

# Paris day trips by rail

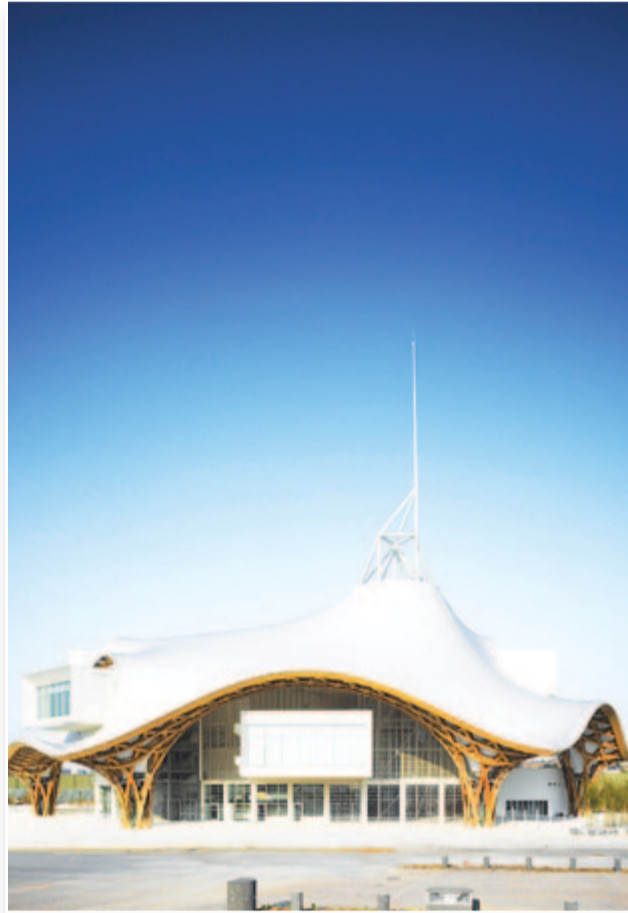
Metz and Rouen offer superb architecture, fine food.

## Beverly Mann

As much as I adore Paris, leaving the city for a slower and more rural lifestyle is always a lure for me. Short day trips by Rail Europe's super-efficient train system provide a myriad of opportunities to escape for a day or an overnight trip before returning to the pulsating City of Lights. The two medieval cities that I ventured to during my week in Paris, Metz and Rouen, are both the capitals of their region, have famous cathedrals, monuments dating back thousands of years, memorable food and some of Europe's finest chocolate. But the best part was that they are only 90 minutes by train from Paris.

## Medieval Metz

My greatest motivation for visiting Metz, the capital of the Lorraine Region, was the new Centre Pompidou, the sister museum to the one in Paris. As I arrived at the Metz train station, I was amazed to see a pathway connecting me to this surreal, giant modular structure. The museum stood like a white Chinese hat or extraterrestrial spaceship set amid 16th century Renaissance buildings. The Metz museum opened its doors in 2010 with 65,000 works of contemporary art and temporary pieces from the Paris Centre and other museums. Works of Calder, Braque, Leger, Matisse and Miro are among the collection. The Metz Pompidou Centre is considered the first-ever decentralised project for a major national cultural institution, functioning completely independently. Walking through the billowing latticework ceilings, I could catch a glimpse of a Gothic-style steeple, Romanesque archways and bell towers of the fortified city in the



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**THE NEW CENTRE POMPIDOU in Metz, sister museum to the one in Paris.**

distance. Sitting at the confluence of the Moselle and Seille rivers, Metz is coloured with an illustrious history of conquerors and cultures, from Roman to French, Italian and German influences – all of which I encountered through my day trip. Metz was also once called the City of Three Colours for its yellow limestone and pink and grey sandstone building materials. Perhaps it is because of the illuminating golden glow of Saint-Etienne's Cathedral (Temple of Light or God's Lantern), built between 1220 and 1520, where the yellow stone shines most brilliantly in the mid-day sun, along with the most stunning

