



Provence and the French Riviera make up the southeast corner of France. The warm weather, intense sunlight, and magnificent scenery attracted artists like Van Gogh, Cezanne and Matisse.

Its coastline along the Mediterranean Sea made it a playground for the rich and famous.

The region is filled with ancient ruins, 2,000 year old towns, unique shops and good things to eat and drink.

For centuries, the Rhône River has been the area's main north-south highway and the route I chose for a river cruise between the towns of Tournon and the city of Nice.

#### TOURNON TAIN L' HERMITAGE

Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the ancient Greeks were trading in this area. They were followed by the Ancient Romans. Romans liked to go everywhere the Greeks had been, it was that kind of relationship. There were three things going for this spot: it had a big river that emptied into the Mediterranean. It had a small river joining up right here which gave them the ability to go deeper inland. And it had a



couple of high mountains where they could build their forts to defend the area.

The twin towns of Tournon and Tain

L'Hermitage face each other from opposite sides of the Rhône River. In 1825, they were linked together by the earliest suspension bridge in Europe.

Originally all suspension bridges were built with chains. And of course they were only as strong as their weakest link. Then in the

middle of the 1800's a couple of architects came up with the idea of twisting steel wires together to make a much stronger cable. That gave them the opportunity to build longer and stronger bridges. And the first one of this type built in continental Europe, was built right here.

The quiet riverside road at the edge of Tain L'Hermitage offers some of the most beautiful views of the river.

One of the city's original gates is still standing, with its town crest and motto: strong walls make good neighbors.

#### VIVIERS

That evening we arrived in Viviers. During the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a big deal bishop made Viviers his home town. And during



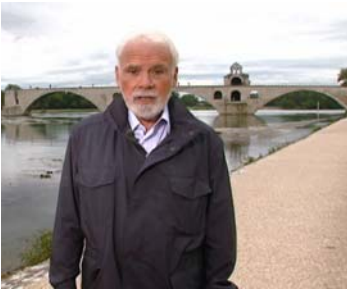
the 12<sup>th</sup> century a huge cathedral was built to signify the town's importance.

#### AVIGNON

The next morning our ship was deep into the heart of France known as Provence. Some locals like to tell you that this land came into existence when God decided to take all the best parts of the universe, that were left over after the Creation, to make his own paradise. Interesting view --- It's humble in the sense that you are working with leftovers, but awe inspiring because it's God creating his own paradise. Typical attitude for Provence---everything here is simple, but it's the best. We tied up in the town of Avignon.

The old name of the city was Avignon. The city of the wind. And here we have a very cold wind called the Mistral wind. "Mistral" in Provençal that means the "master". And this wind is coming from the north of Europe

getting cold in the Alps and crossing the Rhône Valley. But this wind is very useful because it's pushing the clouds away. So when the Mistral is blowing, no clouds, very sunny day, very beautiful day.



On one side of this river is the town of Avignon which belonged to the Popes. On the other side of this river is land that belonged to the king of France. And for hundreds of years

they were connected by a bridge. Then in the 1600s a huge flood came down the river and knocked out half the bridge. Obviously it had to be repaired. So the Pope called up the king and said "Hi, how about fixing your bridge!?" And the king said "ha ha ha it's not my bridge, it's called the Pont de Avignon, the bridge of Avignon. Your town, your bridge. You fix it". And they discussed that for a while. And today if you want to go from one side to the other, you swim.

The reason the Pope was in Avignon was because during the 1300s Rome was in such chaos that he decided that he had to get out of town and the new town he chose for the Papal Court was Avignon. The Papal Palace was built for him. It was a busy place when the Pope was there, and filled with magnificent works of art. But it was also a primary target during the French Revolution and inside not much is left.

#### PONT DU GARD

People have been living in this area for thousands of years. But in the year one hundred twenty they became citizens of the Roman Empire. The big town in the neighborhood was Nimes and 50,000 people lived in it which meant they needed 40,000 cubic meters of water everyday. Roman architects solved the problem by building an aqueduct that came from this spring to the center of town. The spring was always filled with water, because it rains a lot.

