

EXPLORATION

The Secret Rival of the City of Light... Even Parisians Love Lyon

By Barbara Diggs

Paris may be the darling of pretty much everyone, everywhere, but many French people aren't quite as impressed. In a number of polls, the French have said "*non*" to Paris as their favorite city. Instead, they point to Lyon, an absolute stunner of a city in the Rhône-Alps region, as the best place to live in France.

Lyon's appeal is undeniable. Situated at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône rivers in east-central France, the city—despite being France's third-largest—has an intoxicatingly languid feel that Paris just doesn't have. The city's abundance of terracotta rooftops and warm, sunset-colored buildings call to mind some tranquil Mediterranean town, not a thriving metropolis of nearly half a million.

Then there's the space. Lyon is just under half the size of Paris. But in contrast to Paris's 20 tightly-wound snail-shell of *arrondissements*, Lyon's nine districts, which include two immense hills and two rivers in the city center, offer a feeling of generous space and depth that is rare in a large city.

And if *that* weren't enough, Lyon also has mind-blowing gastronomy, boasting some 2,000 restaurants and earning its reputation as France's culinary capital. Bon vivants worldwide travel to eat at Lyon's legendary *bouchons*—a special kind of home-style restaurant that serves up heaping plates of traditional Lyonnais cuisine until you're ready to beg for mercy.

Oh—and did I mention that Lyon is vastly more affordable than Paris? Renting an 830-square-foot apartment in the most chic section of Lyon costs about \$1,200 to \$1,300 a month, whereas the same-size apartment in a similar Parisian neighborhood will set you back around \$2,700, if not more.

So it's really no surprise that Lyon is wooing Parisians away from the City of Light—nor that some expats are swearing they'd pick Lyon over Paris any day. "I would much rather live in Lyon than Paris," says U.S. expat Lucy Vanel, who has lived in Lyon for 14 years. "We could live in a lot of places, but we choose to stay in Lyon because it is so wonderful."

Joëlle Key-Tissot, another Lyon-based U.S. expat, agrees. "Lyon is the perfect place for an expat to live for just about any reason... It's older than Paris, it has more history, people are less stressed, the transportation system is faster and cleaner, it's close to both the Alps

and the sea, and the general atmosphere is nicer."

If you're thinking of putting Lyon on your radar—for a visit or for life—here's a short guide to the city's most tempting neighborhoods.

Presqu'île: Old-World Elegance and Style

If you think you'd enjoy living in a fashionable 19th-century apartment building, in a classically beautiful part of town, surrounded by restaurants, theaters, shops, museums, and cafés, with scant need for public transportation or a car, then you'll love Lyon's Presqu'île neighborhood.

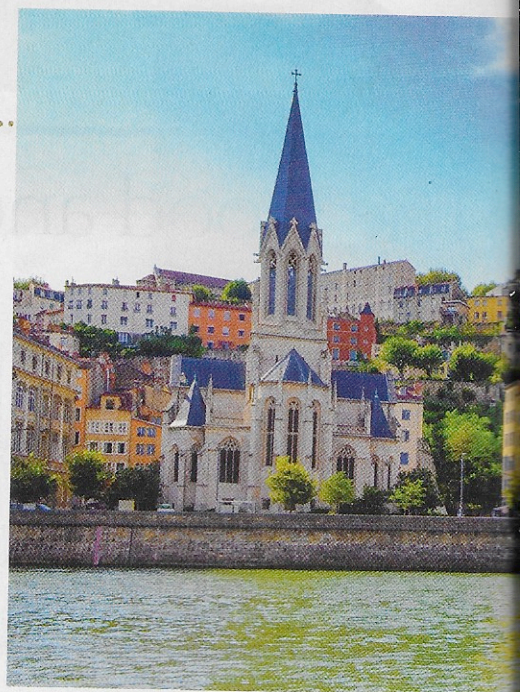
Presqu'île ("peninsula"), is a curving strip of land squeezed between the Rhône and Saône, at the very heart of Lyon. It begins just where the two rivers meet and stretches north toward the foot of the hill known as la Croix Rousse. Home to the first and second of the city's nine *arrondissements*, Presqu'île is generally considered to be one of Lyon's most glamorous areas.

