

Heather's Top Ten Tips for a Stress-Free Visit to Versailles

A Special Mini-Guide for the 100th edition of the Secrets of Paris Newsletter, June 2010

As part of my job as a private guide, I have taken many people to the Château de Versailles over the years, and have created detailed itineraries for countless others. Most people don't think they need a guide for Versailles, or they simply rely on the audio guides provided inside the Château. And that's fine for knowing what painting you're looking at or which passage Marie-Antoinette took to avoid being captured by the mob. But no audio guide can help you with the logistics of a visit to Versailles.

My specialty is helping get my clients to and from the chateau in the most comfortable way possible based on their budget, explaining which tickets are best and where to get them, how to avoid the lines, where to find the cafés, bookshops and bathrooms where there's no line, how to navigate the maze of gardens to see the hidden groves and fountains, and the most efficient way to visit the Grand Trianon and Marie-Antoinette's Domain without collapsing from exhaustion.

Of course, I can't take all of you around Versailles, there's only one of me. So here are a few tips to help you prepare your own trip to the Sun King's palace:



1. **Allow at least six hours if not a full day.** There are far too many tour companies offering four-hour tours, including the travel time to and from Paris in a minibus. Not only will you feel rushed, you'll miss some of the best parts of Versailles and the opportunity to relax in some of the most magnificent gardens in France. Versailles isn't just enormous (the chateau alone covers 11 hectares, the grounds are over 800 hectares), it's also considered the apex of French arts, architecture, and landscape architecture. Louis XIV spared no expense in showing the world the magnificence of his kingdom, so do yourself a favor and give yourself enough time to enjoy it properly.

2. **Get your tickets online and print them out in advance.** Don't even think of showing up without a ticket or you'll have to stand in two lines: one for your ticket and one for the actual entrance. The [maze of ticket options](#) is very confusing. Children under 18 and those with a Paris Museum Pass get in free to the Château and Trianons, but do not get audio guides nor access to the gardens on summer weekends when the fountains are on (Musical Fountain Show). The Passport covers everything, so it's worth the extra splurge unless you're positive you're not going to the gardens or Trianons.

3. **When to Go?** If you have the luxury of deciding when to go, I would suggest September or October, when the crowds are smaller, the fountains still on, and the weather more reliably dry and mild. Of course, most people go when they can. If you can, avoid weekends and Wednesday afternoons (popular with school kids). In the summer try and get there right at 9am to avoid being in the chateau when it's hot and stuffy. In the winter the gardens are free because there are no flowers, the statues are covered, and the fountains are empty (although some people like this). Versailles is closed Monday (except for the gardens in summer, which are open daily).



4. **Visit the Tourism Office.** If you arrive in town without a ticket, you can stop by the [Versailles Tourism Office](#) and buy the Passport there (there's usually no line). It's conveniently located on the street between the chateau and the Rive Gauche RER station, at 2bis Ave de Paris. They can also give you a great map of the town that includes the chateau, and tell you about the open-air markets, antique shops, current special events around town, and local restaurants. There are info desks at Versailles, but with long lines.



5. **Educate yourself.** They won't do it for you. There are few signs around Versailles explaining what you're looking at. Even the audio guides only provide a minimal of info. Read up on the history in advance, see movies or read books about Versailles. There's actually a lot of [free info right on the website](#), with pictures (of what it looks like without the crowds). If you arrive clueless, stop in one of the bookshops (after you show your ticket, but before you start the tour of the State Apartments) and grab one of the small picture books about Versailles (available in English) that explain what's in each room, the history, the gardens, etc. You'll get so much more out of your visit if you know a little background and read about some of the fun historical anecdotes.

6. **Drink and go to the loo BEFORE you enter the State Apartments.** The masses of visitors to Versailles are funneled through the main part of the chateau in a u-shaped walk through a series of rooms, including the King's Bedchamber and the Hall of Mirrors. Once you enter the first room, you have to keep going as the crowd is pushing from behind. There are no short cuts, no places to turn around, no bathrooms and no places to get a drink of water. This is where I witness the highest number of visitor meltdowns (and not just the kids, either). Be prepared with bottles of water. They're sold from stands in the gardens, but not at the chateau entrance, so bring them with you from Paris. There are bathrooms, cash machines, and coatcheck just after you go through the ticket check.



