



PHOTOLIBRARY



Go with the flow: clockwise from left, Saint-Bénézet bridge and the Popes' Palace at Avignon; Napoléon cruising the Rhône; flamingos on the Camargue; on-board lounge

# A week in Provence

It's a hard job, but someone has to do it. **Jon Bryant** tours the Rhône on a luxury barge with gourmet chef on board

Our majestic cruiser has docked only a few yards from where Vincent Van Gogh painted *Starry Night over the Rhone* in 1888 – and where the ancient Romans cheered as lions slaughtered Christians. The giant Roman amphitheatre is still there, as is the café where Van Gogh may have bought his absinthe. A midnight walk in Arles is the place where story books come alive.

Back at the cobbled riverside, we board our péniche-hôtel Napoléon, a gloriously luxurious floating hotel that cruises up and down the Rhône. This 130ft barge is part of the Orient-Express Group's Afloat in France fleet. It sleeps 12 people, has a crew of six and is the perfect way to explore Provence.

The boat's main salon is boutique-hotel stylish, complete with furniture in the sunflower and olive shades of Provence. Downstairs, on the cabin deck, it's all crystal chandeliers, gilt-framed mirrors and stylish, wood-panelled cabins. The dining room is decorated with portraits of the region's most famous sons – Nostradamus, Petrarch the Montgolfier brothers – and, in the centre panel, a mounted Napoleon (looking surprisingly tall).

During the trip, we pass ancient stone bridges and medieval castles, but it's not all fairytale France. The fast-flowing river also passes nuclear power stations and atomic energy centres. While it is a pleasure to sip champagne in the

lounge bar, the futuristic domes and cooling towers of the latter are also worth staying on the sundeck for, as are the occasional giant locks.

At Bollène, the lock is the second deepest in Europe (at 75 feet) and, as the water rapidly drains away beneath the boat, you feel like a tiny rubber duck in a giant tin bath, sinking ever nearer the plughole. Then, just as fast, the lock gates open and we're on our way again, towards Tarascon castle; the Montrachet in the ice bucket has barely moved.

Filled by the melting snows from the Alps, as well as the incoming waters of the Saône, Durance, Gardon, Isère and Ardèche rivers, the Rhône can reach more than 270 yards wide in some places, where you can barely make out the passers-by waving at you from the bank. But you can join them in the evening for a game of boules or ride past them on one of the Napoléon's bicycles.

Or you might prefer to stay on board reading Jean de Florette while tasting the culinary delights of the region prepared for you by the on-board chef. It's easy to sail from a tian of crab to the banana tarte tatin, or from the foie gras terrine to the glazed lemon tart via pyramid-shaped cheeses and a glass of Condrieu. And, of course, the unmissable Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

However, the excursions are well worth climbing into the air-conditioned minibus for. Besides Arles, we also visit



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the mental sanatorium in Saint-Rémy, where Van Gogh was treated, and look through the rusting bars of the room where he stayed to the garden beneath.

From our mooring in Avignon, not far down from the famous medieval Saint-Bénézet bridge, more famously known as the Pont d'Avignon, we can see the

towers of the massive Popes' Palace, where the papacy was based during the 14th century.

After our guided tour of the palace, we wander around the town's medieval lanes looking for *herbes de Provence* and odd-shaped bottles of pastis. The boat's chef can take you on an early morning visit to Les Halles food market, where olives stuffed with almonds sit above giant rosettes of France's best sausages, spicy peppers, onion tarts and jars of truffles and golden olive oil.

We also visit Le Grand Servan olive farm, where the 16,000 trees are harvested by one man in charge of a scary-looking contraption, who also happens to be a former French presidential bodyguard.

We buy a litre of his exquisite olive oil, recover from his spy-crushing handshake and return to the boat for lunch and cocktails.

Later, we head off to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the summer residence of the Popes and home of one of the most sought-after wines in the world. They say it's the pale stones under the vines, which absorb the heat during the day and reflect it back at night, that give this red wine its distinctive rich, peppery flavour.

Of course, a magnum is waiting for us when we arrive back on the Napoléon and, when it is served with a beef carpaccio and a Valrhona chocolate tart, you quite forget about the Popes and the gripping handshake.

As the boat drifts further and further away from the black bulls and painted caravans of the Camargue Delta, some gypsy kings (and a queen) come aboard on the last night of the cruise to dazzle us with their guitars and flamenco and we dance – from what I can remember – until dawn.

*Afloat in France* offers a six-night cruise on Napoléon between Arles and Tain L'Hermitage (or vice versa), with regular departures until mid-October 2010. From £3,060pp, including all meals, drinks and excursions. Napoléon can also be privately hired for the same cruise, from £29,940 based on eight people sharing. (0845 077 2222; [www.afloatinfrance.com](http://www.afloatinfrance.com))