

LIFESTYLE

Green the new black in Paris

Huttopia Versailles offers an eco-friendly holiday on an exceptional wooded site in the great outdoors, while being in close proximity to Paris and Versailles



Green Tourist Catherine Mack

PARIS is the most visited city in the world, apparently. The words green and eco are not really associated with a place which is famous for its fashion, style, arrogance and ultimate cool. On my student year out there I always felt like a podgy, ganzy-wearing Paddy compared to the drop dead gorgeous beatnik beauties I tried to keep up with in college corridors. But even Paris, I am relieved to say, has discovered that green is the new black.

Having a cross-channel train service that comes into its city centre is a good start, of course, and if you haven't tried the Eurostar yet, it's a must (www.eurostar.com). Either start at London's Kings Cross St Pancras International station or head the other way from Paris for a daytrip. It is one of the greatest success stories of European travel, and people laugh at me when I say that my ambition is to see the equivalent under the Irish Sea - to UK, that is, not to France, I hasten to add.

For accommodation, I am now able to wear my mucky hiking boots with pride in Paris, as I hopped straight on a RER (Réseau Express Régional) commuter train to Porchefontaine, just outside Versailles, where we stayed in a beautiful wooden cabin on a woodland campsite, run by eco-glamping experts Huttopia (www.huttopia.com). For €125 per night for the cabin (minimum two nights), you can watch the sun come up in the morning from your wooden decking, and zap in on the train to watch the Eiffel Tower light up in the evening. Then back to the warmth of the lodge's wood-burning stove. This is all the magic of Paris without Mickey Mouse, and beats Davy Crockett's ranch in Disneyland any day.

Ecochic

There is a choice of ecochic accommodation at Huttopia in Versailles, with cool, cream canvas tents (from €60 pn),

which are better equipped than my home kitchen, or quirky and funky 'roulotte' wooden caravans (from €89 pn). Their latest addition is the Cahutte (from €95 pn), where you stay in a cabin downstairs, but upstairs is made of canvas. Very ooh la la. All are exquisitely designed, and we loved the look of the tents so much, that we ended up coming back to one of their other bigger sites at Rambouillet the next year to try them out. I think they must put something in the water at Huttopia, because their unique campsites are verging on addictive, with visit number three already being planned for this summer.

However, this trip to Paris was a quick city break, and I was hoping to do a day at the Chateau de Versailles, the famous Sun King Louis XIV's home, but my own little sun princes were somewhat distracted by the shimmering blue of Huttopia's outdoor (heated) swimming pool, where we splashed and crashed for a day, deciding to do Paris by night instead and leave chateau visiting for another time.

If you prefer hotels to 'huts' then the green hotel chain to check out in Paris is Accor, multi-award-winning for its sustainability practices and excellence in corporate social responsibility. Its beacon hotel is the Novotel Gare de Montparnasse, the first Parisian hotel to be given the High Quality Environment label, ensuring better insulation, energy-efficient lighting, good waste management, low water and energy consumption, and ecological materials such as carpets, wood and paints (www.accorhotels.com). For a less pricey (and less central) option, the Accor Group's Ibis Hotel in Porte de Clichy has installed solar panels to take the edge off its energy consumption.

Bike scheme

In Paris itself, you can cycle everywhere with the well-established urban bike scheme, called the Velib, a bit like Dublin Bikes, only there are many more of them (www.velib.paris.fr). Go and explore some of the city's organic food markets ('bio' in French), such as at Boulevard Raspail on a Sunday morning, or Boulevard Batignolles on Saturdays. Or in Versailles itself there are numerous markets, including the historic Notre Dame Market in Carrés Notre Dame (Tuesday, Friday and Sunday mornings) or the Halles Notre Dame (Tuesday to Saturday all day, Sunday 7am to 2pm). The more recent

addition of an organic food market can be found at Versailles's Place de la Cathédrale Saint Louis every Saturday morning.