In about the year 50 AD, Roman architects began building an aqueduct to bring water

from the mountains to the city of Nimes. It was an impressive structure that ran for almost 30 miles and the most spectacular part was the span over the Pont du Gard. Even today it attracts thousands of tourists. It illustrates the high level of architectural skill possessed by the ancient Romans.



The Pont du Gard passes over the normally quiet Gardon River at the bottom of a deep valley. But from time to time the Gardon floods and walls of water crash against the pillars that hold up the bridge. In order to protect the structure against these destructive currents the Roman architects shaped the pillars like the prow of a ship.

The walls of the canal were waterproofed with a type of plaster that was made from a mixture of lime, pork fat, wine and figs. Salt and pepper was added to taste. It was so effective that two thousand years later it can still be found on parts of the aqueduct.

Much of the primary work for the construction was done at the stone quarry. Each stone was cut to a particular size and shape --- then lettered to indicate which arch it was for and numbered to show the workmen where it was to be placed in the arch. Not quite a kit from IKEA but getting close.

#### ARLES

On the tenth day of our trip we arrived in Arles. A lot of its ancient Roman architecture still stands and gives



the town a strong sense of history. Its Roman arena was built to seat over 25,000 spectators.

Over two thousand years ago Roman architects figured out how to design a stadium so people could get into it and out of it quickly.

There was a circular walkway that went completely around the stadium. Off the walkway were stairs. Some of them went down to the lower seats. Some of them went to the middle

seats. And some of them went up to the bleachers.

The spectators showed up regularly to see the gladiators take on the wild beasts. You can still see the tunnels where the animals charged into the arena. And there's where they posted each day's final score ---Gladiators 2, Lions 7.

The Church of St-Trophime is a magnificent example of the Romanesque architecture of Provence. And it's famous for its 12th century portal and cloister.

For me the most interesting aspect of Arles is that it was the town where Vincent Van Gogh created many of his most famous works. He arrived here in February of 1888 and in the 15 months he lived here produced over 300 paintings and drawings, including this one called *The Drawbridge*.



Another famous Van Gogh painting is called *Aliscont*. It's a walkway designed to look like Roman burial ground. Van Gogh was fascinated with the challenge of painting an outdoor scene at night. And one of his most successful solutions is called the *Café at Night* where he's begun to put in his famous stars. It actually looks like the café.

That afternoon, we took a ride through the countryside to the village of Les Baux de Provence. It's a pedestrian-only village next to the ruins of a 13<sup>th</sup> century castle.

First the Prince of Hibble came here and built this village because they got a lot of enemies all over Europe. And then during the 17<sup>th</sup> century they became Protestants and the French king said to his prime minister, Richelieu, to come over there and destroy all the area and kill everybody.

So the French Army came here and destroyed all the area. So that's why you have the rooms of the castle at the top of the village. Then during the 19<sup>th</sup> century an engineer came and found the bauxite in this area. And they were mining over there to extract the bauxite and the people came here to work in the mines and

they did renovation in the village. And that's why you have this very well preserved village just behind us.

#### NICE

After breakfast we took a motor-coach drive along the Cote d'Azur to the city of Nice. The Cote d'Azur



translates into English as the "azure coast" and it takes its name from the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the blue skies above the French Alps. For almost two hundred years this region has been a summer playground for the rich. The first to arrive were the English aristocracy looking for a healthier climate. Then their equally well-to-do friends from the great cities of Europe. During the 1920s the Americans started arriving. F. Scott Fitzgerald often used the Cote d'Azur as a background for his novels. They all arrived as tourists but soon ended up buying property and building magnificent villas surrounded by beautiful gardens.

Nice is the area's capital city. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the Greeks settled in --- then the Romans. Later it was under the control of the French. Other times its allegiance was with the Italians. In 1860, the Treaty of Turin was signed and Nice became an official and probably permanent part of France. Many of the street signs are in French and Nissart. Nissart is a true language that is closer to Italian than French and was spoken here for hundreds of years.

The Promenade des Anglais, which means the English Promenade, was built during the 1800s by Nice's wealthy English community.

And from the very beginning, in a generous show of equality, they allowed non-English people to walk on it with them.

