

A Week in Provence

Olive groves, vineyards, lavender, sun, and more sun...a week isn't nearly enough time to see the south of France—but it's a start

By Wendy and Rob Lindsay

Cours Mirabeau, the grandest of Aix's boulevards; below: the *Fontaine de la Rotonde*.



It began when we read Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*,

a lighthearted account of renovating a crumbling old farmhouse deep in rural Southern France. Our only travel in France at that point had been zipping across the landscape in high-speed trains. They're efficient and exciting, but Mayle's book had made us yearn to slow down and savour the scenery—and the food and the wine—and soak in the sunbathed ambiance of Southern France.

Given an opportunity to cruise the Rhône River, we decided the time had come for a week in Provence.

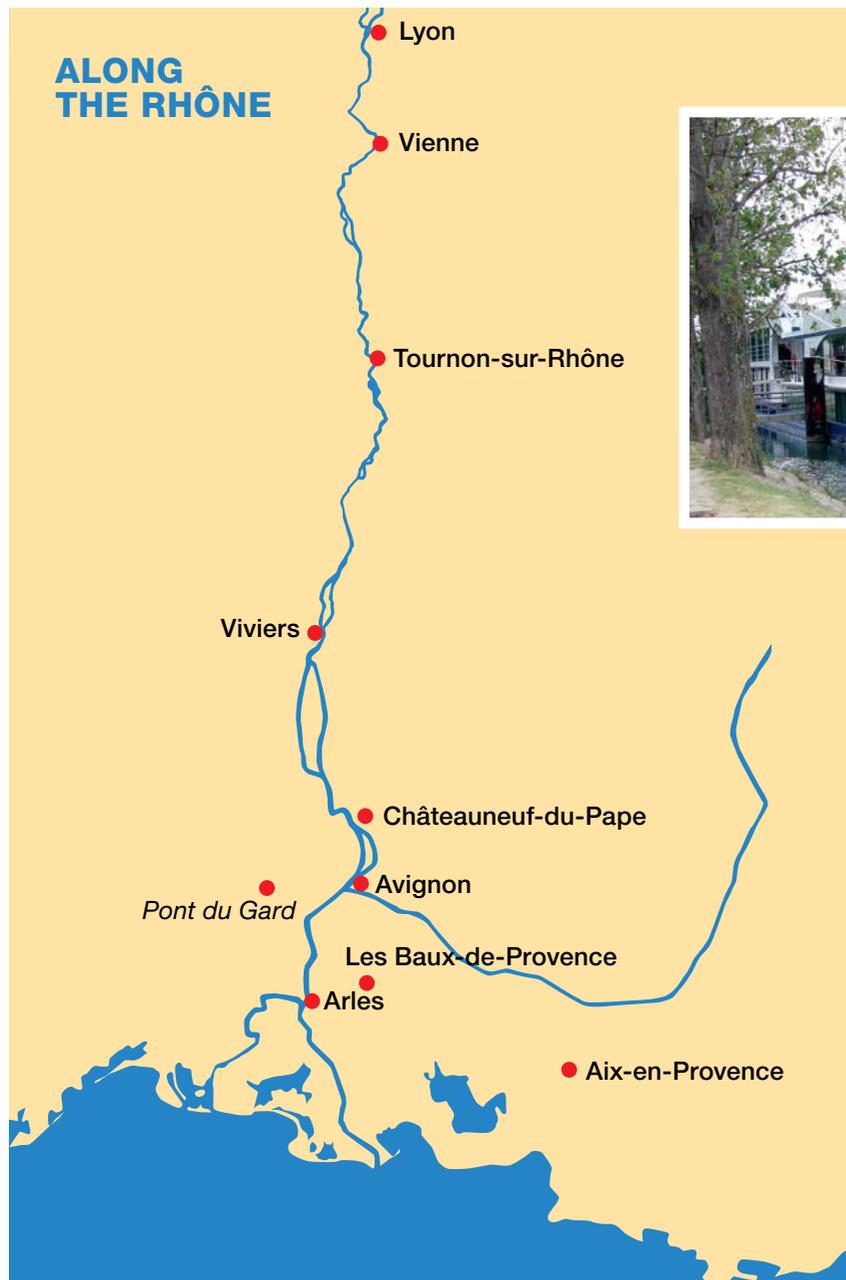
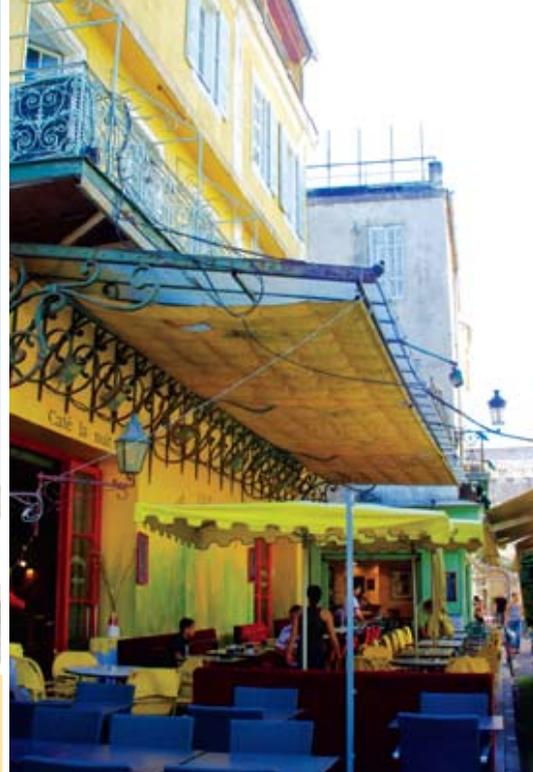
Aix-en-Provence

