

Day 13 – Resistance, Rolling Hills, and a Government That Falls

Monday, 8 September 2025 – Weather: light drizzle but lucky enough to stay dry

Lyon woke slowly under a soft drizzle, and so did we, savoring the luxury of a leisurely breakfast at the Mercure Lyon Plaza République. Some of us tried the local indulgence of pink praline brioche — a Lyonnaise specialty that looks almost too pretty to eat — while others chose local cheese, charcuterie, or the classic croissant. It was the perfect start to a day that would be both deeply reflective and unexpectedly eventful.

As we walked along Rue de la République, Lyon's main artery, we noticed the city waking up under the unusual quiet of a public transport strike — just footsteps, bicycles, and the occasional car. Gwen drew our attention to the Lyon-style windows, with their tall, wide frames designed to let in as much light as possible for the silk workers who once toiled at their looms. We passed the elegant Palais de la Bourse, built in the mid-19th century as Lyon's Chamber of Commerce, and reached the striking Opéra de Lyon, whose modern glass-and-steel crown by architect Jean Nouvel rises above its 19th-century base like a bold punctuation mark on the skyline.

At Place des Terreaux, framed by the Musée des Beaux-Arts and the Hôtel de Ville, we met our guide Magali for a powerful journey through the history of the French Resistance. This was not a history lesson so much as an immersion in moral courage. We stood in the very streets where clandestine presses once ran, where ordinary citizens chose to risk their lives rather than accept oppression. Magali told us about Charles de Gaulle, the voice of Free France, about Jean Moulin, the unifying figure of the Resistance, and about the darkness represented by Klaus Barbie, the "Butcher of Lyon." The stories were both harrowing and inspiring. We ended this part of the day over coffee in a local café, letting the weight of the morning settle and sparking thoughtful conversation about what we might have done had we lived in those times.

Some of us visited the Musée des Beaux-Arts afterward, while others returned to the hotel before reuniting for our afternoon journey. Houssine and Sofiane, our cheerful drivers, took us north into the rolling hills of the Monts du Lyonnais and into the UNESCO-listed Beaujolais Geopark. The drizzle had lifted, leaving the countryside gleaming — a patchwork of vineyards, farmhouses, and villages that looked like a softer, greener Tuscany.

Our first stop was Oingt, one of France's "Plus Beaux Villages." Perched high above the valley, Oingt is a medieval gem built from golden limestone that seems to glow even under gray skies. We wandered its narrow streets, peered into artisan workshops, and learned about the Beaujolais Nouveau festival, a joyful November tradition when the first wines of the harvest are released with music and celebration. We also explored the differences between the wines of southern Beaujolais — fruitier, lighter, and ready to drink — and those of the north, known for their structure and depth.

Our journey continued to the tiny village of Bully, with just 2,200 inhabitants and a storybook square dominated by its château. The green hills around the village seemed to roll endlessly, dotted with vineyards and small farms. There, we met Jean-Yves, who welcomed us into the council room to explain how a small village is run — its budgets, its challenges, its hopes for the future. Then he led us to his home, where Claudine greeted us with warmth and a table set for le goûter, the cherished French afternoon ritual. We tasted local Beaujolais wine and brioche aux pralines country-style — bright, sweet, and celebratory. Their dog Luky quickly became everyone's friend.

Back in Lyon by evening, we gathered at Le Lafayette, a lively neighborhood spot where the owner's hospitality made us feel more like family than guests. Over plates of delicious, unfussy food, we learned the news that had been buzzing all day: the government had lost a confidence vote and fallen — a major moment in French politics. Outside, the city was beginning to stir with demonstrations. Numbers varied

wildly — “over a thousand,” said bystanders, “three hundred,” said the police, “two million,” claimed the protesters — but one thing was certain: France was heading into a turbulent week.

Back in our hotel rooms, just a few hundred meters from where the crowds were gathering, we could hear the chants beginning to rise. Gwen reminded us that this, too, is part of the journey: witnessing democracy in motion, feeling history as it happens. In the coming days, strikes and demonstrations might change our plans — but that, she suggested, is exactly the kind of adventure that makes a journey unforgettable.

Tomorrow, new challenges — and discoveries — await.