



# Roman Provence

A cruise along the Rhône is the perfect way to dip below the surface and find another side to the south, says **Kate Crockett** ▶



**D**id you know that Pope Clement VI appointed a Great Mustard Maker to the Papal Court in Avignon? Or that stones from the ancient Roman theatre in Orange were removed and used to build the medieval cellars of Château la Nerthe in Châteauneuf-du-Pape?

Neither did I. But these are some of the fascinating nuggets of information I gleaned while on a recent visit to Provence and the Rhône Valley, cruising the River Rhône on board the *péniche-hôtel Napoléon*. From facts and figures about the Romans in France, to how many kisses you should greet someone with in this part of France (answer: three); all have been carefully squirrelled away. During the summer months the *Napoléon* plies the Rhône between Arles and the river's furthest navigable point, Lyon. In the world of French cruises, the Rhône is something a little bit different. It is not the quaint, tranquil Canal du Midi or Canal de Bourgogne, but a wide, fast-flowing working river, where riverside castle ruins and crumbling watchtowers nestle up to the necessary industry that utilises this important natural artery.

The scenery that passed by as we travelled down the river was fascinating, but even more enlightening were the excursions that can be enjoyed. Travelling upriver, our first night was spent in Arles, where the first *sortie* was a guided night walk through the city, discovering the nocturnal vistas that inspired its most

famous resident, Van Gogh. The exact spot where the artist painted his 1888 canvas *Nuit Étoilée sur le Rhône* is on the riverside just above *Napoléon's* mooring; while the iconic yellow awning of Le Café La Nuit – better known as Café Van Gogh – is a short walk away in the Place du Forum.

## Sculpture trail

*Napoléon's* host also guided us to the eerie Roman amphitheatre (which still hosts bullfights twice a year to celebrate the rice harvests at the beginning of April and September) and the medieval church of Saint-Trophime in Place de la République, with its extraordinary Romanesque sculptures, beautifully lit at night. In the centre of the square stands a Roman obelisk, the lower half of which was discovered in the 17th century in what was once the Roman Circus. The needle's point was discovered centuries later unwittingly being used by locals as a bench, after which the two pieces were reunited. The stroll back to the barge looped around the rather forlorn-looking Thermes de Constantin – thought to have once been the largest Roman baths in Provence, but currently closed – and down to the twinkling riverside.

The next morning a short drive delivered us for a goosebump-inducing visit to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole monastery in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where from May 1889 Van Gogh spent the most

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Avignon from the River Rhône **ABOVE:** A view of Arles and its Roman amphitheatre **RIGHT:** The view from Van Gogh's window at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole **OVER THE PAGE:** The boat *Napoléon*

PHOTOGRAPHS: PCL (OPENING IMAGE); OT ARLES; KATE CROCKETT



productive year of his artistic life. From the barred window of his sparse whitewashed bedroom, a pretty patchwork of Provençal colours reveals itself, even to this day, in the olive trees, clumps of lavender, peach blossom and beds of irises.

The gastronomy of Provence makes a fascinating feature of any trip to the region. An excursion to an olive farm in the grounds of a magnificent Provençal bastide turned out to be less traditional than it at first appeared. Domaine Le Grand Servan near Tarascon makes organic olive oil in an area better known for fruit farming. The owner's modern harvesting techniques (he has been trialling a machine which 'tickles' the olives off the branches, much as grape harvesters do), combined with

## The boat docks at a berth close to where Hadrian reputedly crossed the River Rhône by elephant

traditional pressing methods, go into creating an oil that is sweet and fruity and has extremely low acidity. You can discover the flavours for yourself in the tasting room, where you can also buy the oils and homemade *tapenades*.

There is a further opportunity to munch your way through olives, tapenades, charcuterie and cheeses at Avignon's central market, which early birds visited with the chef one morning. Not only did he explain the many local specialities on sale but we were able to choose the produce we wanted to see on that day's menu.

