

Paris by John Broadhurst.

'I've got the shingles,' I said. 'Oh no!
Don't say,' said Mum, 'We won't be able to go.'
No pain, but it didn't look too nice,
So Mum rang the Doctor to ask his advice.
'If you feel alright, then go,' he says.
Good job 'cause we've nearly run out of days
To prepare for our Paris adventure.
Please read on, it's all passed the censor.

I know the journey's all part of the trip,
But it was so uneventful we'll skip that bit.
Heathrow Airport, Terminal Four,
We arrived there early just to be sure.
Two novice travellers on our way,
Gate 15, we heard them say.
A 767 British Airways jet,
The biggest plane we've been on yet.
Fasten your seat belts, watch the TV,
See what to do if we ditch in the sea.
Emergency exits, inflatable slides
All designed to save our hides.
'Have a nice journey,' she smiles from the screen;
After such stern warnings, we feel quite green.
The Captain assures us, all is well
As we're off up the runway like a bat out of hell.
Up through the clouds,
Stretching like shrouds,
Or miles and miles of glimmering snow,
As higher, and higher, and higher we go.
The hostess appears with something to eat,
Some shake their heads, they're white as a sheet,
'Thank you, not today,'
We hear them say.
I was glad of the food and drink,
Besides all else, it gives less time to think
Of the video screen,
And what might have been.
The clouds melt away, and there bellow,
A patchwork of fields, which just goes to show
That the French farmers have at last,
Pulled themselves up out of the past.
Over village and town and woodland and all,
The plane gently descends towards Charles de Gaulle.
Fasten your seat belts, full on the brakes,
Forty five minutes is all it takes.
The flight itself was very fast,
So here we are in Paris at last.

Two naïve travellers collecting our cases,
Watching the other worried faces;
Wondering if their bags will appear;
But out they all come, there was nothing to fear.

Finding the hotel was our next big task,
So we look around anxiously for someone to ask.
'Be patient my dear, no need to fuss,
Take exit twenty for the shuttle bus
Which conveys you, free, right to the station,
From there take the train to your destination.'
A five day travel ticket will do the trick,
The next thing is which train to pick?
Any one we got on, we could be sure,
Would take us to the Gard du Nord.
We followed the signs to the Rue de Dunkerque,
By now dragging the case was quite hard work.
Much to our relief, across the road
We spotted our chosen holiday abode.
We walked in the entrance, oh what a state,
There was no turning back, it was much too late.
Off the walls the paper was peeling,
I hardly dare look up at the ceiling.
Room 301, on the third floor.
A lift, a lift! Who could ask for more.
When we saw it, what a shock,
Surely someone must have turned back the clock.
Iron gates, like a cage at the zoo,
With room inside for just we two.
We entered the room in trepidation;
Turned the key, and our consternation
Was all dispelled,
For there we beheld
A modern room, en suite, with TV,
As opposite as it could possibly be
To the rest of the hotel,
Which was just as well.
Shattered, relieved and nearly exhausted
We both collapsed on to a comfy bed,
There to rest and sleep,
Leaving our luggage around in a heap.

Refreshed and fed we set out to explore
This city everyone said we were sure to adore.
The first shop we saw, Tati by name,
Where all the clothes seemed much the same.
A cup of hot chocolate went down a treat,
As by then we were feeling our aching feet.
So back to our room, and to bed,
To dream of what might lay ahead.

'It's twenty past eight,' was the next thing I heard:
Breakfast wasn't exactly the last word.
Continental is what it was called,
Those expecting egg and bacon would be appalled.
Mum was happy, as croissants we had,
To be perfectly honest, it wasn't that bad.

The flea market was our first port of call,
Where some of the gear would be fit for a ball.
But most was leather, jewellery and such;
Good to have seen, but really not much
Use to us, however cheap,
But then, we only went for a peep.
And to say we had been,
As there were many other things to be seen;
Like the rabbit warren of antique shops
Held together by pillars and props.

