

ACCIDENTAL TOURIST



ILLUSTRATION: PIET GROBLER

Paris is one of the most visited places in the world. It attracts 20 million people every year according to USA Today and these numbers are likely to rise in the run-up to the city's hosting the Olympic Games in 2024.

But while its top attraction is Disneyland (another gripe for another day), I decided to stick to the "old-school" sites instead. Given the rich history of the French capital, it's not surprising to see crowds almost everywhere you go.

First on my list during a four-day summer holiday was the Eiffel Tower. Named after engineer Gustave Eiffel, whose company designed and built the monument as the entrance to the 1889 World's Fair, it recently celebrated 300 million visitors since it opened.

In some ways, it felt like all of these people were there the morning I arrived, forcing me to stand in a long line, to hold my breath in the crowded elevator rising to the top of the tallest structure in Paris (324m if you're interested), and to dodge an army of selfie sticks like I was in a medieval sword fight.

Things were less crowded at the top of the Arc de Triomphe, perhaps because it required winding your way up 284 steps. But, as I could see from the live camera feed, modern life was waiting down below in the Place Charles de Gaulle (formerly named Place de l'Étoile because of the "star" of 12 avenues that radiate from this square).

As cars spiralled around the road, a revolving door of tourists were bussed in for quick photographs before they were taken away, oblivious to the wonder of this monument, commissioned in 1806 and inaugurated in 1836 to honour those who fought and died for France in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

It wasn't long before I sensed a pattern that repeated itself throughout the trip. I saw it at the Louvre, originally built as a 12th-century fortress but later converted into a palace. The fact that this is considered the greatest museum in the world didn't stop many people from taking a picture of themselves "touching" the glass pyramid – because that's never been done before – without bothering to explore the more than 38,000 works in eight curatorial departments inside.

I saw it at Notre-Dame, the medieval Catholic cathedral completed in 1345 and considered one of the finest examples of French Gothic architecture (this was before the April fire). I saw it at Sacré-Cœur, the Roman Catholic basilica located at the summit of Montmartre, a large

hill that is the highest point in the city. And I saw it at the Pantheon, originally built as a church but now a secular (and surprisingly high-tech) mausoleum containing the remains of distinguished French citizens, including author Victor Hugo and scientist Marie Curie.

Day after day, I couldn't help but stand in awe at the size and scope of these magnificent monuments. Indeed, there were times when I was so overwhelmed by the grandeur before me that all I could do was sit and marvel at the immensity of humankind. And yet as much as I wondered why we don't build grand structures like this anymore, I also wondered why we don't see the ones we already have. We might take a quick pic and then snap all the! selfies! to brag to our family and friends, almost like graffiti artists trying to say "I WAS HERE" by spray-painting their signatures as a means of making their mark.

No, there's nothing wrong with taking pictures to remember a special place, but we must be better about doing so. First, pretend you have a camera with limited film. This will force you to see what you're looking at, compose your image well, and avoid the hassle of going through thousands of similar pictures when you get home. Second, if you want to be in the picture, ask someone else to take it for you. Finding a trustworthy individual (ideally someone with a professional's camera around their neck) is far better than using your cheap selfie stick. You might even make a new friend or even discover the truth of Jiayang Fan's sentiments in her fascinating New Yorker article: that "flawlessness isn't the same as beauty, and the freedom to perfect your selfie does not necessarily yield a liberated sense of self".

Third, and most important, put away your camera when you're done. (If you're brave enough, you could even leave it behind once or twice so that you can stop and savour without an agenda.) There were many times on my trip when I realised that what I was seeing was too big or too beautiful to capture in a frame. So I didn't even try. Instead, I opened my ears to the sounds, opened my hands to the textures, and opened my eyes like many did not. That was more than enough. And that's because, while a picture may be worth a thousand words, sometimes a mental picture is worth more than words could ever say.

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PICTURE IT: NOT A SINGLE SELFIE



EUGENE YIGA

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Oh, Snap!

MAXED OUT

Jacci Babich sent this pic of her grandson, Peter Xavier Babich Bonior, 5, cuddling up to the statue of Max, the famous west lowland gorilla, at the Johannesburg Zoo. Peter lives in the Waterberg in Limpopo. Babich says: "Knowing the story of Max's crime-busting activities by heart, Peter climbed straight into Max's arms, where he remained.



Max returned to a hero's welcome at the zoo, and died there in his sleep in 2004.

"From his unusual 'podium' he compelled every school group or child walking by to hear how Max [in 1997] had tackled an armed robber who had mistakenly jumped into his pen, while trying to escape from police.

"Max grabbed the crook, and the crook shot Max three times! The police caught the crook and took him to gaol and Max was fixed up at the Milpark Hospital."

Want R500? Send your picture (at least 500KB) with a brief description of what's happening in the photo, plus the full names of the people pictured and where they're from, to ohsnap@sundaytimes.co.za.



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