

what's a travelgirl to do in...

PROVENCE

By Jan Schroder

*I followed her gaze to see the straw-hatted
French farmer perched on his tractor,
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and brilliant red poppies below, and
the impossibly blue sunny sky above.*

“It’s like a cliché. You are inside a postcard,” one of my traveling companions remarked as we motored through the flowering fields of Provence. I followed her gaze to see the straw-hatted French farmer perched on his tractor, framed by the vibrant green of the grapevines and brilliant red poppies below, and the impossibly blue sunny sky above.

It did indeed look like a postcard. But all of Provence feels that way: like a brilliantly lit world, where colors are so intense the Impressionists flocked there for the special quality of the light.

Yeah, a year in Provence would have been awesome, but our schedule was limited to just a few days. But during that time we got a glimpse how ancient cultures lived,

wandered streets of medieval villages, stayed in former convents and monasteries, viewed Impressionist masterpieces projected on ancient quarry walls, and just basked in that gorgeous Provençal sunshine, available 300 days a year. And, yes, we may have sipped a few glasses of the region’s lovely rosés along the way.

With many villages just a short distance from each other, you can easily see several in a day, stopping at one for its weekly market and a stroll through cobblestoned streets, and another just for its spectacular view of the surrounding valley. Here are a few highlights, starting with Marseille, the capital of the Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur region.

Visit Provence from late June to August and you’ll be able to see, and smell, the gorgeous lavender fields in full bloom.



Marseille: The Oldest City in France

It wasn't the most picturesque time to visit Marseille as the Old Port is undergoing a makeover and we had to maneuver around fenced-off areas to get close to the water. Greeks landed in this natural harbor on the Mediterranean in 600 B.C. and it has functioned as a port ever since. I guess when you're 2,600 years old and expecting hundreds of thousands of visitors, a makeover is in order.

As the European Capital of Culture for 2013, Marseille will play host to more than 400 cultural events next year, so the city is adding a large pedestrian square to its Old Port. We still got a glimpse of its bustling activity as customers found their way to the fishmongers' carts where they ply their fresh catch of the day.

New hotels are also under construction, including the Inter-Continental Marseille, being built in an 18th-century building.

As we took a walking tour of the old city, I wondered about the juxtaposition of historic and modern architecture, which our guide told us was a result of the city's virtual destruction by the Nazis in 1943, when 1,900 buildings were destroyed.

With just a morning to spend here, a walking tour is all we

had time for, but strolling along the streets and checking out the shops gave us a taste of the city's charm. I had to purchase some lavender soap, as 50 percent of lavender oil is produced in France, and took a bite of a traditional Navette, a cookie shaped like a boat in honor of the belief that after Jesus died, Mary Magdalene came to Marseille that way.

If time allows, stop in one of the portside restaurants for a taste of the city's most famous dish, bouillabaisse. Ancient fisherman created this traditional fish stew as a way to use the less expensive, bonier fish in their catch.

Les Baux-de-Provence: The European Rock City

First glance explains how this city got its name. A stroll up its steep walkways is a walk through centuries of French history, from The Castle, built in medieval times, to the 12th-century Saint Vincent's Church, where mass is still celebrated. Mansions from the 16th and 17th centuries now house museums, art galleries and plenty of intriguing shops. It's worth the climb to the top to see the ruins of The Castle and the magnificent view of the Alpilles Valley.

One of the highlights of my trip to Provence was just below

PHOTOS: JAN SCHROEDER. PHOTO TOP LEFT COURTESY OF LES BAUX DE PROVENCE TOURIST OFFICE

Les Baux. Carrières de Lumières is an art space housed in a former limestone quarry where we saw the exhibition *Gauguin, Van Gogh, Painters of Colour*. While motoring around Provence is like living in a postcard, standing inside this massive quarry while 70 projectors display huge replicas of masterpieces by these two artists is like being inside a painting. I felt as if I was walking down the star-lit streets of Arles or feeling the sand between my toes on the beaches of Tahiti.

Several paintings are displayed at once on the various walls of the quarry before "melting" into more paintings, as the exhibition explores the links between these two artists, who were both inspired by the landscapes of Provence.

