

The Ile de la Cité

Start: Place Louis-Lépine (Métro: Cité).

Finish: Square du Vert-Galant.

Time: 3 to 5 hours, depending on how much time you spend in the churches and museums.

Best Time: Any time during the day.

Worst Time: Major holidays, when the Conciergerie and Sainte-Chapelle are closed.

There's no better place to begin exploring Paris than the Ile de la Cité, the city's historical, spiritual, and administrative center. It was here that the earliest Parisians settled more than 2,000 years ago. It was here that Roman and then French monarchs established rule. The soaring towers of Notre-Dame and the massive windows of Sainte-Chapelle proclaim the glory of Gothic art, while France's judicial and administrative systems remain firmly centered on the island where it all originated.

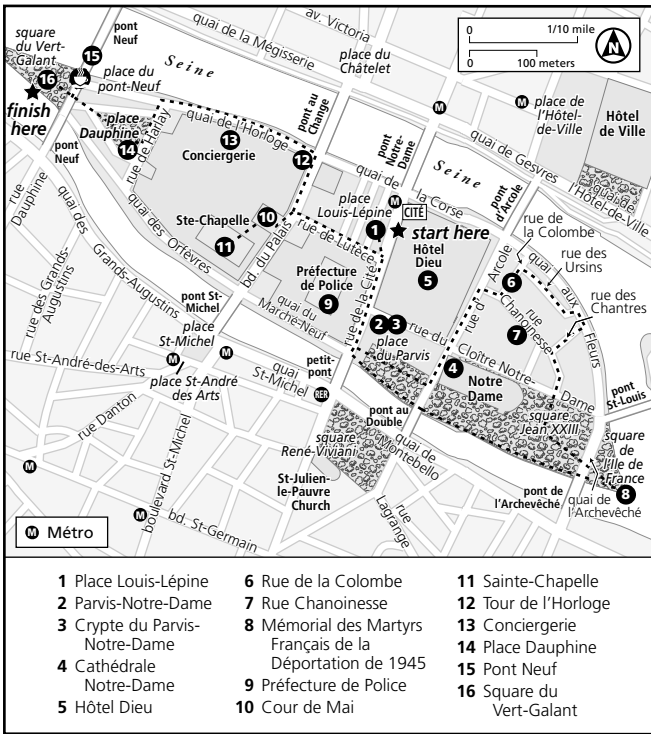
The Ile de la Cité was ideally situated for the Germanic Parisii tribe that arrived in the 3rd century B.C. The Seine formed a natural moat to protect the tribe's settlement and was an abundant source of fish. The Parisii produced excellent boatmen who traded up and down the river with neighboring tribes, a nearly forgotten chapter in the city's history that is recalled in the city's coat of arms: a boat with the Latin inscription *FLUCTUAT NEC MERGITUR* ("It floats and does not sink"). Their settlement was also conveniently located on the main north-south trading route connecting the Mediterranean with northern Europe.

That was the good news. The bad news was that the river and the road made handy routes for invaders, not just traders. The island was repeatedly attacked, first and most successfully by the Romans. Julius Caesar stormed through France in 52 B.C. after defeating the Gallic leader Vercingétorix, and quickly made the Parisii settlement an urban outpost of his Empire. The Romans found the city so agreeable that they stayed for 500 years, and the settlement became known as *Lutetia Parisiorum* (*Lutèce* in French). They built a temple to Jupiter on the site of Notre-Dame, put administrative buildings where the parvis is now, and installed their governor at the site of the current Palais de Justice. Until the 17th century, the western end of the Palais de Justice marked the limit of the island. Place Dauphine and square du Vert-Galant were created in 1607 by fastening two smaller islands to the Ile de la Cité.

Barbarians came in 276, and a population that had expanded to the Left Bank took shelter on the island and built a wall to protect itself. Attila and the Huns were next on the scene in 451; according to legend, only the help of Geneviève, Paris's patron saint, saved the city. In 486, France began to stabilize as an independent kingdom when the first Merovingian king, Clovis, defeated the last Roman governor and turned back the Visigoths and Alemanni.

In 508, Clovis made Paris his capital, and the island became known as the Ile de la Cité. Christianity took root under the Merovingian monarchs, and two grand churches were built near the royal palace: St-Etienne and the first Notre-Dame. The Carolingians succeeded the Merovingians, and Paris was subject to repeated Norman invasions. When the Carolingian dynasty ended in 987, the nobles chose as king

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Hugh Capet, comte de Paris and duc de France, beginning the new Capetian dynasty. His successors resided on the Ile de la Cité until the 14th century, and the island became the center of royal and ecclesiastical power. The kings and their administration occupied the eastern part, where the Palais de Justice now stands, while the remainder became crowded with churches and houses. The powerful canons of Notre-Dame established a school in the 11th century, attracting scholars from all over Europe to the bustling island.

