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Jeans and Sneakers: Fashion Don'ts in Paris?

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Are sneakers a barely acceptable 'dress-down' accessory in Paris, or a fashion statement which US tourists can use to their advantage? The Senior Editor of web magazine Paris Eiffel Tower News, Phil Chavanne, discusses the topic from all angles.

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Article Body:

Are sneakers a barely acceptable 'dress-down' accessory in Paris, or a fashion statement which US tourists can use to their advantage? The Senior Editor of web magazine Paris Eiffel Tower News, Phil Chavanne, discusses the topic from all angles.

Being the Senior Editor of Paris-Eiffel-Tower-News.com, visitors' e-mails have a magical tendency to find their way to my desk. The good side of it is I am allowed to pause vainly as an expert on all that is Paris, and impart my thin knowledge of the French capital to studious travelers. Amongst the many questions offered, one keeps coming back: "Is it considered bad taste to wear sneakers in Paris?" Ah-ha! That's an issue P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster would have been delighted to jump on. Following in the footsteps of this worthy role model, I shall bring an answer to this existential torment once and for all with thundering authority.

Paris, French fashion, sneakers

Paris-bound tourists are often of the opinion that French women are die-hard fashion victims. This claim is definitely exaggerated, though access to stylish clothing is heavily facilitated in Paris where women magazines such as 'Elle' and 'Figaro Madame' dictate what's fashionable and what's not.

In my humble opinion, perennial tastes look very much alike in Paris and New York City. Globalization tends to homogenize fashion, making work-a-day wear

similar in large cities.

No matter, the sneaker concern remains valid. Sneakers are now such a commodity in the US, how is it in Paris?

The generally accepted business dress code in France usually bars sneakers from entering the corporate environment, except for low-level positions. Thus the Parisian woman wears good-looking city shoes to go to work, unless the business which employs her cultivates a sporty image in which sneakers find a natural home.

Yet sneakers have become design icons in their own right. Adidas, Puma and Nike each have their own Parisian stores, and crank out more models a convincing fashion-victim could easily shake credit cards at. Adidas recently teamed with iconic fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto to create Y-3, a new line of dress-up sneakers. Stella McCartney also has her own Adidas line.

What major difference in shoe-attitude could we identify between American and French shoe-consumers? The latter will wear sneakers as design items, not as workaday shoes. Sneakers won't be bought for comfort, but will find an easy way into a tight purse when they compliment dress-down pants and make their owner look good. The She-Parisian loves sneakers which make her feet look thin, small, and classy.

A mere glance at the types of sneakers most commonly seen on women's feet in Paris is telling: you won't see any wide, cushy, comfy-looking, plain vanilla sneakers. You will see small, thin-looking, flat-sole, designer sneakers.

For the same reasons, a pair of Stephane Kelian or Robert Clergerie shoes will almost always be favored over a pair of good-looking Pumas. Shoes are a fashion statement, and the more understated it is, the better.

That's another major difference between French and American women. Understatement is a cardinal rule in French fashion. Anything that is too visible is considered garish. This is why the little black dress is such a fashion icon, and why Audrey Hepburn will always be remembered as The Quintessential Fashionable American Woman.

Tourism in sneakers

All this does not mean you can't wear sneakers when you travel to Paris!

For one thing, sneakers are usually comfortable walking shoes. As the very best

way to discover Paris is to stroll along its streets, wearing shoes in which you feel comfortable covering five miles a day at a leisurely pace is an important decision. It will influence your general mood during your stay in the French capital.

Do not back off from wearing sneakers if these are your best walking shoes.

My second point refers to the 'look issue'. Will I look good in the streets, or will I be the laughingstock of all these snooty, dressed-up, fashion-conscious Parisian women?

Frankly, you should not ask yourself this question. Because who cares about your looks in the street? Never be self-conscious, just be comfortable in your shoes. You are a tourist, this is your very own time in Paris! Jeans and sneakers are international. People will not be offended by your attire. Unless you dress in 80's disco garb with polka-dot sneakers, nobody around you will mind your looks.

And if they ever notice your jeans, LL Bean trekking shoes, and Patagonia jacket, well, push come to shove, they might think you're American. And so what? In all likelihood they will appreciate your visiting Paris.

Dining out in sneakers

Does it mean you can wear sneakers everywhere, on any and every occasion? Not so.

For instance, can you have dinner in a restaurant shoed with your brand-new white sneakers?

For the sake of it, let's imagine you are strolling along in your Levi's jeans and Lands End boots. It's now dinner time, you are hungry, and scanning the landscape looking for a promising restaurant. There is it! The menu displayed outside is appetizing, prices are within your comfort zone, the place is not so crowded... Ah, but guests are dressed smartly. Will they let you in? Will you fit in?

I have yet to see a door sign indicating 'No Sneakers Allowed' in Paris. Some high-brow places may expertly leave you at bay: "Do you have a reservation? Sorry, we are full tonight". But beside those rare snobbish places, no restaurant will refuse to seat you because you wear casual sneakers.

Therefore the right question is not 'Will I be allowed in?', but 'Will I feel comfortable entering a dressy place in sneakers?' I venture that you probably

would not. And the problem is that being self-conscious is a surefire way to kill your meal. Your attention should be in your plate and on your food, not on your shoes and garb.

My practical rule is 'Dress according to the lieu'. If you intend to dine out at expensive, dressy restaurants when you are in Paris, just bring your Pradas. Better yet: pay a visit to Stephane Kelian's and Robert Clergerie's boutiques in Paris, and buy yourself gorgeous-looking footwear by these Parisian designers.

A night in sneakers at the Opera

There are other places where sneakers just won't cut it.

The Opera House is one of them. But I know no one who would be so foolish as to dress in jeans and sneakers for a night at the Opera. Therefore the sneaker issue is deemed moot.

What about the cabaret? I say it is much better to dress up when you plan to spend the evening at 'Moulin Rouge', 'Lido', and 'Paradis Latin'. Though the stage is the only spot well lit in these places, people around you will usually dress up for the occasion. You will be more comfortable in some formal wear.

How about the boats on the Seine? If you are boarding a boat for a dinner cruise, don't wear sneakers. This is a romantic experience, you will want to make the most of it. An evening dress is 'de rigueur'. On the other hand, if you simply want to cruise up and down the stream, sneakers are fine.

Museums? Forget style, wear very comfortable shoes. Nobody will look at your shoes, art is on the walls. But walking down the Louvre galleries is a tiring experience: so much to see, so many galleries, so slow the pace. The good doctor's advice: go with cushion and comfort.

Art gallery 'vernissages'? Style is your cue. Art galleries are small, vernissage evenings are short. Evening dress, black preferably, nothing flashy, and good-looking design shoes. No sneakers.

Wrapping up

Dress for the place you go to. If you are unsure about the dress code, you may call in advance to get appraised of it. Pack a dressy pair of shoes, or buy one when you are in Paris. Bring a discreet, understated evening dress.

But don't back away from sneakers for other not-so-formal occasions. Wear them

shamelessly in the street. You will blend just fine if you harbor a pair of jeans and a pair of sneakers. Nike is an American brand, and it is very popular in France. Levi's, Diesel, and Calvin Klein are American brands, and they rule the French jeans scene too. In fact, I can't quite think of any domain in France where American culture did not leave a mark -- except maybe cuisine.

So be comfortable in your sneakers, and enjoy the view.