

## Day 12 – Crossing France by Train and Discovering Lyon

Sunday, 16 November 2025 – No rain during our walks, and cooler temperatures

The sun rose over Carcassonne in a brilliant blue sky — the kind of light that seems to bless both travelers and locals. After an early breakfast overlooking the citadelle, we loaded our luggage onto the van, said a last quiet *au revoir* to the ramparts, and made what might have been the shortest bus ride of the whole trip: just a few minutes to Carcassonne's small train station, with our driver, Cédric.

Before boarding, Gwen explained the fascinating world of French railways: how SNCF (the *Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français*) runs the country's vast rail network, and how different types of trains serve different purposes. The TER trains, she said, are the lifeblood of local commuting — slower, with frequent stops — while the TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse*) is France's pride, carrying passengers at speeds of up to 320 km/h across the country with astonishing efficiency.

Once aboard, we settled into our comfortable seats, ready to cross France from west to east. The landscapes unfolded like a moving film reel. We passed through the Minervois and Corbières, where endless rows of gnarled vines basked under the sun. To the south, the hazy outline of the Pyrénées marked the borderlands of France and Spain, a reminder of how close we were to Catalan country. Then — a flash of blue — the Mediterranean Sea shimmered on the horizon as we passed near Narbonne.

Soon came Béziers, one of France's oldest cities, famed for its Roman amphitheater and tragic Cathar history. The fishing boats and canals of Sète slid into view, known as the "Venice of Languedoc." We crossed Montpellier, youthful and lively with its universities, then on to Nîmes, guardian of the Roman amphitheater and *Maison Carrée*, proud witnesses of antiquity. As the train veered northeast, we caught glimpses of the Alps in the far distance, their peaks still dusted with white. Then came the gentle, rolling hills of the Luberon, dotted with perched villages and lavender fields now turning to late-summer gold.

By midday we reached Lyon Part-Dieu, the city's main station and one of the busiest in France — a striking mix of modernist 1970s architecture and constant movement. This district is the beating heart of Lyon's business life, full of glass towers, shopping centers, and office workers on weekdays.

From here, it was just a short walk to our lunch stop, *l'Empreinte*, where we were treated to a delicious salad of vegetarian assortment.

Refueled and happy, we met our new driver Stéphane, who would be with us for our Lyon adventures. He drove us through the city, as Gwen narrated Lyon's layered history. Founded by the Romans in 43 BCE as Lugdunum, Lyon has been a crossroads of trade for over two millennia. During the Renaissance, it became a silk capital and later a hub of printing and intellectual life. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage site, celebrated for its unique blend of history, gastronomy, and urban beauty.

We saw the modern Part-Dieu district and learned about Les Brotteaux, a former train station now reborn as a restaurant and event venue. We passed the Parc de la Tête d'Or, Lyon's vast green lung, home to botanical gardens, a rose garden, and even a free zoo. Crossing the Rhône, we admired its wide, majestic flow before climbing towards the Croix-Rousse hill, once home to the *Canuts* — the silk workers whose revolts in the 19th century shaped labor rights in France. We spotted Lyon's characteristic tall windows, built to let in maximum light for weaving.

A highlight was the Canut Wall, a monumental *trompe-l'œil* mural showing life in the neighborhood. Then we wound our way toward the hill of Fourvière, Lyon's "praying hill," crowned by the dazzling Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, built in the 19th century as a symbol of gratitude after Lyon was spared from war.

We saw the UNESCO-listed Old Town, past the medieval streets of St Paul, St Jean, and St George, and by the Courthouse with its neoclassical façade, often called the “Palace of Twenty-Four Columns.” We saw the famous painted walls, including the Lyonnais Fresco that celebrates the city’s great personalities, and the library mural, a giant painted bookshelf.

We then walked — with a few scenic detours — to our hotel to settle in.

Some of us made booking in diverse restaurants and strolled back to the hotel under the soft lights of the city, full of impressions, discoveries, and the promise of more to come. Lyon had already begun to weave its spell.