

Cruising and Imbibing Down the French Rhone River

By Don Mankin



Don Mankin and wife Katherine cruising on the Rhone

Who could resist the fine wines constantly thrust my way on our 7-day, wine-themed cruise down the Rhone River in France? Not I. It would have been impolite to refuse.

The “adventure” for the Adventure Geezer on this trip was getting to my cabin without falling down the steps. Most of the time I succeeded.

Clearly, one of the main attractions of this AmaWaterways (amawaterways.com) trip was the wine-tastings, pairings and seminars led by Freddy Arredondo, winemaker and co-owner of Cave B Estate Winery in Eastern Washington. A knowledgeable, charismatic and skilled presenter, Freddy was able to hold the attention, day-after-day, of an audience of slightly tipsy passengers.

Well, maybe it was only me who was slightly tipsy. My mother taught me not to waste food so I didn’t spit or dump my wine like the more sophisticated passengers. Instead, I tried my best to drink everything poured into my glass. My mother would have been proud.

As fun and informative as the wine tastings were, even more important for me was the opportunity to visit several historically significant towns along the way in ease and comfort.

The cruise started in Lyon, the second largest city in France. If you’ll pardon the travel-writing cliché—Lyon is picturesque and charming. (In fact all of the places we visited were picturesque and charming. So to avoid repeating myself, factor the cliché into every description that

follows. You can also add “historic” and either “medieval,” “Renaissance,” or “Gothic,” or some combination of the three, to save time and space. All apply.)

Lyon is also special for the two rivers, the Rhone and the Saone, which flow through the old town before converging just south of the city, creating views from almost everywhere but the narrow, winding alleys and covered walkways (“traboules”) that weave throughout the historic core of the old city.

Our first stop after Lyon was Vienne, a Roman colony in the waning years before the beginning of the Christian era. Well-preserved Roman monuments are scattered throughout the city, including an impressive Roman theatre, still used for concerts.

For me the highlight of our day in Vienne was the steep hike up Mt. Pipet overlooking the city. After a few minutes to appreciate the views, our guide took us into the rustic chapel at the top of the hill and sang a rendition of Ave Maria that sent chills up-and-down my agnostic spine.

In Tournon, our next stop, we went to a red wine and chocolate pairing in the Tournon castle after we arrived, then tried to burn off the calories the next morning by hiking to the L’Hermitage vineyards on the hillside across the river.

This was followed by – what else? — a wine tasting. On the way back to the ship we stopped at Chocolate City, the flagship store for Valrhona chocolates. I didn’t stop sampling their wares until I had regained whatever calories burned off on the hike and then some.

Among the many options for our all-too-brief visit to Avignon was a morning excursion to the famous Roman aqueduct and World Heritage Site, the Pont du Gard. Built in the first century AD and at a height of over 160 feet and a span of almost 900 feet, it is a testament to the engineering skills of the ancient Romans.

The last stop on our cruise was the city of Arles, best known, perhaps, for the two years that Vincent Van Gogh spent in the city, a sojourn that produced some of his most famous paintings.

Looking for something different, I chose a morning excursion to the Camargue Regional Nature Park on the Mediterranean for a touch of wildlife and natural scenery. At the heart of the Camargue is a saltwater marsh that is a protected sanctuary for birds, including flamingos, egrets and ducks.

This is only a sampling of the many options that were available each morning and afternoon, ranging in level of activity from “gentle” to “active.” Most of the time we chose the active options to try and compensate for the wine and excellent meals and snacks we consumed several times a day. It must have worked since I only gained a couple of pounds on the trip.



Or maybe it was just the opportunity to drink as much as I wanted without worrying about anything more challenging than staying upright long enough in the evenings to get back to my cabin and slide into bed.

For more information on the Adventure Geezer visit his website and blog at adventuretransformations.com.



An unexpected attraction was the many locks we passed through as we descended down the river. Even my technophobic wife, who is usually uninterested in feats of engineering, was fascinated by the technical intricacies of the locks and the skill required to maneuver a large vessel through the narrow locks, usually with only inches to spare.

Possibly what I liked most about the trip was the smooth, fluid, silent passage through the environment. Much of the time, when I wasn't eating, drinking or on an excursion, I just kicked back on the deck -- sensing, observing and appreciating that I did not have to control where we went and how fast we got there.

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BY ACTIVE OVER 50 TRAVEL WRITER DON MANKIN AND SHANNON STOWELL
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