

One of the most memorable experiences of my quarter in France was visiting the palace and gardens at Versailles. I came with my Civilization class for a field trip, and we took a tour in English. The artwork and architecture are beyond compare. Any one of the rooms in the palace would deserve its own trip. A flexible neck (for peering up at ceiling paintings) and a good camera (for inspiring jealousy afterwards) are essential. Though it's hard to follow a

continuous thread when you're shunted from room to room so rapidly, I most admired the interplay between French and Roman imagery. Since the French kings were virtually deities, with the power to heal disease with just a laying-on of hands, I found it curious that these Christian god-men so readily employed pagan symbolism. Notice, though, the terrific prominence of the chapel. The museum portions of the palace are also wonderful, especially the brief military history of France displayed through the series of paintings in the Hall of Battles.

What I really want to write about, however, are the gardens. Not long after my class had finished its tour, a rainstorm suddenly besieged the castle, and the crowds poured towards the exit. But an umbrella lay in my backpack, and I entered the gardens mostly dry, and mostly alone. I cannot imagine a better way to enjoy the gardens at Versailles than right after a rainstorm when everyone has left. Most striking is the boulevard design with self-contained gardens interspersed. Each section possesses its own labyrinthine mystery, demanding some footwork before it will reveal itself: the gardens wrap themselves around you upon entering, but as soon as you leave a garden, you're back to the broad gravel path, faced by uniform rows of greenery. Inside, the spaces gather you in, but outside, the eye is drawn to distant vistas of the canal. The gardens are a delicate balance between earth and water, and the fountains intertwine with the trees to induce a sense of splendor equal to the palace. Thankfully, it eventually stopped raining on my umbrella. I took my leave as the sun began setting, and when I now think of France, I see that fountain of Apollo's chariot settling into the dusk. No one should leave Paris without seeing Versailles on a rainy day.

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Versailles Gardens
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