Off we went on the Metro once more,
By now feeling more secure,
And confident, we knew where to go.
Notre Dame appealed to us both, so
Off we went, but first we spied
Tiny cages with birds clustered inside.
Our burning wish was to set them free,
But we knew if we did in trouble we'd be,
For this was a market to buy a pet,
Sadly, many would soon be needing the vet.
Yet on a much more cheerful note,
In that avenue, quite remote
Were flowers grander than I'd seen before,
Set out in stalls along the floor.
Many shapes and colours they bring to mind,
It was a pity we had to leave them behind.

Round the corner we stopped for a spell
To gaze in wonder at Sainte-Chapelle.
We moved on then to a different wonder,
Notre Dame somehow larger and grander;
Towering high into the sky.
We went inside and wondered why
There was no service taking place;
I thought the French were a religious race.
But no, just crowds taking the majesty in,
Taking photos somehow seemed a sin.
So we just sat down quietly and looked;
The magnificent stained glass had us hooked;
As did the faith that made men long ago
Design and make so beautiful a window.

The tower was next. Was it wise?
It could have meant my sad demise,
For heights and I do not agree,
So I went on reluctantly,
Up the stairs,
Winding affairs.
Respite at the shop,
All too short a stop;
On up to the next landing,
By which time I was hardly standing.
From the back I took in the view,
Which was about all that I could do.
Mum went up another flight,
Seemingly to a tremendous sight
Of Paris stretched out beneath,
Well worth the visit, however brief.

By then, we were both in need of a rest,
And wondered what to do for the best.
A river trip seemed a good idea,
Our feet must have given a happy cheer
As we set down on a huge settee,
Comfortable, relaxing, yet we were able to see
The sights alongside this romantic river,
With its dark water all a quiver.
Twenty five bridges we saw from the boat
Which was so full, I was amazed it could float.
From there, as we returned to our holiday house,
We caught sight of the phenomenal Metro mouse.
First one, then two, then hundreds more
Scurrying about the railway floor,
Under the rails, then scuttling back;
Soon the whole platform was watching the track.
We looked in amazement, yet all in vain,
They weren't even deterred by a moving train.
Megi would have been in her element here,
There were than enough mice to last her a year.

The Louvre, Monday, we were to see,
I didn't really think it would be my cup of tea;
But sculptures and paintings, all very famous,
On all these things I'm an ignoramus.
Leonardo de Vinci, Michelangelo,
Famous people even I should know.
All there for us to see,
Appreciated by even a Philistine like me.
Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo
Were perhaps the most famous works on show.

By then we were really feeling our feet,
So we sat down on the nearest seat
By the Place de la Concorde, your life you risk,
Crossing the road to the Obelisk.
Set amidst fountains and a vast open space,
With the National Assembly on the South face.

The Champs Elysee seems to go on for miles,
Too far to walk after all other trials;
So on to the Metro, the easy way,
Perhaps we'll walk it another day.
The Arc de Triomphe, larger than life,
Depicting all the French nation's strife.
A magnificent monument
Full of heartfelt sentiment;
Standing there for all to see,
Man's endless search for liberty.

Quite by chance a Rover showroom I spied,
I couldn't resist a peep inside.
There, much to our surprise
Minis done up in a strange disguise.
Leather seats, dashboard of wood,
Convertible option, and if you should
Wish to make yourself extra secure,
Have nudge bar added for fifteen hundred francs more.
All done to give them the English look,
Pity they're not in the British book.
The Frenchman's car,
In which they spar
Is always very close to the one in front,
They don't seem to park, so much as shunt.
They leave them only inches apart,
And when driving they seem to think it smart
To blow their horns, when they're in a jam;
It really is an awful sham.
Their cars are dented, bent and bruised,
Simply because they are badly abused.

The people of Paris aren't like me and you,
They must never need to go to the loo.
Public conveniences, none in sight,
So, it's cross your legs and search all night!