Many of the famous sights here are the legacy of the Capetians. Notre-Dame was begun under Louis VII in 1193, Louis IX completed Sainte-Chapelle in 1248, and much of the Conciergerie dates from the 14th-century reign of Philippe le Bel. Charles V was the last king to live on the island; after the uprising led by Etienne Marcel, he retreated to safer quarters on the Right Bank.

2. **Parvis-Notre-Dame.** Enjoy the view of the magnificent cathedral across the square (a *parvis* is a square in front of a church). Until the 19th century, a network of medieval streets and buildings nearly obscured the cathedral. Then Baron Haussmann cleared the parvis of thousands of inhabitants as well as their houses, churches, and cabarets. The outline of this old neighborhood and its main street, rue de Neuve Notre-Dame, is traced in colored paving stones on the parvis.

Underneath the parvis is the:

3. **Crypte du Parvis-Notre-Dame.** In 1965, excavations for a new parking lot under the parvis revealed Gallo-Roman ramparts, 3rd-century rooms heated by an underground furnace system called a hypocaust, and cellars of medieval houses. Naturally, the parking lot idea was abandoned and the excavations were turned into an archaeological museum. When you go down to the crypt, you'll be at the island's original level. Throughout the centuries, builders erected new structures over the ruins of previous settlements, raising the Ile de la Cité about 7m (23 ft.). To help you visualize the kinds of buildings that once stood here, there are scale models showing how Paris grew from a small settlement to a Roman city, as well as photographs of the pre-Haussmann parvis. The crypt is open daily except Monday 10am to 6pm (10am–5pm in winter), and there's an admission fee.

Emerge from the crypt and head toward Notre-Dame. To your right is a **statue of Charlemagne** from about 1882.

In 1768, it was announced that a spot at the far end of place du Parvis, in front of Notre-Dame, would be the point from which all road distances to Paris would be measured. And so it came to pass, and today a circular bronze plaque marks *kilomètre zéro*.

Continue on to the:

4. **Cathédrale Notre-Dame.** Like many Gothic cathedrals, Notre-Dame was built on a site that had been considered holy for many centuries. This is where the Romans built a temple to Jupiter, the remains of which were found in 1711. In 528, the Merovingian king

Childebert built the first Notre-Dame here using stones from the Roman arena on the Left Bank. By the 11th century, this church and the neighboring St-Etienne were falling apart; at the same time, the population of Paris was growing. In 1160, Maurice de Sully, the bishop of Paris, had an idea to build one immense church to replace the two older ones. Three years later, work began on this cathedral, which took almost 200 years to complete; construction ended in 1359.

The facade's design is perfectly proportioned, deftly balancing space and stone, the vertical and the horizontal. The two towers are narrower at the top than at the base, lending them the illusion of great height. The central door is larger than the others, and the one on the left has a gable, introducing an asymmetry that enhances the overall harmony. Beneath the rose window over the main entrance are 28 statues of the kings of Judea and Israel that were smashed by 18th-century revolutionaries under the mistaken impression that the statues represented French kings. They were restored in the 19th century by Viollet-le-Duc.

The cathedral interior also fell victim to revolutionary fervor: Few of the original furnishings remain today because Notre-Dame was pillaged. Sometime during the revolutionary period, the stained-glass windows were also replaced with clear glass and the walls whitewashed. It wasn't until the 1830s that anyone thought about restoring the cathedral. Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) played a large role in generating public interest in the church and, finally, stimulated Louis-Philippe to order a restoration project in 1844.

Try to visit Notre-Dame on a sunny day, when light streams through the rose windows. The north rose window, representing Old Testament prophets and kings, has remained nearly intact since the 13th century. The remarkable lightness of its design is due to the then-new ability of 13th-century artisans to create windows with more glass than stone. Look for the Coustou and Coysevox sculptures in the choir; Robert de Cotte's choir stalls, on the backs of which are bas-reliefs, including scenes depicting the Virgin Mary's life; and Cliquot's organ (1730). You should also climb the tower and take

Baron Haussmann: The Man Who Transformed Paris

Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann created so much of the Paris we see today that it's impossible to ignore him. Given the job by Napoléon III, he transformed the city in the 1850s and 1860s from a medieval town into a 19th-century metropolis. He razed old Paris, widened the streets, and laid out a series of broad boulevards leading from four then-new rail stations on the city's periphery into its heart. Along their routes he created dramatic open spaces such as place de l'Opéra and place de l'Etoile (now place Charles-de-Gaulle–Etoile).

