

## Day 6 – Monday, 27 October 2025

After several full days of discoveries, the group embraced a slower rhythm this morning — a rare and well-deserved *sleep-in*. The sun rose gently over Toulouse as we lingered over coffee and croissants before boarding our comfortable and clean coach with our ever-attentive driver, Yannick.

We soon left the pink hues of Toulouse behind, heading south toward **Ariège**. Nestled between the Pyrenees and the rolling plains of southwest France, **Ariège** is one of the most unspoiled departments of Occitanie. Named after the river that runs through it, this land of forests, caves, and mountain pastures has long been shaped by independence and resilience. The region's history is woven with the legacy of the **Cathars**, medieval heretics who sought spiritual purity and simplicity, and whose story still echoes through the hilltop castles of the Pyrenees. Ariège remains a sanctuary of rural authenticity — where the pace slows, the cheese smells stronger, and every village has its own rhythm of bells.

As we drove, Gwen introduced us to the **Cathar philosophy**, born in these very hills in the 12th century. The **Cathars**, or "*Parfaits*" ("the pure ones"), were a Christian dualist movement that flourished in southern France during the 12th and 13th centuries. They believed in two opposing principles: a world of good (spirit) created by a benevolent God, and a world of evil (matter) created by a lesser, corrupt being. Rejecting material wealth and the power of the established Church, Cathars preached humility, equality, and nonviolence. Their movement was crushed during the **Albigensian Crusade** (1209–1229), but their ideals of simplicity and conscience left a deep cultural imprint on Occitanie.

Our first stop was the enchanting **market town of Mirepoix**, where we arrived just in time for *market day* — always the best day to meet the soul of a village. Just off the wooden arcades, stalls overflowed with cheeses, charcuterie, olives, soaps, and colorful fabrics, while locals lingered over coffee and gossip. Gwen guided us through the town's fascinating history: once rebuilt after a devastating flood in the 13th century, Mirepoix remains one of the most beautiful medieval bastide towns of the south.

At the heart of the square stands the **Maison des Consuls**, famous for its carved wooden beams — each face telling a story of time, trade, or legend. Nearby, the **Saint-Maurice Cathedral**, with its single vast nave, shelters centuries of faith and community life beneath its Gothic arches. The market itself was a festival of colors and aromas, a living postcard of French country life.

After some browsing (and a few irresistible purchases), we regrouped for a local tasting: **fritons**, deliciously crispy morsels of seasoned duck fat — a rustic specialty. Gwen surprised everyone with a small memento — a **magnet featuring a Mirepoix artwork**, created by local artists — a token of our morning's wanderings.

Our journey continued through **the rolling hills of Ariège**, dotted with the distinctive **grey Ariège cows** and small stone hamlets that seem untouched by time.

We soon reached **Carla-Bayle**, once known as Carla-le-Comte — birthplace of **Pierre Bayle**, the 17th-century philosopher whose writings on tolerance and reason foreshadowed the Enlightenment. A Protestant in a time of fierce religious conflict, Bayle believed that faith should never be imposed, and that morality could exist independently of religion — a revolutionary idea for his time. His hometown, once fortified, still carries the quiet dignity of resistance and intellect.

A short drive took us to **Montbrun-Bocage**, where the ever-smiling **Joe** awaited us with contagious enthusiasm. An American expat turned local, Joe shared how he and his family made this village their home — drawn by community spirit and the slower rhythm of Ariège life. We strolled through Montbrun's narrow lanes, learning about its history, its church, and its lively **Sunday market**, famous for organic produce and local crafts.

The scent of fresh bread led us to a **natural bakery**, where the temptation of pastries was simply too strong to resist. Then came the highlight of our afternoon: a visit to **La Grangette**, the eco-friendly haven Joe and his wife **Angela** have lovingly created with other community members. There, under a radiant autumn sky, Angela welcomed us with tea, coffee, and a divine slice of homemade **lemon cake**. It was a simple yet perfect moment — conversation, laughter, sunshine, and cake — proof that hospitality is often the most memorable luxury of all.

Back on the bus, we played a lively round of *“Remember what we learnt on our trip”*, filled with laughter and good-natured teasing. We also learnt about the legend of Dame Carcas and her pig. Our performance was so sharp that Yannick accused us (half-seriously) of cheating — proof that this traveling family knows each other well by now.

As we returned to Toulouse for our evening adventures, the mood was light and content. Everyone, it seemed, was part of the same rhythm now — relaxed, engaged, and connected. Because just like in every good family, it’s not about being perfect — it’s about showing up with a smile, keeping curiosity alive, and making room for each other along the road, while having a good laugh with every family member - driver included.