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AT HOME ON THE RHONE

Drifting along France's delightful waterways by riverboat is the best way to see Provence



The allure of Avignon: The famous St Benezet Bridge and Pope's palace are best viewed from the water

Picture: ALAMY

ALL WE could remember of the song was *Sur le pont d'Avignon*, but our gaiety aboard this charming French riverboat was such we didn't need more than that.

Avignon was once home to seven Popes who had sought sanctuary in the 14th century during violence in Rome. They built a fairy-tale papal palace within impressive medieval walls whose high stone ramparts rise up from the banks of the Rhone and induce awe in all who enter this city by river.

With nearly 50 canals linking its rivers, France has the most developed waterway system in Europe, and it is possible to cross the country afloat from north to south and west to east.

This was not my usual sprint to Provence: it was civilised, slower, with no time-consuming ferry, fume-choked road or stressful airport.

Instead, breakfast on board Eurostar to Paris, lunch on the superfast French TGV train to Provence and a champagne reception at cocktail hour on the good ship Napoleon, 40m long and the largest of the Afloat in France fleet, which Orient Express boasts is the finest river cruiser in France.

It's an incredible vessel. It began life in the Sixties as a working barge, but these days it's a luxuri-

ous floating palace fitted out with Louis XVI-style furniture, stately en-suite bedrooms, a lounge and dining room, three decks, a terrace for outdoor eating and whirlpool spa.

Oh, and racks of mountain bikes for those energetic moments when you feel like riding along some picturesque towpath shaded with avenues of pleached limes.

There is a crew of six, two girls and four chaps, all neat as a new pin in their ship's uniform. They arrange trips ashore, provide a history of places we visit and instruct us on the food and wine of the region.

This is a fabulous way to enjoy France. After a breakfast of freshly

baked croissants and coffee, we cast off to sail the broad, handsome Rhone, a river that begins somewhere in the Alps, gliding gently past lichen-coated mill buildings, castles and the tumbling vineyards that produce grapes for world-famous chateaux.

Lunch is taken in some tranquil, reedy location, after which we venture ashore. In the Romano-gypsy city of Arles, just above the wetlands of the Carmargue, we visit the almost 2,000-year-old Roman amphitheatre where gladiators once fought.

It was Arles that inspired Van Gogh, and we sip Pernod at midnight at the cafe immortalised by

his celebrated painting *Cafe Terrace At Night* and moor the Napoleon by the spot he set up his easel to paint *Starry Night Over The Rhone*. We are reminded of Don McLean's chart-topping hit *Vincent*, with its lyrics *Starry, Starry Night*.

We even visit the asylum where Van Gogh was committed after cutting off his ear.

At the celebrated wine village of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, we sample the £50-a-bottle *Cuvee des Cadettes*, 2005.

Our chef, John Inescon, from Skipton, North Yorks, is a marvel — his Valrhona chocolate tart is fit for Versailles. This floating house

party is an intimate experience and is as luxurious as any villa holiday, but with the added pleasure of enjoying one of the world's greatest passing panoramas.

TRAVEL FACTS

A WEEK on Napoleon costs from £3,200pp based on two sharing, for a cruise between Arles and Tain L'Hermitage in Provence and the Rhone Valley. Price includes all food, wine with meals, bar drinks on board, sightseeing, 0845 077 22 22, orient-express.com.

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