It's not hard to see where this reputation for glamour originates. Thanks to its wealth of classical buildings, sweeping public squares, and elaborately-carved fountains, Presqu'île gives off an enchanting air of old grandeur. Here you'll find majestic 18th- and 19th-century buildings such as the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall), the Palais de Bourse (Chamber of Commerce), and the Lyon Opera House, whose classical foundations are surprisingly topped by a modern glass-and-steel arch.

Here you'll also find Place Bellecour, a vast public square the size of a small city block, which plays host to multiple festivals and exhibits throughout the year. Its towering equestrian statue of King Louis XIV is green-black during the day but is mysteriously lit to appear white at night.

The area is also sprinkled with museums set in glorious, centuries-old mansions, such as the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Decorative Arts Museum) and Musée Historique des Tissus (Textile Museum). You'll also find Lyon's most upscale shops and boutiques, from Chanel to Cartier.

Despite all Lyon's sophisticated trappings, I couldn't escape how *normal* the locals seemed. Strolling through the outdoor market, Marché St. Antoine on the elegant Quai Tilsitt, I observed only a few of the meticulously-groomed, frighteningly chic people I'd have



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Presqu'île is Lyon's most glamorous neighborhood on a peninsula of land where the Rhône and Saône rivers meet.

THE THREE BEST SPOTS FOR HOME-STYLE LYONNAIS CUISINE

No visit to Lyon is complete without eating at one of its famous *bouchons*, at least once. More than once if you've got the stamina. But you may wonder: What exactly is a *bouchon*? There's no official definition, but a *bouchon* generally refers to a tavern-style restaurant that serves up mountainous portions of old-school Lyonnais cuisine in a homey, convivial setting for reasonable prices. Expect to see dishes featuring every imaginable (and some unimaginable) part of a pig, cow, chicken, or duck, transformed into a delicious salad, sausage, or roast.

While some restaurants offer faultless, old-style Lyonnais cuisine, without the congenial atmosphere and cozy feel, they're still not quite considered "real" *bouchons*. Want the genuine article? Try these three places:

1. Abel. Dating back to 1726, Abel is known as the oldest and most authentic *bouchon* in Lyon. Just approaching the restaurant's old-fashioned exterior, you sense that you're in for a treat—a feeling not dispelled when you enter its cozy, wood-paneled interior. A stickler for tradition, Abel hasn't changed the menu for 25 years. Look for classic dishes such as *quenelles de brochet* (pike dumplings), *ris de veau aux morilles* (sweetbreads with morels), *langue de boeuf piquante* (spicy beef tongue), and chocolate mousse. The portions are huge, so go hungry. Fixed-menu prices range from \$31 to \$56. (25, rue Guynemer, Lyon 2ème.)

2. Au Petit Bouchon "Chez Georges." Just as in the old days, expect to eat elbow-to-elbow with your fellow diners at the wooden tables of this classic establishment. Chez Georges is run by Marcel and France Deschamps, a couple known for creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere and churning out excellent Lyonnais classics with unfailing consistency. Very reasonably priced, a three-course meal here starts at \$25. Among other dishes, try the *cervelle de canut* (silk-worker's brains), a cheese dip of fromage blanc seasoned with chopped herbs and shallots. (8 rue Garet, Lyon 1er.)

3. Notre Maison. You gotta love any restaurant that hangs a sign on its front door saying: "People who are in a rush are not welcome in this establishment. Thank you." I turned on my heel right away, but vowed to return one day when I had more time. Nestled in a pretty cobbled street in Vieux Lyon, Notre Maison ("Our House") is said to be the real thing: a homey, bustling interior, brimming with good feelings and great food. Recommended is the *sabodet*: sausage cooked for hours in red wine and served with lentils. Fixed menus for three-course meals start at \$22. (2, rue Gadagne, Lyon 5ème.)

expected to see in an equivalent area in Paris.

