

Galerie
Tinée Valley's secret treasures

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOSÉ NICOLAS

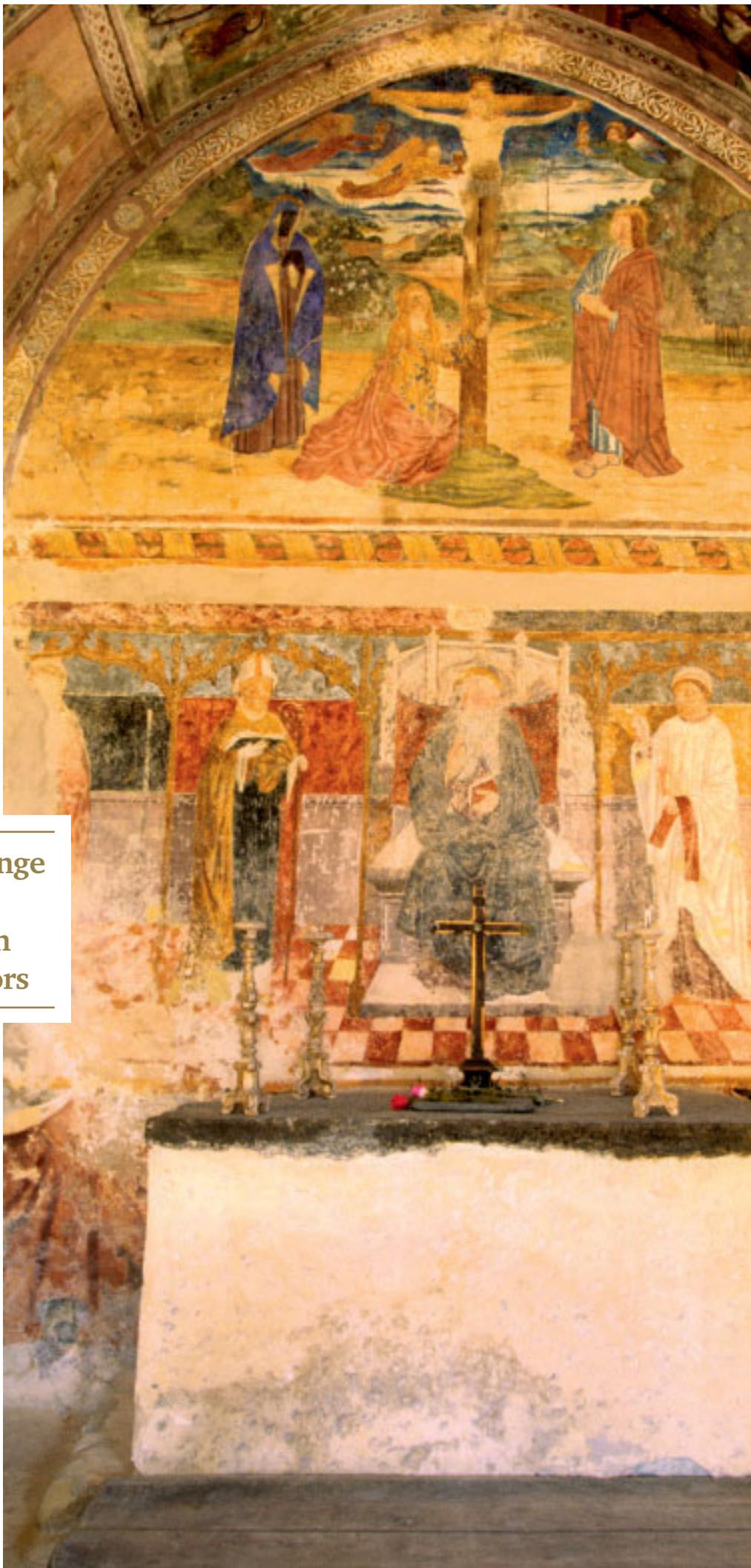
The painted chapels of the Tinée Valley north of Nice form a giant medieval art gallery showing delicate, devoted frescoes, some of which lay undiscovered for centuries. Dotted along the old salt route that joined the Mediterranean to the regions of Savoy and Piedmont, small chapels were built as places of rest where pilgrims and shepherds high up in the mountains could shelter for the night and where merchants could pray that they wouldn't catch the plague.