Haussmann was born in Paris in 1809 and went to the provinces, where he gained a reputation as a tough administrator. In 1853, Napoléon III appointed him Préfet de la Seine, and Haussmann began the work of revising Paris. His lack of tact and obstinate conviction in his superiority were notorious, and he was widely hated for the destruction he caused. Although his actions swept away many of the densest old neighborhoods filled with mansions and private gardens, the straight broad avenues he created did modernize the city and make it more navigable.

The Haussmann boulevards are lined with buildings of a relatively uniform pattern. Typically, they're seven stories tall, built of limestone with long wrought-iron balconies on the second, fifth, and sixth floors. The top floor usually contains irregularly shaped apartments or garrets intended as servants' quarters for the bourgeois families who occupied the lower floors. Today these tiny *chambres des bonnes* (maids' rooms) are relatively inexpensive lodgings for those priced out of expensive Paris real estate.

in Paris from above—the view is unparalleled. The entrance is outside, to the right.

Throughout the ages, Notre-Dame has served as Paris's community hall. Extravagant banquets were thrown open

to the people; plays were staged in front of the doors; and curiosities, such as elephant tusks and whale's ribs, were displayed inside.

The church was a sanctuary for the poor, the weary, and fugitives from justice. Philippe le Bel once rode inside on horseback, and it was here in 1430 that Henri VI of England was crowned king. In 1779, Louis XIV dowered 100 young women and married them off here en masse. In 1793, a belly dancer was placed on the high altar, and the saints in the niches were replaced by statues of the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau. And it was here in 1804 that Napoléon Bonaparte, usurping the role of Pope Pius VII, lifted the imperial crown from the altar and crowned himself emperor and Joséphine empress.

Notre-Dame was constructed as an expression of profound religious faith, and the sheer beauty and force of the building—with its sculpture-encrusted facade, leering gargoyles, and flying buttresses (which date from the 14th c.)—have made it perhaps the highest single artistic achievement of the Gothic period.

When you leave the cathedral, go right and you'll see the entrance to the:

5. **Hôtel Dieu**, across the street on rue du Cloître Notre-Dame. Built by Diet from 1866 to 1878 in neo-Florentine style, the Hôtel Dieu is the main hospital for central Paris, replacing the original 12th-century Hôtel Dieu that had run the entire width of the island, touching both riverbanks. The location of the medieval hospital may have been chosen for its proximity to Notre-Dame. (With a mortality rate of 20% in those days, patients needed all the help they could get—both divine and medical.) Or it may have been placed conveniently close to the Seine in order that the water would flush away hospital waste. Go in the main entrance and take a break in the spacious neoclassical courtyard, whose small garden and fountain make a quiet oasis on this busy island.

From rue du Cloître Notre-Dame, make a left on rue d'Arcole. The entire area from here to the eastern tip of the island was once occupied by the cloister of Notre-Dame, a small city-within-a-city of winding streets and

three-story half-timbered houses. It was here that Notre-Dame's canons established a prestigious school where scholars like Pierre Abélard (see Walking Tour 7, Stop 7) and Maurice de Sully taught the sons of kings. Fortunately, the neighborhood was spared Haussmann's restructuring due to the baron's death. Though much has been renovated beyond recognition, the narrow interior streets I'll lead you down retain a flavor of medieval Paris.

From rue d'Arcole, make a right onto rue Chanoinesse and then a left onto:

6. **Rue de la Colombe**, dating from the 13th century. At **no. 6**, the traces of the 3rd-century Gallo-Roman wall are outlined in colored paving stones on the street, and at **no. 4**, a medieval door topped with a medallion of two doves (*colombes*) recalls the St-Nicolas tavern that stood here in the 13th century.

Continue on to **rue des Ursins**, turn right, and notice **no. 7**, the 17th-century house where playwright Jean Racine allegedly lived. Follow the street to rue des Chantres and turn right onto:

7. **Rue Chanoinesse**, scene of the crime of the century—the 14th century, that is. Somewhere on this street (the exact addresses are unknown) were the adjoining shops of a barber and a baker, the latter renowned for the excellence of his pâtés. At the time, the neighborhood was packed with students, many of them foreign. If one disappeared every so often, it was assumed that he fell victim to one of the muggers and thieves who plied the area. But when a German student vanished one day in 1387, his dog began barking furiously in front of the barbershop. No one could get the dog away from the shop, so police were called. After an interrogation we may assume was forceful, the barber finally confessed that for years he had been slitting the throats of students and selling the bodies to the neighboring patisserie. Both culprits were placed in an iron cage and burned alive, and their grisly story became the subject of a popular medieval song.

