

Day 5 – Porcelain, Secrets, and the Magic of the Dordogne

We all woke up in our temporary French homes, each of us having shared an evening of stories, laughter, and warm hospitality with our host families in the peaceful countryside of Limousin. The cooler morning air made our breakfasts—often with homemade jams, fresh bread, and strong coffee—even more comforting. There were heartfelt goodbyes, a few misty eyes, and lots of reminiscing about our experiences. But by mid-morning, we had all reunited, recharged and closer than ever, ready for the next adventure.

Our first stop: Arquié Porcelaine, just outside of Limoges. Gwen and Isabelle welcomed us back on board, and we were introduced to Alexandra, our guide through the workshop. She unlocked the secrets of Limoges porcelain, a globally renowned craft with roots dating back to the 18th century, when deposits of kaolin—the essential white clay—were discovered near Saint-Yrieix. Since then, Limoges has become synonymous with quality porcelain, appreciated by kings, emperors, and modern designers alike.

Arquié, a family-run business blending tradition with innovation, still uses time-honored techniques. We learned about the three firings in the kiln, reaching temperatures over 1,300°C, the precise glazing process that gives porcelain its brilliance, and the decorating techniques, some done by hand, others by transfer. Street art-inspired murals in the factory added a colorful, modern twist to this timeless art.

Back on the bus, we headed deeper into the Corrèze countryside. The lush, rolling hills outside our windows mirrored the rich conversation inside, as Gwen shared her grandfather Raymond's story—a life marked by joy, loss, war, and unanswered questions. It was a moving reflection on identity, belonging, and the complex legacy of WWII in France.

We touched on DNA testing, which is currently illegal in France for recreational use—a sharp contrast to the U.S. (French law views it as a potential threat to family privacy and social stability). This led naturally into a discussion of secularism in France (*laïcité*)—a cornerstone of French public life since the 1905 law separating Church and State. While religion is respected, it's kept firmly out of public institutions, including education. Speaking of which, we also covered religious schooling in France, which exists but operates under state contracts that regulate curriculum and funding.

We passed through some of the most sparsely populated areas in France. Corrèze is part of what's often called “La France oubliée”—the forgotten France. A rural region of immense charm and natural beauty but challenged by depopulation. To counter this, the département commissioned a song by Les 3 Cafés Gourmands, titled *À nos souvenirs*, a nostalgic, upbeat tribute to their childhood memories and small-town life. It gave us all a little lump in the throat and some foot-tapping joy.

As we arrived in Uzerche, the soft drizzle gave the village a mystical sheen. Perched above the Vézère River, Uzerche has earned its nickname: *la Perle du Limousin*. Its medieval core is a testament to a time when religious, economic, and military power were all concentrated in one fortified town. We admired the home of Napoleon's surgeon, passed through the ancient city gate, visited the first chapel dating back to the 10th century, and paused to take in sweeping views of the lush valley below.

Our stroll through town took us past timbered houses, turrets, and the Tower of the Black Prince—a relic of the 13th century. The Abbatale Saint-Pierre, with its Romanesque roots and understated elegance, reminded us of the enduring spiritual legacy of the region. We talked about the symbolism of Marianne, the French Republic's allegory, and tasted linden leaves—a local tradition during springtime. There was even time to learn about the Palm Sunday hazel branch procession, unique to Limousin.

Lunch was served in a cozy local restaurant, with a choice of succulent salmon, tender Limousin beef (from the local golden-red cattle, famed for their quality meat), or a creamy risotto. For dessert, many of us tried the *flognarde*—a baked custard-like dessert with apples or pears, a cousin of the *clafoutis*. (Scroll down for the recipe!)

On the road again, we drifted into quiet reflection to the soundtrack of Fréro Delavega's *Même si c'est très loin* and *Sur la route*, two breezy, soul-searching songs perfect for watching the countryside roll by. Then came Stéphane Eicher's *Déjeuner en paix*, Einaudi's contemplative piano piece *Experience*, and the familiar serenity of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G major.

As we crossed into the famed Périgord, we learned that this historical province of France is divided into four parts:

- Périgord Vert (green) – pastoral and lush
- Périgord Blanc (white) – chalky soil and limestone
- Périgord Pourpre (purple) – wine country
- Périgord Noir (black) – forests and Sarlat, where we're now headed

We followed the Vézère River, a lifeline that carved out deep gorges and caves long before history books were written. In Montignac, we passed near the site of Lascaux, discovered in 1940 by teenage boys, revealing over 600 Paleolithic cave paintings—some more than 17,000 years old. As we descended into Sarlat-la-Canéda, the rain, a gift to local farmers, was falling.

Our home for the next few nights: the Grand Hôtel de Sarlat, a charming property combining two manor houses with cozy gardens, modern rooms, and even a hot tub.

After a short rest, we met Gwladys, our local guide, who walked us through Sarlat's medieval maze, revealing the secrets of its prosperity, its architecture, and its unique *Enfeus*—funerary arches used for burials during the Middle Ages. We stood in awe before the Lantern of the Dead, a mystery tower from the 12th century, and learned about Jean Nouvel's architectural interventions in the old Sainte-Marie church.

She also introduced us to André Malraux, whose 1962 laws led to the preservation of historical centers like Sarlat. Without those laws, the town's golden stone facades might have crumbled away. Instead, they glowed in the evening light as we joined the locals for an *apéro* on the square—glasses clinking, conversation flowing.

Dinner was a relaxed and festive affair at Coin Coin, a tapas-style restaurant where Julien, the owner, welcomed us like old friends. The food was delicious, the company even better, and the mood warm and joyful after such a rich day.

Some of us strolled back through cobbled streets, others enjoyed a dip in the spa, and all of us turned in feeling lucky—not just for the day we had, but for the people we're sharing this journey with.