Cruising between Arles to Avignon, visitors mustn't miss the opportunity to see the impressive Palais des Papes and go beyond to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, where the ruins of the papal summer residence tower over famously profitable vineyards. Here, the boat docks at a berth close to where Hadrian reputedly crossed the River Rhône by elephant and we were given access to the cellars of the respected vineyard, Château La Nerthe. ▶

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER

During the Roman conquest of Gaul, the territories which would later become modern-day France were transformed by the Empire. Step back in time with a visit to these ancient sites

### PONT DU GARD

Spanning the River Gard between Uzès and Nîmes, this ancient Roman aqueduct, which dates back to the 1st century, is the most visited antiquity in France.

Route du Pont du Gard  
30120 Vers-Pont-du-Gard  
Tel: (Fr) 8 20 90 33 30  
[www.pontdugard.fr](http://www.pontdugard.fr)



### MAISON CARRÉE AND ARENA, NÎMES

The city's remarkable Square House (pictured above) is one of the best-preserved Roman temples in the world. Another must-see is the arena.

Office du Tourisme de Romaine-Gard  
41 Rue Fresque, 30000 Nîmes  
Tel: (Fr) 4 66 21 82 56  
[www.arenas-nimes.com](http://www.arenas-nimes.com)

### THÉÂTRE ANTIQUE D'ORANGE

This remarkable Roman theatre still boasts its original stage wall. Built by Emperor Augustus to seat 10,000, it remains a popular venue today.

Rue Madeleine Roch, 84100 Orange  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 51 74 70  
[www.theatre-antique.com](http://www.theatre-antique.com)

### MUSÉE DE SITE GALLO-ROMAIN VILLA, LOUPIAN

Located near Sète, this well-preserved villa was discovered by a farmer ploughing his land.

Route Départementale 158 E4  
34140 Loupian  
Tel: (Fr) 4 67 18 68 18  
[www.loupian.fr](http://www.loupian.fr)

### ARC DE GERMANICUS, SAINTES

Built in 18AD for Emperor Tibère, the arch originally stood at the entrance of a Roman bridge.

Place Bassompierre, 17100 Saintes

Tel: (Fr) 5 46 74 23 82  
[www.saintes-tourisme.fr](http://www.saintes-tourisme.fr)

### GLANUM, SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE

One of the most important Roman excavation sites in France, these ruins include a forum, baths and temples.

Office du Tourisme de Saint-Rémy-de-Provence  
Place Jean Jaurès  
13210 Saint-Rémy-de-Provence  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 92 05 22  
[www.saintremy-de-provence.com](http://www.saintremy-de-provence.com)

### GALLO-ROMAIN SACTUARY, SANXAY

This extensive site includes the remains of a Gallo-Roman sanctuary. Route de Ménigoute, 86600 Sanxay  
Tel: (Fr) 5 49 53 61 48  
[www.sanxay.monuments-nationaux.fr](http://www.sanxay.monuments-nationaux.fr)

### THÉÂTRES ROMAINS DE FOURVIÈRE AND AMPHITHÉÂTRE DES TROIS GAULES, LYON

In addition to the Fourvière complex, the site of the Grand Theatre and smaller Odeon, Lyon also boasts an amphitheatre where Christian martyrs were thrown to the lions.

Office du Tourisme et des Congrès du Grand Lyon  
Place Bellecour, 69214 Lyon cedex 02  
Tel: (Fr) 4 72 77 69 69  
[www.lyon-france.com](http://www.lyon-france.com)

### CRYPTE ARCHÉOLOGIQUE DU PARVIS NOTRE-DAME

The Roman foundations of the Île de la Cité offer a glimpse of past times.

1 Place du Parvis Notre-Dame  
75004 Paris  
Tel: (Fr) 1 55 42 50 10, [www.paris.fr](http://www.paris.fr)

### LA GRAUFESENQUE

Excavations at Condatomagus near Millau have revealed potters' workshops.

Office de Tourisme de Millau  
1 Place du Beffroi, 12103 Millau  
Tel (Fr) 5 65 60 02 42  
[www.ot-millau.fr](http://www.ot-millau.fr)



A private tour took in the modern fermentation tanks, as well as the medieval vats still used for blending, and rows of wines aging in oak barriques and in bottles. In one tunnel, in a row of locked cases, are bottles laid down for some of France's finest restaurants, hotels and chefs, including Alain Ducasse and Michel Bras. In another there are barrels in which Château La Nerthe produces its liqueur brandy (it's the only winery in the *appellation* to have a licence to do so). In another we saw the very stones taken by medieval stonemasons from the theatre in Orange to build the château's cellars. Upstairs in the tasting room visitors can try a selection of red and white vintages which, if you're lucky, will include Château La Nerthe's top vintage, Cuvée de Cadettes.

