

# RISE OF THE IRON LADY

It is as much a symbol of France as a beret or a baguette. **Olivier Chartier** charts the rise and rise of the Eiffel Tower.

Like any Grande Dame exposed to time and the elements, the Eiffel Tower is thankful for the occasional face lift.

Two hundred meters above the ground, a team of painters, clad in harness and safety glasses, strip paint off with hammers. A few months ago, they started painting the tower with some sixty tons of paint...by hand!

Every seven years, these tightrope-walking painters give the Iron Lady a very special kind of face-lift. After 120 years she deserves it! And she has hardly changed a bit, apart from a few missing girders and a different complexion: practically red when it was built, the tower was yellow for many years before taking on the attractive bronze tones that the funambulist painters are doing their best to preserve.

Yet, when you look at it, you do not notice the color so much as the architecture, a kind of 19th century futuristic rocket shooting up above the Paris rooftops. The object of intense controversy at the time, the tower very nearly was not built.

Just two weeks after building had started, on February 14th 1887, the greatest living French artists of the time put their names to an open letter in which they poured scorn on the project, calling it a "gigantic black factory chimney", a "ghastly pillar of bolted metal", a "nail in the sky" and even a "suppository full of holes".

Gustave Eiffel simply replied that "the tower will be the tallest structure ever built by man - does that not make it the most magnificent, in its own way? I think the tower will have its own special beauty".

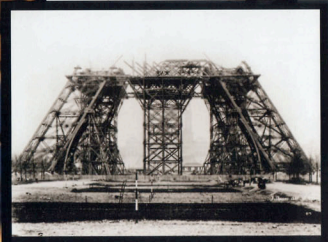
The engineer was absolutely right: his tower was to remain the highest building in the world until 1929 - and in 2006, a record seven million visitors came to admire it.

Not every one knows that, at first, Eiffel himself was not convinced by the idea. When engineers Maurice Kozhkin and Emile Nougier had first shown him, three years before, their plans for a metal tower, Gustave Eiffel had not seemed in the least bit interested. It was only when his two employees came up with a second version of the project that he took it on board.

Famous already for his achievements all over Europe, the entrepreneur then brought his political connections into play - with great success, as the government selected Kozhkin and Nougier's project to represent France at the 1889 universal exhibition, being staged in honour of the centenary of the French Revolution.

The project was to pass into posterity, not in the name of the engineers who designed it, but in that of their boss, Gustave Eiffel, who had made sure of a twenty-year option on the tower's commercial rights.





At the end of those twenty years the tower was originally destined for demolition, as, in the minds of those who commissioned it, it was nothing more than a temporary architectural tour de force of no practical value. Aware that this might be the case, Gustave Eiffel did everything he could to make 'his' tower indispensable.

It was his idea to make the third floor, where he had his office, into a science laboratory, where aerodynamics and meteorology might be studied. In 1898, the first wireless telegraphic communication took place, between the top of the Eiffel Tower and the dome of the Pantheon, some four kilometers away in the centre of Paris.

A true visionary, Eiffel believed in this new technology, albeit in its infancy, and decided to suggest that the tower would be an ideal place for a military telecommunications station. The government accepted this and extended Eiffel's concession by 70 years.

They did well to do so. During the First World War, the transmitters installed on the third floor of the tower had an important strategic role to play, enabling communication to take place between the General Staff and the Front, as well as picking up the German High Command's message of surrender on November 10, 1918, and foiling the plans of the notorious spy, Mata Hari.

The tower's future was no longer in doubt: no-one was thinking of demolishing it any more (although this did not prevent con-artist Victor Lustig from selling it by the ton, in 1925, to a somewhat gullible scrap-metal merchant, before disappearing with a healthy deposit!)

Over the years, the Eiffel Tower has attracted more cranks and eccentrics than crooks of Lustig's ilk, from Franz Reichelt, for example, who, in February 1912, tested a parachute he had made, by jumping from the first floor (resulting in a 4-inch hole in the lawn underneath), to today's base-jumpers, whose exploits are available for all to see on YouTube.

Let us not forget, either, the aviators of the early 20th century, who liked to fly round and round the tower, seeing just how close they could get, or tightrope-walker Philippe Petit, who made his way to the second floor via a 700 metre cable stretched above the river Seine.

