

COLUMNS

## How do Chinese tourists really feel about Paris?

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*View from Four Seasons Paris*

By **Philip Guarino**

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There is no denying that France holds a special place in the hearts of Chinese tourists.

Last year, an estimated 2.2 million mainland Chinese travelers visited the country, up from 1.7 million in 2013. And owing to a weaker euro, French retailers have continued to see strong sales to Chinese travelers in 2015.

The allure of Paris as a "must-visit" has not dimmed even as more Chinese travelers have returned to France for their second or third trip.

According to the city's Regional Tourism Committee, the number of Chinese visitors to the French capital increased nearly 49 percent year-on-year from January to August of this year.

But these rosy statistics only paint half of the picture.

With volumes growing, and many top tourist destinations now seeing an influx of Chinese tourists, what do the Chinese tourists themselves think of Paris?



*Philip Guarino is Europe director of China Luxury Advisors*

To find out, China Luxury Advisors interviewed Chinese travelers in Paris near the high-end retail landmark, Galeries Lafayette. Below are featured two interviewees, names withheld.

*Woman: age 35, independent traveler, middle/upper-middle class from top-tier city in China, frequently in Paris*

Would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself?

I'm from Hangzhou, close to Shanghai. I'm married and have a relatively good job in China.

How do you feel about shopping in France in general, and Paris in particular?

It's quite nice, although this isn't my first time to go shopping in Paris.

I've bought some nice things here and was also able to get some gifts for friends and family, which are not the same as what I can buy in China.

So you've been to Paris many times, but what brought you here for the first time? And how'd you get here?

My first time in Paris, we traveled with a group of people, maybe six or seven years ago.

Before coming, we [she and her husband] contacted a tourism agency, since we didn't speak French and were not familiar with the country.

What about your first time in France? Did you also go shopping? How was it?

Yes, of course, the first time we came here, we wanted to see all the romantic things about France the Eiffel Tower, the Seine, the Mona Lisa and we went to Galeries Lafayette for shopping. It was an okay experience, but there were too many Chinese people.

As we couldn't speak French or English, the experience was not very good all the time.

Back then, I only knew of the most famous brands, like Louis Vuitton, but France impressed me with its huge collection of luxury and beauty brands so I had to come back.

What about this time? Did you come again via an agency? It seems you are familiar with Paris.

Ah, yes, after the first time, we came to Europe many times on package tours and also for shopping.

But after a few trips with tour guides, we decided to come by ourselves, since it's cheaper and actually the guides usually don't know all the information we need.

This time we just came with friends, and I wanted to buy some new items, which I might have to wait to purchase in China.

You know here in Europe, either you can buy something before it is released in the Chinese market or you can buy something at a lower price than in China.

Do you feel differently this time traveling without a tour guide? Has anything changed in Paris?

I do think the service is getting better, not a lot better, but at least it's not getting worse.

A few years ago, there weren't that many Chinese-speaking salespeople here. Now some brands for instance, Miu Miu have Chinese salespeople, so I can speak my language.

Also, some of the saleswomen have connected with me on WeChat. I now can contact them to learn about new products.

As you know in China, I can't always get the latest news.

One thing hasn't changed: there is still a sea of Chinese tourists here.

One last question. Did you choose Galeries Lafayette specifically, or just come shopping here because you were taken here the first time you came to Paris?

I prefer Galeries Lafayette, since it's very big, and clearly divided into men's and women's sections.

My husband can do his shopping if he doesn't want to shop with me and it is also close to many other places the Louvre, the Seine, et cetera.

*Man: age 24, from lower-middle-class family in Southwest China, first time in Paris*

Would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself?

I'm 24, from Wuhan [second-tier city in Southwest China]. I just graduated from university, so I decided to travel to Europe, since I hadn't been here yet, with my girlfriend.

Why did you choose Europe, or Paris?

It had to be France because it's the best place for her to go shopping and the most romantic city for love. I must say that she decided it.

For me, Europe has a lot of things to offer and I have many things to discover in Paris.

I definitely don't want to spend all my time here at a shopping mall.

So what have you visited in Paris so far? How have you found things here?

We just visited the Eiffel Tower and, yes, we will visit other famous places. It is our second day in France and the tour guide took us to Galeries Lafayette. It's really a big shopping place and my girlfriend bought many things.



*Picture posted on Weibo by Chinese tourists with Paris' Eiffel Tower in the background*

What did she buy? And what about you? Did you buy anything for yourself?

Well, all the things that girls love.

She bought lots of cosmetics, as she prefers the quality here in Europe. She got me some things as well, but I'm not an expert on that.

I actually didn't buy a lot, but I got a few pair of nice leather shoes for myself and my family.

Then we went to some smaller stores to buy some special gifts for friends.

Why do you want to buy something from smaller shops for friends?

I just feel that maybe my friends might like something different, because here you see too many Chinese people, too, too many.

The chance that we end up buying the same things is really big, so I prefer to explore other shops that aren't so mass-market.

Do you have any idea of where to find the smaller, private shops? Or maybe the guide will take you there?

I don't know yet. We have two free days without the guide, so I might check on the Internet and try to see what's interesting.

I made some notes before coming here, so I know maybe I can go to the district called the "Marais," they say it's nice and interesting for young people there.

Speaking of the Internet, how did you find the information for shopping so far? How did you research the brands before traveling?

Usually it's my girlfriend who prepares the information about shopping. She seems to know everything about fashion, and I just take care of the map so we don't get lost.

I know she got a lot of information from her friends, who have already visited France, and she also contacted some "daigou" [gray-market resellers], as she has bought foreign brands from these people before.

Based on your experience, how do you find the shopping here?

It's okay. I guess with so many Chinese people, at least you don't feel strange.

Sometimes I didn't realize I was in France, because even here in the shopping mall, the salespeople can speak Chinese to me.

So far, it's been okay. Busy. Maybe when I finish this trip, I'll be able to say whether I had a good time.

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*These interviews were conducted before the Nov. 13 Paris attacks.*