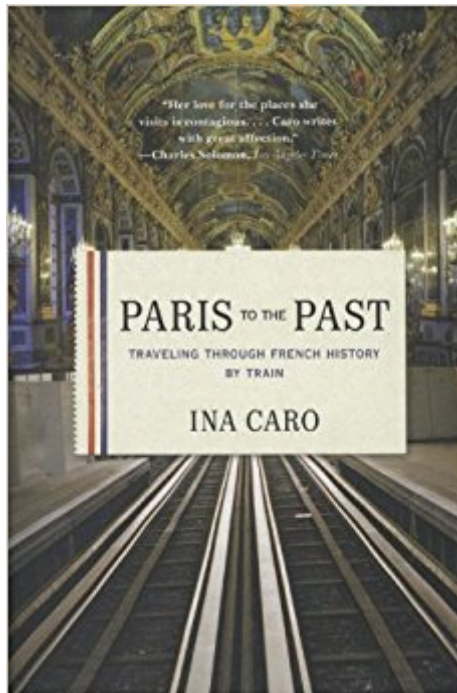




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Paris To The Past: Traveling Through French History By Train



Synopsis

Would rather go to France with Ina Caro than with Henry Adams or Henry James. *Newsweek* In one of the most inventive travel books in years, Ina Caro invites readers on twenty-five one-day train trips that depart from Paris and transport us back through seven hundred years of French history. Whether taking us to Orleans to evoke the visions of Joan of Arc or to the Place de la Concorde to witness the beheading of Marie Antoinette, Caro animates history with her lush descriptions of architectural splendors and tales of court intrigue. "[An] enchanting travelogue" (Publishers Weekly), *Paris to the Past* has become one of the classic guidebooks of our time. 6 maps

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With charming humor and easy erudition, Ina Caro's *Paris to the Past* is an exuberant journey from the City of Light to the outlying monuments of its storied, glorious, peculiar, and even culinary past. Ushered from Romanesque church to Gothic cathedral, from gilded bronze doors to walled cities, from Joan of Arc to Marie de Rohan to Rochefoucauld, we travel with our companionable, piquant narrator into the vagaries and unexpected corners of time and place. This is a gem of a book-- part history, part travelogue, part love affair impossible to put down, until that is, we pack it for Paris.--Brenda Wineapple, author of "Genet: A Life of Janet Flanner" Ina Caro's *Paris to the Past* has convinced me that I must visit France again very soon, and this time I know who my guide will be. Even the most hardened Francophobe won't be able to resist Caro's charms and infectious enthusiasm for the great stories of French history. This is one of the most captivating and original

travel books in years.--Gay TaleseIt is hard to imagine a more enchanting or more brilliantly conceived book. With Ina Caro as your guide, you will fall in love with French history. Ancient castles and cathedrals come to life through her marvelous stories; biographical gems capture the lives of memorable kings and queens. But most of all, you will fall in love with Ina Caro herself with her infectious love of history, food and architecture, her husband and life itself.--Doris Kearns GoodwinThis book is animated by love on every page: love of French history, love of ancient pageantry, palaces, and cathedrals, and love of the historian husband who accompanies her on her wanderings. Paris to the Past is guaranteed to enrich the experience of both newcomers to France and veteran travelers alike.--Ron Chernow, author of "Washington: A Life"Read Ina Caro's wonderful Paris to the Past, fall in love again with the most beautiful city in the world, and start packing your bags.--Robert Massie, author of "Nicholas and Alexandra"[Caro] is an unabashedly enthusiastic guide. Her love for the places she visits is contagious. "A keen, if sometimes breathless guide to monarchical France and its architecture. "Ina Caro . . . has spent her life studying and writing about France, and she has crammed all of her knowledge into this delightful travel guide. "

Ina Caro, author of the best-selling *The Road from the Past*, is an authority on medieval and modern French history. She lives in New York with her husband, the acclaimed biographer Robert A. Caro.

The recipe Ina Caro followed in writing "Paris to the Past: Traveling through French History by Train," was simple, if somewhat arbitrary: write a gist of the history of Paris (and so of the kingdom and empire of France) based on extant landmarks. Or, conversely, write a kind of travel guide to historical Paris arranged chronologically. The landmarks, naturally, must be centered about Paris; the means of transportation to get there (or at least in the general vicinity), by train--to include regional rail and subway, the "Metropolitan." The landmarks, with few exceptions, couldn't be much more than an hour away from Paris. Focus on the history of the places you'll go--the idea being to see the development of France through the art and architecture of the places visited in historical progression--but throw into the mix your personal recollections about your actual travel experiences. The arbitrary elements are clear--travel by train and restrict that travel to about an hour--and not unreasonable. As travel becomes faster and more convenient, one can imagine that one day all of France could be covered under such a recipe. But it works. The first stop, Saint-Denis, for instance, is a relatively short (20 min) Metro ride to a northern suburb; a later destination, Chartres, an easy one-hour shot from Paris. At first, I thought that the choice of locations seemed peculiarly non-Parisian: relatively few destinations covered in the book are in