Look for **nos. 22** and **24**, excellent examples of 16th-century gabled canonical houses. The entry hall of **no. 26** is paved with tombstones (gray slabs, no engravings),

probably from one of the many church cemeteries that dotted the island. A buzzer opens the door any day except Sunday. Retrace your steps and notice the well-preserved 17th-century facade of the **Hôtel du Grand Chantre** at **no. 12. No. 10** is thought to be the location of the house of Héloïse's uncle, where she and Abélard fell in love (see Walking Tour 7, Stop 7).

Follow rue Chanoinesse to the entrance to **square Jean XXIII**, where you'll see restrooms on your right. This stately park is usually busy with people enjoying a magnificent view of the cathedral's east end. The 14th-century flying buttresses stretch like graceful tentacles from the apse that joins Viollet-le-Duc's 90m (295-ft.) spire. The park is on the site of the archbishop's residence, built in the 17th century and destroyed during a riot in 1831. The square opened in 1844; at its center is the neo-Gothic fountain known as Fontaine de la Vierge.

Go to the tip of the square and cross quai de l'Archevêché, heading into square de l'Île de France, to reach the haunting:

8. **Mémorial des Martyrs Français de la Déportation de 1945.** Descend the stairs (you'll see the iron spikes blocking the opening at the tip of the island), then turn left at the bottom, and pass through the narrow opening. Designed by G.H. Pingusson in 1962, the memorial is dedicated to the 200,000 French who died in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. The concrete, iron spikes, and claustrophobic rooms vividly convey a sensation of imprisonment. One room is constructed around 200,000 quartz pebbles—in the Jewish religion it's traditional to place a stone or pebble on a grave, and there's one pebble here for each person who died. Also inside are several other small tombs holding bits of soil from each of the concentration camps.

Retrace your steps across quai de l'Archevêché but, for variety, walk on the left side of square Jean XXIII, which affords a view of the tree-lined Left Bank. Cross rue d'Arcole, continuing on the left side of Parvis-Notre-Dame, and make a right on rue de la Cité. On your left is the:

9. **Préfecture de Police.** Here in the Palais de la Cité's old barracks, the police joined the Resistance against the

Nazis in 1944 by twice locking themselves inside—first on August 19, then on August 26. Almost 300 were killed.

Head back toward the Cité Métro station. You'll come to a wide pedestrian street, rue de Lutèce. Turn left and head toward the elaborate Louis XVI wrought-iron gate separating boulevard du Palais from the:

10. **Cour du Mai.** The May Courtyard took its name from an old custom in which clerks of the court planted a tree there every May 1 (though you won't find any trees here now). The buildings around it were constructed between 1783 and 1787, on the site of the old Merovingian palace that was destroyed by fires in 1618 and 1776. During the revolution, crowds used to gather on the steps in front of the courtyard to watch victims of the Reign of Terror pass from the yard on the right, which abuts the Conciergerie, to carts waiting to take them to the guillotine at place de la Révolution (now place de la Concorde). The steps lead to the **Palais de Justice**, Paris's law-court complex stretching from boulevard du Palais to place Dauphine. The courts that Balzac described as a "cathedral of chicanery" are open to the public, with the entrance to the left of the great gate. Here you'll also find the entrance to:
11. **Sainte-Chapelle.** This chapel, the oldest part of the Palais de Justice complex, was built between 1246 and 1248 by Louis IX to house two significant religious artifacts: a piece of the cross on which Christ was said to have been crucified, and what may be the Crown of Thorns (both have been moved to Notre-Dame and are on view only on Good Friday). It's said that, to acquire these artifacts, St. Louis paid nearly triple the amount required for the entire church's construction.

Sainte-Chapelle really consists of two chapels, one on top of the other. The *chapelle basse* (lower chapel) was used by palace servants and is ornamented with fleur-de-lis designs. The *chapelle haute* (upper chapel) is one of the highest achievements of Gothic art. Although the painted columns and much of the sculptures date from the 19th century, two-thirds of the stained-glass windows are original, most from the 13th century. Old and New

Testament scenes are emblazoned in 15 perfect stained-glass windows covering 612 sq. m (nearly 6,600 sq. ft.). The 1,134 scenes trace the Christian story from the Garden of Eden to the Apocalypse, and you read them from bottom to top and from left to right. The first window to the right represents the story of the Crown of Thorns; St. Louis is shown several times. Some of the windows show the church's construction, and the great Rose Window is meant to depict the Apocalypse.

