

My summer vacation: Versailles

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Here are some notes on Versailles. Some are travel tips. Others are just my personal observations.

Absolutely get a timed ticket if you want to visit the Palace. With the ticket, you walk straight to the entrance, bypassing the enormous line of people who do not have timed tickets. Yes, you will think that you are surely doing something wrong, seeing as you're walking past hundreds and hundreds of people, but really, you just go straight to Entrance A. The middle door is for people with timed tickets.

Avoid the line for the audioguide by downloading the app ahead of time. The app contains the same audio content as the audioguide, except for the audio content synchronized to the videos in a few of the rooms. If you don't want to download the app, at least bring wired headphones so you can listen to the audioguide more conveniently than holding it to your ear continuously.

Visiting the Palace leads to ostentation fatigue. Yes, it's another ridiculously ornate room that I'm sure was absurdly expensive to create and decorate. Eventually, it just stops registering.

If you have younger kids, they may very well not have the patience for a three-hour tour through the Palace. Consider skipping the Palace entirely and just visiting the garden. Garden admission is generally free, but there is a charge on fountain days. We went on a fountain day, and our little ones were so enthralled by the fountains that they watched the same show three times in a row. (The gardens are open on Mondays even though everything else is closed. So if all you care about is the gardens, Monday is a great day to go, since it will not be crowded.)

Note that the Versailles web site contains a number of errors that are relevant to visitors planning their visit. The site says that 2019 fountain shows are

On **Saturdays** and **Sundays** from 6 april [sic] to 27 October 2019

On **Tuesdays** from 21 May to 25 June 2019

On **some additional dates** (Friday 19 April, Wednesday 8 May, Thursday 30 May, Thursday 15 August)

From reading the above description, you would conclude that Tuesdays in July and August are not fountain days.

But you'd be wrong. We went on a Tuesday in August, and it was a fountain day.

The way to find out for sure whether a particular day is a fountain day is to see how much they charge for an adult tickets for that day. If they charge €20, then it's a regular day. If they charge €27, then it's a fountain day.

There are also some translation glitches on the site. For example, the hours are confusingly described as

The Palace is open every day except Mondays from 9am, but the estate of Trianon and the Coach Gallery only open in the afternoon.

Misplaced modifiers make this even more confusing than it already is.¹

Fortunately, the French version is clearer:

The Palace is open every day except Mondays. The Palace opens at 9am; the estate of Trianon and the Coach Gallery open only in the afternoon from Tuesday to Sunday.

Still not great, because “every day except Mondays” and “from Tuesday to Sunday” are the same thing, so it's confusing to describe the Palace days of operation in one way, but the Trianon and Coach Gallery days of operation the other way.

On busy days, the app tells you, “High affluence expected at the Palace.” Well, yeah, it's the Palace of Versailles. It's all about affluence.

Oh, wait, this was a translation error, faked out by a false friend. The French word *affluence* means “crowds”, not “wealth”.² What they're saying is that heavy crowds are expected at the Palace.

The gardens are ridiculously huge. I would look at the map and say, “Oh, our destination is right over there, not too far away.” And then look up and see the destination way off in the distance. We never even got to see all of the fountains, much less the gardens, and the area beyond the gardens were completely missed.

Bonus chatter: There was a French-language documentary on TV that described how they got water to Versailles. I didn't understand anything they said, but just from the visuals, it was clearly an immense undertaking that got more and more ridiculous as each water source dried up, and the system had to be extended *even further*. While I was in France, I was able to watch a German-language documentary on the subject, but it's not available in the States.

Back in the day, they were unable to generate enough water pressure to operate all the fountains simultaneously. What they did was run only the fountains that were visible from the Palace. If the king went out for a stroll, they would turn on the water only for the fountains near where the king happened to be.

¹ This is also confusing for Americans, because in American English, we do not say just "open from X". You have to say "open from X to Y", If you want to give just the opening time, you say "opens at X".

² They both come from the same root word meaning *flow*. The French word treats it as a flow of people; the English word treats it as a flow of money.

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