

## DAY 7 – Cliffs, Castles, Cheese and Camaraderie

Tuesday, November 11, 2025

Weather: Perfect—clear skies, warm sun, and not a drop of rain.

After a peaceful night in the quiet comfort of the Grand Hôtel de Sarlat, we gathered for a good, hearty breakfast—just enough to fuel what would be a day full of incredible sights, stories, and shared laughter.

We met our driver, Domi, who would be with us for the day's journey, and set off toward one of France's most awe-inspiring pilgrimage sites: Rocamadour.

As we drove along the Dordogne River—rightly nicknamed the Vallée des mille châteaux (Valley of a Thousand Castles)—we caught glimpses of Château de Fénelon and Château de Carlux perched proudly in the landscape. Crossing into the Lot département and the Occitanie region, we entered a terrain shaped by geology and history alike. We passed through Souillac, admiring the 12th-century abbey church from the bus—a Romanesque masterpiece whose carved capitals still whisper medieval stories.

From there, we entered the Causses du Quercy UNESCO Global Geopark—a land of limestone plateaus, sinkholes, and ancient phosphate mines that have yielded fossils dating back millions of years. Our ascent took us over one causse and down into a green valley where Belcastel stood like a stone sentinel, a quiet witness to centuries of power struggles.

Then came the moment we had been waiting for: our first panoramic view of Rocamadour from the village of L'Hospitalet. The sight never fails to amaze: a whole village clinging to the cliff in three tiers—castle above, sanctuaries in the middle, and the village below.

We descended slowly via the Chemin de Croix (Way of the Cross), pausing at stations along the way to learn about medieval life—its hardships, faith, and the importance of pilgrimage in a world where relics and miracles were an economy all their own.

At the sanctuary, we discovered the Black Virgin of Rocamadour, the 12th-century statue said to have worked countless miracles, as well as the ex-votos—tokens of thanks left by pilgrims over centuries, from shipwreck survivors to new parents.

By the chapel of Notre-Dame, we admired two rare frescos: a haunting Danse Macabre, a reminder of the Black Death's grip on medieval imagination, and a serene Annunciation, still radiating peace after seven centuries. We even spotted the legendary Durandal sword, said to have been flung into the cliff by Roland, Charlemagne's nephew—a reminder that myth and history often share the same stones.

After exploring the sanctuaries, we continued down to the lower village and stopped at the stained-glass workshop of artist Chantal Jean. With warmth and precision, she explained how glass, fire, and patience combine to create a work of art—and how she restores medieval pieces for the sanctuaries themselves.

Then it was time to sit, savor, and share a meal together at Le Lion d'Or. For a few of us, Rocamadour cheese made its way onto our plates—creamy, delicate, and justifiably famous.

On the way back, we caught a glimpse of Belcastel - castle on the rock spur, set for the film *Des hommes trop tranquilles*, of Gustave Eiffel's metal bridge and the fairy-tale Château de Treyne, a perfect postcard of douceur de vivre.

Our driver also agreed to add an extra stop at Château Le Paluel, a landmark in local history, burnt down by the SS marching North toward Oradour-sur-Glane.

During the ride, conversation turned to tobacco production, kayaking trips, real estate, terroir concept, cheese production and many more subjects.

Back in Sarlat, we had time to relax, shop, or stroll before gathering again for dinner at Le Bistrot de l'Octroi. Laughter flowed as freely as the wine, and we toasted another remarkable day in the Dordogne.

It was, in every way, a day woven with wonder, learning, and camaraderie—the kind of day that leaves you smiling as you fall asleep, already eager for tomorrow.