

Day 10 – A Taste of Terroir and a Farewell to the South

After a peaceful night and a luxurious breakfast in our charming riverside hotel, we stepped into the crisp southern morning light—perfect weather for a day built on simplicity, generosity, and discovery. We were reunited with our driver Denis, who greeted us warmly for our final day on the road together.

Leaving Carcassonne behind, we ventured southeast through a landscape quilted with vineyards, caught between the folds of the Montagne Noire and the rolling Minervois. Our destination: Château l'Amiral, in the village of Aigues-Vives, a name that means “living waters” and speaks to the ancient springs that once sustained Roman settlers here. Today, the life force flows instead through grapevines and the enduring passion of their caretakers.

At the gates of the domaine, we were welcomed by Bénédicte and Rodolphe, the winemakers and owners—humble, generous, and full of insight. Rodolphe led us into the vineyards where our adventure began. He explained the essential French concept of *terroir*: the combination of soil, climate, topography, and human touch that gives wine its soul. Here, limestone-rich soils, dry summers, and mistral winds shape the grapes and the people alike.

We learned about the appellation system in France—a strict classification that links wine to place and process. The estate produces both Pays d'Oc IGP (Indication Géographique Protégée) wines and Minervois AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée), a mark of quality and tradition. Rodolphe described how each grape—Syrah, Grenache, Carignan, and others—brings its own character to the blend, influenced by drought, sun, and the natural rhythms of the vines. A snail on a vine leaf reminded us of the slow magic of winegrowing.

We strolled back to the chai, the winery building where the alchemy unfolds. Rodolphe demystified the process of winemaking according to color—white, rosé, red—and introduced us to the tools of the trade: pigeage, remontage (pump-overs), and the influence of tannins. The moment we had all been waiting for arrived—the tasting.

We sampled their full range:

- Minervois AOP Red: Powerful, structured, with ripe black fruit and garrigue herbs.
- Pays d'Oc Rosé: Fresh, light, with hints of strawberry and citrus zest.
- Pays d'Oc White: Crisp and aromatic, with notes of white flowers and pear.
- Limited cuvées aged in oak: Elegant, nuanced, built for aging.

Then came the highlight: a blending workshop, where we got to play winemakers, combining varietals and tasting the difference each grape made. Laughter flowed as freely as the wine—some creations were brilliant, others... let's just say they reaffirmed our current careers.

Lunch was a postcard of French countryside living: a long table under the trees, shaded by fig and pear, set with heritage plates and a red-checked tablecloth. We were served a humble feast of cantaloupe, garden tomatoes, pâté de campagne, farm cheeses, and ripe fruit salad, with espresso to finish. No one wanted to leave. We would have gladly surrendered to a nap in the grass, the château's pigs, goat, and geese for company.

But eventually we said our heartfelt goodbyes to Bénédicte and Rodolphe and returned to Carcassonne to begin our farewell to the south. Some of us returned to the citadel for a last dose of medieval magic, others visited the Fine Arts Museum, wandered through the bastide, or simply relaxed on the terrace of our hotel, chatting and reflecting under the sun.

A few gathered one last time for dinner in town, while others savored the quiet of the evening, the distant glow of Carcassonne's ramparts casting a golden aura on our final night in this land of wine, history, and heartfelt connections.

Tomorrow, a new rhythm begins: the TGV awaits, ready to take us north to Gwen's hometown, and toward the final chapter of our French journey. But tonight, we drift to sleep filled with the warmth of the day—its tastes, stories, and the people who made it unforgettable.