

Day 16 – Paris, Past and Present

Thursday, 20 November 2025 – Weather: a clear late autumn day

Our last full day together began gently, with the soft light of November filtering into the courtyards of Les Jardins du Marais. By now, the hotel felt like home: Christmas-styled pathways, quiet elegance, and the comforting routine of fresh breads, creamy yoghurts, fruit, cheeses, and perfectly brewed coffee. We set off at 9:00 a.m.—a slightly later start, a welcome mercy as we were all moving just a little slower after our 16 days of adventures.

The city was fully awake now, buzzing with November layers and energy. It felt like a different France from the warmer weather we had left behind just a few weeks earlier—streets full of commuters, cafés humming with locals enjoying the last of the beautiful days.

We began our final guided walk through Le Marais, a district where every stone seems to hold a story. Our first stop was Place des Vosges, its perfect symmetry and red-brick arcades glowing in the morning light.

In the corner of the square sits the home of Victor Hugo, who lived here from 1832 to 1848. We spoke of Hugo's literary genius, his deep humanity, and his vision of France—one that still resonates today. From there, we crossed through the classical courtyard and peaceful garden of the Hôtel de Sully, stepping for a moment into the 17th century.

We then made our way to Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis Church, a Jesuit gem with Italian Baroque lines and a soaring dome. Here, Victor Hugo's daughter Léopoldine was married—and, tragically, buried soon after, following the accident that shaped so much of Hugo's later writing.

Past the Musée Carnavalet, dedicated to the history of Paris, we entered the beating heart of the Jewish quarter on Rue des Rosiers. Here Gwen wove together centuries of Jewish life in Paris—its periods of flourishing and of persecution, its expulsions and returns, and its modern-day renaissance.

In Square Joseph Migneret, we paused for reflection. Migneret was a schoolteacher who risked his life to protect Jewish children during the Occupation, and the square bearing his name is a green, quiet space of remembrance. Stories of resistance and courage, which we had first explored in Lyon, now echoed in these narrow streets.

By mid-morning, we were ready for a pause: a cappuccino or a hot chocolate under the Parisian skies, a moment to breathe, talk, and take it all in.

Our walk continued at the Shoah Memorial, one of the most powerful sites in Paris. Its walls, carved with the names of those deported from France, are an unflinching reminder of the human cost of hatred. Inside, the eternal flame burns quietly.

We kept on walking to St Louis island and crossed to Île de la Cité to catch glimpses of Notre Dame and learn about its history. Some attended Mass at Notre-Dame, still standing proud under its scaffolding, its spire back toward the sky after the 2019 fire. Others entered the jewel-box world of Sainte-Chapelle, where sunlight shattered into thousands of colors across the Gothic stained glass. Art lovers crossed the river to the Musée d'Orsay, exploring its Impressionist masterpieces under the roof of the former train station. A few curious minds wanted to see the Orangerie.

As evening fell, we gathered one last time, dressed a little more elegantly, laughter mixing with nostalgia. Gwen raised a glass and offered a farewell toast—reminding us that what we had lived together was more than a trip: it was a shared journey through history, culture, and the French art de vivre.

Our farewell dinner at Le Centenaires was lively, warm, and just a touch emotional. The food was excellent, the wine flowed, and the conversations were full of the kind of reflections that only come at the end of a shared adventure.

Seventeen days ago, we began as travelers, strangers perhaps, curious about France and about each other. Tonight, we parted as companions of experience, woven together by landscapes, stories, flavors, and the quiet magic of walking through history side by side.