

## Day 3 — Friday, October 24, 2025

### *From Toulouse to Carcassonne and Caunes-Minervois: History, Legends, and a Taste of the South*

After a generous breakfast from the hotel's extensive buffet, we set out early, just as Toulouse was beginning to stir awake on what promised to be one of those perfect autumn days of the southwest — crisp air, golden light, and that soft hum of life returning to the streets.

As we left the Pink City behind, we caught glimpses of cyclists gliding along the wide bike lanes, the morning reflections dancing on the Canal du Midi — a 17th-century engineering masterpiece linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, once a vital trade route and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Beneath rows of stately sycamore trees, the city slowly faded, giving way to the highway..

On board, we met our trusted driver, **Yannick**, whose steady hands and good humor quickly made him part of our Gate 1 family. As the smooth French highway carried us southward, **Gwen** began her morning presentation, unraveling the intricacies of the French administrative system — from the national **state**, down to **regions**, and finally **departments**, the smaller divisions created after the Revolution to make governance more equal and accessible.

We entered the **Aude** department, named after the river that cuts through it, and soon the **Montagne Noire** — the “Black Mountain” — appeared on the horizon, its forested slopes marking the transition from the lush Atlantic climate to the sunlit Mediterranean basin.

And then — there it was. **Carcassonne**. Rising like a fairytale fortress from the plain, its twin rings of ramparts and pointed towers gleamed under the autumn sun. The first sight of the **Cité Médiévale** was pure magic.

At the gates, we met **Thomas**, our local guide, whose voice brought the stones to life. He wove the city's long story: from its origins as **Carcaso**, a Roman stronghold, to the **Trencavel family**, viscounts of Carcassonne, Albi, and Béziers — southern lords known for their tolerance and tragic fate during the **Albigensian Crusade**.

We explored the defensive system — towers, walls, murder holes, drawbridges, barbicanes, machicolations — all brilliantly restored (and perhaps a little romanticized) by **Eugène Viollet-le-Duc**, the 19th-century architect who gave France many of its “medieval dreams” back in stone and slate. His work in Carcassonne remains one of the most debated, and beloved, examples of his vision.

Inside the **Basilica of Saints Nazaire and Celse**, once the city's cathedral, sunlight streamed through stained glass that seemed to hold every hue of the Occitan sky. Thomas also reminded us that today, only **27 inhabitants** still live year-round within these ancient walls — a living reminder that Carcassonne is not just a monument, but a home.

After the tour, we had time to wander freely — some lingered over cassoulet or ice cream, others browsed shops or admired panoramic views over the Bastide below. Every corner seemed to whisper a story.

In the afternoon, we continued our journey through the **garrigue**, that uniquely Mediterranean landscape of low oaks, thyme, rosemary, and sun-warmed limestone. We reached **Caunes-Minervois**, a village whose name comes from the Latin *cavus* (hollow) — a nod to its geological setting between hills and vines.

With Gwen as our guide, we explored the town's treasures: the deep red **marble of Caunes**, famous since the 17th century and used in Versailles and the Louvre; the venerable **plane trees** of Place de la République, now officially listed as heritage trees; and the majestic **Abbey of Saint Peter and Saint Paul**, founded in the 8th century by Benedictine monks, later taking center stage during the Inquisition that scarred the region's history.

We wandered through narrow medieval lanes and elegant Renaissance façades, learning how architecture mirrored daily life — the blend of beauty, practicality, and resilience that still defines southern France.

Our day ended on a delicious note at **Le Clos du Marbier**, where **Irène**, our warm-hearted host and winemaker, welcomed us for a tasting of her family's wines — ruby reds full of sun and spice that tasted of the countryside itself. Surrounded by laughter and clinking glasses, we toasted again to friendship and discovery.

Back on the bus, the evening light turned the fields golden as Gwen played a soundtrack for the road:

🎵 **Francis Cabrel**, the poetic voice of the southwest, with *Octobre*, a romantic song about the weather of October;

🎵 *Les Copains d'abord*, Georges Brassens' timeless hymn to friendship;

🎤 *Il y a* by Jean-Jacques Goldman, a nostalgic song about fleeting moments in the gorgeous south,

*Toulouse*, by Toulouse singer Claude Nougaro

By the time we returned to Toulouse, the city lights shimmered on the Garonne. Everyone found their own little dinner adventure — perhaps a terrace by the river, a bistro near the Capitole, or a quiet corner with a glass of wine — before sinking into well-deserved rest on those now-familiar, wonderfully fluffy pillows.