



Inside the Eiffel Tower

Funke Osae-Brown

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A few weeks ago when we arrived Holland, Abi, our training group's course leader, sold to us the idea of visiting Paris, which we toyed with for a while. Last weekend, about seven of us finally agreed to embark on this adventurous journey, travelling by road to Paris from Amsterdam. We spent close to eight hours on the road because the bus had to make some stops along the way.

After the long hours on the road, we were all surprised it wasn't a tiring journey, when we arrived in Paris the early hours of Saturday morning.

Since it was dawn, the weather was quite friendly. It wasn't therefore much of a problem waiting for nearly two hours for Nadine, our host, to pick us up at the bus station. "I'm really sorry, guys, for arriving so late to pick you up," she apologised. "I was held up in traffic."

We later discovered that the traffic was bad in Galleini that day because of the construction work going on on the metro line for that route.

After refreshing ourselves, we hit the road almost immediately. The first port of call, of course, was the famous Avenue des Champs-Elysees. It is a very long avenue, lined with trees on both sides. On this road also are world famous fashion designers like Hugo Boss, Louis Vuitton, among others, and this is also where the rich and famous in Paris live.

From this avenue, we moved towards the great Eiffel Tower, the hallmark of Paris. The week before, I saw a report on CNN on the refurbishment of the tower. Hence, when we arrived there that evening, the tower stood tall in its resplendent glory.

The paint was still shining and there was a long queue of tourists waiting to climb the tower. We were told that maintaining the tower includes applying 50 to 60 tons of paint every seven years to protect it from rust, and this happened to be the seventh year. And in order to maintain a uniform appearance to an observer who is below, three separate colours of paint are used on the tower, with the darkest at the bottom and the lightest at the top. Occasionally, the colour is changed, as it was currently being painted in a shade of brownish-bronze, and named after its designer, Gustave Eiffel, an engineer, and it is the tallest building in Paris and the fifth tallest structure in France as a whole.

There were many people milling around the tower when we arrived, and it was not a surprise therefore to know that more than 200 million people had visited the tower since its construction in 1889, including 6,719,200 just in 2006. This made it the most visited monument in the world. It has a 24 meter antenna and the structure itself is 324 metres high.

The first and second levels are accessible by stairways and lifts. A booth at the south tower base sells tickets to access the stairs, which begin at that location. At the first platform, the stairs continue up from the east tower and the third level summit is only accessible by lift.

From the first or second platform, the stairs are open for anyone to ascend or descend, regardless of whether they have purchased a lift ticket or stair ticket. The actual count of stairs includes nine steps to the ticket booth at the base, 328 steps to the first level, 340 steps to the second level, and 18 steps to the lift platform on the second level. The majority of the ascent allows for an unhindered view of the area directly beneath and around the tower, although some short stretches of the

stairway are enclosed.

We exited through the lift on the third level, as we could not continue because it was late. It was past 10 in the evening, although the sun was still up! Nature played a trick on us there as we thought we had all the time in the world!

The rumbling sound of the approaching metro jolted me back to life after we had had a long walk through some streets of Paris. Walking up and down the metro station was an excruciating task for a tired soul, but I was left with no option but to muster enough strength to carry on.

"We have to hurry," I managed to tell Nadine, my host, Mary, Toili, Farooque and Hammed, my friends. I don't want us to miss that metro just arriving.

"Don't worry about that," replied Nadine. "Metro arrives every five minutes. There's no need to hurry; before we climb down the stairs another would have arrived."

Climbing up and down the flight of stairs added to the tiredness, and I was left wondering how France was able to construct its metro numbering about three levels. Paris has one of the best metro systems in the world. It is possible to go to any part of the city within 30 minutes with proper knowledge of the metro.

It could be really confusing for a first time tourist who may be at a loss of what route to take. To make things worse, information on all the schedule boards are printed in French. Almost everyone was holding a map, including some residents of Paris!

On a particular afternoon, we almost missed our way even though Nadine, a resident, was with us. After climbing several stairs, we realised we were taking the wrong exit to board the metro, and nothing could be more hurting than to climb the

flight of stairs again. On this wing, there were no elevators; and the time it took us to walk around the station was enough to get on the next metro. By the time we arrived at the foot of the metro, it was packed full, but we managed to secure a standing position in one of the coaches.

“This is Molue,” exclaimed Mary.

“This is a re-enactment of what we have in Matatus in Kenya ,” added Toili.

We were all surprised at the possibility of having an overloaded metro in a city like Paris, a town in the heart of Europe. We thought that was only possible in Africa, a continent believed to be synonymous with everything negative. However, that was not the only negative thing we discovered about Europe. Nadine had earlier warned us to be careful with our bags, as there were bag snatchers and pick-pockets, or call it pick-bags, in Paris .

On a typical metro, like the Danfos and Molues in Nigeria, there were all kinds of people with different faces. There were beggars, as well as those who played musical instruments for money. On a particular day, we ran into a young boy with needle marks all over his arm, begging for money to eat. I saw some people who did not even have metro tickets jumping over the security bars.

According to the little boy, he could not get money from government to feed himself and was unable to get a job too. His story was interesting to me because I felt he was still very young and should have been in school. Obviously, the needle marks on his arms showed he had been into drugs. Nobody made any attempt to give him money, except an old woman who dropped a coin into his palm.

For me, Nigeria is not the only country where begging in buses is common, as the Paris example showed. With this scenario in a town termed the world's most beautiful city, it is not right for Western nations to keep labelling Nigeria, or even any African country, as bad.

To access the metro, you have to slot in your ticket through a hole. As soon as the machine reads it, the bar turns, giving you a right of passage. But there were commuters who blocked the bar with their stretched legs because they had no ticket, which is a criminal act.

Although, it was always possible to purchase metro-season ticket to travel, this is cheaper. The Paris metro tickets are available for full day, one week, 10 days, one month, and so on. Going underground in a metro took me into another world, a world different from what was happening above, in the open air.

I was able to see another side of Paris, the reality of what goes on in the belly of the earth.

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