The *péniche-hôtel Napoléon* lends itself to an intimate cruising experience, sleeping just 12 with a crew of six. While cruising the blue-grey waters from city to city, life on board centred on fine wine, local liqueurs, Provençal cuisine and regional cheeses. There were at least four new varieties to try each day, ranging from Brie de Meaux to Bleu d'Auvergne and Saint-Félicien to Roquefort.

As one would expect, wines of the Côtes du Rhône feature prominently – from a peachy Condrieu from northern Rhône (enjoyed one evening with *moules marinières*) to fine Tavel rosés from the southern Rhône (best sipped in the sun on the top deck) – alongside well-chosen vintages from France's other great wine producing regions.

Highlights included a peppery 2006 Château Destieux Saint-Émilion (paired with pan-fried sea bass and scallops on truffle mash) and a Côte-Rôtie Bonserine 2006 paired with five-spice roasted duck and merguez sausages served on a white bean *cassoulet*.

The complimentary bar on the *Napoléon* also offered liqueurs, from pastis and *prunelle*, to its namesake's favourite cognac, Courvoisier. The perfect end to a day of sightseeing in Roman Provence. 🍷

PHOTOGRAPHS: ORIENT-EXPRESS - RYAN DAVIES

## FRANCOFILE Dip your toe and test the waters in Provence

### GETTING THERE

Kate travelled by Eurostar  
tel: 08432 186 186  
www.eurostar.com  
and TGV tel: 0844 848 4070, www.rail europe.co.uk Flights and rail transport can be arranged when booking the *Napoléon*.



### ABOUT THE CRUISE

The *Napoléon* can be booked on a per cabin basis from £3,200 per person, based on two adults sharing (or private charter from £31,500, based on eight sharing) for a week-long cruise between Arles and Tain-l'Hermitage (or vice versa) in Provence and the Rhône Valley. The price includes six nights on board, all meals, wine with meals, liqueurs and bar drinks and excursions.  
Tel: (UK) 0845 077 2222  
www.orient-express.com

### THINGS TO SEE AND DO

#### Domaine Le Grand Servan, near Tarascon

Discover how the first cold-press olive oil is made using traditional methods at this organic olive farm.

Don't leave without a bottle or some of the delicious new artisan tapenades. Open by appointment.

Tel: (Fr) 4 90 43 57 90

www.grandservan.com

#### Palais des Papes, Avignon

See how Avignon's popes lived during the 14th and 15th centuries in the private chambers, apartments and chapels of this spacious papal palace.

Tel: (Fr) 4 90 27 50 00

www.palais-des-papes.com

#### Saint Paul de Mausole, Saint-Rémy

Areas of this working

institution, including the cloisters and Van Gogh's room, are open to the public. At the bottom of the approach road look out for the Roman mausoleum and triumphal arch known as Les Antiquités.  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 92 77 00  
www.avignon-et-provence.com/saint-paul-mausole

#### Château La Nerthe, Châteauneuf-du-Pape

The château is open for tastings by appointment.

Tel: (Fr) 4 90 83 70 11

www.chateaulanerthe.fr

### TOURIST OFFICES

#### Office de Tourisme d'Arles

Boulevard des Lices  
13200 Arles

Tel: (Fr) 4 90 18 41 20

www.arlestourisme.com

Ask about the three tourist passes offering a discount

when exploring the city's monuments and museums.

#### Office de Tourisme d'Avignon

41 Cours Jean Jaurès – BP8  
84000 Avignon cedex 1

Tel: (Fr) 4 32 74 32 74

www.avignon-tourisme.com

The free Avignon pass entitles you and up to four others to discounts for up to 15 days at various city attractions, including the Palais des Papes and the Pont Saint-Bénézet (the Pont d'Avignon).

#### L'Office du Tourisme et des Congrès du Grand Lyon

Place Bellecour – BP 2254  
69214 Lyon cedex 2

Tel: (Fr) 4 72 77 69 69

www.en.lyon-france.com

The one to three-day Lyon City Card provides entry to most museums.