

Day 5 — Sunday, October 26, 2025

From Toulouse to Cordes-sur-Ciel and Albi: Art, Faith, and a Hint of Soap

Sunday began with our now-familiar hotel breakfast — a comforting rhythm of croissants, yogurts, and perhaps, because it was Sunday, a crêpe or two for good measure. After yet another friendly battle with the famously stubborn coffee machine (which once again lost), we gathered by the bus to meet **Yannick**, our ever-smiling driver, on a spotlessly clean bus.

As we talked about food, we rolled out of Toulouse into a France still half asleep on a quiet Sunday morning. The roads were lined with misty fields and sleepy villages until vineyards began to appear — the **Gaillac wine region**, one of the oldest in France, dating back to Roman times. Here, vines grow on both banks of the Tarn River, producing everything from deep, spicy reds to crisp whites and fruity rosés. The secret lies in the diversity of soils and the traditional grapes like **Duras**, **Braucol**, and **Loin de l'Œil**, whose very name (“far from the eye”) evokes the long stems from which its fruit hangs. Add know how and tradition to this, and you get the “terroir” concept.

Our first stop was the hilltop village of **Cordes-sur-Ciel**, whose very name sounds poetic — and deservedly so. Founded in **1222 by Count Raymond VII of Toulouse**, this medieval jewel perches on a rocky promontory, often floating above the morning fog — hence “*sur Ciel*,” or “above the sky.” As our little tourist train chugged up the winding streets, the village slowly revealed its treasures of Gothic stone and light.

With Gwen as our guide, we walked through time. She told us about the town’s origins as a **bastide**, one of those planned medieval towns built to promote trade and security during the 13th century. At the heart of every bastide lies the **market square**, framed by arcades, where weekly markets once brought together merchants, pilgrims, and gossip from miles around. Cordes’ own **central halle**, with its ancient **well**, still stands as a gathering place and symbol of communal life.

We admired the **Maison du Grand Veneur**, whose carved façade shows a noble hunter surrounded by animals and foliage — a masterpiece of 14th-century Gothic sculpture — and the **Maison de l’Écuyer**, or “House of the Squire,” with its elegant arched windows and proud stone knights gazing down from the walls. Each house seemed to whisper of wealth, art, and the merchant families who once traded pastel and leather here.

Free time followed, as the morning sun turned the limestone walls honey-gold. Some of us wandered into artists’ studios, others sipped coffee overlooking the valley, or sampled the town’s traditional **croquants**, almond biscuits as crisp as their name suggests. One lucky group stumbled upon an exhibition opening and shared both biscuits and conversation with local artisans — proof that Cordes-sur-Ciel still inspires creativity as it has for centuries.

Back on the bus, we drove through rolling hills to **Albi**, the red-brick city on the Tarn River, another UNESCO World Heritage site. After a stroll through its cobblestone streets **Elvire**, our local guide, gave us a tour of Albi.

She introduced us to the majestic **Sainte-Cécile Cathedral**, one of the largest brick cathedrals in the world, built between 1282 and 1480 as both a symbol of faith and a fortress of Catholic power after the Cathar heresy. Its plain exterior conceals a jaw-dropping interior — walls covered in frescoes, a vast painted *Last Judgment*, and a lavish **Gothic rood screen** carved like lace in stone.

Next door stands the **Palais de la Berbie**, the former bishop’s palace, now home to the **Toulouse-Lautrec Museum**. Inside are the vibrant, provocative works of **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec**, born here in 1864 — the artist of Montmartre’s cabarets, dancers, and Parisian nightlife. His life was as short as it was brilliant, marked by physical disability but immense creative energy.

We also learned about **pastel**, the blue dye that made this region rich during the Renaissance. Derived from the crushed leaves of the woad plant, pastel pigment brought Albi and Toulouse their golden age before indigo and synthetic dyes replaced it.

Before leaving Albi, with a new Saint onboard, Saint Yannick, carrier of the pizza, Gwen handed each traveler a little gift: **a bar of soap made with pastel oil**, reminding us that the same plant once used for dye now softens skin and perfumes drawers — a perfect symbol of how old traditions find new life. We also got to try the crispy, flowery candied violet flower, a treat from one of the best artisans in France (Meilleur ouvrier de France - MOF) - Yves Thuriès.

Elvire gave a fascinating presentation on the **Canal du Midi**. Designed by **Pierre-Paul Riquet** and completed in **1681**, this 240-kilometer canal was an engineering marvel of its time, connecting the Garonne River to the Mediterranean and transforming trade across southern France. Its ingenious locks, bridges, and aqueducts — shaded by centuries-old plane trees — are now a UNESCO treasure and a peaceful haven for cyclists and barges alike.

With a glass of local wine in hand, it was easy to imagine the slow rhythm of a barge gliding down those tranquil waters. Evening settled softly as Toulouse's lights twinkled, and everyone prepared for their own little Sunday-night adventure — a final stroll, a last toast, or simply a quiet dinner before bed.