

## Day 4 — Saturday, October 25, 2025

### *From the Pink City to the Pyrenees: Faith, Sunlight, and French Spirit*

After breakfast at the hotel — by now a comforting ritual of buttery croissants, steaming coffee, and the usual debate between fruit salad and another pain au chocolat — we set off southward toward the Pyrenees.

It had rained during the night, but as if by some divine intervention, the skies cleared just as we left Toulouse. The road shimmered with the morning light, the air crisp and golden, and by the time we reached the foothills, the Pyrenees stretched before us in radiant clarity.

As the landscape rolled by, Gwen unfolded the fascinating story of **Lourdes** and its place in 19th-century France — a nation torn between faith and reason, Church and State. Since the French Revolution, these tensions had shaped every aspect of public life. Two child figures soon came to symbolize these opposing worlds: **Gavroche**, Victor Hugo's defiant street boy of *Les Misérables*, a champion of rebellion and social justice; and **Bernadette Soubirous**, the humble peasant girl of Lourdes, whose visions of the Virgin Mary would move millions.

In 1858, at only 14 years old, Bernadette claimed to have seen “a lady dressed in white” in a cave by the River Gave. Over the course of **18 apparitions**, the lady revealed herself as the **Immaculate Conception**, confirming a dogma newly proclaimed by the Vatican. The Church was initially cautious; the State, skeptical. Yet the devotion of believers transformed the quiet Pyrenean village into a world-renowned sanctuary. By the late 19th century, pilgrims arrived by train from across Europe, and the **Basilica of the Immaculate Conception** rose above the grotto like a luminous crown.

Today, Lourdes welcomes over **three million visitors each year** — believers and nonbelievers alike — seeking healing, hope, or simply a moment of peace. As Gwen beautifully reminded us, whatever one's faith, the sanctuary offers “*un cœur à cœur*”, a heart-to-heart moment with oneself, or with God.

Before reaching the town itself, we stopped at the **Pic du Jer**, a mountain overlooking Lourdes. We boarded one of France's oldest funiculars, inaugurated in **1900**, which still operates using its original counterweight system to climb the steep 1,100-meter slope in just a few minutes. As the funicular ascended, the valley unfurled beneath us — sunlit, serene, and alive.

At the summit, the weather was nothing short of miraculous: brilliant blue skies, crisp mountain air, and the **majestic ballet of vultures** circling effortlessly above us, their broad wings tracing patterns in the light. From this height, the **Pyrenees** stretched endlessly — a living painting of ridges and snow-capped peaks. We could make out the **Cirque de Gavarnie**, a UNESCO World Heritage site and colossal natural amphitheater carved by glaciers, and the **Vignemale**, France's highest Pyrenean summit at 3,298 meters — famously explored by Count Russell, who once hosted dinners inside its ice caves!

We then met **Christophe**, our guide to the **Grotte du Pic du Jer**, who led us through its ancient limestone chambers. He explained how the caves were formed over millions of years by underground rivers and how the Pyrenees themselves were born from the slow but powerful collision of continents — a humbling reminder of the Earth's patience and strength.

Back on the bus, **Yannick**, ever the attentive driver, greeted us with his cheerful “*Ça va ?*” as we continued toward Lourdes. Gwen provided insights into the Sanctuary's layout — from the **Grotto of Massabielle**, where Bernadette saw her visions, to the **three basilicas** rising above it: the Immaculate Conception, the Rosary, and the vast underground Basilica of Saint Pius X, capable of holding **25,000 worshippers**. She also described the Processions of Light, the Baths, and the Stations of the Cross winding up the hillside — the physical and spiritual rhythm of the Lourdes experience.

The sanctuary was alive with a **rare and moving spectacle** — the **pilgrimage of the French cowboys, the Camargue Gardians**, which takes place only every two years. Riders paraded proudly on their **white Camargue horses**, the men in broad-brimmed hats and embroidered vests, the women dressed as elegant **Arlésiennes** in long silk skirts and lace headdresses. The sight of their procession, blending southern grace and devotion, felt timeless — a celebration of both faith and tradition.

Then came our free time — to light candles, fill bottles with Lourdes water, sit quietly by the Gave, or simply watch the waves of pilgrims passing by, each with their own story. It was a deeply spiritual, yet profoundly human moment.

When we gathered again, the bus hummed softly with reflection — and the rustle of paper wrapping as Gwen passed around **biscuits baked by the nuns** and **mints made with Lourdes and Vichy waters**. Sweet, simple tokens of a sacred place.

As we drove back toward Toulouse, music filled the bus — a fitting soundtrack for our day. We listened to “**La Valse d’Amélie**” by **Yann Tiersen**, whose delicate piano notes instantly evoked the whimsical charm of *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain*, and “**Una Mattina**” by **Ludovico Einaudi**, made famous in *The Intouchables* with Omar Sy — both melodies gentle, moving, and filled with emotion. Then came “**Et même si c’est très loin**” by **Fréro Delavega**, a song about friendship, distance, and joy in shared journeys — a fitting echo of our own adventure.

Laughter soon returned as we played a lively game of “*Guess the French Celebrity*.” From painters to presidents, musicians to scientists, this group proved unstoppable — Yannick suspected cheating, but we insisted it was just French education!

That evening, we gathered for a **delicious group dinner** celebrating the southwest’s rich flavors:

- **Salade de gésiers**, warm duck gizzards sautéed in duck fat and tossed with crisp greens;
- **Cassoulet**, the legendary slow-cooked stew of white beans, Toulouse sausage, and duck confit;
- and for dessert, the indulgent **Baba au rhum**, soft sponge soaked in rum syrup and crowned with whipped cream.

The meal was joyful and full of laughter — a perfect conclusion to a day that had nourished both spirit and soul. By the time we returned to the hotel, hearts were full, and eyes heavy with the good kind of tiredness that comes only after a day well lived — faith, friendship, and a little French sunshine leading the way.