Instead, the locals who carefully examined the bright-orange pyramids of clementines, bulging sleeves of pistachio-stuffed sausages, and tiny, ash-dusted cakes of goat cheese alongside me had a relaxed air. And they were dressed for a casual morning of food shopping, instead of looking as though they were heading to an exclusive art-gallery opening.

The most central area of Presqu'île, the second *arrondissement*, is probably the most traditionally fashionable area. But even here you'll find pockets of more down-to-earth charm. For example, the cobblestone streets of rues Mercière and Maronniers are downright cozy. Both are studded with homey-looking, traditional Lyonnais *bouchons*, where you can get a solid three-course meal of *caviar de la Croix Rousse* (lentil salad in cream sauce), andouillette sausage, and praline tart for as little as \$17.

The northern section of Presqu'île, which includes the lower slopes of the Croix Rousse hill, is more edgy-chic than glamorous. Buildings are still splendid 19th-century gems, but their façades have a more "lived-in" look. In this area you're more likely to find unusual, trendy shops, such as the vintage clothing store Be Bop or the environmentally conscious Skunk Funk Boutique, rather than posh chains. This neighborhood also has a number of specialty coffee and tea shops, organic restaurants, bars, and jazz clubs, but is still home to old-school *bouchons*.

As one Lyonnais real estate agent told me, "Foreigners often choose to live on the Presqu'île because it's central, attractive, and lively... Other parts of the city are just as beautiful, but they don't have the animation that Presqu'île has." While I am certain that many Lyonnais residents would challenge this statement, Presqu'île is definitely both lovely, lively, and a fun place to live. An 800-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment in a 19th-century building with beautiful moldings, a fireplace, and hardwood floors, in the heart of Presqu'île, will likely rent for about \$1,200 to \$1,300 a month.

Vieux Lyon: Romans and the Renaissance

Just opposite Presqu'île's western bank, across the churning Saône river, lies Lyon's oldest and perhaps most charming district, Vieux Lyon. As one of the largest and best-preserved old towns in France, the entire neighborhood of Vieux Lyon has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. If you have a passion for the past,

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be it ancient, medieval, or Renaissance, then this part of town will speak to your soul.

Vieux Lyon is where the city was born. Some 2,000 years ago the ancient Romans, indulging in their habit of snapping up the choicest locations they stumbled across, established a colony, Lugdunum, on the hill now named Fourvière. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the growing city spilled down the hillside toward the Saône, crowding the river's left bank with an appealing jumble of Gothic churches and dusky pink, russet, and ochre-hued homes and buildings topped with red-pink clay roofs.

The Fourvière hillside is a must-see on a visit to Lyon. It offers amazing panoramic views of the city—on a clear day you can see the Alps—and is crowned by a castle-like basilica, Notre Dame de Fourvière, which seems to stand guard over the city. On the hill's western slopes, you'll find the surprisingly intact ancient remains of Lugdunum, including two large Roman theaters, now resembling amphitheaters, which are often used for music concerts or other performances.

The true heart of Vieux Lyon, however, is the Renaissance neighborhood at the foot of Fourvière. Composed of a delightful warren of cobbled streets flanked by graceful 15th- and 16th-century buildings, you can spend hours, if not a day or two, exploring the area.

Several great museums can be found here, including the Hôtel Gadagne, a lovely early 16th-century mansion that houses both the Historical Museum of Lyon and the International Museum of the Marionette, a space featuring some 2,000 puppets from around the world. Movie fans will enjoy the Museum of Miniatures and Cinema, which holds hundreds of miniature movie sets and film props, including a fascinating recreation of the 18th-century Parisian perfumer's workshop used in the film *Perfume*.

But what Vieux Lyon is most famous for is something you'll only access in Lyon: *traboules*. *Traboules* are secret, covered passageways that link buildings together—in one case, running an entire city block. These narrow, vaulted corridors—hidden behind ordinary wooden doors—were created centuries ago to allow residents to easily move between buildings and streets without going outside. Some *traboules* are plain, others stunning, leading to interior courtyards with carved-stone spiral staircases housed in soaring, rose-colored towers. About 300 *traboules* exist throughout Lyon, dozens of which are open to the public. While you can



The presence of thousands of university students gives Lyon a youthful energy and you'll find lots of outdoor art and excellent museums, too.

explore some on your own, I recommend taking a guided tour.