During the late 15th century, wandering artists from Nice and Liguria painted frescoes on the chapel walls, paid for by local noblemen and merchants. Most depict the lives of the saints and the Holy Trinity but they also display the fantastic horrors of the Middle Ages' mind – devils on horseback, dog-headed humans whipping whores, nuns, cripples, living skeletons and monsters devouring pilgrims – alongside simple scenes of everyday life. Few people could read at the time, so they also became painted story books to educate the locals. However, as the old trails were forgotten, many of the chapels were abandoned and the once vibrant art trapped inside began to fade.

The most difficult challenge of all is to find the one person in the village with a key to unlock their doors

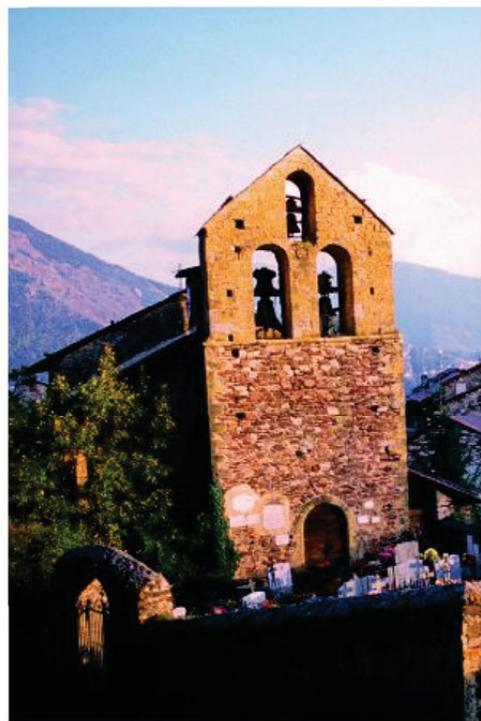
The chapels high up in the valley, are covered in snow for a third of the year. Even driving up in the summer is quite a feat, with the road skimming under overhanging elephant-grey rocks and twisting up hairpin bends. Skiers will recognise the resort names but they may not know about the hidden chapels. The most difficult challenge of all is to find the one person in the village with a key to unlock their doors.

At Clans, an hour's drive from Nice, the enigmatic gatekeeper is Madame Dauphiné, who can usually be found chatting to her centenarian friends on the village square. She gave me keys to the village's two frescoed chapels and explained the paintings to me over a cup of tea. The chapel of Saint Michel is a few ▶





OPENING PAGE: The chapel of Saint Érige in Avron THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Inside Saint Antoine chapel in Clans; The village of Roubion and its chapel are perched precariously; The chapel at Saint-Dalmas





ABOVE: Saint-Érige in Auron
FAR LEFT: Chapel of Saint Sébastien in Roure
LEFT: The little village of Roure sits high in the mountains
FOLLOWING PAGE: The chapel in Saint-Étienne-de-Tinée

hundred metres above the village and the outside has been newly painted. There's also a bench outside from which to enjoy the views down the valley.

A creaky old door reveals a bright frescoed façade behind the altar depicting Saint Michel in his armour, his sword aloft in his tiny right arm having defeated Lucifer, who writhes on the ground at the saint's feet, his red tail crushed and his horns comically limp beside his face. In his left arm, Saint Michel holds a set of scales to weigh up human souls. Above the saint is Jesus on the cross, and above him, the Lord Almighty, with both hands offered open palm to the tiny congregation – the chapel could seat about ten people.

Painted by the Ligurian artist Andrea de

Cella around 1515, the fresco shows a strange creature bringing back a tiny frisbee to Saint Roch. It is in fact an interpretation of a hunting dog which saved Roch from starvation in the forest to which he had been banished, by bringing him bread and licking his wounds. Like Saint Sébastien on the other side of the altar, Saint Roch was invoked against the plague.