And then, of course, there are all those who have added climbing the tower's 1,666 steps to their list of sporting achievements. If you fancy having a go yourself, you might try aid beat the record for climbing to the second floor on foot (8min 51sec), by mountain-bike (13min 58sec) or by unicycle (22 minutes)

Or maybe you'd prefer coming down from the first floor in a wheel-chair (record - 11 minutes). Whatever your preference, you will walk in the footsteps of history.

## VIVA LA EMIRATES!

Emirates has more flights from Australia to France each week than any other airline.

While it is no secret that airlines are doing it tough, Emirates has stayed on course with its decision to build the number of outbound flights from Australia.

It currently offers 63 direct flights per week to Dubai, increasing to 70 from December 1st, 2009.

Emirates spokesperson, Dean Cleaver, said that despite its size the Australian market is considered one of the most important in the airline's system.

"This has been one of our best performing markets," Mr Cleaver said. "We are continuing to build our relationship with Australian travellers by opening new routes including Nice on the French Riviera."

Emirates flies twice daily to Paris and five times weekly to Nice from Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth.

Return prices start from \$1,740 in Economy and \$7,999 in Business excluding taxes. Conditions apply. Keep an eye out for specials.

# backstage at the Tower

The characters you meet at the Eiffel Tower add to the experience, says Olivier Chartier.

"You can't take the real one away with you, so buy mine and then you can take your own little bit of Paris home," says Souleymane, at the foot of the Eiffel Tower.

"And mine only costs a euro."

Souleymane comes from Mali and he is as funny as he is wary. Along with countless other souvenir hawkers he sells Eiffel Tower models, cigarette lighters and postcards, while a few metres away soldiers in fatigues wander around the base of the tower, pretending not to see these street sellers.

As happens every morning, the show is about to start at the Eiffel Tower and all the performers are ready to take the stage. By 9am, when the ticket-offices in the North and South pillars open for business, there is already an endless queue of tourists snaking its way around the Iron Lady's feet.

In the air-conditioned lift that takes visitors up the first 115 metres, lift-operator Marie L. announces its imminent arrival at the 2nd floor in 3 different languages.

She-whispers to me that the lifts break down quite frequently.

"Three years ago, I was stuck between the 2nd and 3rd floors for nearly an hour and a half.... The tourists didn't say anything, they just enjoyed the view and kept their fingers crossed," she laughs.

"But don't tell anyone I said so, I might get into trouble."

Marie is one of 280 staff employed by the SETE (Société d'exploitation de la Tour Eiffel), the company that runs the Eiffel Tower as a tourist attraction. Security guards, cashiers, lift-operators, technicians, firemen: all busily getting on with their jobs, in stark contrast to the motionless backdrop of the Tower. Often in a hurry, rarely wearing a smile, they maintain an image of Paris that harks back to an earlier time.

This morning, a dozen metres above the second-floor platform, the eye is drawn to a painter balanced on an iron girder. Between strokes of his paintbrush, he takes the time to answer the astonished tourists' questions.

"They wouldn't let me paint the Pyramids so I came here instead," is his humorous reply. In fact, there are two Egyptians working on the tower, the others are Greek or French."

When asked what the most dangerous part of his job is, he does not have to think about his answer:

"Painting the inside of the tower, because you're hanging in mid-air. It's no good trying to do this job if you have a fear of heights!"

You just cannot beat the view of Paris you get from the Eiffel Tower. And if you have a plate of duck foie gras and poultry cooked together in front of you into the bargain, then you really are in paradise!

Pascal Féraud, the young 35 year old chef installed in the kitchen by renowned restaurateur Alain Ducasse, has just been awarded a first Michelin star for the Jules Verne, the famous restaurant on the 2nd floor of the tower.

This is just the first stage of a journey to excellence, undertaken with determination despite problems that are unique to the venue. "Working here is magic, but hazardous too", admits Féraud.

"There isn't any storage space, and we only have enough room for the products we'll be using during each individual service. So if we forget anything, it takes us 20 minutes to go and get it..."

With no cold room or gas, this is a gastronomic restaurant where lack of space and drastic regulations are challenges that must be met on a daily basis. But what do little niggles like these matter when you work at one of the world's most extraordinary locations?

Pascal Féraud in the kitchen of his Michelin-rated restaurant, Jules Verne