And it's still the thing to do. And as you walk along you will pass the Hotel Negresco.

The Negresco was built in 1912, and has been a social and gastronomic landmark ever since. Dozens of great French chefs worked here when they were first getting started. And anyone who thought they were someone paid the hotel a visit.

The dome of the Salon Royal was built by Gustav Eiffel in an attempt to prove that his life was not just about towers.



The chandelier that hangs from the dome is made of 16,000 pieces of crystal and was made by Baccarat.

It was ordered by the Czar of Russia but by the time it was ready for delivery to the palace in St. Petersburg the Russian Revolution had already begun and if there was one thing that Lenin hated it was a big chandelier. Time and time again, they come up in his writings as an example of the capitalist exploitation of the masses.

They also have the first hotel elevator built especially for the handicapped. It opens by itself.

During the late 1800s, Lord Coventry retired from the British military and took up residency here in Nice. His wife was a bit absent-minded and often forgot to start his Lordship's lunch on time. And so he had a cannon placed on top of the hill and fired it every day at noon to remind her to get started. And don't forget to chill the wine!

The hill itself offers excellent views of the city and was the spot where the Ancient Greeks in 400 B.C. -- give or take a few years -- set-up their settlement. During the Middle Ages it was the site of a defensive castle. It was strategically placed and appeared to be impregnable, until Louis XVI blew the whole thing to smithereens



in 1706 because he was fed up with the locals yelling about their right to independence. The net result is a lovely place for a picnic, quite flat.

And to help you with the preparations of that picnic, there's a daily outdoor market that's famous for its local fruits, vegetables and

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flowers.

This is a typical French bread. It's called a ficelle, which means a rope or a string and the reason it's so thin is that the bakers



figured out that their customers liked a lot of crust but not much inside. And so they ended up baking it as thin as they could.

The cooking of this part of France is often described as "la cuisine du soleil" – the food of the sun - and its history goes back for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks settled here and carried on their traditional approach to cooking. After all, like their own communities, this was just another city on the sea. Then the Romans came along with their recipes and for hundreds of years this area was under the control of the Italians. And let's not forget the Spanish. For a century or so this was their land. Today the cooking of southeastern

## *Cruising Provence*

France is a blend of ancient Greek and Roman, Italian, Spanish and French.

The most famous dish in the city of Nice is salade nicoise.

And almost every restaurant had some version of soupe de poisson (fish soup). It's served with rounds of toasted French bread and a sauce based on garlic, pimiento and chili pepper.

The chefs of the southeast coast of France are also serious about their vegetable cookery. A perfect example is melanzane Parmigianino – a simple dish made from slices of fried eggplant that are layered with tomato sauce and mozzarella.

One of my favorite spots in Nice is the Musee Matisse.

Many art historians consider Matisse to be the most important French painter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I find that his works have a distinct Mediterranean feeling that make them even more interesting to see when you are in his old neighborhood. He painted the people he knew, the rooms he lived in, and even his lunch.

The last few hours of our trip were spent shopping for local specialties.

My first stop was Alziari which specializes in olives and olive oils.

As the ancient Greeks and Romans set-up their colonies around the Mediterranean one of the first things they did was see if the climate was right for growing olives and if it was, olive trees were one of the first things they planted. As a result of this Greek and Roman policy, for thousands of years, olives have been grown in the southern part of France and processed into olive oil.

After Alziari we went to Auer. The chefs at Auer are master sugar workers and produce some of the world's finest candied fruits---cherries, oranges, orange peels, apricots, pineapples and pears. The fruit is blanched in boiling water then cooked with water and sugar and dried. The sugar acts as a natural preservative.

My last stop was Molinard. It's the retail shop of a perfume factory in the nearby town of Grasse, which is an epicenter of perfume production. The fields around the town are filled with roses, jasmine and bitter orange blossoms that are used to produce natural fragrances for the perfume industry.

Each perfume is made up of three elements. A top note which is the first thing you smell. Then a middle note which gives the perfume a sense of solidity and finally an end note which is the smell that stays with you.

All of which makes a nice end note for my cruise through the south of France.

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