

Mes amis,

As we come to the close of our journey, I invite you to pause for just a moment and take a deep breath. Close your eyes if you'd like — and remember what France has smelled like these past two and a half weeks.

Fresh baguettes at dawn, herbs in the gardens of Villandry, the scent of lavender soap at the market in Sarlat, the cool dampness of the stones in Oradour-sur-Glane, and, yes, a little diesel and a little very human smells in cities — that's part of the memory too.

We tasted France: the sparkling Crémant de Loire we toasted with in Angers when we first met, Rocamadour cheese melting on warm bread, velvety reds in Gaillac and Carcassonne, the farm-to-table dinner with Isabelle and Mamie Ginette, cooked by the family in Sarlat, the foie gras, praline brioches that turned our fingers pink, and crepes that made Paris feel just a little sweeter.

We heard France: the organ in the basilica of Carcassonne, the bells of Rocamadour. We heard each other's laughter on buses, in vineyards, in cafés — and we heard silence, too, in Oradour, where words were not enough.

We saw France: from the black-and-white roofs of Angers to the golden stone of Oingt, from medieval castles clinging to cliffs to Jean Nouvel's modern interventions in Sarlat and Lyon. We watched Burgundy's vineyards blur past at 300 km/h on the TGV, we watched Paris glitter from the Seine, and we saw history and daily life in the eyes of the people we met.

And we touched France: the cool handrails of the château towers, the polished stones of Lyon's traboules, the soil in the vineyards, the tubes of the blending workshop as we created our own wine. Some of you touched the past in a very real way — tracing names on memorials, resting your hand on 2,000-year-old walls.

This trip was not just about UNESCO listed places. It was about people — the living soul of France, a country still alive. Edwig, Sarah, Justine, Lydia, Eve and Morgane — our guides who opened doors into history, culture and traditions. Jérôme, Domi, Hendrick, Denis, Cédric, Stéphane, Henri, Sofiane, Oussine, Islam and Amir, who drove us with skill and patience, even on narrow country lanes. Maxime, Anastasia, and baby Raphaël at Château Auzias, who showed us that wine is about family and future, not just the past. And perhaps most of all, our home-hosts — David & Ika, Colette and Patrick, Delphine & Andrew, Jean-Yves and Claudine — who welcomed us as friends and reminded us that France is not just a museum, it is alive, in kitchens and gardens and conversations shared over coffee.

We also leaned into some of France's more complicated sides — its history of religious persecution, its rural depopulation, its strikes and blockades, its debates over pensions, electricity production, education, politics, immigration, religion, and identity. But that, too, is what travel is for: not to paint a postcard, but to understand a country as it truly is.

I hope you will leave France with full hearts and sharper senses — not just knowing its history, but feeling its humanity. And I hope when you think back on these days, you will think not only of what you saw, but of what you discovered: patience during delays, courage on long walks, joy in unexpected moments, and connection — to this country, to its people, and to each other.

Thank you for your curiosity, your questions, your trust, and your laughter. You made this trip what it was.

May this not be the end of your journey with France, but the beginning.

And company line: fill in your surveys...