

## DAY 9 – From Foggy Plateaux to the Citadel of Carcassonne

Thursday, November 13, 2025 – A dry, warm, but windy day

After a peaceful night at the Grand Hôtel de Sarlat, we said goodbye to the Périgord Noir and climbed aboard our coach for a day of transition, discovery, and deep conversation. Our driver for the day was Denis, a calm and caring character who carried us across the South of France.

As we left Sarlat, the countryside was draped in a soft, mysterious fog — the perfect backdrop for thoughtful bus conversations. Gwen opened the floor to a variety of topics, and soon our bus became a rolling salon:

- Retirement and Pensions in France: We learned that the legal retirement age was recently raised to 64 (sparking major strikes in 2023), with most French retirees receiving a combination of state pension and supplementary employer-based plans.
- Healthcare System (Medicare): France's Sécurité Sociale provides near-universal coverage, with a mix of public and private care, and complementary insurance called *mutuelle* to cover co-pays.
- Employment & Taxes: Gwen explained the structure of French income tax (progressive, with a focus on household income), and social charges that fund healthcare, pensions, and family allowances.
- Sole Traders: We discovered how the *auto-entrepreneur* status (now *micro-entrepreneur*) allows freelancers and small business owners to work with simplified tax and accounting obligations.
- Religions in France and how this has evolved over the centuries.

Our route took us across the *plateaux des Causses du Quercy* — dry limestone plateaus marked by *dolines* (sinkholes), juniper scrub, and low stone walls. This UNESCO Global Geopark preserves a unique landscape shaped by water and time, dotted with sheep farms and sleepy villages.

A late-morning stop at an *aire d'autoroute* (highway rest area) gave us a glimpse into French road-trip culture: picnic tables shaded by trees, separate play areas for children, recycling bins, and vending machines stocked with regional snacks. Some of us tried *pain aux raisins* (spiraled raisin pastries), a perfect prelude to discussing Philippe Delerm's classic essay collection *La première gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules* — especially the short piece *Le croissant du trottoir*, a meditation on the small, almost sacred joy of a simple pastry eaten outdoors.

Back on the road, we passed the distinctive *pigeonniers* of the Tarn-et-Garonne and Southwest — elegant dovecotes that once symbolized wealth and nobility (pigeon breeding was historically a seigneurial privilege).

Soon we were rolling through Gaillac, birthplace of one of France's oldest wine regions (vineyards since Roman times). Known for its diversity of grapes, Gaillac produces reds (from Duras, Braucol), dry whites (Mauzac, Len de l'El), and a charming *méthode ancestrale* sparkling wine.

Our next topic was Catharism, the 12th–13th century Christian dualist movement that saw the material world as evil and sought a life of purity. The Catholic Church labeled it heresy, and Pope Innocent III launched the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229), a brutal military campaign that devastated the region,

leading to massacres (like Béziers, 1209) and eventually bringing the lands under direct control of the French crown.

Arriving in Albi, we discovered a town that feels both southern and stately, built in the warm pink brick of the Tarn. We admired the imposing Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile — the largest brick cathedral in the world, built as a statement of Catholic power after the Cathar wars. Its fortress-like exterior contrasts with an interior that dazzles with flamboyant Gothic vaults, Italy-inspired frescoes (including a monumental Last Judgment), and one of France's largest classical organs.

Lunch was a treat: a choice of fresh fish or Toulouse sausage served with hearty sides, followed by dessert and coffee. Free time allowed us to stroll the cathedral square, peek into the charming streets of the episcopal quarter (UNESCO-listed), and soak in Albi's relaxed southern pace.

Back on the bus, music set the mood for the next leg of our journey:

- Francis Cabrel – “La Corrida”: a haunting anti-bullfighting ballad by one of France's most beloved singer-songwriters, born in Agen.
- Jean-Jacques Goldman – “Il y a”: reflective and tender, by the songwriter behind many French hits (and Céline Dion classics).
- Olivia Ruiz – “Je traîne des pieds”: playful, autobiographical song by the “Chocolate Girl” from Carcassonne, celebrating her free-spirited childhood.
- L'Os de Nadeau – “Saussat”: a folk tune celebrating Occitan identity and rural roots.

We skirted Toulouse, catching glimpses of its aerospace outskirts, and soon entered the rolling landscapes of the Aude département. Gwen introduced the Canal du Midi, a 17th-century engineering marvel by Pierre-Paul Riquet that links the Atlantic to the Mediterranean — one of the great achievements of Louis XIV's reign and today a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As the Montagne Noire loomed in the distance, the road curved toward our final destination: Carcassonne. The first glimpse of the medieval citadel — turrets rising against the sky — was unforgettable.

We checked into the Hôtel des Chevaliers, where many rooms offered a stunning view of the walled cité. After a short rest, we gathered for an evening stroll through the Bastide Saint-Louis, Carcassonne's “new town” from the 13th century, with its grid of streets, covered market, and lively cafés.

The day ended with a convivial dinner at the hotel, and local wines — shared with friends against the backdrop of the glowing ramparts. It was the perfect end to a day that had taken us from foggy plateaux and medieval heresy to the gates of one of France's most iconic fortresses.