

2014  
TRAVEL  
SPECIAL  
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# *French.* CONNECTIONS

*Two thousand years of tradition unfolds  
along a Rhône River cruise → BY ROB BHATT*

Sunset in Lyon, France.

STEFANO SCATA



Opposite page (top to bottom): Arles' nearly 2,000-year-old amphitheater and scenic sailing through the Rhône Valley. Near left: Avignon's famous sights include the Palace of the Popes (background).

## It was a hot August afternoon in Lyon,

and after spending the day exploring France's third-largest city, my girlfriend, Kate, and I had dumped our daypacks in our room and adjourned to a sunny deck for a few games of backgammon. ¶ As I gazed westward across the Rhône River, I could admire the city's 130-year-old basilica, with its gilded Virgin Mary statue shimmering under the sun from atop Fourvière Hill. We had spent the earlier part of the day at the base of the very same hill, exploring the district's cobblestoned streets and the *traboules*, or ground-floor tunnels, running through the tightly packed, 15th-century buildings of Vieux Lyon. After lunch in one of the neighborhood's sidewalk cafes with two other couples, Kate and I had split off from the group for an aimless walk through the shopping district off Place Bellecour. We were now happy to take a break, particularly since the next leg of our trip would begin in an hour or so. And in order to make it into Burgundy by dawn, we would need the energy to sit through a four-course, wine-paired dinner and possibly even dance in the lounge after that. ¶ Did I mention that we were on a river cruise?

TOP: BUENA VISTA IMAGES; COURTESY OF UNIWORLD CRUISES

### The "Hotel" Sails at Dusk

In the past decade, river cruising has emerged as the hottest segment of the perpetually hot cruise industry. Operators such as Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection, Viking River Cruises and others continue adding new itineraries around the world. In addition to those across most of Europe, sailings are now available in locations as exotic as Southeast Asia and the Amazon Basin. Closer to home, a growing number of options are becoming available along such famous waterways as the Mississippi River and even our own mighty Columbia.

With river cruising causing so much of a stir, Kate and I decided last summer to see what the fuss was all about and booked a stateroom on a seven-night Uniworld cruise along France's Rhône River, from Provence to Burgundy, aboard

the 130-passenger *River Royale*. (For 2014, Uniworld debuts the slightly larger S.S. *Catherine* on the Rhône and moves the *River Royale* to Bordeaux for new epicurean-themed sailings.) After boarding in Arles, it didn't take us long to discover that having to unpack your bags only once in a floating boutique hotel that takes you from port to port is just one of the many charms that this mode of travel has to offer.

### From Centurions to Artists

Our first night on the ship found us docked a stone's throw from Arles' historic district. Located about 25 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, the city has held strategic value since before Roman times, and its most famous attraction is a Roman amphitheater built around A.D. 90. After dinner,



The Arles cafe (left) depicted in van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night* now bears the artist's name; the 2,000-year-old Pont du Gard attracts sightseers and sunbathers (downstream). Opposite page, left to right: The restored 15th-century hospice in Beaune, now a museum, boasts vivid color; back in Arles, a self-guided walking tour leads to such famous van Gogh subjects as this replica of the Langlois Bridge.



the old city's limestone and mortar buildings beckoned us to take a stroll, and, as we happened upon a town square lined by sidewalk cafes, we couldn't help but feel as though we had walked into a Vincent van Gogh painting. This was more than just coincidence, we learned the next morning, during a talk led by an art historian in the ship's lounge. During the 15 months that van Gogh lived in Arles (1888-89), he produced about 200 paintings. Among his most famous works from this period, *Café Terrace at Night* depicts one of the cafes that Kate and I had passed the night before.

As we returned to the historic district's gates after the art talk, our tour guide, Nina, stopped to point out a restaurant a few blocks away. The establishment, she explained, sits near the former site of the subject of another famous van Gogh painting, *The Yellow House*, depicting the home where the artist briefly lived and welcomed friends and colleagues, including Paul Gauguin. (The house was destroyed during an Allied bombing raid in 1944.) Later, we visited the former hospital where van Gogh stayed before he was admitted to the asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, and this gave us a chance to admire the courtyard garden depicted in yet another famous van Gogh work.