Arles: Soul of Provence

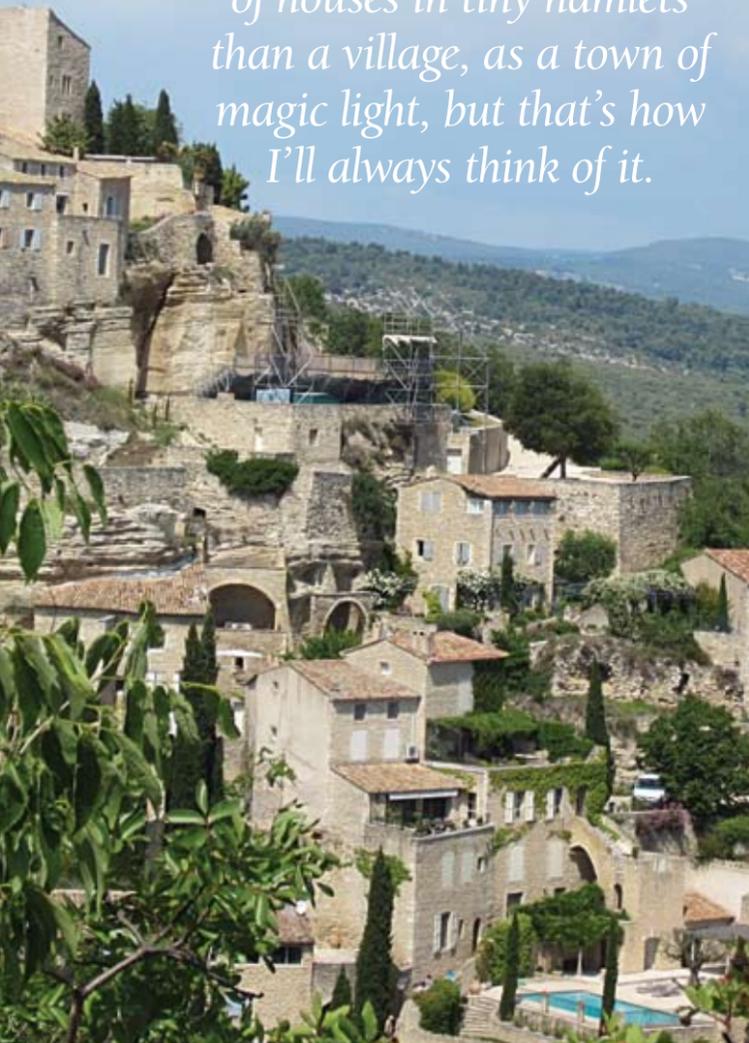
Although it was a bit unnerving to be walking several feet below ground in the huge U-shaped galleries of the Cryptoporticos, I figured I was fairly safe from any type of collapse. After all, these galleries were completed by the Romans around 10 B.C. and are the best-preserved Roman galleries in the world. Above ground, I was equally amazed by the 10,000-seat Roman Amphitheatre, which is still used today.

One of my favorite parts of walking around this ancient city on the Rhône River, where many 16th- and 17th-century mansions still line the narrow streets, was visiting a few of the stops on the Van Gogh Trail. The troubled artist lived in Arles in 1888-89, producing 186 paintings during that time. Yellow panels placed on easels in ten areas around the city depict each work of art in the exact setting where Van Gogh painted it. No wonder art lovers refer to Arles as the soul of Provence.

We visited the famous Le Café La Nuit, the bright yellow café on Place du Forum that is famous as the setting for "Le Café, Le Soir." We also saw the flower-filled courtyard of the former hospital where Van Gogh was treated after the infamous ear-cutting, and where he painted "Le Jardin de la Maison de Santé à Arles" and strolled through the beautiful Jardin d'Ete, site of his painting "L'entrée du Jardin Public à Arles."

Opposite page from left: Every room in the charming Au Vieux Panier in Marseille is decorated by a different artist each year so you can literally sleep in a work of art; Neither construction on a new pedestrian square nor the rainy weather keep the fish mongers from selling their fresh fish. This page from top left: Paintings by Van Gogh and Gauguin are projected on massive quarry walls; The soup course at Restaurant Le 33, an intimate courtyard restaurant in Arles; The Bistro A Côté is a more affordable bistro option to its sister restaurant L'Atelier, also in Arles; When poppies are in bloom they add more red to Roussillon, known as the Village of Red.

It's possible no one else refers to Gargas, more a collection of houses in tiny hamlets than a village, as a town of magic light, but that's how I'll always think of it.



Above from top: Stone buildings seem to rise right out of the cliffs in Gordes; A view of the famous Pont d'Avignon from the Dom Gardens.

Avignon: The City of Popes

Avignon earned its nickname, as it is the only city outside of Italy where popes have lived. For political reasons nine of them made their home here from 1305-1377, but they were hardly suffering during their sojourn to Southern France. In 1335, the church began construction on the Palais des Papes, the biggest Gothic palace in Europe, where once 250-300 people lived in its 61,000 square feet.

We toured the 25 rooms open to the public, which include the pope's bedroom where we marveled at frescoes dating back to 1337.

It's worth the steep climb up through the Dom Gardens by the Palace for the magnificent views of the Rhône River and the famous Pont d'Avignon, first constructed in the 1100s. We climbed back down for a stroll on the famous bridge, where Le Mistral, the strong winds of Provence, threatened to blow me over while our good-natured guide sang the famous children's song "Sur le Pont d'Avignon."

Roussillon: The Village of Red

This could be called "the town that ochre built." The pigment, which can be used to make oil paint, is often used to make a reddish hue but can be tinted a variety of colors, 17 of which could be seen on the exterior of the homes as we climbed the narrow, medieval streets of this small village.

