

Travel Journal – Day 1: Lyon – Beaune – Besançon

Our French adventure began under blue skies as we left the Hotel Marriott in Lyon, located near the Parc de la Tête d'Or, one of the largest urban parks in France. This vast green oasis — larger than Central Park — features a lake, botanical gardens, greenhouses, and even a small zoo, making it a treasured retreat in the heart of the city.

We boarded the bus and headed north into the Beaujolais UNESCO Global Geopark, a region of rolling hills and vine-covered slopes that not only produce elegant, light red wines, but also reveal geological richness — volcanic soils and granite outcrops that have shaped the landscape and its culture over millions of years.

By mid-morning, we arrived in Beaune, the historic wine capital of Bourgogne (Burgundy). The town greeted us with sunlit medieval roofs and quiet cobbled streets. We were joined by our warm and knowledgeable local guide Laurence for a tour of the Hôtel-Dieu / Hospices de Beaune, the world-renowned medieval hospital founded in 1443. With its flamboyant Gothic architecture, polychrome roof tiles, and deep ties to Burgundy's winemaking heritage (its vineyards still fund a charitable foundation), it offered a glimpse into a long-standing tradition of altruism, craftsmanship, and oenology.

After our tour, we returned to the bus for a scenic drive northeast through the Jura department, part of the Jura mountain range. This lesser-known alpine region is both rugged and pastoral, where forested slopes meet small lakes and cliffs. The Jura gives its name to the Jurassic period, when this very land was submerged beneath a warm shallow sea, forming the limestone layers where many dinosaur fossils have since been found.

Along the way, we learned about France's administrative divisions — how Napoleon Bonaparte, seeking rationality and efficiency, restructured the country into départements in 1790, each named after geographical features like rivers or mountains. These departments are grouped into regions, and further divided into communes, France's smallest administrative unit, each with its own mayor and town hall — no matter how small the village.

By late afternoon, we arrived in Besançon, a city wrapped in a wide loop of the Doubs river and watched over by Vauban's Citadelle, a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was Ascension Day, a public holiday in France, and the town was calm and peaceful under the golden light.

We caught our first glimpse of our floating home for the next week: the MS Danièle, moored just beneath the citadel. Onboard, we were greeted by our friendly and attentive crew:

- Alain, our experienced and steady-handed captain
- Sylvie, the ever-capable first mate
- Timi, our warm and organized hotel manager
- Olivier, our charming bartender
- Margaux, always ready with a smile and helpful hand

They welcomed us with a celebratory kir royal — a crémant de Bourgogne made from Chardonnay grapes, delicately effervescent, with a splash of golden mirabelle plum liqueur for sweetness and depth.

We took time to settle in, some enjoying a walk through Besançon's elegant centre, others relaxing with a drink on the sundeck as the soft light danced on the river. We then gathered for the safety briefing, donning our (surprisingly stylish) life jackets, before being introduced to our chef, the talented Bastoche.

Dinner on board was a beautifully prepared three-course feast:

- Verrine of salmon and smoked trout with a yogurt mousse, light and fresh with a hint of citrus
- Guinea fowl in a mushroom sauce, tender and rich, paired with creamy gratin dauphinois
- Strawberries with chantilly cream, simple and fragrant, evoking summer

To accompany our meal:

- White Mâcon: crisp, floral, with hints of pear and almond
- Red Mâcon: soft tannins, ripe red fruit, subtle earthy undertones
- Rosé de Provence: dry, fresh, with delicate notes of strawberry and rose petals

After dinner, many returned to the sun deck, sipping wine under the stars, the gentle notes of music from a local guinguette (an open-air riverside café with dancing) floating on the breeze — and the calm murmur of the Doubs river promising the start of a beautiful journey.