Paris proper. Quickly, though, I came to appreciate the thinking behind the choices. How often in touring a place do we group our visits by location and so get a smattering of different periods, and so varying ideas and styles, all in one confusing blur? Here's a clever way to sort it out and get a deeper, richer understanding of another culture. "Paris to the Past" isn't without quirks. Sometimes, Ina Caro reminds you of a somewhat eccentric if lovable aunt. She takes you along even if you might think better of it. For example, ignoring the advice given in many a travel book about when and how to visit Versailles, not to mention the fact that Versailles is a "must-see" on every tourist's France itinerary, she ends up tiresomely kvetching about the crowds. She also has a strange way with words, as in this monumental case of blaming the victim: "While looking at this portrait [of Joan of Arc, from the 16th century], I also realized I had to stop being angry with Orleanians for having been bombed in 1940 and consequently not having any early-fifteenth-century buildings" (p. 138/loc. 2257). Then there's the wince-inducing joke: Caro criticizes medieval French persecution of the Jews with this comment about matzoh: "After tasting French bread, I can understand that Christians would find anyone peculiar who preferred matzoh to French baked bread, but even so, no matter how bad matzoh tastes, even if you are French, I don't think it was grounds for religious persecution" (p. 87/loc. 1447). She can also make anachronistic associations, such as saying that the 18th century architect Jacques-Angé Gabriel built the Musée Rodin (p. 319/loc. 5052), or repeat as fact an old pseudo-historical canard claiming that the Jesuits made "twenty-three attempts" on the life of Henry IV (p. 209/loc. 3372). Caro's history lessons take you only so far. Frequently the ravages of time take their toll on French historical sites, and one must make do with partial evidence or reconstructions. Caro has an affinity for models of sites that no longer exist--trust me, she says, you'll love them, too. She has an aversion to the history of war and violence, which albeit understandable is nonetheless unfortunate given how terrible much of the period covered was. The splendid 18th-century secular art and architecture that she revels in was brought about under excesses of the royal family and aristocracy that later result in the Revolution, but we don't get a much of a sense of how the Revolution came about and how both monarchy and Revolution went awry. To be fair, Caro did not set out to write a history, but a historical travelogue. In this she was quite successful; you enjoy accompanying her on her day jaunts, just as she enjoys in turn the company of her husband, Bob (the brilliant biographer Robert Caro). "Paris to the Past" is well worth reading in preparation for your own travel adventures in Paris. Indeed, I could see designing a very interesting sojourn in the French capital region using this book as a guide.

I loved Caro's first book, which changed my life. I took it with me as an afterthought on a trip to

France, and soon changed my itinerary to follow in her footsteps. It lead me to meet people and go places I never would have found on my own, make lifelong friends and find places I return to again and again. and I bless her everyday for that. I have been looking forward to another volume from her ever since. This one is a puzzle, however. The main fault lies in the lack of an editor. There are abundant grammar errors, and garbled sentences galore. I suspect, based on reading other guides in anticipation of visiting some of the sites she describes, that many of the practical details are not, or no longer, correct -- the time to walk from here to there, availability of taxis and so on. The chatty personal approach is fine with me, but not in such excess that it eclipses the narrative. I found the historical descriptions fascinating, but too convoluted to read for very long at a stretch. I wish that the elements either read smoothly together like a novel, or were more independent, like a guide. Ms. Caro knows a lot about French history, and I have learned a lot from her. I don't mind that she does not speak French. I do mind that her editor did not discipline her exuberance into a more structured, organized and useful book. All of that said, this is a good book, and a marvelous approach for a luxurious visit to France, and on balance, I recommend it. Just don't try reading it all at once, and expect to read it several times if you really want to follow in Ms. Caro's footsteps.

I love this book. I've been to France several times, and will continue to travel there as often as health and money permit. I don't know of another book that allows for the traveler who is committed to public transportation. Not all of us want to stress ourselves by renting a car - it is supposed to be a vacation, right? Like Caro, I'm enchanted by St. Denis, and marvel that it is usually ignored by travel guides. Maybe that's for the best, considering the crowds the author describes at Versailles. You can have hilarious adventures on trains and connecting buses or taxis. I look forward to following Caro's advice in an upcoming trip in discovering some new places. My rating of four stars instead of five is due to the lack of pictures. And I'm wary of little sketchy maps such as she includes - they give no idea of distances. This is not your basic guidebook. This is for you if you already own the basics (Rick Steves or the Lonely Planet) and want to do some unique exploring on your own. No tour guide necessary. Just get a train pass and a carnet of metro tickets and go. Or wait - keep the train pass days for the TGV trips and go with the day rates for nearer destinations - but you already knew that, right?

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