We stopped in Roussillon for a few hours one morning to climb to the top for the views, then back down to enjoy the weekly market where vendors set out produce and locally made products. I had to buy more lavender soap and how could I resist buying my favorite herb, herbes de Provence, in its place of origin?

Gordes: The Acropolis of Provence

From the red cliffs of Roussillon we drove to the beige stone village of Gordes, perched on the Plateau de Vaucluse. We made a brief stop here for the magnificent views of the Luberon Valley. Listed as one of the most beautiful villages in France, Gordes is the setting for the movie *A Good Year*, starring Russell Crowe as a London securities trader whose life changes when he inherits a chateau and vineyard in Provence. We should all be so lucky.

Gargas: The Town of Magic Light

It's possible no one else refers to Gargas, more a collection of houses in tiny hamlets than a village, as a town of magic light, but that's how I'll always think of it. We stopped here for a visit to Mathieu Lustrerie, where the second-generation owner Mathieu Lustrerie led us through the former ochre factory, where his company now restores chandeliers from all over world, including Versailles and the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. An eye-opening gigantic black-and-white photo shows the restored chandelier at Opera de Monaco, an 18-month project done at a cost of \$400,000.

In addition, they also design and create their own magnificent lighting fixtures as well as supply custom-made ones for homes throughout the world.

"It is more than a chandelier, I give you magic light," Mathieu said. "You will love everything in your room. I put my name on everything so it has to be perfect. My work will live long after me."

The same can be said of all the lovely villages of Provence.

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ILLUSTRATION BY KARLA TRAPP

Provence 411

Tourism

Atout France - France Tourism Development us.franceguide.com

Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur Tourism board www.52sunsations.com

Marseille Tourist Office www.marseille-tourisme.com

Bouches-du-Rhône Tourism board www.visitprovence.com

Stay

Marseille
La Résidence du Vieux Port www.hotel-residence-marseille.com
Located on the south side of the Old Port, this retro '50s-style hotel has fantastic waterfront views from its balconies.

Au Vieux Panier
www.auvieuxpanier.com
Each of the six rooms in this 150-year-old former home is decorated by a different artist each February when it shuts down for a month and reopens with a totally new look.

Avignon
Le Cloître Saint Louis www.cloitre-saint-louis.com
This 16th-century former cloister is now a four-star hotel with 80 rooms in its historic and contemporary wings.

Eat

Marseille
Restaurant le Péron www.restaurant-peron.com
Spectacular views of the Mediterranean along with perfectly prepared seafood are served by waiters with that infamous French attitude.

Arles
Bistro A Côté www.bistro-acote.com
Lunch on the terrace of this bistro by Jean-Luc Rabenel was a highlight in Arles.

Restaurant Le 33
www.hotel-particulier.com
A tiny restaurant set inside the beautiful courtyard of l'hôtel Particulier.

Provence
Hôtel Jules César www.hotel-julescesar.fr
The Roman façade of this 17th-century former convent is a perfect setting and location from which to enjoy this charming city founded in the 6th century and where its namesake founded a Roman colony.

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PHOTO BY JANICE McDONALD

Running with Sheep by Janice McDonald

There is nothing like seeing a wave of 3,000 sheep heading toward you on a cobblestoned street to get your attention. This was not the Provence I had always heard of, but, you know what? I'll take it any time.

The place is St. Remy de Provence. And while the proper name for the annual event is "Fete de la Transhumance," you will hear it referred to more than once as "The Running of the Sheep." It's much safer than running with the bulls in Spain.

The tradition is hundreds of years old. In late spring each year, herdsmen move their sheep from the lower grasslands of Provence to the cooler pastures in the lower Alps. In these modern days, most of the sheep make the journey by truck, but to keep tradition alive, St. Remy hosts an entire festival to help send the sheep on their way.

The event is tailor-made for the locals. Most of those lining the streets are actually from St. Remy and neighboring towns. Vendors sell everything from olive oil, wine and fresh lavender to arts and crafts. Ground central is Place de la Republique, the small square at the heart of town.

I made my way to the square and tried to get on a curb high enough to see over the heads of others. Soon the sound of clinking bells and the bleating of sheep and goats could be heard. A few dogs and donkeys accompanied herdsmen, both young and old, dressed in traditional garb. People cheered them on and reached out to touch them as they went by.

It was over too quickly. I started shopping around and then heard a familiar sound. They were making a second round! It was a bombardment of sights, sounds and colors.

Even if it weren't for the sheep, the town alone is worth a visit. Filled with history, churches, galleries and shops, it has numerous pedestrian-only places to stroll or to sit and have a coffee or a glass of wine.

The festival is held each year on Pentecost Monday, the Monday 50 days after Easter. St. Remy is small, so if you plan to stay there during the festival, it's best to book early because hotels are limited in the small town. That said, the Fete is a great Day Trip from elsewhere in Provence. St. Remy is just more than an hour from either Avignon, Arles or Nime.

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