Vieux Lyon is also host to a variety of shops, restaurants, bars, and a surprisingly high number of Irish pubs, making it a very dynamic area—though possibly too much so for a day-to-day life. Its cobblestone streets are frequently thronged with tourists. It's also one of the most expensive areas of Lyon, thanks to its beauty and World Heritage status. A renovated, two-bedroom apartment of 1,000 square feet, with classical features—marble fireplace, hardwood floors, and the like—in Vieux Lyon rents for about \$1,600 to \$1,800 a month. Mind you, while this is expensive for Lyon, the price would be considered a steal for a comparable neighborhood (say, the Marais) in Paris.

Croix Rousse: Bourgeois Bohemia

Rising to the north of Presqu'île, awash with pale yellow and ochre buildings, is the second of Lyon's two hills, Croix Rousse. Nicknamed "the hill that works" (in contrast to Fourvière's "the hill that prays"), the hill's slopes and summit have had a firmly entrenched reputation as Lyon's working-class district since the 19th century.

During this period, Lyon was known as the silk-weaving capital of Europe, producing extraordinary tapestries and textiles sought by

DISCOVER THE MODERN ART AND MURALS OF LYON

Lyon is an intriguing city for multiple reasons, not least of which is its appreciation of modern art. Walking around the city, you'll encounter all kinds of impressive (and sometimes jarring) works of art, from the colorful "Flower Tree" (above)—an enormous plastic tree consisting of 85 glossy flower blossoms—at the Place Antonin Poncet, to "The Weight of Oneself," a massive statue of a man carrying his own limp and naked body in front of the Palais de Justice along the Saône.

But of all the modern art Lyon is famous for, its *trompe l'oeil* (optical illusion) wall murals justifiably top the list. These brilliant, building-sized murals cannot fail to surprise and fascinate. About 150 of them are scattered throughout the city,

each revealing some part of Lyonnais history or identity.

Murals you won't want to miss include the "Mur Lyonnais" (2, rue Martinière). It depicts 31 famous Lyonnais historical figures, from Paul Bocuse to the Little Prince, lounging in the windows of a building that looks so realistic, you could almost be tempted to enter the Beaujolais wine bar painted at the mural's base. In the Croix-Rousse neighborhood, there's the "Le Mur des Canuts," a painting beautifully representing the legendary hill and its silk workers (boulevard des Canuts, intersection rue Denfert-Rochereau). And be sure to look for "Bibliothèque de la Cité," a 4,300-square-foot painted bookcase, overflowing with the works of hundreds of French authors (quai de la pêcherie/rue de la Platière). It's just fantastic.

the wealthy and by royalty throughout the world. The majority of Lyon's 90,000 silk workers, known as *canuts*, lived and worked on Croix Rousse, in homes designed with exceptionally high ceilings to accommodate their immense Jacquard looms. Thanks to this unique architecture and history, the hillside is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Croix Rousse is referred to locally as the "village," but I found the atmosphere so strikingly different from other parts of Lyon that it was almost like visiting a different city. In keeping with its working-class roots, Croix Rousse proudly maintains an offbeat, slightly gritty energy. At the hill's plateau, restaurants and cafés seem to be bustling, down-to-earth places, crowded with laid-back locals of every generation. For the first time, the city reminded me of Paris—the non-touristy parts—as I observed old-timers standing at zinc bars in cafés, throwing back espressos and chatting with waiters.

As you wander down the hill's steep slopes, in between catching wonderful vistas of Fourvière and Presqu'île, you'll find many original boutiques and shops with unusual fashion, decorative items, and jewelry. In particular, look for the rather difficult-to-find Village des Créateurs du Passage Thiaffair (19, rue René Leynaud, 1st *arrondissement*), which is a series of artists' workshops, studios, and a multi-designer concept store located in a 19th-century, uncovered *traboule*.