The Metro, France's answer to London Underground
Has many different signposts, but once they're found
Are very efficient and easy to trace,
You just need to know the name of the place
At the end of the line you are travelling on,
Then disembark at the right station.

A 'Paris Visite' is a must,
It simplifies both Metro and bus;
Removing the search for just the right change,
All you do is carefully arrange
Where you wish to go, and when,
Then put it somewhere safe till you need it again.

On Tuesday we started at Ecole Militaire,
Then walked to the Eiffel Tower from there.
At first sight half of it was lost in the mist,
But as we came nearer the sun-kissed
Top came in to view,
If only for a moment or two;
Only to disappear again,
This magnificent monster on the banks of the Seine.
Stage One was enough for me,
Mum was determined the lot to see;
So while I found somewhere comfy to sit;
She went all the way up this 'Meccano Kit.'
The view from the top, so I'm told
Sees a panorama of glorious Paris unfold.
'Take plenty of photos,' I said, 'Whilst up there.'
Sadly the film expired, so to be fair.
We just had to wait and see,
If the few Mum took would be
A perfect record of what she saw,
As there was no time to go back for more.

Leaving the Eiffel Tower behind,
The Musee d'Orsay we next had to find;
To see the impressionist painters we set off,
Monet, Manet, Pissarro, Renoir, Van Gogh,
Cezanne, Gauguin, and Toulouse-Lautrec,
So much to absorb; and my feet hurt like heck!

We walked along the Bois de Boulogne with, almost, an independent air
Because by the time we found it we were nearly in despair.
But, at last, in peace and solitude beside the lake we sat,
While on the next bench was a lady sitting with her cat.
Then, suddenly to our surprise,
Before our disbelieving eyes,
She walked off looking far from jolly
With the animal seated in her shopping trolley;
Looking for all the world like a queen,
Just another of the strange sights we've seen.
We set off again along the track,
When suddenly I said, 'Don't look back.'
For just nearby running quite free
A Rottweiler I could see,

With its Alsatian friend,
So we legged it round the nearest bend.

For shopping we went to Lafayette,
The largest store I've been in yet.
It stretched one side of Hausmann Boulevard,
On the feet it was mighty hard.
But then, hasn't the whole holiday,
Yet for getting around it's by far the best way
To see the sights, and just be near
Enough to soak up the atmosphere.
The Poor People of Paris was a hit long ago,
But they're still there, that's one thing I know.
One woman sat by the station to beg,
With a babe in arms and blood on her leg.
While other just stand,
And hold out a hand.
All with a message of some tale of woe,
No food to eat and no place to go.

If only someone would start a trend,
And invent a machine for the cigarette end.
I've never seen so many people smoke outside,
At least on the Metro they have their pride,
Or is there some unwritten law of the land;
Not to mount the train with a fag in your hand.
Some say London is a dirty place,
But some parts of Paris are a complete disgrace.
On every spare piece of wall,
However large, or however small
Has graffiti sprayed in bright coloured paint,
Although in some places it looked quite quaint;
Most of it just added to the grime,
What a pity they've nothing better to do with their time.

In the evening we went to the Follies Bergeres,
If only to say that we'd been there.
We felt so tired we nearly didn't go;
But it turned out to be a fantastic show.
Glitter, dancing, singing and lots of noise,
All carried off with perfect poise.
Costumes so colourful and sparkling bright,
Completed a truly wonderful night.

The Pompidou Centre for its part
Is home to France's modern art.
The outside is a mass of tubes,
Whilst the inside has its share of nudes.

The streets must have been cobbled long ago,
For here and there the patterns still show.
Each gendarme who guards them frantically blows a whistle,
They must make the French motorists fume and bristle.
They really are a bit of a curse,
To me they just seem to make things worse.

The evening meals weren't a great success,
In fact, one of usually made a mess
Of our choice of menu,
Even when we liked the venue.
The prices were fair if you looked around,
In some cases, cheaper than at home we found.

