Understand Paris

PARIS TODAY ............................. 300
So France’s first left-wing president in 17 years has taken up residence at Paris’ Élysée Palace. How will he fare?

HISTORY ............................... 302
Timeless it might seem, but Paris has changed dramatically over the centuries. Here is its tale.

FASHION ................................. 313
No city has influenced world fashion more than the place where the little black dress was born.

ARCHITECTURE ......................... 316
From Roman baths to contemporary designer rooftops: Paris plays architecture God.

LITERARY PARIS ....................... 323
Literary backdrop or literary inspiration: bookworms are right at home in the City of Light.

PAINTING & VISUAL ARTS .............. 328
It’s not all about Mona Lisa in the world’s largest museum: Paris’ art heritage is vast and unparalleled.

MUSIC & CINEMA ....................... 333
Music diversity (French jazz, afro-pop, Algerian rai) and cinematic splendour (from classic Cocteau to recent Oscar/Cannes winners) abound in Paris.
While the elegance, depth and extraordinary spirit of the Paris of Haussmann, Hugo and Toulouse Lautrec will never disappear, Europe’s mythical ‘City of Light’ is on the brink of redefining itself big-time. Reinvention and innovation is the name of the game for urban planners, and the arts scene has never been more exciting. Parisians themselves, moreover, are in the mood for change: 2012 presidential elections ushered in France’s first Socialist president in 17 years.

A Left-Wing President
Presidential elections in May 2012 pitted incumbent right-wing president Nicolas Sarkozy against left-wing candidate François Hollande, only for France to walk away with its first Socialist president since 1988. Hollande had campaigned to reduce unemployment (which was at a 12-year high), clear the country’s debts by 2017, raise income tax on top-end salaries and steer France though Europe’s biggest economic crisis in decades. The French, fed up with austerity and desperate for change, welcomed this approach. Legislative elections held a month later sealed the left’s comfortable grip on power: the Socialists won a comfortable majority (273 seats) in France’s 577-seat lower-house National Assembly, paving the way for the new president to preside un-fettered over a troubled France from his new Parisian home at the Élysée Palace.

Reinvention & Innovation
The city today is about reinvention and innovation. From community actions, like turning an art nouveau covered market to a sports centre in the Haut-Marais, to gargantuan projects affecting thousands of commuters every day, such as the overhaul of the Forum des Halles, Paris is not sitting on its laurels. The French capital is an architectural reference accustomed to looking good, and faded grandeur or a glamorous history is simply not sufficient: so out with the tired 1970s concrete at Les Halles, and in with designer garden crowned with a futuristic, rainforest-inspired canopy in glass (by 2016). Same goes for historic Gare d’Austerlitz and the Seine-side quartier around the train station where builders are beavering away on yet another renaissance in the city fashioned out of glass (and lurid lime-green in the case of the fashionable Docks en Seine). Paris-based Jean Nouvel is the architect.

Best on Film
La Môme (La Vie en Rose; 2007) Édith Piaf, from Paris waif to New York superstar.

Best in Print
Paris in Colour (Nichole Robertson; 2012) No photographic title better captures the city’s extraordinary colours and hues than this.
Stuff Parisians Like (Olivier Magny; 2011) Witty vignettes about (and how to be) Parisian.
The Ladies’ Delight (Émile Zola; 1883) Nineteenth-century shopping at Le Bon Marché.
Paris in Mind (Jennifer Lee; 2003) Anthology of Paris-related pieces by 29 American writers.