

Paris, 28 August - 1 September: an Olympics of design and culture away from the crowds

Paris: the city of love, croissants, and – this year – the Olympics and Paralympics. We visited at the end of August, hoping to practice our French (recently boosted by a Cambridge University course) and see first-hand the effect of hosting the biggest sporting – and arguably cultural – event in the world. The weather range truly befitted late summer, spanning heatwave, deluge, and low-hanging mists.

After arriving by Eurostar late afternoon, we went to our Airbnb near the Gare de l'Est. In the vein of the authentic Parisian experience, it was a chambre de bonne six stories above a *boulangerie*, accessible via many stairs or a coffin-sized lift, and filled with questionable colonial-era artwork. The view from the windows (partly thanks to the number of stairs) was gorgeous, echoing the Parisian roofs from the Olympics opening ceremony, but with less rain.

That first evening was hot – a true summer evening, the sort where everyone is outside and energy is high. We wandered along the banks of the nearby Canal Saint-Martin, heading towards Dumbo Burgers, a (wonderful) recommendation from our host. As we ambled back, someone dived into the canal and swam back to the bank – a suitably ethereal, slightly fuzzy memory that my camera completely failed to capture in the dark.

On Thursday, we had a mission. With wheelchair basketball tickets booked for 4pm at the Bercy stadium, we had a deadline to complete our checklist of food spots and sights (weighted strongly towards the former). First stop: a bakery, *Boulangerie Utopie*, home to a truly delicious black sesame éclair. Second: wander through the Marais, enjoying some *lèche-vitrines* ('window shopping' – literally, 'window licking'). Third: Restaurant Cinq-Mars, a bistro with a fairly priced lunch menu and a ridiculously large, luxurious, pillowy chocolate mousse.

Soon, it was Paralympics time. We grabbed some bikes, taking advantage of the expanded network of cycle routes, and made our way to Bercy stadium. Over the next four hours, we watched two brilliantly close matches: on the men's side, USA versus Germany, and on women's, China versus Canada. We left with a newly strengthened admiration for wheelchair basketball players – and an underlying discomfort around the audience's tendency to boo the Chinese athletes during penalties.

On Friday, the rain arrived. We had already planned to do a day trip outside of Paris, so this was our chance – the weather forecast seemed grey, but less wet, beyond the city. We cycled to the Gare de l'Ouest, getting soaked in the process, where a suburban train took us out to Fontainebleau-Avon, weaving through the suburbs and eventual countryside. Our destination was the Château de Fontainebleau, a Versailles-esque palace that was formerly one of Napoleon's residences. Walking from the station, the sleepy village turned into an eerie park, with tall lines of trees and an ominous sense of history. The grey sky may have had something to do with it, but it was extraordinary how everything in this estate seemed to come into existence as we came upon it, hiding behind the treeline before suddenly folding out into three dimensions. Even the palace, despite its huge size, seemed to only truly appear once we were within fifty metres of it.

After a picnic, we explored the gardens and the palace site, chased (ominously) by a small white tourist train. In a grotto, rippling Olympian muscles emerged from stone walls; over on the lawn, a replica of *The Dying Gaul* gazed weakly downwards. In the town we bought some French books to aid our language, and decided to head back to the station via the Forest, abandoning our original plans to rent bikes. A forty-minute walk through the trees along paths of sand – famously pure, used in the production of Murano glass and the glass diamonds of the Louvre's pyramid – took us back to the

station, and we returned to the bustle of Paris after a curiously timeless day out. We spent the evening near Sacré-Cœur, which was lit up brilliantly against the dark sky.

On Saturday, we travelled to the well-to-do 16th arrondissement to find Villa La Roche, a house designed by the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, and now an homage to his design principles. Inside its angles and sweeping curves, a temporary exhibition by Louis-Cyprien Rials outlined Le Corbusier's design of a stadium in Baghdad and its uncomfortable afterlives through the revolution and US invasion. Particularly poignant, timed to coincide with the Paralympics, was a video about Iraq's amputee football team, training in the stadium.