And so we found ourselves in the heart of Aix-en-Provence watching the refreshing waters of the *Fontaine de la Rotonde* splash and sparkle in the sunshine. We were just a few steps from the beginning of the *Cours Mirabeau*, the grandest of Aix's boulevards. Plane trees arching overhead formed a lofty green tunnel as we wandered up the wide boulevard from fountain to fountain to foun-

Photos: Romain Chirac/Hemis/Corbis (Cours Mirabeau); Lindsay Editorial (fountain and marker).



At Arles, the arena (left), and the terrasse of the *Café la nuit*, made famous by van Gogh.



tain. On the south side of *Cours Mirabeau*, elegant 17th- and 18th-century mansions now housed museums, galleries, and business offices. But on the north side, just as we had imagined, were rows of sidewalk cafés. Waves of tourists and local business people kept the tables filled, but, as the lights of night were lit, it became obvious that Aix is a university town as students filled the cafés and bars.

Founded by the Romans in 123 BC for its thermal waters, Aix is now known for its language and law schools. One famous local lad attended law school at the behest of his father but ran away to become an artist—Paul Cézanne. Metal symbols embedded in the sidewalk proudly mark the spots around town linked to Cézanne's life and art.

Like flowers turning to the sun, artists are irresistibly drawn to the vivid

Colourful shutters at Arles.



light and vibrant landscape of Provence. A list of names of those who painted here reads like a who's who of the art world: Monet, Renoir, Picasso, Matisse, van Gogh, and Cézanne.

That evening we found our quiet sidewalk café, *Les Agapes*, and dined on warm goat cheese and walnut salad, stew Provençal (a creation of vegetables and tender slow-cooked beef), sumptuous raspberry cake, and, of course, the requisite bottle of French wine. As a thank-you gesture, our host added complimentary glasses of *Farigoule de thyme*, a local liqueur made with brandy and thyme. We were so impressed with its herbal fragrance and taste that we set off the next morning on a quest to buy a bottle. We met many friendly locals and shopkeepers who referred us from one place to another along the *Rue d'Italie* until we finally arrived at the liquor store, only to find it closed despite the sign in the window indicating it should be open. The lady in the bakery next door simply smiled and said with a shrug, "Perhaps he did not feel like coming to work today."

ning sun. Little wonder Vincent van Gogh had his most prolific period here, painting more than 200 canvasses in fewer than 15 months. The sidewalk café that inspired his famous "*Café de Nuit*" in 1888 is here.

It was in Arles that van Gogh notoriously lopped off part of his own ear after a fight with fellow artist Paul Gauguin. This led to van Gogh being sent to a hospital that is now a museum. It's fascinating to walk in the hospital garden and locate the vantage

Arles

Our tour was to begin on the shore of the Mediterranean in Nice, so regretfully we departed Aix by train, vowing to return. Our cruise group briefly explored Nice, with a side trip to Monaco, before heading overland to the city of Arles on the Rhône River.

Arles was a multi-faceted surprise. Founded, like Aix, by the Romans, it has a wealth of enduring Roman edifices. Although built in 46 BC, the 26,000-seat amphitheatre is still used for bullfights and opera today, and the 12,000-seat Roman theatre a few blocks away is still used for its original purpose—a venue for drama and concerts.

Arles is a charming town to explore on foot, with bright blue shuttered windows in sunbathed walls, vibrant, flower-filled window boxes, inviting sidewalk cafés, and racks of colourful Provençal-prints blowing in the mor-

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