

I'll swap you London for this

He got Yves Saint Laurent and Eiffel Tower views; they got Primark and a North London terrace. But house-swapping isn't all cognac and crêpes, as *Mark Piggott* finds

Our Paris homeswap adventure begins ominously: Emma, our five-year-old daughter, vanishes between the Metro platform and the train, and we haul her to safety. On entering the apartment, a lightbulb pops, and we're plunged into darkness. Finally, we're about to take a stroll when our key snaps in the lock. We are locked out of a stranger's apartment with no money and it looks like rain. Emma begins hopping about urgently: "I need a poo..."

After a swift search, we stumble across a town hall. Entering, I smile sheepishly at the receptionist; her eyes widen. Suddenly unable to recall even a basic civil greeting, the first French word I learnt at school springs to mind. Smiling cheesily, I point at my daughter. "Erm... *merde?*"

The receptionist's eyes widen farther, but she appears to get the message. We manage to locate the caretaker, a fearsome woman in her forties, who, after asking some no doubt pertinent questions, gives us a key.

It feels odd, being in a stranger's home like burglars, their photos and personal effects all over the place; we will never meet, our trains passed each other beneath the Channel. Home-swapping is increasingly popular not only because

it saves on hotel costs, but also because by staying in someone's apartment — a rather small apartment — we're experiencing the "real" Paris, away from tourist traps, buying groceries in local shops and doing our best to integrate.

First thing next morning, there is a knock at the door: it's the caretaker. Wine bottles, we deduce from her animated gestures, are not to be thrown down the rubbish chute: the sound of bottles breaking echoed round the block late into the night. My wife is escorted to the recycling bins.

Undaunted, we set out to see Paris. Neuilly, halfway between the Arc de Triomphe and the huge square Polo of La Défense, is pleasant and friendly. Walking along the quiet, almost subdued streets, you are struck by the ornate buildings (browns, terracotta), the sound of doves, the splendid churches, the becalmed traffic, overhanging

balconies that burst with flowers, and gardens and terraces that appear to float on air. The café on the corner is even called *Le Café du Parc*; with its vigilant waiters, awnings, cognac and crêpes, it looks exactly as you would expect a Parisian café to look, like a set from that greatest of all French movies, *Les Aristochats*.

For someone conceived — as I was — at a Socialist Labour League conference in Morecambe, Disneyland ►

◀ Paris is a vision of hell, except harder to enter. The kids seem unimpressed; queues for the popular rides stretch to the horizon. A downpour sends us scurrying into one of the vast domes where ancient cartoons play 24/7 and everyone eats cold chips and drinks warm beer at seven quid a pint. I attempt to inquire after a rental buggy for half a day by repeating, "Demijour?" The girl sighs impatiently: "Please, sir, speak English."

On our way home, we pop into a Monoprix chainstore. I push Sean in his buggy straight into a glass door, which makes a loud noise as we bounce off. The place is closed: inside, a security guard watches us coolly as we stagger away. Back home, the apartment is a death trap: handles keep falling off; bulbs pop so often they induce epilepsy; a shelf in our bedroom falls down. Next morning, we are told off for hanging washing on the balcony.

We visit Le Jardin d'Acclimatation, which is everything Disneyland is not: relatively inexpensive, friendly, city-central and full of novelties that young kids adore. (The hall of mirrors at the entrance alone provoked more smiles from Emma and Sean than a whole day at Disneyland.) Set over a vast, tree-spotted 20ha (about 50 acres) park, the Jardin has rides, boats, animals, birds, toddler parks, cafés, music, sound-gardens with chiming gongs, big dippers, swans, mystical towers and theatre.

Next day we sense a buzz in the air: it's the finale of the Tour de France. The vast crowd is composed mainly of loud, drunk Norwegians brandishing giant foam hands. The organisers appear to believe that the spectators relish hours of opticians' floats and bank adverts in return for a brief flash of Mark Cavendish's green jersey.

Paris is London in a parallel universe, familiar yet not quite the same: it has the same alphabet, people and companies; then you look up expecting to see Marble Arch and instead glimpse the ubiquitous Eiffel Tower. As we walk back along the mega-flash rue St-Honoré, with its Cartier and YSL, I wonder why the swapper in our North London home was so excited about seeing Primark.

Our time in Paris is almost up and we've been bowled over. The food is excellent and not as expensive as feared, and for the shopaholic there's everything you could need. Paris may be the city of love simply because you fall in love with the city itself; or perhaps it has more to do with the seductive promise of good wine, fine food, clean sheets and white lace. Somehow it just does its job. During our stay, for the most part, it's hot during the day with rain at night to damp down the humidity and dirt — they even get the weather right. What more can you ask of a city?

Before leaving for home, we inspect the apartment. The place seems undamaged, at least structurally; I hope our home-swapper has been as diligent. We are just chinking champagne glasses — au revoir, Paris! — when Sean does a muck-spreader impression all over the floor. Again I recall the first French word I learnt; it begins with M.

Fire Horses, Mark Piggott's debut novel, is published by Legend Press

Tackle the city with kids

1 At Métro stations, you often have to ask the guard to open the exit doors, then swipe your ticket for pushchairs, then swipe your own ticket separately.

2 Le Jardin d'Acclimatation beats Disneyland Paris hands down. So don't schlep to Marne-la-Vallée-Chessy; go to Sablons.

3 Encourage kids to say "Bonjour", "Merci" or anything French, really. They will draw a smile from the most aloof waiter.

4 Eat inside. The kids can't escape on to busy roads, and it's less expensive.

5 Paris has surprisingly few cyber-cafés, so make sure you have internet access organised and book tickets online to avoid queueing.

6 Go to Tour Montparnasse rather than the Eiffel Tower. The views are better, it's safer for children and there's a bar. There is also a superb view from the Ferris wheel beside the



Family fun Head for the Louvre and take a ride on the nearby Ferris wheel

Louvre, but mind the child-sized gaps.

7 Everyone speaks English; they just enjoy the fact that you don't speak French. Get the kids to talk for you.

8 At pedestrian crossings, cars won't stop unless you put a foot on the road.

9 In the suburbs, few shops open later than 8pm, so pack enough nappies and baby food.

10 Remember: no one cares about you. Paris is rich, suave and sophisticated, and to the French "les rosblifs" are bottom of the pile. They will expect you to mess up and not have any money — and are happy when this is the case since it makes them feel even more superior.

Advice for the first-time home-swapper

Use a reputable website that charges a joining fee. This filters out a lot of time-wasters. Choose sites that are based in the UK. We booked our Paris home-swap through Interface (intervac.co.uk), which costs £49.99 to join. Other good sites include: homebase-hols.com; homelink.org; ukholidayswapshop.co.uk

Leave your opposite number copious notes on all the mundane aspects of your home that you take for granted, eg, recycling, boiler, shower. When arranging key-swaps, ensure you have a fallback. **If you have young children, take out extra insurance and warn your fellow swappers to keep valuable/breakable items out of reach.**