

Travel Journal – Day 9: Annecy – Aillon-le-Jeune – Entre-Deux-Guiers – Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye – Loriol-sur-Drôme

This rainy day unfolded like a poetic interlude, with silver light filtering through the clouds, casting a dreamlike shimmer over the hills and valleys. Far from gloomy, it gave our journey a sense of intimacy and wonder—mist curling around the peaks, forests glistening, and drops beading gently on the windows as we left Annecy after another delightful breakfast.

We followed the shoreline of Lake Annecy, catching last views of its still waters and the lakeside castles we'd come to know. Then the road climbed gently into the hills, winding through lush alpine meadows, damp with dew, nestled between patches of forest on undulating slopes. The air was fresh and earthy.

We travelled along the edge of the Parc Naturel Régional des Bauges, a protected area rich in biodiversity and traditional savoir-faire. France's Regional Natural Parks are designated areas that preserve both natural landscapes and cultural heritage, encouraging sustainable tourism and local pride. The Bauges is also a UNESCO Global Geopark, recognized for its unique geological formations and its efforts to connect people to the Earth's history through education and conservation.

Our first stop was in Aillon-le-Jeune, at the fromagerie, a term used in the Alps for a cooperative cheese dairy where farmers bring their milk to produce cheeses using age-old methods. With Marilyn as our guide, we explored the cheese-making process, watching the cheesemaker's ancestral gestures through a window, stirring, pressing, and flipping with reverence. We tasted a delicious lineup:

- Tome des Bauges – earthy, creamy, protected by AOP,
- Monpela – milky and fresh,
- Margeriaz jeune – mild and supple,
- Margeriaz vieux – aged, nutty, and intense,
- and ValBleu – a local blue with soft veins and a bold finish.

All washed down with local apple juice and a glass of Savoie white wine, as the rain whispered softly outside.

We continued through a mysterious mountain road, clouds drifting between trees, toward Chambéry, catching a glimpse of the Château of the Counts of Savoy. Then onwards to the Chartreuse mountains, where the thick mist and deep greens made it feel as though we were entering a forgotten world.

We learned about the Carthusian monks of the Grande Chartreuse, who have lived in seclusion here since the 11th century, committed to silence, prayer, and contemplation. They are also the creators of the legendary Chartreuse liqueur, a vivid green herbal spirit made with 130 secret plants and flowers, distilled since the 18th century by only two monks at a time. Its unique flavor and mysterious recipe have made it iconic worldwide.

At Entre-Deux-Guiers, a town that once marked the border between France and the Duchy of Savoy, we crossed the Guiers Vif, roaring from the rain, and sought shelter in La P'tite Chartreuse, a humble local bar where the patrons were stunned (and delighted) to find us there. We savored chocolate cake with Chartreuse-infused custard, warm and rich, perfect for the grey afternoon.

Back on the freshly cleaned bus—thanks to Alex, who took the time to scrub it spotless—we headed through the Vercors, a rugged massif known for its wildlife, including chamois, marmots, golden eagles, and

lynx. The scenery grew more dramatic, the valleys deeper, the rock faces steeper, as we approached the Ardèche region, famed for its deep gorges, chestnut trees, lavender fields, and winding roads.

Our next destination was Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, one of “Les Plus Beaux Villages de France”—a label given to the most charming and historically preserved villages in the country. The rain let up just in time for us to walk through this medieval gem, admiring its cobbled streets, half-timbered houses, and impressive abbey. Once a major pilgrimage site, the abbey was founded in the 11th century to house the relics of Saint Anthony the Great, and became renowned for the Order of Hospitallers who cared for victims of “St. Anthony’s Fire.”

From there, Alex masterfully navigated the narrow village streets, easing the bus up the hill to continue our journey past the Drôme’s famous walnut groves, eventually reaching our peaceful resting place: Les Oliviers Hôtel & Spa in Loriol-sur-Drôme. A family-run haven, it welcomed us warmly after the day’s adventures.

Dinner was simply sublime:

- Tomato and capsicum soup, airy with a chorizo cappuccino foam,
- Tender chicken with roasted aubergine,
- and for dessert, a refreshing nougat ice cream with mango and passionfruit coulis.

As the rain quieted and night fell gently, we settled in, rested and ready for our next chapter: the sun-drenched Baronnies Provençales.