Soon after leaving, a true deluge began. With no warning from any weather app, we hid in a street doorway. The rain was unpleasant, but once it stopped, Paris began to glow gently, its roads and buildings gently shimmering in the light. It was the perfect setting to see the Eiffel Tower – and the Olympic seating being deconstructed below it, an intriguing blend of metals, the temporary functional scaffolding against the icon of the Paris skyline. One velveteen ice cream from Berthillon on Île Saint-Louis later, and both the day and our trip were almost done. For our final evening, we treated ourselves to a Lebanese feast at Le Cèdre, back on the Canal Saint-Martin. We played cards at a canalside bar amidst rumblings of thunder and bright flashes of lightning, a brewing storm that never quite broke.



Liz in the Airbnb



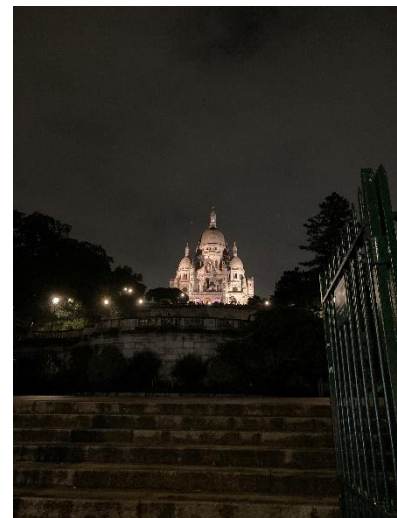
Wheelchair basketball



View from the Airbnb



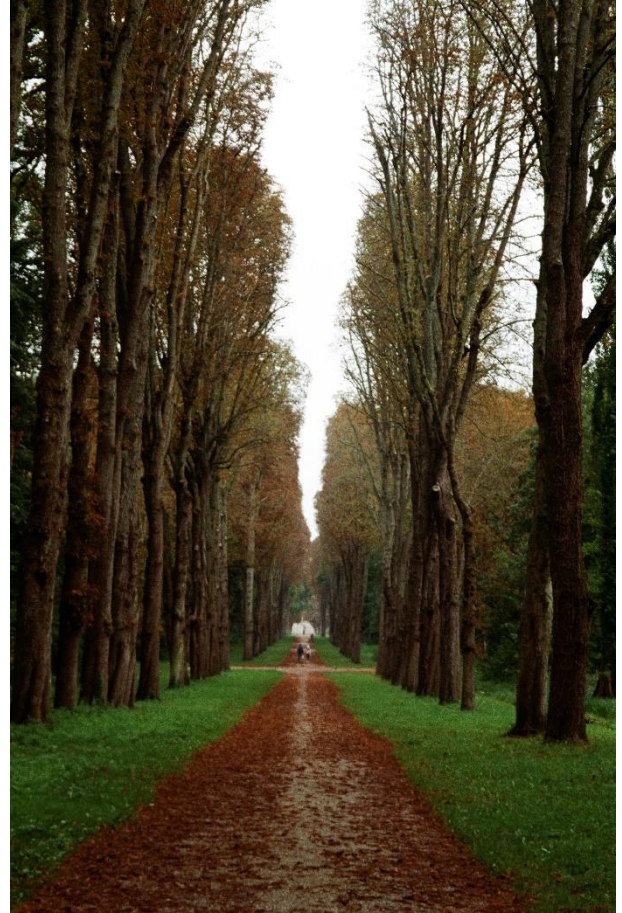
Rachel at the Eiffel Tower



Sacré Cœur at night



Liz at the Château de Fontainebleau



Walking to the Château de Fontainebleau



Enormous mousse at Cinq Mars



The sand in Fontainebleau Forest



The statues in the chateau's grotto



Fontainebleau picnic



Château de Fontainebleau



The sweeping lines of Villa La Roche



Villa La Roche



Dinner at Le Cèdre



Dinner at Le Cèdre