

The Getaway: International

SOUTHERN FRANCE: SCENIC TOWNS OF THE RHÔNE RIVER VALLEY

SOUTHERN France is renowned for its breathtaking beauty, especially the area known as the Rhône River Valley, which extends along the Rhône River from Lyon, the country's second largest city, due south to the Mediterranean Sea. Considered a gastronomic paradise, the region is also nirvana for wine lovers, particularly the area stretching between Vienne and Arles.

ROMAN RUINS AND HILLTOP VIEWS

Arles, situated where the Rhône fragments into an immense, natural delta called the Camarque, was established in 123 B.C. Known as the “Little Rome of Gaul,” it’s a good place to begin your trip. This city lays claim to numerous intact Romanesque monuments and Roman ruins. The most striking of these is the immense, two-tiered 20,000-seat Roman amphitheater, Les Arènes, so well preserved it’s easy to imagine crowds roaring during ancient gladiatorial contests.

In more recent times, artists have come to love this city for its ethereal light. Vincent Van Gogh lived here in 1888 and 1889 and, despite being ill, created a staggering 300 paintings.

Another beautiful Provençal town is the village of Les-Baux de Provence, which sits atop a craggy hill crowned by a ruined castle. Les Baux’s narrow streets are lined with alluring Provençal shops and restaurants.

North along the Rhône you’ll find Avignon, where medieval walls enclose a maze of narrow streets filled with churches, museums and palaces. Avignon’s Palace of the Popes, home to seven pontiffs from 1309 to 1377, is equivalent in size to four Gothic cathedrals and features stunning frescoes.

Gardens adjacent to the Palace offer sweeping views of the Rhône and the Pont d’Avignon, or Pont Saint Bénézet. Destroyed by a flood in 1668, the broken bridge, named after Saint Bénézet, a shepherd boy, juts halfway out over the Rhône. Pay a small fee at the kiosk to walk the bridge and learn his story.

After exploring the city, grab a picnic lunch at Avignon’s covered market, Les Halles, or stop to sip wine at one of the city’s many outdoor cafés.

WINE AND CHOCOLATE

Wine is one of the many reasons visitors flock to this part of France. The Papal vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, for example, once the summer residence for the Avignon Popes, still deliver the red wine so renowned in this part of the country.

Of the two thousand people who live in this area, three hundred and twenty are wine makers, and there are more than two dozen wine shops in Châteauneuf that offer tastings. Even if you aren’t a wine connoisseur you should visit this town, as the views offered from its hilltop castle ruins are spectacular.

Especially scenic is the riverside town of Tournon, farther north, and Tain l’Hermitage, its twin city across the river. Stone walls here mark steeply sloping terraced vineyards backed by jagged outcroppings.

Tournon’s dramatic 10th-century feudal castle offers stunning views of the river and a rolling patchwork of vineyards. Be sure to cross the bridge into Tain, where you can indulge in some delectable chocolate. Valrhona, the French luxury chocolate manufacturer founded in 1922, has a tasting room where you can sample and buy some of the world’s best.

Even farther north along the river is the riverside city of Vienne, surrounded by steep hills and situated between France’s Burgundy and Beaujolais regions. Some say it was once ruled by Pontius Pilate. Legend or truth, one thing seems certain: this city was transformed by Julius Caesar from a Celtic region into a Roman colony in 47 B.C., and became an important outpost for the Roman Empire.

Today, Vienne is a hub of cultural activity, with many of its Roman monuments still intact. There’s a 13,000-seat Roman theater discovered in 1922 that dates to A.D. 40-50. And rising in the middle of a town square lined with modern shops and restaurants is the glorious Roman Temple of Augustus and Livia, a reminder of times past and the glory of the Roman Empire.

A CITY FOR GOURMANDS

Finally, there’s Lyon, France’s culinary center, brimming with Michelin star restaurants, even among the bouchons, small bistros that serve superb-value Lyonnaise cuisine.

With so many beautiful towns in the Rhône River Valley, it can be difficult to choose which ones to see. But that’s a good thing, because once you visit, you’ll want to return again and again.

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