

Aux Champs-Élysées: The story behind France's most famous avenue

Thank you for joining us for a new edition of France In Focus. I am Nadia Charbit. And this week we are taking you for a stroll along the capital's most famous avenue, the Champs-Élysées that lies just at our feet. From its very regal conception, the Champs has always been the scene of French history and prestige. For better or for worse, let's take a step back in time.

The Champs-Élysées is today one of the most famous avenues in the world, but where it's situated started off as marshland with kitchen gardens where herbs, fruits and vegetables were grown. It was in the time of Louis XIV in the late 17th century that a wide promenade was built at the foot of the Tuileries Palace grounds. A beautiful walkway lined with elm trees and flowerbeds. When the French Revolution began in 1789, this symbol of royalty became an obvious place to spill the blood of the aristocracy. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were among many who met their fate at the avenue's guillotine.

The Champs-Élysées, French for Elysian Fields, is named after the paradise of dead heroes in Greek mythology. But it has been visited not only by France's heroes, but also by its enemies. It served as a theater to some of the most dramatic events in French history such as the Nazi occupation.

From the Place de la Concorde, members of the occupying army parade along Parisian territory.

In 1941, footage of German soldiers goose-stepping from the Arc de Triomphe became a symbol of a nation on its knees. But it was here too on the 26th of August 1944, the general Charles de Gaulle walked in a liberated France helping to restore national pride and unity, and erase the recent humiliation.

General de Gaulle, provisional leader of the French Republic, will cross the capital on a flying carpet of celebration. He walked along the Champs-Élysées on foot.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, when the stars visited the capital, the Champs-Élysées was the place to be seen.

Amid the glorious hustle and bustle, sparks fly for the chosen few. The rich and famous came for the all-night parties and extravagant shows.

It is a tradition, a rite, almost an institution.

And even in song the avenue is celebrated as a place to be come rain or shine.

(Aux Champs-Élysées,) aux Champs-Élysées

Au soleil, sous la pluie, à midi ou à minuit

Il y a tout ce que vous voulez aux Champs-Élysées

(On the Champs-Élysées,) on the Champs-Élysées

In the sun, under the rain, at noon or at midnight

There is everything you want on the Champs-Élysées

In the rain like François Hollande on the day of his inauguration, it has become a tradition for French presidents of all colors to grace the famous street for the eDay on May the 8th and on the French National Day on the 14th of July.

“I don’t regret being my taxes when I see that.”

The Champs-Élysées is also a place to celebrate France’s great sporting events. On the 13th of July 1998, huge crowds gathered to celebrate France’s home World Cup victory. The avenue once again became the symbol of national unity for people of all ages, colors and creeds. And sports people of varying disciplines have covered the 1,900 meters of the Champs-Élysées.

But the most prestigious avenue in Paris really comes to life at the end of the year. The festivities help justify the nickname *City of Light*, a treat for locals and tourists alike.

While nowadays of course the Champs-Élysées are all about cinemas, tourism and shopping. Every day tens of thousands of people walk up and down the celebrated thoroughfare eager to part with some hard-earned cash. That’s why most businesses dream of planting the company flag here. Apple is among the latest. But of course storefront space is limited, and the asking price is sky-high. As F. Allard and C. Chagot found out.

Every year millions of visitors flock here, and just as many potential customers. Galerie Lafayette is preparing to join the businesses luring them in. Its new store is due to open in October next year. It’s good news for the company but also for the rest of the avenue.

“It is a very big premium store that offers brands that aren’t yet available on the Champs-Élysées, and that’ll attract new customers. Thirty years ago, the Champs-Élysées started drawing in these big names. There were some before that but it’s going from strength to strength and becoming more high-end every year. “

For this choice shop window, the department store had to get its checkbook out. The 9,000 square meter building was vacated by Virgin Megastore after it went bankrupt. Here renting a storefront costs over 13,000 euros per square meter. At that price, only the big brands can follow. That's the case for Apple. It's soon to open a store and offices on the site. Its former tenant Western has temporarily moved to this emblematic former cinema on the Champs-Élysées, a gimmick designed to open wallets.

*"We've all experienced the magic when we enter a cinema, that moment between when we sit down and when the film starts. We wanted to recreate that moment for our customers. We have a significant client base here. A lot of it is international, the customers that appreciate the Champs-Élysées shopping experience. So yes of course it is quite a deliberate operation. **And lucrative?** And lucrative. "*

For the luxury store, there is no question of leaving the avenue. It gives international visibility and the company's best turnover. Western will occupy these premises until it can negotiate another location on this most popular of arteries. On the other side of the road, hotel Barocco Fouquet's is expanding. After a difficult year and facing increasing competition, the luxury hotel is trying to attract the wealthiest tourists by transforming its offices to luxury apartments.

"We will be the only hotel that will be able to offer such a beautiful product with such a magnificent location and with an exceptional view of the Arc de Triomphe. "

An argument that carries weight with a clientele ready to pay up to 18,000 euros a night for a piece of the French capital's most popular avenue.

Well just like the song says rain or shine it's always a busy scene here, and what of you up from the Arc de Triomphe down to the Tuileries Gardens below. Well the French modestly call this the world's most beautiful avenue, and we thought we'd give you a chance to make up your own mind with this report by Claire Williams and Sonia Baritello. A day in the life of the Champs-Élysées.

"In the morning, it is quiet."

"It's calm in the morning and gets busier during the day. I like it."

"We are just wandering and walking today in the Champs-Élysées. Hopefully doing some shopping. That's the main reason why we're here. I haven't told him yet though."

“So it’s my first time being here. It’s brilliant. Yes, nice.”

“It is so beautiful.”

“Very big. Good shopping. Very expensive. Very crowded. Yeah.”

“Pickpockets approach people from behind. If there are big crowds, some guy could come from behind and cause chaos.”

“He’s not authorized to sell. That harms florists who also want to sell roses, but have to pay taxes.”

“We’re striking because of our difficult working conditions. We’re open on Sundays and everyday until midnight.”

“It’s my first time on the Champs-Élysées and it’s totally insane! I really love it!”

“I’m used to seeing celebrities shopping.”

“I think its standing has deteriorated. I’ve seen the Champs-Élysées change. Not always in a good way.”

“It was a dream to visit the Champs-Élysées. Today, one of my dreams has come true.”