The same distance downhill from Clans is the chapel of Saint Antoine, a fourth century hermit. Thirty scenes from his life (and after he died) are depicted on the walls of this tiny chapel, including several healing miracles, his resistance of temptation and a highly comical picture (from a 21st century perspective) of Saint Antoine administering a cup of medicine to two monks lying in the same bed. Their expressions are deadpan – straight out of a Buñuel film.

Along the right-hand side are the seven deadly sins depicted as seven chained figures riding a variety of gazelle, salukis, donkeys and a lion into hell which is represented by a monster's giant mouth in the far corner of the chapel. In all the region's chapels, the artists used the shape of the room to 'organise' their work. The long rectangles usually show the principal scene and the curve of the vault intensifies and dramatises the story – screaming faces or falling beasts or, at the isolated chapel of Saint Érige in Auron, an axe-wielding executioner in doublet and hose who has just decapitated Saint Denis.

Part of the allure of frescoes is that they appear to be fading away and the missing faces or blanched fragments add to their beauty and mystery. Most of the Tinée paintings are true frescoes, painted rapidly into damp plaster, but there are also clearer and shinier images in tempera where the colour pigment is mixed with egg yolk.

At Saint-Dalmas-Valdebloure, the key is kept by Valérie in the village grocery store on a big wooden fob. The local church has 14th and 16th-century paintings by Andrea de Cella and Guillaume Planeta worth seeing. In the chapel of Sainte Marguerite nearby, locals unearthed some murals behind the main altar in 1996. It was the first time they had been seen for 300 years but they have been covered up again, as the villagers didn't want to change the focus of the building.

Further east across the valley is Venanson, which, along with Roubion, Roure and Saint-Étienne-de-Tinée, all have chapels dedicated to Saint Sébastien. An eternally shocking and upsetting image, Saint Sébastien is always ▶



portrayed tied to a post with his torso pierced by a dozen arrows. He survived the assault and traditionally protects the villages against the plague. A mass is held in Saint-Étienne's tiny chapel on 20 January – the day of Saint Sébastien. Inside the simple chapel the stories painted on the ceiling are from Genesis – the only ones in the region – including a vision of God making Adam in his own image (He's just finishing off the left leg). On the right-hand side is a painted *plaquette* bearing the signatures of the two artists, Giovanni Canavesio and Giovanni Baleison, who painted the frescoes in 1485.

On the other side of the village is the chapel of the Trinitaires which has a detailed fresco dating from 1685 of the Battle of Lepanto. It was at this battle that the Spaniard Miguel Cervantes lost his arm (he's portrayed wearing a green smock). The battle in 1571 represented a great victory for the Christian Spaniards and Duchy of Savoy against the Ottoman Empire. It is interesting to see the dominant galleons flying the Savoy flag (Tinée was part of the Savoy kingdom at the time of the painting) and all the 'infidels' struggling in the water with their heads wrapped in cloth.

French bureaucracy stretches a long way into the Tinée Valley. It may be just a reflection of an area with a low population density and some precious landmarks but each chapel is normally only open to the public on one day each week, and sometimes just for one hour. Those that have keys available – from certain people at certain times – mean it is often quite a pilgrimage to gain access to the chapels. Once inside, the memory of the two-hour, winding drive from the Côte-d'Azur soon disappears. Have a coffee in the main square, look up at the many intricate sundials scattered around the villages and in winter, you can always visit them on skis! ☺

Jon Bryant

The Nice-based Cercle Bréa produces a guide to the dozen or so painted chapels entitled *Sur les chemins des chapelles peintes*.

Tel: (Fr) 4 93 27 27 01, www.cerclebre.com

For opening times and to obtain entry to the chapels, call the town hall or tourist office of each village.

La Tour tel: (Fr) 4 93 02 05 27

Clans tel: (Fr) 4 93 02 90 08

Auron tel: (Fr) 4 93 23 02 66

Venanson tel: (Fr) 4 93 03 23 05

Saint-Étienne-de-Tinée tel: (Fr) 4 93 02 41 96

Saint-Dalmas tel: (Fr) 4 93 23 25 90