Go left to quai de l'Horloge to see the:

12. **Tour de l'Horloge**, the site of Paris's first public clock, built in 1371 and restored many times. The frame is emblazoned with the royal fleurs-de-lis, and the figures represent Justice on the right and Law on the left. The clock no longer works.

Around the corner at **no. 1** quai de l'Horloge is the:

13. **Conciergerie**, much of which was built by Philippe le Bel in the 14th century as an extension of the Capetian palace. The Salle des Gardes and Salle des Gens d'Armes are particularly fine examples of secular Gothic architecture. Later, this building's prisons were used as holding cells for the revolution's tribunals. Marie Antoinette was held here before her execution; others imprisoned here before execution included Robespierre and Danton. Exactly 4,164 "enemies of the people" passed through the Conciergerie between January 1793 and July 1794, more than half of them headed for the guillotine.

Continue along quai de l'Horloge and first you'll see the **Tour de César**, where Ravillac, Henri IV's assassin, was held and probably tortured. Next is the **Tour d'Argent**, where the crown jewels were stored at one time. Both towers were built around 1300. The **Tour de Bonbec** is the last and oldest tower, built around 1250. It was called *bonbec* ("babbler") because the torture inflicted here was so intense. Prisoners had their legs squeezed between two planks or ropes tied progressively tighter around different parts of their bodies until they cut into the skin. The oldest form of torture was a trap door that opened into a pit of razor-sharp spikes. You'd babble, too.

Including the Tour de l'Horloge, these four towers are the only remains of the Capetian palace and were restored in the 19th century. Notice how the facade of the Conciergerie changes from a Gothic style to a Corinthian style as you walk west along the quai.

Turn left on **rue de Harlay** and notice the Louis XIII facade at **no. 2**. On your right is the restful:

14. **Place Dauphine**, another of Henri IV's successful projects. The king who ended the religious wars was also Paris's first urban planner. After designing the royal place des Vosges (see Walking Tour 3, Part I, Stop 3), the monarch decided to build a more enclosed square where bankers and merchants could discreetly conduct their work. In 1607, Henri IV appropriated two small islands located off the Ile de la Cité and joined them to the larger island. He then designed a triangular square surrounded by 32 houses of brick and stone and named it after the Dauphin, Louis XIII. Alas, the beautiful symmetry of the enclosed square was destroyed in 1874 when the houses on the eastern end were destroyed to give a better view of the Palais de Justice. A later designer realized that the vacuous facade was best hidden and had a curtain of trees planted on the east side in an attempt to restore the sense of a private square. **No. 14** boasts one of the few facades retaining its original look.

Pass between the buildings at the point of the triangle and you'll come to:

15. **Pont Neuf**, where it used to be said that at any hour of the day you could meet "a monk, a loose woman, and a white horse." Pont Neuf is Paris's oldest bridge (even though its name means "new bridge"). Henri III laid the first stone on May 31, 1578, yet was long gone by the time it was finished and officially opened by Henri IV 29 years later. Pont Neuf was the first stone bridge built that wasn't lined with houses. With a total of 12 arches, pont Neuf is actually two bridges (they don't quite line up)—one stretching from the Right Bank to the Ile de la Cité, the other stretching from the Left Bank to the island. Originally the bridge served as a lively social center where

Parisians went to do their banking, be entertained by jokers and street performers, and even have their teeth pulled.

Note the **statue of Henri IV**, erected by Louis XVIII using bronze melted down from a statue of Napoléon that once stood atop the column in place Vendôme.



Take a Break At 13 place du pont-Neuf is the **Café Henri IV**, an old-fashioned wine bar redolent with the aromas of freshly baked pies and strong cheeses. Try an open-face sandwich slathered with rich pâté, and wash it down with one of the excellent wines sold by the glass.

When you leave the cafe, walk down the stairs behind the statue of Henri IV into:

- Square du Vert-Galant**, created at about the same time as place Dauphine. This is about as close to the river as you can get without actually being in it; the square is at the level of the Ile de la Cité during the Gallo-Roman period, about 7m (23 ft.) lower than it is now. Enjoy the view of the Louvre and the gargoyles on pont Neuf. The shrubs, flower beds, and benches make this a great picnic spot. You can pick up drinks and snacks next to the park at the embarkation point for the tourist boats (*vedettes*) that ply the Seine.

To find the Métro, return to pont Neuf and turn left. Cross the bridge to the Right Bank and you'll reach the pont Neuf Métro station on your left.