager to provide us with all the advice and information necessary for us to make the most of our brief stay in Paris.

Described as a three-star boutique hotel, I had done some research into Hotel O before booking and was intrigued by what was frequently referred to as the 'naturalistic' design theme running throughout the hotel. Perhaps the vision of Hotel O's designer Ora Ito is best explained by the tree trunk-like feature in the centre of the hotel's reception which seems to form the base from which the rest of the hotel grew. The hotel's space-age bar was a contemporary fusion of light and colour, clearly a place to enjoy a cocktail or two. Breakfast, we were advised, was served between 7am and 11am but room service was also available. The hotel did not have a restaurant for evening meals.

Heading up the winding tree-themed staircase to our room, our 'Cocoon' was situated on the third floor and although the layout was fairly basic the unusual, futuristic light fixtures lifted it out of the ordinary. Totally high-tech, it took us some time to master the lighting system, and even more to achieve the simple task of charging our phones. The bathroom, although very practical, left a lot to be desired if luxury was what you were looking for – reminiscent more of cool student digs than a luxury Parisian boutique hotel – but it was perfectly adequate and in keeping with Hotel O three-star status.

What it may have lacked in terms of five-star luxury, it more than made up for in location. Just a short walk from the Louvre and Tuileries Gardens, the historic Les Halles area is crammed with shops, restaurants and pavement cafés. Notre Dame and the Seine are 10 minutes away and we wasted no time heading out to make the most of the nearby tourist hot spots. We were delighted to discover the many affordable and authentic French restaurants on the hotel's doorstep.

Clearly aimed at the young at heart, the quirky vibe of the hotel was certainly different to any I had experienced before, and whilst it was not the most luxurious, the bed (which took up most of our room) was incredibly comfy, the buffet breakfast extensive and the



'The Hotel O's space-age bar was a contemporary fusion of light and colour, clearly a place to enjoy a cocktail or two'

'Heading back down the Champs Elysées towards Hotel Crayon takes you through the Louvre Gardens. Given the 28-degree heat, a seat by one of the numerous fountains and an ice cream made it a personal favorite time of the trip'



staff top notch in terms of attitude. It certainly remains a highly competitive option for a place to stay when visiting Paris.

Hotel O's sister hotel, Hotel Crayon, is an enjoyable five-minute stroll away through the winding streets (anyone who has been to Paris will appreciate the feeling of wanting to walk around slowly simply to be sure to take in all of the picturesque surroundings). Arriving early, we were greeted by the hotel staff, and a goldfish named Bubbles. Given our early morning arrival, our rooms were not yet ready, but leaving our bags with the obliging reception staff we left to embark on our day's explorations.

That day we made the most of what Paris has to offer. Heading over to the Eiffel Tower, an enjoyable 50-minute walk away, our route took us over the River Seine, passing many worthwhile sights on the way. We picnicked in the hot sunshine beneath the tower, but didn't join the queue to get to its viewing platform. That afternoon we headed over to the Champs Elysées to do a spot of shopping. Given the temperatures and the tourists in June, this proved to be one of our more questionable decisions – we should have listened more closely to the locals and their advice that the joy of Parisian shopping lies more in the back street boutiques than this avenue for global brands. However, despite the high level of pavement-weaving skills required to speedily manoeuvre this densely populated street, the sight of The Arc De Triomphe at the end is not one to miss, and we were pleased to have ticked it off our list of places to visit.

Heading back down the Champs Elysées towards Hotel Crayon takes you through the Louvre Gardens. Given the 28-degree heat, a seat by one of the numerous fountains and an ice cream made it a personal favorite time of the trip. After a full day of walking, we were very happy to be shown up to our room. Larger than our previous room in Hotel O, and more in line with what one might expect from a boutique Parisian hotel room, the furnishings were brightly coloured but tasteful and the room, while not massive, was cool and had all the space you would need. Described as 'bohemian-chic', Hotel Crayon is filled with an eclectic collection of vintage furniture and like its sister hotel, is a great option for a more budget-conscious stay in the city. We were intrigued by the hotel's café-style honesty bar. A concept we had not come across before, the 'honesty policy' meant we were allowed to help ourselves to any of the goodies available, and to simply leave the payment we thought appropriate.

Given our long day, we chose to pop to a restaurant just around the corner, where both the food and service were excellent (good restaurants on the doorstep were definitely a recurring theme of our trip and one of the highlights). Content we had made the most of our short time in what is one of the world's most fascinating cities, we made the short walk back to the hotel to get an early night before our morning Eurostar the next day.

Fact File

• The Eurostar is quick and easy making Paris the perfect location for a mini break. The short walk from Kings Cross to St Pancras is just five minutes, and from London to Paris a mere two hours and 45 minutes.

• Both these hotels enjoy a superb location with both great restaurants and top tourist spots just minutes away and make a perfect base from which to explore Paris.

Hotel O
19 rue Hérold 75001 Paris
www.hotel-o-paris.com

Hotel Crayon
25 Rue du Bouloi 75001 Paris
www.hotelcrayon.com