stained glass – one of the most important collections in the world. The Cathedral faces the main square, Place d'Armes, ensconced by 18th century structures and home to the Saturday marketplace, which I happened to experience the day I arrived. I bought several pieces of clothing that in Paris would have cost me more than twice as much. The pulse of the city comes alive within the square at the market hall, where I lunched at Chez Mauricette and experienced many of the fresh local specialty meats, cheeses and fruits. The restaurant exhibits its emblem of Tables de Rabelais, named after a famous food writer of the 1500s and representing the highest food quality. The pâtisseries are difficult to pass up, especially the Paris-Metz cake, a luscious array of raspberries, cream and macaroons. This delectable treat was created as a tribute to the 2007 TGV train system, which expanded Metz to become the gateway to Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Luxemburg (just an hour rail ride away). Considered a garden city with miles of green promenades, riverbanks and moats, Metz needs to be explored by foot. I passed through thousands of years of history in just a few



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**FEATURED ART WORKS and sculpture garden at the Musee des Beaux-Arts in Rouen.**



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**IN ROUEN, stroll between the beautifully preserved buildings from the 1500s.**

hours' time.

## Rouen by the sea

My next side trip was the seafaring capital of Normandy, Rouen, where I left from Gare Lazare in Paris going the opposite direction from Metz. When I think of Rouen, I immediately envision impressionist Claude Monet's pastel blue and green paintings of the renowned Romanesque and Gothic Notre Dame Cathedral, built between the 12th and 16th centuries. Its final spire (the highest in France) was erected by the 19th century. Monet spent arduous days painting dozens of images in the mercurial light at the building just across the way, now the Tourist Bureau. Also of interest and just adjacent to the Cathedral is the Faïences Saint-Romain, a porcelain shop where I was able to view a craftsman hand-painting each delicate piece of porcelain before setting it in the kiln, an ancient art form still alive here. I ambled down to the Rue du Gros leading me to the city's icon, the famous Great Clock and its Gothic belfry above a Renaissance archway. Part of the oldest clock mechanisms in Europe, the bells of the belfry have been operating since the 14th century.

## Celebrating Joan of Arc

The city is most remembered, though, for the site of Joan of Arc's trial and her ordeal of being burned alive at the stake for alleged heresy in 1431 at the Place du Vieux-Marché, or Old Market Square. At Rouen's Musée des Beaux-Arts, there is a room dedicated to works depicting her life. The town even holds a yearly Joan of Arc Festival the last weekend of May. It was from La Couronne, France's oldest inn (1345), where many spectators of the Joan of Arc pyre stood and watched this horrific crime. But it was also at this site that celebrities and diplomats have dined in comfort and elegance amid beautiful china and fresh flowers. The walls are lined with the photos of Hollywood stars and notables who frequented the restaurant – Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, Jean Paul Sartre, Julia Child and Salvador Dali, who has a room named after him. A section of the Couronne was also recreated in the film *Julie & Julia*. Duck is the house specialty. My foie gras de canard nearly melted in my mouth and the roasted medallions of duck was tender and well seasoned. However, animal activists might not be pleased with the traditional way (suffocation) the duck is killed in order to preserve the blood.

## History within history

After lunch, I visited the largest civil Gothic edifice in France, the Parliament of Normandy and Court House. It was constructed towards the end of the Middle Ages on the remains of the former Jewish Quarter (also known as the Sublime House) that were not discovered in the Court House until 1976. It is not quite certain if this Romanesque ruin was once a university or a synagogue. Before my return to Paris, I couldn't resist a stop at La Chocolatière to taste their famous paillardises and relax with a cappuccino and mouth-watering chocolate mousse. What better way to leave than with the true taste of Rouen on my palate?

Metz information: [www.tourisme-metz.com](http://www.tourisme-metz.com).

Rouen information: [www.rouenvalleedeseine.com](http://www.rouenvalleedeseine.com).

Rail passes, train schedules and tickets: [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com).

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**DELECTABLE duck pâté served at La Couronne in Rouen – a typical French fare.**