The neighborhood is a popular quarter for artists, craftsmen, actors, and people seeking a bohemian, multicultural atmosphere. The slopes are also known for their music hotspots and nightclubs. "It has a great energy," says Liza Goodfellow, a Canadian who has lived in Lyon for two years and loves to visit Croix Rousse. "The market there seems to be the most authentic, in the area with the least number of tourists."

Lucy Vanel, who both lives and runs a cooking school in Croix Rousse, says she wouldn't live anywhere else. "After we moved here, people who didn't know me but had seen me started saying hello and shaking my hand on the street. It attracts people much more laid-back than down on the Presqu'île."

Housing prices vary, depending on whether you're searching on the plateau or the slopes. Plateau prices are a bit higher: Expect to pay about \$1,600 a month for a 900-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment in an *immobilier canut*—the beautiful, centuries-old buildings with extra-high ceilings used by silk workers. Similarly sized apartments in modern buildings tend to be less: about \$1,350 or so. On the slopes, you can rent a gorgeous, 900-square-foot, two-bedroom with traditional details for \$1,450, with smaller, old-fashioned apartments renting for just over \$1,200.

The 6th *arrondissement*

While most neighborhoods in Lyon seemed to be identified by name, the 6th district seems to be simply known as "le 6ème" (see-zyem). The area is a little like the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris, but with bigger sidewalks.

The 6th *arrondissement* isn't the sexiest part of Lyon in terms of restaurants and shops, but it's a tranquil, spacious place with beautiful, 19th-century bourgeois buildings and tree-lined streets. It seems ideal for families with young children and retired couples who'd like to be close to Lyon's cultural and gastronomic scene

IS THIS THE TRUE CITY OF LIGHT?

Paris may be called the "City of Light," but Lyon is threatening to snatch the title. Every December, all of Lyon bursts into a frenzy of glorious light and color, as Lyonnais celebrate their annual Festival of Lights.

The tradition started in December 1852, when the Lyonnais placed lit candles in their windows and balconies, then flooded into the streets to celebrate a new statue that was being added to Fourvière in tribute to the Virgin Mary. The celebration was so spontaneous and joyful that the tradition of placing lit candles in the windows of all Lyonnais homes, and of enjoying the spectacle from the streets, continued on December 8 every year thereafter.

The tradition has since turned into a magical four-day celebration of light and fantasy. More than 120 artists and designers from around the world, selected anew each year, create 80 installations illuminating Lyon's most famous buildings, landmarks, and parks, transforming the city into something marvelously surreal.

Last year's visitors saw leafless December trees suddenly aglow with pink cherry blossom-like lights, a lake scattered with illuminated lotus flowers, and massive buildings that seemed to shiver and jump with colorful light. Video, music, and sound accompany the lighting, adding to the feeling of celebration.

If you want to attend, be sure to book your hotel as early as possible—the festival attracts millions of people from far and wide, some reserving as early as a year in advance.

without living in the heart of it all.

The biggest attraction of this neighborhood is undoubtedly the 289-acre Parc de Tête d'Or (Park of the Golden Head). Once you're ensconced inside the Tête d'Or's sprawling, flower-filled grounds, the city feels very much farther away. Unlike many Parisian parks, where the grass is to be admired but not walked on, Tête d'Or offers plenty of lush expanses where you can play catch or have a picnic. There's also an "African Plain," a kind of open-air zoo, where 130 different types of animals, from giraffes to zebras, wander around cage-free. At the park's heart is a large lake filled with the clear green waters of the Rhône, which offers paddle-boating excursions in the summer months.

Although this is considered Lyon's most bourgeois area, a 700-square-foot, renovated one-bedroom apartment, just a few minutes' walk from the Tête d'Or, can be rented starting from \$900 a month. A two-bedroom apartment of 900 square feet will likely cost you \$1,250 to \$1,400 a month. And in case you were wondering, in the equivalent Parisian neighborhood, the 16th *arrondissement*, the same money would get you a 500-square-foot, one-bedroom far on the outskirts of town. At best. ■

"It's a popular quarter for actors, artists and craftsmen."