

How To Do A Family City Break in Paris



Location

The Mandarin Oriental is an elegant, modern, and very luxurious hotel in the heart of Paris, the fashion capital of the world. This wouldn't immediately seem the natural place to bring a lively six-year-old girl and a noisy five-year-old boy. I had images of them scuffing the paintwork, breaking the remote controls on the giant flat-screen tv in their bedroom and spattering crumbs all over our fellow guests in the lift. But the Mandarin Oriental on the sleekest of chic streets, the Rue Saint-Honoré, is determined to make its small visitors feel completely at home. For a start, the huge, light-filled lobby is decorated with some very beguiling and child-friendly giant panther and butterfly sculptures. Their bedrooms come complete with colouring books and crayons, and, best of all, the gorgeous outdoor restaurant, with tables separated by giant ferns and jungle greenery, specialises in delectable cakes and buns.

Why go

Children and city breaks don't always go brilliantly together, but this is the way to do *Parisien famille* without tears.

Our first masterstroke was to take the children's little three-wheeled scooters on the Eurostar. This meant that they could whizz around, up and down the banks of the Seine, exploring the back streets of my favourite area of Paris - the Marais - and even trundling gamely all the way across the river to the Eiffel Tower and to the zoo in the Jardin des Plantes without once complaining of being tired. Indeed, it was George, my husband and I who came back to our soothing room at the Mandarin Oriental with sore feet from pounding after them for hours on end.

Our second genius plan (thanks to the Mandarin Oriental) was to employ the services of an amazing company called Family Twist. They will arrange family-oriented fun that not only introduces your children to the joys of French culture but also teaches you something new, no matter how well you think you know the capital. With their help, we had a fascinating walking tour around Montmartre, following in the footsteps of *Amelie*, we spent a couple of hours learning the secrets of baguette baking and made our own delectable pains au chocolat, and, best of all, we had a horse-drawn carriage ride around the centre of Paris, oohing and aahing at the sights as our noble steed, Nice Tea, clopped solemnly down the Champs Elysees.

What's the story

The combination of somewhere utterly luxurious and relaxing to stay, no audible 'I'm tired' and 'when can we have an ice cream' whinges (from us or from the kids), and 10 Euros each for the children to spend on as much tourist tat as they felt like meant we were all in seventh heaven. It's hard for everyone in the family to enjoy themselves at the same time: if we're shopping, the boys are bored; if we're in a museum, the kids are bored, but on this long weekend, uniquely, we all had a gorgeous time - even if we did come back with four Eiffel Tower key rings, two Paris snow globes and a musical box playing Frere Jacques.

Eating and drinking

High tea at the Mandarin Oriental's Camelia restaurant was a highlight, particularly since the Michelin-star-spangled chef, Thierry Marx, specialises in quite spectacular macarons. However, we also gorged ourselves on steak tartare and chips at the Plaza Athenee hotel's Relais restaurant which is like Covent Garden's The Ivy in terms of the calibre of celebrities it attracts, but with better service and much more delicious food. Other than these two serious meals, it was a question of ducking into whatever pavement cafe looked like it would serve a solid vegetable lasagne to the kids and a nice chilled glass of rosé to their parents. I consider it a personal triumph that my daughter clamoured to order snails at Ma Bourgogne, a dreamy bistro on the Place des Vosges. Ok, so she only managed one, shuddering with disgust as she swallowed it, but that's a start.

The room

The Paris Mandarin Oriental's theme is butterflies - so there are butterfly carpets, butterfly paintings and butterfly sculptures in alcoves. They lighten the decor and make the hotel seem playful and pretty. There's a nod to fashion in the paintings on the walls and large prints of Man Ray photographs in the rooms and the beds are, as you'd expect, indecently comfortable. However, it's really the bathrooms that are the stars of the show here. They have marble-clad showers, huge free-standing baths and tvs you can watch as you wash.

What's the crowd

We weren't the only family staying in the hotel by any means and there was a pleasing mix of couples on a romantic break, business people lounging in the spa's swish swimming pool, and families introducing their children to the City of Light. There were also mother-daughter combinations ordering glasses of pink champagne at breakfast. When the time comes, that's what I want Olga and me to do.

Out and about

Apart from the carriage ride, zoo visit, tour of Monmartre and baguette baking that Family Twist organised for us, we also visited Notre Dame and the Musée de la Marine near the Eiffel Tower. I had also booked us a table at the Eiffel Tower restaurant for lunch on our last day as otherwise the queues stretch for miles. And I was feeling so pleased with myself about it until I realised that I'd booked lunch at a restaurant called The Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas by accident and there was to be no panoramic view for us that day. But the children were stoical about missing the treat, and it means we've something left to do on our next visit.

Pack

Your chicest coat and your stoutest walking shoes. I tried to keep the children looking impeccable and Parisian but no matter how smart they looked as we set off in the mornings, by the time we staggered back to the hotel in the late afternoon they were definitely on the scruffy side of English again. Ah well.

Rate

The Family Travel package and the 'J'aime Paris en Famille' offer are available exclusively at Mandarin Oriental, Paris. Rates start from £817 per night on a B&B basis. For further information and bookings please call +33 (0)1 70 98 78 88 or visit mandarinoriental.com/paris

[Familytwist.co.uk](http://familytwist.co.uk) organises bespoke family-oriented treats in Paris

[Eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com) has trains to Paris with blissful frequency from £69 return

[Plaza-athenee-paris.com](http://plaza-athenee-paris.com) for fabulous lunches