

France, minus the French

Our European correspondent Lee Suckling heads to Paris in search of hot boys.

I've come to Paris at the absolute worst time of the year. Living in London is, naturally, not just about living in London. It's about having the entire continent of Europe at your doorstep; knowing that you can be transported to a far away culture on a Friday night and be back at work first thing Monday morning.

A month into my UK adventure and France is begging. The ease of getting there is almost incomprehensible for an Antipodean: just

there wasn't a cute French boy in sight. Even a trip to Le Marais, the Darlinghurst of Paris, proves a disappointing talent-scouting mission.

Surely a Saturday night out at a gay club would prove different. Surely not every Parisian leaves the city at the end of summer.

Raid is known as one of the premiere clubs in Le Marais. Normally a hangout for the hip and hot locals, it's overrun tonight with big American jocks, all eager to pounce on a

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one hour and fifteen minutes on the superfast Eurostar. It used to take me that long to see friends on the other side of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

When the train pulls into Gare du Nord, it's clear to me that something about Paris is off. "I've got to warn you," my friend James says while picking me up. "This isn't Paris. It's August and all of the Parisians have left the city. It's full of American tourists."

He was right. In my first three days in Paris,

genuine French boy. The faces are disappointed when I walk in (it seems they think I'm another one of their own) and James and I end up downing four 10€ vodka tonics within the space of 20 minutes.

Ready to leave disappointed, we finally start chatting to a couple of other guys, on holiday from New York. "How long have you guys been together?" they ask, before James and I look at each other and laugh. "We're not together, we're just mates," I say.

James and I get to talking, discussing the science of going out if you're looking to hook up. There are two options: go out in threes or, if you're with just one other friend, you have to physically look completely different. If you look similar (as James and I do) people will assume you're together and no-one will hit on you.

So we split up, mingle by ourselves, and both pull successfully. Although, not with French guys. Yes, I really have come to Paris at the absolute worst time of the year.

It's not until Sunday afternoon that I get my first real taste of Parisian gay culture. It seems that all those who do remain have one summertime refuge from tourists, a picnic restaurant called Rosa Bonheur.

There's a line of 50 gay boys to get in, always a good sign. Most noticeably, every single one of them is skinny and a bit twinkly. "I forgot to tell you," says James when I mention my observation. "Guys don't work out in France."

It's true. In Paris I'm a muscle boy – something I'd never be considered back in Australia. I get to chatting with a couple of local guys who tell me that in France muscles aren't masculine; they're "too showy". Exercise is only in the form of riding a Velib on the public bicycle rental system and a Frenchman would never be caught dead in a gym. Biceps don't exist here, nor do pecs. Abs? Pfft.

There's something about France that makes you feel like you constantly need to impress. I don't feel like I should defend myself, I feel like I should succumb to their way of being. So I have another piece of white baguette. And another. And another.

For some reason, despite following a diet that Down Under we would consider horrific, the French seem to have this amazing metabolism to keep the slim, svelte figures they desire.

White bread, fried everything and red wine. Oh, and pastries, of course. That's the French diet. On the Champs-Élysées the bags aren't Vuitton, they're McDonalds.

Florent, a young blond French boy I met in line to buy more bread, cheese and rosé, starts flirting as I discuss my hang-ups with eating a year's worth of carbs in a night and how I'm going to feel terribly guilty about it all tomorrow.

He squeezes my upper arm and jokingly tells me I'm "on the cusp of being grotesque" (in a way only the French can get away with).

"It's my last night in Paris, I've got to go for it," I say to myself. I brush his sideswiped mop of hair out of his eyes, stare for a good 10 seconds, and go in for my first genuinely French French kiss.

I might have gone to Paris at the absolute worst time of the year. But I got back on the Eurostar happily smitten. C'est la vie, right? ★

