

Day 12 – From the Citadel to the Capital of Silk (and Everything Else)

What a journey today—from the medieval stones of Carcassonne to the vibrant, mural-painted walls of Lyon. The weather couldn't have been more inviting for a travel day: clear and luminous, as if France herself wanted to show off her landscapes.

We began early, with a quiet breakfast overlooking the Aude River, taking one last moment to say goodbye to the citadel and bastide city that had cradled us for the past few days. We boarded our coach with Cédric for the short drive to the Carcassonne train station.

Our train for the day was the TGV—France's celebrated high-speed rail, a marvel of modern transportation launched in 1981 with the Paris–Lyon line. Now crisscrossing the country at speeds up to 320 km/h (199 mph), it has become a national symbol of innovation and sustainability. But before our TGV pulled in, we glimpsed a regional TER Occitanie train, part of the local network that connects smaller towns to larger urban centers. True to its reputation, the train was nearly silent—French rail travel is often as calm as it is efficient.

As we settled into our sleek, comfortable seats, the landscape began to scroll past like a living painting. We passed the Montagne Noire, with its dark, forested hills, and the limestone ridges of the Corbières. The vineyards of Languedoc stretched into the horizon, and glimpses of the Mediterranean glistened as we passed Narbonne, Béziers, and Sète—port cities rich in Roman and maritime heritage.

Montpellier, a university city with a young, creative energy, gave way to Nîmes, famous for its Roman amphitheater and denim (from “de Nîmes”). From there we crossed Avignon, the city of Popes, and Les Alpilles, the low limestone range that inspired Van Gogh. Valence, gateway to the Rhône Valley, marked our approach to Lyon.

We arrived at Gare Part-Dieu, Lyon's central station, and walked to our nearby restaurant to enjoy ravioles de Romans, a delicate specialty from the Drôme region—miniature pasta parcels filled with cheese and herbs, a cousin to Italian ravioli with a distinctly French flair.

After lunch, we met our driver Jean-Luc for a panoramic introduction to Lyon, France's third-largest city and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Our tour began in Part-Dieu, a modern district once dominated by the 19th-century Servient military barracks. We continued to the Brotteaux and its elegant train station, then stopped outside L'Est, one of Paul Bocuse's iconic brasseries. Bocuse, legendary chef and ambassador of Lyonnaise cuisine, helped solidify Lyon's title as the Capital of Gastronomy.

Next stop: the lush Parc de la Tête d'Or, created in 1857 and home to botanical gardens, a lake, and even a zoo. We crossed the powerful, “masculine” Rhône River, then climbed la Croix-Rousse—the hill of the Canuts, Lyon's 19th-century silk workers. This area echoes with stories of social struggle, innovation (thanks to Jacquard's revolutionary loom), and urban art, including Le Mur des Canuts, one of the city's largest trompe-l'œil murals.

Descending to the “feminine” Saône River, we passed the Mur des Lyonnais, where dozens of Lyon’s most celebrated figures are depicted: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and his Little Prince, the Lumière brothers who invented cinema, Joseph-Marie Jacquard, Louis Pasteur, and even Roman emperors who once ruled from here, when Lyon was the capital of Gaul.

We drove by Vieux-Lyon, where Renaissance façades whisper of a time when Italian bankers brought silk, architecture, chocolate, and finance to the city, establishing Lyon as a hub of wealth and culture. We passed La Passerelle, the graceful footbridge across the Saône, and Les 24 Colonnes, the neoclassical courthouse. We admired the Cathédrale Saint-Jean, a blend of Gothic and Romanesque architecture, and drove by Saint-Just High School, which Gwen proudly calls her alma mater—once a Jesuit seminary with sweeping views of the city.

We then arrived in Place Bellecour, one of Europe’s largest open squares, with its statue of Louis XIV and the Alps visible on clear days. After checking into our central hotel, we set off again on foot to explore Place des Jacobins with its ornate fountain, and Rue Mercière, once home to printers, now filled with lively restaurants.

As the sun began to soften, we boarded a boat for a sunset cruise on the Saône, gliding past Les Subsistances, a former military warehouse turned cultural hub, and L’Homme de la Roche, the lonely statue of a man carved into the riverbank. The cruise took us to Confluence, Lyon’s cutting-edge district of eco-architecture and innovation. We admired bold designs like the Orange Cube and Musée des Confluences, where Rhône and Saône rivers meet.

We returned by way of the Théâtre des Célestins, a 19th-century gem of Italianate architecture, and stopped for a look at the majestic Grand Hôtel-Dieu, once a hospital and now a marvel of adaptive reuse with shops and restaurants under its 18th-century domes.

Dinner tonight was casual for some, a culinary adventure for others—whether sharing light bites or enjoying a full local meal. Either way, we returned fulfilled, already feeling Lyon’s rhythm settling in.

We’re beginning to suspect that Lyon is not just the capital of silk, nor simply the capital of gastronomy. With every turn, it reveals itself as the capital of... well, everything: of murals, of rivers, of innovation, of heritage. It’s a place of confluences—in name and in spirit. And we’re lucky to be here.

Tomorrow, we’ll explore it even further. But tonight, we rest in the heart of France’s most secret capital.