Old Arles, with more than two millennia of history, provides many opportunities to visualize life during different epochs. As we peeked inside the arch-rimmed amphitheater, modeled after Rome's Coliseum, I tried to picture the gladiator battles that took place inside. Even more mind-boggling was the thought of life during the Middle Ages,

when Arlesians turned the arena into a fortified mini-village to protect themselves from marauders. In the 19th century, the city's denizens restored the arena to its original design, and these days, the venue hosts concerts and other events, including bullfighting, a tradition that came to the region in the 19th century (disclaimer: I'm not a fan of bullfighting).

### The Pace of the River

Such was the pace of our journey. Days began with lavish breakfast buffets—with proteins, starches, fruits and juices represented in equal abundance—followed by guided walks through the historic district of a new port city each day, most just steps away from our docks. After Arles, the ship—picture a 65-room luxury hotel fused onto a skinny ship—took us to Avignon, Viviers, Tain l'Hermitage and Lyon before continuing up the Saône River to Burgundy's Chalon-sur-Saône. We were divided into groups of about eight to 12 for the informative walks, led by local guides, and these typically ended in time to get us back on the ship for another lavish buffet for lunch. Most afternoons afforded time for further exploration, either on our own or on one of the optional tours offered by the cruise line.

One such optional tour, after we docked in Avignon, took two busloads of passengers, about 80 people in all, to the Pont du Gard aqueduct bridge, one of the best remaining examples of the artistry of Roman engineering. After we explored the marvel, boasting three tiers of limestone arches

spanning the Gardon River, we reboarded our buses, which split up for visits to separate Châteauneuf-du-Pape wineries.

Earlier in the day, we had walked through the Palace of the Popes, the fortified Gothic palace that housed seven popes between 1305 and 1376 and, later, two of the five antipopes of the Western Schism. Sampling wines produced in the steep, rocky hills where the Avignon popes fostered viticulture seven centuries ago gave us a literal taste of the region's papal legacy.

### The Traveler's Dilemma

Dinners on the ship were events in their own right, with nightly themed menus showcasing the dishes and wines of the areas we were visiting. For example, the Provençale menu offered a luscious herb-crusted roasted rack of lamb among its entrée choices, while the Epicurean Adventurer

## rivers rock!

River cruise itineraries typically range between seven and 15 or more days, with some longer excursions combined with land tours. Most operators also offer pre- and post-cruise tour packages. Cruise fares typically include guided walking tours and wine-and-beer service with lunch and dinner. Some operators charge extra for optional land tours, cocktails and/or gratuities, while others (including Uniworld, beginning this year), offer all-inclusive experiences. With so many options to choose from, we recommend contacting a travel agent to help find the perfect cruise for you.

menu included buttery strips of beef loin served with Pont Neuf potatoes. I passed on the sautéed frog legs offered on the latter menu, but I did say, "Oui," to the night's wine selections, reds and whites from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, of course.

Between these merry feasts and our walking tours, it was pretty easy to bond with our fellow passengers, a mature, travel-savvy group. More than half hailed from the United States, while Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Brits and Canadians rounded out the mix.

Unlike the more energetic on board, Kate and I never made it out onto the dance floor on the night we set out from Lyon. What can we say? We wanted to be fresh for the next day's excursion, a visit to Beaune's restored 15th-century hospice (now a museum), followed by a wine tasting and lunch at a château hosted by the count whose family has held the land since the 12th century. Such are the dilemmas of visiting Europe; you are often forced to choose between satisfying

your thirst for culture with seemingly nonstop visits to landmarks or simply using your vacation time to relax and recharge. As we learned along the Rhône, a well-crafted river cruise itinerary allows you to strike a pretty even balance between both aspirations. ¶

Journey editor **ROB BHATT** often travels with a portable backgammon board.

LEFT: JUERGEN RICHTER

LEFT: OLIVIER VANPÉ; JOSE ANTONIO MORENO