7. **Check your bags and coats.** I highly recommend checking everything but a small bag with your money and camera (and water bottle). You will be in there at least an hour, often being jostled and squashed. It becomes a pain to carry coat, umbrella, heavy bag, etc. And the more junk you're hauling, the bigger target you are for pickpockets (a problem due to the crowds since the time of Louis XIV!). Just be sure to get your stuff before going to the gardens (you won't have the energy to go back at the end of the day).

8. **Don't miss the gardens and the Trianons.** The least crowded parts of Versailles are the gardens (lots of room to spread out) and the Grand and Petit Trianons, where there are



hardly ever huge crowds. Get yourself a garden map at the entrance so you can find all of the hidden groves where the king would throw parties. Some are absolutely amazing. The [garden fountains](#) go off in the summer on weekends, but only for certain hours, so be sure you know exact times so you don't get all the way out there and miss them. The Trianons are about 15 minutes' walk from the chateau, and the Hameau (hamlet) another ten. If you're really beat take the little train (about €6) which loops between the chateau, the canal, and the Trianons. If you have kids (or a fascination with farm animals), it's totally worth the trek out to the

Hameau, especially in spring or early fall.

9. **You can eat at Versailles.** I usually stop for lunch or a snack at one of the cafés such as [La Flotille](#) at the top of the Grand Canal (bottom of the gardens). It's not extraordinary food, but these cafés are a good place to stop and get much-needed rest and sustenance before continuing to the Trianons. There are also a few snack stands hidden in the gardens, fresh squeezed OJ carts, and an Angelina's tearoom in Marie-Antoinette's Domain. No need to reserve. If you have the energy, I recommend eating in the town at any of the cute bistros around the Marché Notre Dame.

10. **Getting there and getting out.** There are [several ways to get to Versailles](#). The RER C goes direct from Paris to Versailles Rive Gauche (once on the platform in Paris, look for the Vick or Vero trains). It's the end of the line, and then you have a 10-minute walk to the chateau (follow the masses, you'll see it well before you reach it). You can also take the SNCF Train from the Gare St Lazare to the Versailles Rive Droit station, which is about 15 minutes of walking, but it's convenient if you want to stop at the Marché Notre Dame for the open air and covered food markets. Do be sure to buy a round-trip ticket from Paris if you're returning by train or RER, as the lines will be long at the ticket window in Versailles, and you don't need that at the end of the day! Did I mention Versailles was enormous? Once you have walked for hours, and have arrived at the Hameau, you'll have to walk all the way back. Even if you use the little train, there is still a lot of walking (and the wait in line for the train). One sanity saver I use is the Versailles Taxi (06 48 16 39 38 or 01 39 50 50 50). I have them pick me up at the Hameau (Porte de St Antoine) and take me directly to the train station. If you have the budget and are traveling with kids or anyone who tires easily, I would recommend hiring a private driver to take you in the morning and pick you up in the afternoon. For some of my tour clients, the best part of the day is when the air-conditioned minivan appears exactly at the right place and the right time to take us back to Paris (they're on call, so I can ring them whenever we're ready to go and tell them where to meet us). This is usually about €80 each way. I use [Cab Service Prestige](#) (01 75 62 01 63), but almost any private taxi service in Paris offers this service. Finally, you can drive yourself, but do come early to find space in the paid parking areas (the ones next to the Trianons are less crowded).



I hope this mini-guide makes your visit to Versailles go a little more smoothly. There is so much more to the palace that I couldn't possibly cover here, such as the extra tour circuits of the Chateau including the Dauphin's Apartments and the Carriage Museum, the equestrian shows at the Royal Stables and fireworks shows in summer, bike rentals to explore the park grounds (beyond the gardens), and the many fascinating facts about the Chateau and the royal and imperial families who lived there. If you're looking for more travel planning advice or would like to schedule a private tour, don't hesitate to contact me at secretsofparis@gmail.com.



*This mini-guide was created for the Secrets of Paris Newsletter.
No part of it can be republished, retransmitted or redistributed without written permission.*

Copyright © 2010, Heather Stimmler-Hall for www.secretsofparis.com, all rights reserved.