

Day 7 – Tuesday, 28 October 2025

Auvillar, Cows, and the Last Ride Home

After our usual breakfast — now a well-practiced ritual of croissants, yogurt, fruit, and a polite duel with the coffee machine — we met our ever-reliable Yannick, smartly dressed and ready for laughs. The morning began under the fog, but as we crossed into the Tarn-et-Garonne, the clouds slowly parted. By the time we reached Auvillar, one of France's official *Plus Beaux Villages*, we were able to admire the brick and stone façades glowing softly in the autumn light.

Gwen led us through the cobbled streets, beginning at the Clock Tower, the former main gate to the medieval town, where she evoked the age of troubadours — the poets and singers of medieval Occitania who celebrated love, honor, and the music of words. We wandered to the Palais des Consuls, symbol of civic life and justice, and on to the Church of Saint Peter, whose mix of Romanesque and Gothic styles tells of centuries of devotion and reconstruction.

Our steps brought us next to the Halles, the round covered market built in the 19th century atop a terrace overlooking the Garonne valley — a masterpiece of both charm and utility. Here, Gwen introduced us to the pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela, whose French route, the *Via Podiensis* (GR 65), runs directly through Auvillar. The town has long been a haven for pilgrims, travelers, and dreamers alike.

At the viewing platform, where the Viscounts of Auvillar once had their castle, we admired the breathtaking view of the Garonne River, the Golfech power plant, and the undulating hills beyond — a reminder that this region balances the past and the present in every horizon.

We were then greeted by Muriel, the gracious director of the local Tourism Office, who welcomed us inside the former Ursuline Convent. Once home to a teaching order of nuns, the building now serves as a peaceful exhibition space, where centuries of education and spirituality echo through the restored chapel.

Outside the tourism office, James and Safran were waiting — Safran, the fierce beast of Tarn-et-Garonne, who, after a swim, can sometimes be mistaken for the great Garonne water rat 🦦. She greeted every single one of us as part of her pack — or rather, her extended family.

We then headed toward a private tour of the small Auvillar Museum, created by locals back in 1929 to counter a rumor that their beloved village was *ugly*. Meanwhile, James, Yannick, and Safran headed to the nearby bookshop-café — the kind of cozy social hub you still find in the most authentic French villages.

Pam, a proud local, welcomed us inside the museum — more a cabinet of curiosities than a museum for now, but soon to become the largest porcelain and faïence collection in France thanks to tireless local efforts. She shared the story of Auvillar's past, tied to the art of faïence pottery and goose feathers used for writing, both of which once made the village famous far beyond the Garonne Valley.

After the visit, we enjoyed free time for a delicious coffee and slice of cake before continuing our journey toward Montauban.

Our next destination was Montauban, nicknamed "*la ville rebelle*" for its proud independence and Protestant past. On the way, Gwen told us about Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the city's most famous painter, whose neoclassical precision still fascinates art lovers, and Olympe de Gouges, the pioneering feminist who penned *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* during the French Revolution — a text far ahead of its time.

In Montauban, we stopped at the grand Place Nationale — once called *Place Royale* — whose elegant brick arcades recall both power and rebellion. There, surrounded by history, we enjoyed a leisurely homemade lunch in a local tea room, savoring both the flavors and the stories of this proud southern city.

After lunch, we talked and savored the moment before climbing aboard the bus once again for our next stop: **La Ferme du Ramier**.

There, our guide introduced us to the proud art of modern dairy farming — where the cows are pampered, massaged, and even choose when to be milked by robotic systems. We learned how technology and tradition work hand in hand to create exceptional local cheeses. The tasting that followed was pure delight: Ramier Roux jeune, *Tome jeune*, creamy and mild; *Ramier roux vieux*, aged and complex; and a tangy *Bleu du Ramier* — all paired with a smooth local red wine.

Daniel was given the honor of naming a 2-day-old calf — a little bundle of curiosity now officially known as **Daniele**. We had to resist the collective temptation to bring her onboard and make her the group's new mascot.

Yannick, spotless bus and all, guided us safely back to Toulouse. After some last-minute shopping, we gathered one final time for our farewell dinner — a joyful, emotional evening full of laughter, gratitude, and a few misty eyes. Over shared toasts and stories, our group celebrated what we had become: not just travelers, but a family — one that had proven that with kindness, humor, and open hearts, any journey can be extraordinary.

We dined like true Toulousains at **M. Georges**, the lively brasserie on Place Georges — a local favorite and the perfect setting for our final meal together. Between clinking glasses, laughter, and heartfelt goodbyes, we closed our journey just as we began it: with warmth, camaraderie, and the unmistakable joy of being part of something special.