To Sacre-Coeur we took the bus,
It wasn't far, but was much less fuss.
There's a choice of steps or funicular;
But we decided to walk, as that was by far
The best way to see the view;
Having said that, even if you do,
You end up short of breath and tired;
Only to see why the church is so admired.
The Gothic style makes it seem dark,
And the walls are also rather stark;
But the mosaic ceiling takes your breath away
Which made me want to stop and stay,
To look at the majesty of it all;
The figure of Christ so real and tall.
The crypt was bigger than we had thought,
And yet, in hindsight, perhaps we ought
To realise such an enormous place
Would have so much underground space.

The nearby square, La Place du Tertre
Is like a view through La Fenetre.
Artists there of every style,
Some will paint you in a brief while.
All have talent in abundance,
Signifying much of the spirit of France.

Our last morning had arrived,
We consulted the guide book and contrived
To visit La Defence,
Pronounced as the French say 'France.'
The centre piece of this futuristic part of the city,
A colossal open square monument, dedicated to Fraternity;
Surrounded by towers more than thirty storeys high,
Reaching out towards the clear blue sky.
The sheer size of it all makes you want to stay,,
It's such a pity we only had part of the day

To explore this marble covered work of art;
Sadly, we only had time to start.
As this gateway to the future we left behind;
Way in the distance L'Arc de Triomphe did remind
Of visions the architects have shared;
One wonders if ours would have dared
To create such a different, controversial shape
Which was there to enhance the French landscape.
Much of Paris, it seems to me,
Is a mixture living in harmony;
Old and new, side by side
Which only the sceptic would deride;
For they have done what they thought best,
And when it's completed, then all the rest
Will appreciate the foresight of the few
Who were not afraid to try something new.

Sadly, as in other great cities on earth,
Some people have so much, they don't know their worth;
While others much sit by the roadside and beg,
Like the one with the baby and blood on her leg.
Then there was the boy who walked with a stick,
Cynically one wonders, is it just another trick,
To make a living
Out of others' giving.
Does anyone know, does anyone care,
All I know is it's a shame they're there.

Reluctantly we made our way to the plane,
A Tristar was to fly us home again.
Taking memories of this city of contrast
With its monuments so varied and vast.
Of steps, steps, steps everywhere we've gone,
Two hundred and fifty in Notre Dame alone.
Of the wonders of Paris, there for all to see,
More different from home it couldn't possibly be.
Of wide open spaces,
And busy crowded places.
Of the city centre, which was so clean,
And the outside areas, quite the other extreme.
Of dirt and litter everywhere,
The total depths of despair.
Majestic, outrageous, vast, magnificent,
Suffice to say we're glad we went.
So footsore, weary, yet content,
From all this holiday has meant;
For Paris a truly beautiful city,
It really is such an awful pity
We could not have had a longer stay,
But perhaps, yes perhaps we'll go back one day.

So we were homeward bound,
Once the shuttle bus we'd found.
The bus doors opened right onto the road,
So all our luggage, quite a heavy load
Had to be taken out amid the cars,
The French bus drivers really are a farce.
A strike by baggage handlers next
Had all passengers pretty vexed.
As we had plenty of time to spare
We chose our Duty Freees with the greatest care.
I was set on bringing home bottles of wine,
Then we boarded the plane in plenty of time.
But as the hostess poured our tea
We hit turbulence, and we could see
The wing tip straining up and down,
Mum sat there with a worried frown.
Just as suddenly there was calm and flat,
And we landed safely soon after that.
We'd saved Air Miles through the bank,
So for the flight, we've them to thank.
Tim Pretty, from Educational Travel, found us our hotel,
All in all, we did very well.
The Heathrow shuttle took us to stop number four,
And away in the distance we heard a great roar;
And as we waved the bus goodbye
We saw Concorde soar up into the sky.
The car was waiting, on the spot.
That was our holiday. That's your lot!

Oh, 'What happened to the shingles?' I hear you say.
Well I'm happy to tell you, they've gone away!