There are 440km of cycle paths and routes in Paris. The piste cyclable is a bike lane separated from other traffic by some sort of physical barrier and bande cyclable is a painted path on the road. Useful cycling guidebooks include the Guide du Routard's Paris à Vélo and Petit Futé Balades à vélo en Ile de France, both available at www.fnac.com.

One of the greenest and most fun Paris experiences you can have is to join in with the inspired scheme, Paris Respire, meaning Paris Breathes, which led to the shutting off of some of its main arteries on Sundays and public holidays to allow cyclists, walkers, skateboarders and roller bladders to pose along the promenades. My hiking boots really didn't cut the mustard on the quays, however. You do really need some good lycra and *je ne sais quoi* to turn heads on the quays, a people-watching paradise on Sunday's green lanes of Paris.

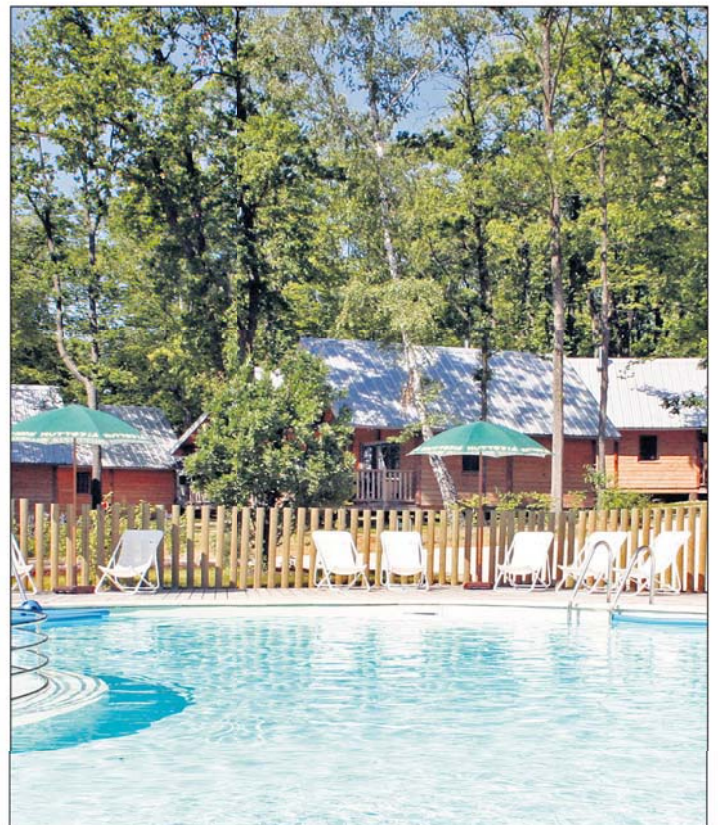
If you want to hire a sportier bike than those offered by the Velib, check out Paris Bike Tours, who will deliver bikes to your accommodation (www.parisbiketour.net) and dare to roam out of town a bit. Taking your bike on RER trains in Paris is pretty straightforward, if you stick to lines A & B only, travel outside rush hour or at weekends all day. This way you can go and explore some of Paris's greener suburbs. Treat yourself to the great find of a book called *An Hour from Paris*, by Annabel Simms (www.annabelsimms.com, published by Pallas Athene Arts), who will lead you into the hidden expanses of the region known as Ile de France, paradoxically some of the least visited in France, and yet on the city's doorstep.

The writing is beautiful, and Simms also gives details of how to access each place by public transport, such as the islands of Créteil, or the suburban town of Poissy, which segues from contemporary to classic, bustling to bucolic within minutes, with a huge open-air swimming pool, Piscine Migneaux, to reward at the end of your journey. No wonder the world just keeps loving Paris.

Catherine is the author of *Ireland Green Travel*, a new travel app now available on iTunes app store, or follow on www.twitter.com/greenirelandapp.



One of the wooded cabins on a woodland campsite run by eco-glamping experts Huttopia at Versailles. (Photo: Huttopia)



Huttopia's outdoor heated swimming pool.

(Photo: Huttopia)