

Day 8 – Paris: The City, The Memories, The Farewell

We awoke in the timeless beauty of historical Paris, the City of Light unfolding beneath us like a tapestry. Morning light shimmered over Montparnasse, and though the Pullman's breakfast room hummed with business-travel urgency, we found an astonishing spread: eggs and pastries, yes, but also prosciutto, dumplings, cured fish, pizza, and silky coffee. Fortified, maps in hand, we boarded the bus for a final panoramic tour with our guide Marie and driver Eric, diving into Parisian traffic, the city's heartbeat.

As we rolled through the capital, Marie took us back to the city's origins with the Parisii tribe, a Celtic people who settled on the banks of the Seine in the 3rd century BCE. Their fishing village on what is now Île de la Cité laid the first stones of Paris. Then came the Romans, who conquered the region in 52 BCE, naming it Lutetia. Vestiges of this Roman city still remain today, especially in the Latin Quarter, where you can visit the Arènes de Lutèce, a Roman amphitheatre, and the ancient Cluny Baths.

We arrived at Les Invalides, its golden dome gleaming. Built in the late 17th century by Louis XIV as a home for wounded soldiers, it now houses Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb, resting under the grand dome in a red porphyry sarcophagus. A man who shaped modern France—and Europe—with both brilliance and brutality, his presence still resonates here.

Our drive took us through the majestic city redesigned under Baron Haussmann in the mid-1800s, under orders from Napoleon III. The Paris we see today—broad avenues, uniform façades, modern sewer systems, and endless perspectives—is the result of Haussmann's transformation, one that inspired city planning around the world.

We passed the UNESCO headquarters, École Militaire, and the Eiffel Tower, once criticized for its design but now the unshakable icon of Paris. We skirted the Seine, lined with houseboats and bouquinistes, glimpsed the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Élysées, and Place de la Concorde, closed off after recent events. We crossed the Pont de l'Alma, passed the modern Russian Orthodox Cathedral, skirted the Tuileries Garden, and saw the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay, two giants of global art that face each other across the river.

Crossing back to the Île de la Cité, Marie reminded us this island is the spiritual and geographical heart of Paris. We parked near the university and walked toward Notre-Dame, newly re-emerged from the shadows of its fire. Some of us stayed with Marie to continue the group tour, while others chose their own paths—venturing inside Notre-Dame's restored nave, or taking a deeply moving private tour on Jewish history in Paris with the insightful and deeply knowledgeable Stéphanie.

Still others journeyed up to the Panthéon, where Voltaire, Rousseau, Curie, and Zola rest beneath the neoclassical dome. Some walked through the Jardin du Luxembourg, alive with families and sculpture, while others visited the famous graves of Jim Morrison and Oscar Wilde at Père Lachaise, their legacies still drawing quiet reverence.

Some took in the final rounds of the French Open at Roland Garros, basking in the vibrant intensity of a tournament soaked in history. Others wandered through the Musée d'Orsay, spellbound by Van Gogh's brushstrokes and the light of the Impressionists. Everyone, it seemed, had their own last Parisian adventure.

By early evening, winds picked up and we gathered indoors, sheltered from the rush outside. It was time for our farewell drinks and dinner. There was laughter, toasts, a few misty eyes. We shared our memories—of the smell of croissants still warm from the oven, of the linden blossoms scenting the air, of a new perfume discovered. The taste of Bastoche's extraordinary cuisine: mushroom puffs, velvety sauces, perfectly balanced pairings. The liquors of Vedrenne, the birdsong along the canal, the frogs of Ranchot, the city's cacophony in contrast. The sight of water lilies curling in the detours of the canal, the Eiffel Tower rising

through clouds, the sloping hills of Burgundy, and the quiet streets of Auxerre. The feel of warm spa water, of sun-dappled limestone, of an old carved owl in Dijon. Even the comfort of a life jacket, strangely nostalgic. So many things to carry home.

Our final dinner was elegant and heartfelt: foie gras, a well-balanced Caesar salad, melting beef steak with sweet potato purée, and a chocolate and caramel bar to close. Everything, of course, paired with the right local wines.

There was laughter again, quiet goodbyes, promises of shared photos, exchanged emails, and dreams of future trips. And then it was time. A journey that had begun on a peaceful barge in Franche-Comté now ended here, among the bustle and romance of Paris.

Here's to many more adventures ahead—and may we always travel with open eyes, light hearts, and just enough room for dessert.