

## Day 7 – Dijon, Auxerre, Paris

We woke from another deep and peaceful sleep in our plush rooms, cocooned by fluffy pillows and hushed morning light. After a delicious breakfast—flaky pastries, just-cooked eggs, fresh berries, silky smoked salmon—we gathered our things and prepared to move on. It was time to say goodbye to our beloved Timi, who had cared for us with poise, heart, and humour from the beginning of our barge adventure. Always ready with a calm presence and a warm smile, she had helped make every day feel easy and special.

We boarded our coach with Eric, our unflappable driver, and set off. The motorway sliced through the green landscape, and we watched as the Chablis vineyards stretched out like rows of parchment, basking in the early light.

As we cruised toward Auxerre, we enjoyed a taste of Burgundy's craftsmanship in the form of orangettes—candied orange peels dipped in bittersweet dark chocolate, aromatic and perfect.

🍷 Orangettes (Recipe): Orange peels, blanched then simmered in sugar syrup, dried and dipped in 70% dark chocolate—an elegant treat, best savoured slowly.

Gwen read to us *Le Croissant du Trottoir* by Philippe Delerm, a gentle reminder to enjoy life's smallest surprises.

We reached Auxerre, a town with a medieval soul and Renaissance grace. Our guide Julia, fluent and lively, led us through the winding lanes and timber-framed buildings of this lesser-known treasure. Auxerre, nestled along the Yonne River, has roots dating back to the Gallo-Roman period and flourished during the Middle Ages as a key religious and commercial hub. Its grand Cathedral of Saint-Étienne was built over several centuries starting in the 11th century, with its richly carved Gothic façade and stunning 13th-century stained glass windows offering a glimpse into the town's once-powerful bishopric.

In the centre of town, we paused before the famous Cadet Roussel statue—celebrating the eccentric 18th-century court bailiff who inspired a popular French Revolutionary song. His quirky ways and oddball habits—three houses, three hats, three coats—became a symbol of the people's light-hearted rebellion, and the melody still rings out at schoolyards and festivals across France.

We wandered beneath the Gros Horloge, a 15th-century astronomical clock set into a stone archway, and admired the blend of medieval and Renaissance architecture that gives Auxerre its fairytale charm. Some of us chose a quiet café or bistro for lunch, sitting beneath flowering balconies, sipping Chablis under the gaze of timber-framed façades.

Later, we regrouped and returned to the bus. The rain politely waited until we were safely back onboard. As we left, we knew Auxerre had surprised us all—certainly one of the tour's hidden highlights.

Our drive continued toward Paris, broken by a brief highway stop where Gwen offered us gougères—those irresistible choux-pastry puffs loaded with grated cheese, golden and airy.

🧀 Gougères (Recipe): Choux dough made with butter, flour, and eggs, enriched with aged Comté or Gruyère, piped into small rounds and baked until crisp and hollow inside.

As we entered the capital, conversation turned toward French culture and politics—lively debates about Mayor Anne Hidalgo, urban renewal, bike lanes, and of course, the 2024 Olympic Games, which had just wrapped up. Paris, still catching its breath, now wore the glow of a city that had just hosted the world. The benefits and burdens were visible: revitalised neighbourhoods, improved infrastructure, and—yes—frustrated Parisians debating the legacy.

We arrived at Hotel Pullman Montparnasse, a sleek and modern refuge with plush comfort and elegant design, nestled near the heart of the city. We each launched into our own Parisian evening: some headed to the iconic Brasserie Lipp, the 19th-century literary haunt where Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir once held court over beer and choucroute.

Brasserie Lipp (History): Founded in 1880 by Léonard Lipp, a refugee from Alsace, this brasserie became a Left Bank institution, frequented by intellectuals, politicians, and artists. Its walls echo with debate, flirtation, and the scent of sauerkraut and strong mustard.

Others chose a glittering night at the Paradis Latin, the oldest cabaret in Paris.

Paradis Latin (History): Originally commissioned by Napoleon in 1803 and rebuilt by Gustave Eiffel in 1889, Paradis Latin blends Belle Époque charm with modern flair—equal parts feathers, sequins, and theatrical spectacle.

The show was exuberant: fit, flexible artists spinning and leaping across the stage; Ava, the mysterious lady in green; Napoleon, shirtless for reasons unexplained; a menagerie of humans-as-animals and animals-as-humans. The wine flowed, the laughter was loud, and the evening sparkled.

We returned to our rooms, grateful for soft pillows, quiet hallways, and the sheer poetry of Paris. Tomorrow: more adventures await in the City of Lights.